In order to understand the ways that metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) can be innovative, it is important to know the federal context and evolution of metropolitan planning. MPOs come in all shapes and sizes with a great variation in their structure, size, governance and authority. These factors influence their technical capacity as well as their ability to engage on a broader set of issues beyond transportation.

Largely creatures of federal law, MPOs exist to provide regional coordination of transportation investments, while ensuring that the public, especially those traditionally underserved by the transportation system, have opportunities to participate in the decision-making process.

Regional transportation networks may consist of one or more transit providers as well as local, county and state roads and trail networks and federal interstates. Added to this mix are intercity transit providers, passenger rail, private and public freight shippers, airports and maritime ports. Despite multiple operators, the system needs to operate seamlessly for the user.

The MPO sits at the crossroads of this fragmented network. It was created to coordinate the various elements into one cohesive regional transportation system. Since federal transportation funds can be spent on practically any part of this fragmented transportation system, it is in the federal government’s interest that federal expenditures on one part of the system do not conflict with other federal expenditures on another part. Doing this requires coordination and partnership across jurisdictions and agencies, starting with a comprehensive planning process that looks at current and future needs and then prioritizes available resources to achieve these goals.

The true power of MPOs comes in their ability to create a collaborative process to address issues that no single jurisdiction can tackle alone. The most critical manifestation of this power is the MPO’s plans, which dictate how transportation funds are spent in the region. A region’s transportation system is the thread that connects other regional priorities, such as economic competitiveness, access to jobs, public health and safety, environmental quality and development patterns. MPOs can leverage their transportation functions, federal responsibilities and authority to address these broader issues.
The framework for metropolitan planning is set by the statutory provisions and federal regulations in federal transportation law, specifically through the “Statewide and Non-metropolitan Planning Program” and the “Metropolitan Transportation Planning Program”\(^1\). The latter program governs MPOs and requires that they be established for urbanized areas with a population over 50,000. However, deciding how to organize the MPO, choosing its voting structure and establishing its broader authority are left to state and local officials.

However they are structured, MPOs must coordinate with other key transportation partners, whether state and local departments of transportation, transit agencies, port authorities, airports, freight carriers and even health and human services providers and first responders. In some regions, this coordination is highly formalized, whereas in others it is more fluid and has evolved over time.

Metropolitan planning was formalized in the 1962 Federal-Aid Highway Act and its Section 134 planning provisions.\(^2\) This legislation introduced the federal requirement for a Continuing, Cooperative and Comprehensive (3-C) planning process in urbanized areas. Historically, highway engineers and land-use planners had failed to coordinate sufficiently, leading to interstates that devastated local communities or environmental habitats. MPOs were created to facilitate ongoing cooperation among federal, state and local governments and between governmental planning and engineering functions to help ensure that federal transportation dollars — most of which are controlled by states — are wisely spent and that local communities have a voice in the decision-making and planning in their regions. The 3C planning process involves four technical phases: collection of data, analysis of data across a common set of planning factors, forecasts of activity and travel and the evaluation of alternatives.

Over the years and numerous transportation reauthorizations, these basic federal requirements have remained largely intact. Though federal law generally prioritizes state DOTs over MPOs in the planning and programming of projects using federal transportation dollars, several important changes in federal transportation law have increased the role, responsibilities and funding support for MPOs.

The Highway Act of 1973 (P.L. 93-87) required the governor of each state to designate an MPO for each urbanized area over 50,000 in population as defined by the Census Bureau (23 U.S.C. Section 134; 49 U.S.C. Section 5303). MPOs were given a formal role in addressing regional air quality issues and state DOTs were restricted from making unilateral changes to the MPO-approved, “fiscally constrained” plan by the regulatory changes to implement the Clean Air Act in 1990 and the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) in 1991.

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1. Sections 134 and 135 of Title 23 and Sections 5303 and 5304 of Title 49, United States Code.
The table below (continued on the following page) outlines the planning documents required of MPOs and DOTs. These plans must be informed by public review and comment and regularly updated to reflect changing needs, opportunities and constraints.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FEDERAL REQUIREMENT</th>
<th>WHO DEVELOPS?</th>
<th>WHO APPROVES?</th>
<th>TIME HORIZON</th>
<th>CONTENT</th>
<th>UPDATE REQUIREMENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP) or Long-Range Transportation Plan (LRTP)</td>
<td>MPO</td>
<td>MPO</td>
<td>20 years (minimum)</td>
<td>Future goals, strategies, projects and policy priorities; performance measures; projected future demand; asset management, safety and system preservation; fiscally constrained</td>
<td>Four years for air quality non-attainment and maintenance areas; five years for others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation Improvement Program (TIP)</td>
<td>MPO</td>
<td>MPO &amp; governor</td>
<td>Four years</td>
<td>All transportation projects receiving federal funding; fiscally constrained and conform with SIP; demonstrate achievement of performance measures</td>
<td>Four years (can be amended at any time)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congestion Management Process (CMP)</td>
<td>Transportation Management Area (TMA) for MPOs over 200,000</td>
<td>MPO</td>
<td>Four to five years</td>
<td>Alternative strategies to mitigate congestion; congestion and air quality data</td>
<td>Not specified. Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and Federal Transit Administration (FTA) review during MPO certification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP)</td>
<td>MPO</td>
<td>MPO</td>
<td>One or two years</td>
<td>Planning studies; research; tasks budget</td>
<td>Annual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Participation Plan</td>
<td>MPO</td>
<td>MPO</td>
<td>not specified</td>
<td>MPO committees and subcommittees; engagement of people affected by transportation policy decisions</td>
<td>Not specified. FHWA and FTA review during MPO certification</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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1 USDOT. The Metropolitan Transportation Planning Process: Key Issues – A Briefing Book for Transportation Decision-Makers, Officials and Staff. Washington, DC. Transportation Planning Capacity Building Program, FHWA and FTA.
<table>
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<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Long-Range State Transportation Plan (LRSTP)</td>
<td>State DOT in cooperation with MPOs, local officials in non-metro areas and Regional Transportation Planning Organizations (RTPO), if applicable</td>
<td>State DOT</td>
<td>20 years (minimum)</td>
<td>Future goals, strategies, projects and policy priorities; projected future demand; performance measures; asset management, safety and preservation; fiscally constrained</td>
<td>Not specified. FHWA and FTA review during annual STIP approval and planning certification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP)</td>
<td>State DOT, in cooperation with MPOs, local officials in non-metro areas and RTPOs, if applicable</td>
<td>State then USDOT</td>
<td>Four years</td>
<td>MPO TIPs are incorporated directly without change into the STIP by the state DOT. Demonstrate achievement of performance measures; fiscally constrained</td>
<td>Every four years; can be amended at any time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Implementation Plan (SIP)</td>
<td>State Environmental Agency via interagency coordination with MPO</td>
<td>US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)</td>
<td>Ten years</td>
<td>SIP includes vehicle emission reduction targets. Developed within 3 years of being identified as non-attainment.</td>
<td>EPA provides updated guidance every 3 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Federal legislation outlines five core functions that an MPO must perform:

1. **Establish a setting.** MPOs must establish and manage a fair and impartial setting for effective regional decision-making in the metropolitan area. This is a critical role because MPOs often represent the only regional assembly for elected officials, stakeholders and professional experts to discuss issues of metro-wide importance.

2. **Identify and evaluate alternative transportation improvements.** MPOs bring technical expertise to transportation planning, using data and planning methods such as travel forecasting and scenario planning to generate and evaluate alternatives. Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century (MAP-21) introduced a new requirement for performance-based planning to tie investments with outcomes. Planning studies and evaluations are included within the MPO’s annual Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP).

3. **Prepare and maintain a long-range transportation plan (LRTP).** MPOs must develop a 20-year LRTP that supports improved mobility and access for people and goods (including operations and maintenance) and supports a good quality of life. The plan includes a list of priority investments, anticipated available funding and the regional goals and policies that will be pursued during that 20-year period. It must be formally adopted by the MPO and updated at least every 5 years. It must also be consistent with the state transportation plan. For MPOs in areas with poor air quality, the LRTP must conform to the State Implementation Plan required to bring areas into compliance with national air pollution standards.

4. **Program transportation funds (TIP and UPWP).** MPOs must develop a fiscally constrained, four-year Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) listing projects and strategies consistent with the LRTP. Projects must be included in the TIP to receive federal funding. The TIP includes new investments, maintenance and system operations and other finance or regulatory tools. Fiscal constraint requirements ensure that proposed projects can be reasonably completed with available funding. MPOs in Transportation Management Areas (TMA) also create and approve an annual UPWP detailing funding for specific data gathering, research or training, evaluation studies, budgeting for community engagement activities and other collaborative efforts. MPOs that are not TMAs prepare a similar, but more simplified statement of work for the year.

5. **Involve the public.** Community engagement is a central part of transportation planning for each of the above steps. MPOs are required to develop a Public Participation Plan. Further requirements for public notice and involvement are stipulated in other related federal laws including the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) that governs the use of all federal funds. Many MPOs have gone far beyond basic federal requirements for public involvement to reach a larger and more diverse set of regional stakeholders and involve them in MPO decision-making processes.

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1 USDOT. The Metropolitan Transportation Planning Process: Key Issues – A Briefing Book for Transportation Decision-Makers, Officials and Staff. Washington DC. Transportation Planning Capacity Building Program, FHWA and FTA.
MAP-21 (Public Law 112-141), signed into law in July 2012, took metropolitan planning one step further by introducing performance-based planning and programming designed to provide more accountability for planning goals, investments and performance outcomes (23 CFR 450.206 and 49 CFR 450.306).

The federal framework for MPO planning and programming creates a baseline of required activity. Innovative MPOs see these requirements as a floor, not a ceiling. They become relevant regional leaders by using the full range of tools at their disposal. They engage decision-makers and the public in long-range planning and goal-setting, gather data and perform technical analysis and prioritize millions of transportation dollars to shape the region and address broader environmental, economic and social goals.

While federal legislation describes the general guidelines for creating MPOs and their areas of responsibility, it is up to the governor and local governments of each region to determine the organizational structure and voting representation. At a minimum, MPO boundaries must encompass the entire existing urbanized area, as defined by the US Census, plus the contiguous area expected to become urbanized over the next 20 years (23 CFR 450.312). To formalize coordination and clarify responsibilities, MPO members sign metropolitan planning agreements with the state, providers of public transportation operating within the area and other regional planning bodies.

Some states, such as Alaska, have designated MPOs through state statute, while others, such as Connecticut, use a State Administrative Code. In addition to meeting federal mandates, MPOs often have extra responsibilities under state law. In California, for example, the MPOs are responsible for allocating some non-federal transportation funds in their regions. In Oregon, the MPOs also have a role in growth management and land-use planning.

Federal guidance encourages having one MPO per urbanized area, but some regions have multiple MPOs. In Florida, for example, MPOs are designated at the county level. Metropolitan areas that cross state boundaries may be served by an MPO in each state. Today there are more than 400 MPOs nationwide. Roughly 12 percent represent areas with populations over 1 million. 36 percent serve regions with populations between 200,000 and 1 million. 52 percent represent areas between 50,000 and 200,000 in population.\(^1\)

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\(^1\) Mallett, William J. (February 3, 2010.) “Metropolitan Transportation Planning” Washington, DC. Congressional Research Service, R41068
Many MPOs are part of a Council of Governments (COG), a regional planning body guided by elected officials representing local governments throughout the metropolitan area. Among the many examples of this model are the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (MWCOG), which houses the Transportation Planning Board (TPB) serving the national capital region, and the Denver Regional Council of Governments (DRCOG), serving the greater Denver metro area. Often these COGs existed before the MPO and may have broader regional planning authorities.

In other instances the MPO may be part of a regional planning agency with functions beyond transportation. For instance, the Metropolitan Council in the greater Minneapolis-St. Paul region is the federally designated MPO but also has oversight of regional stormwater and park systems and is the regional transit authority. But in other places these are separate and distinct agencies. In Boston, for example, the Metropolitan Area Planning Council coordinates planning for a range of social, economic and environmental issues, while the Boston Region MPO is a separate agency responsible for the long-range transportation plan and programming of federal transportation funds. The MPO may be the only regional agency in other regions, especially those with populations below 200,000.

Regional Alphabet Soup: MPO, COG, RPA, TMA and RTPOs

**MPO:** Metropolitan Planning Organization is a federally mandated transportation policy-making organization, comprised of representatives from local government and state governmental transportation authorities, created to ensure that existing and future transportation projects and programs are based on a continuing, cooperative and comprehensive planning process.

**COG:** Council of Government is a regional body serving local governments and counties within a defined metropolitan area with responsibilities over issues such as economic and community development, natural disaster mitigation, emergency response planning, aging services, water management, pollution control and transportation planning. Council membership is drawn from the county, city and other governmental bodies within its area.

**RPA:** Regional Planning Association, Council, District or Commission is a quasi-governmental organization designated by state statute to address regional issues and plan multi-jurisdictional solutions and facilitate local input into state policy development.

**TMA:** Transportation Management Area is a metropolitan area with a population over 200,000 and federally designated by the U.S. Secretary of Transportation with responsibility for the regional congestion management process.

**RTPO:** Regional Transportation Planning Organization is a regional policy board formed through a voluntary association of local governments in non-metropolitan areas with a population under 50,000 and designated by the state to carry out the transportation planning process.
Large urban areas typically have some of the worst rates of traffic congestion and air quality in the country. Federal law treats these areas differently, too, and designates those with at least 200,000 residents as Transportation Management Areas (TMAs). MPOs in TMAs must consist of local elected officials and officials from state and local public agencies that operate major modes of transportation (23 CFR 134 (d)(2); 49 CFR 5303 (d)(20)). MPOs in TMAs establish a Congestion Management Process (CMP) that identifies actions and strategies to reduce traffic congestion and increase mobility. The CMP relies on technical tools to evaluate plans against a set of locally determined performance measures and prioritizes congestion management strategies that may include pricing, rideshare and other high-tech management tools known as intelligent transportation systems.

TMAs also have greater authority over federal Surface Transportation Program (STP) funds, the largest funding category sub-allocated to metro areas and which can be spent on a broad range of roadway, transit, bicycle and pedestrian uses. In consultation with the state DOT, MPOs in TMAs have direct authority to choose projects from their region’s approved TIP to fund with STP funds. MPOs that are not located in a TMA are only authorized to “cooperate” with the state DOT to select projects from the TIP. This means that although the TIP identifies the region's desired transportation projects, the state DOT has the power ultimately to determine which are funded.

MAP-21 now allows states to establish and designate a Regional Transportation Planning Organization (RTPO) to represent non-metropolitan areas to the state DOT (23 CFR 450.210(d)). RTPOs can develop a long-range plan and TIP that the state will use to develop the statewide transportation plan and STIP. Federal legislation now requires state DOTs to cooperate with local elected officials responsible for long-range planning in non-metro areas of the state, or, if appropriate, the RTPO (23 CFR 450.208(a)(4)). This change made in MAP-21 now provides a seat at the table for smaller metropolitan areas to select transportation projects from the State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP).

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1 TMAs can also be designated in areas under 200,000 at the request of the State and MPO.
2 www.fhwa.dot.gov/map21/qandas/qasuballocation.cfm
3 USDOT. The Metropolitan Transportation Planning Process: Key Issues – A Briefing Book for Transportation Decision-Makers, Officials and Staff. Washington DC. Transportation Planning Capacity Building Program, FHWA and FTA.
4 Statewide and Nonmetropolitan Transportation Planning; Metropolitan Transportation Planning Proposed Rule. Federal Register Vol. 79, No. 105. (June 2, 2014.)
Each MPO designates a policy board that is formally responsible for adopting regional transportation plans and policies. Policy boards determine their own representation and decision-making procedures. Typically, the members are designated by the governor or other authority and while many are elected officials, that is not a requirement. Portland Metro is notable as the only MPO whose members are directly elected by regional voters, though Metro still has a requirement that their actions be recommended by an advisory committee of local elected officials and transportation service providers.

For TMAs, federal planning statutes and planning regulations identify a list of government or agency officials who must be on the TMA policy boards. These include partner organizations that should naturally be included in good planning efforts: ports, airports, the state DOT and public transit providers. Many MPOs also include representatives of private transit operators and health and human service providers who are involved with providing transportation options for people with disabilities or low-income households.

MPOs use planning or technical advisory committees (PAC or TAC) and subcommittees to provide technical analysis, recommendations and specialized knowledge to the board on specific planning strategies, projects or issues. The TAC is made up of local government technical staff with expertise in specific planning or engineering areas. Some MPOs also include transportation advocates who bring technical knowledge and a citizen’s perspective that is extremely useful for balancing regional and modal needs. Other specialized standing committees are used to address emerging and priority planning issues, such as innovative finance, climate adaptation and specialized transportation services for people with disabilities. The TAC is typically responsible for reviewing and evaluating transportation-related plans and programs before these items are presented to the MPO board. The TAC ensures that the studies, plans and programs submitted to the MPO are technically sufficient, accurate and comprehensive.

Citizen advisory committees (CAC) are used by most MPOs to provide a citizen’s view on transportation decision-making. Citizens are typically selected to represent a cross-section of the region in terms of geography and cultural values or transportation needs, such as freight shippers, bicyclists or transit riders. CAC members are appointed by the MPO policy board and may be selected from homeowner, business or other civic associations or other interest groups such as those representing people with disabilities, specific minority populations or age groups. A growing number of MPOs are also reaching out to involve representatives...
of schools and anchor institutions such as universities, health care centers or other major transportation
generators. The Public Participation Plan (23 CFR 450.316) describes the CAC process and broader public
outreach strategies used by the MPO to gather citizen input, educate the public and hopefully involve them in
the decision-making process.

There are no federal requirements for MPO staffing, but most are managed by an executive director who
oversees a professional planning staff. For TMAs, especially those with responsibilities beyond transportation,
agency size and budget may be quite large. Federal transportation authorization provides a base level of funding
for MPOs to undertake their required planning roles, but many agencies are supplemented with local funds,
especially regional planning agencies with broader functions. Staff members assist the policy board through
technical work, facilitating public input and community engagement and managing the overall planning process.
FHWA and FTA jointly administer a public certification review every four years to ensure that the MPO is
carrying out the metropolitan transportation planning process in accordance with federal requirements.

Resources

- Statewide and Nonmetropolitan Transportation Planning; Metropolitan Transportation Planning Proposed
  Rule. Federal Register Vol. 79, No. 105. (June 2, 2014)
- USDOT. The Metropolitan Transportation Planning Process: Key Issues – A Briefing Book for
  Transportation Decision-Makers, Officials and Staff. Washington DC. Transportation Planning Capacity
  Building Program, FHWA and FTA.
- Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations (AMPO). [www.ampo.org](http://www.ampo.org)
- National Association of Regional Councils (NARC). [www.narc.org](http://www.narc.org)