Role of Metropolitan Planning Organizations in Transportation Planning

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Metropolitan Planning Organizations, or MPOs, play an important role in transportation planning.

- The Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991, which authorized federal highway and transit funding programs, significantly expanded the role of MPOs in the transportation planning process. Under the legislation, MPOs received federal funding and state transportation officials were required to coordinate with MPOs on project prioritization for the first time.1

- Many MPOs are now responsible for influential planning documents such as the Unified Planning Work Program, which lists the planning studies and tasks the MPO will perform to support the planning process for a one- or two-year timeframe; the Metropolitan Transportation Plan, which every four or five years looks out 20 years to identify future goals, strategies and projects; the Transportation Improvement Program, also known as the Plan, which details transportation investments and strategies every four years; and the Public Participation Plan, a periodic review of public engagement strategies and goals.2

Not all MPOs are created equal.

- The geographical areas MPOs serve vary widely with the smallest covering 34 square miles and the largest covering 38,649.3

- The population sizes MPOs serve also vary widely with the smallest covering tens of thousands and the largest covering more than 18 million individuals.4 Metropolitan transportation planning occurs only in urbanized areas with a population of 50,000 or greater.4

- Staffing also varies widely at MPOs with some relying on as few as two employees—typically a director and a transportation planner—and others employing a staff of more than 100. A 2009 Government Accountability Office, or GAO, report found that some MPOs lack the technical capacity and data necessary to conduct the complex transportation modeling required to meet planning needs.4

- Analysts have noted that the powers of MPOs often are limited simply to listing road projects and don’t extend to the implementation of systematic, strategic transportation planning. Many lack the power to implement the transportation improvement plans they recommend.2

- Some transportation policy experts say MPOs should have the capacity to make choices as to the benefits of projects regardless of mode, but many lack the skills to carry out those kinds of
analyses. In addition, many MPOs don’t have sufficient geographic reach to be able to have an impact on a cohesive regional transportation plan. The 2009 GAO report noted several proposals developed by government and industry associations that could address some of the resource, authority and technical challenges MPOs were facing. GAO noted that greater flexibility in the use of transportation planning funds could better meet the needs of some metropolitan areas; that varying the planning requirements and authority or changing the legal definition of MPOs could address disparities in capacity and planning; that increasing federal investment in modeling and data gathering could improve the technical capability of MPOs and improve the consistency of travel forecasting; and that making the planning process more performance based could allow the Federal Highway Administration and Federal Transit Administration to assess the progress of MPOs in achieving specific results more effectively.

The 2012 federal surface transportation authorization legislation known as MAP-21—Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century—included some modifications to the metropolitan planning process.

- The law required MPOs to establish and use a performance-based approach to transportation decision making and development of transportation plans.
- It required MPOs to establish performance targets no later than 180 days after the date that state or public transportation providers in their area establish performance targets.
- MAP-21 also said that within two years of enactment of the law, the structure of all MPOs would be required to include officials of public agencies that administer or operate public transportation systems.
- The law placed a new emphasis on the importance of nonmetropolitan transportation planning, requiring the states to work more closely with nonmetropolitan areas and giving them the opportunity to designate Regional Transportation Planning Organizations to help address the needs of those areas.

But some say additional metropolitan planning process reforms are needed.

- The Center for State Innovation in 2009 said that most MPOs could benefit from reforms that include giving them sufficient authority to guide regional planning rather than simply approving or vetoing local requests for federal funds and establishing elected board members or population-proportional appointments.
- In a 2014 report, Emil Frankel of the Eno Center for Transportation recommended that Congress incentivize states and MPOs to develop and implement economic analyses of potential capital projects rather than simply rejecting or accepting state and metropolitan transportation investment programs.
- Frankel, who was assistant secretary for transportation policy at the U.S. Department of Transportation during the George W. Bush administration and served as commissioner of the Connecticut Department of Transportation in the 1990s, said in 2015 that instead of more than 400 MPOs nationwide, the United States might better be served if it had 100 or 125. Reducing those numbers would require action at the state level. Frankel contends that many MPOs are just too small and don’t have the staff or the resources to serve in anything other than a logrolling or rubberstamping capacity. If transportation funding is going to continue to be hard to come by at all levels of government, Frankel said, enhancing the expertise, reach and impact of MPOs will be important in helping to ensure that the transportation investments made are the wisest for each region of the country and state governments will have an important role to play in shaping the future of MPOs.
REFERENCES

1 National Transportation Library. “Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 [5].”
4 Ibid [7].
5 United States Code. “Title 23 – HIGHWAYS, Chapter 1 – Federal-Aid Highways, Section 134 – Metropolitan transportation planning [8].”
10 Government Accountability Office [9].
12 Ibid [12].
13 Ibid [12].

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