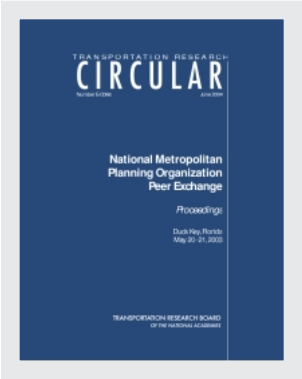

National Metropolitan Planning Organization Peer Exchange Proceedings

DETAILS

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Proceedings

Duck Key, Florida
May 20–21, 2003

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Contents

INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

The Transportation Research Board (TRB) Committee on Metropolitan Policy, Planning, and Processes (ADA20) and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) sponsored a national Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) Peer Exchange during the TRB Statewide Planning Conference held in Duck Key, Florida, May 20–21, 2003. The theme was "Getting to Consensus: How Do MPOs Make Effective Transportation Planning and Programming Decisions?"

The purpose of the peer exchange was to facilitate an open exchange of information on experiences, concerns, and opportunities pertaining to the MPO decision-making process, specifically the "big picture" decision-making process. An additional purpose was to identify information related to MPO decision making that warrants widespread dissemination of best practices and other guidance to the national MPO community and of subject areas that require further research and discussion. The primary product of the peer exchange is this proceedings prepared by Jeff Kramer of the Center for Urban Transportation Research. The proceedings includes

1. Identification of near-term research topics and needs;
2. Identification of short-term needs for the Transportation Planning Capacity Building; and
3. Identification of long-term research topics for the TRB Committee on Metropolitan Policy, Planning, and Processes.

PARTICIPANTS

Roundtable participants came from large, medium, and small communities from across the nation. Some participants were members of the TRB Committee on Metropolitan Policy, Planning, and Processes; nonmembers also were included to ensure a wide diversity of experience and expertise in the roundtable. Table 1 contains the names of participants and the agencies with which they are affiliated.

Participants came from a wide range of groups that have a stake in identifying the characteristics of successful and effective MPO decision making. Stakeholder groups represented included

1. Large, medium, and small MPOs;
2. State departments of transportation;
3. Federal transportation agencies;
4. National and state associations of MPOs;
5. Transit agencies;
6. Academic institutions; and
7. Transportation consulting firms.

READ-AHEAD PAPER DISCUSSION

Before the peer exchange, the chair asked participants to review the MPO decision-making concepts and issues identified in three read-ahead documents:

TABLE 1 National MPO Peer Exchange Participants

Participant	Agency or Organization
Peter Plumeau (Chair)	Wilbur Smith Associates (Vermont)
Harry Barley	Metroplan Orlando (Florida)
Trip Brizell	Dallas Area Rapid Transit (Texas)
Steve Gayle	Binghamton Metropolitan Transportation Study (New York)
Howard Glassman	Florida Metropolitan Planning Organization Advisory Council
Charlie Goodman	Federal Transit Administration
Jeff Kramer	Center for Urban Transportation Research (Florida)
Jim McKenzie	Metroplan (Little Rock, Arkansas)
Therese McMillian	Metropolitan Transportation Commission (Oakland, California)
Robert Ritter	Federal Highway Administration (Washington, D.C.)
Craig Secrest	Transtech Management Consulting (Washington, D.C.)
Tom Swanson	Virginia Department of Transportation
Alex Taft	Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations (Washington, D.C.)

1. Plumeau, P. *Metropolitan Planning Organization Decision-Making: The Question of Effectiveness*. Discussion paper, May 2003.

This document broadly framed, among other things, the environment surrounding MPO decision making and the complexity of measuring decision-making effectiveness in such an environment. The paper pointed out that the role of MPOs has grown and diversified since the implementation of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Act of 1991 (ISTEA). ISTEA and its successor, the Transportation Efficiency Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21), require MPOs to find balance between fiscal, environmental, and socioeconomic concerns while conducting the regional transportation planning process. These considerations include such wide-ranging issues as

- Potential impacts to minority populations, low-income groups, and the disabled;
- Freight movement and the regional economy;
- Endangered species habitat and wetlands;
- Archeological and cultural assets; and
- Safety and security, particularly in light of the potential threat of terrorism to the transportation system.

The list of considerations continues to grow and evolve as new federal requirements are implemented and regional expectations relative to transportation planning expand.

The paper then discusses how gauging the overall effectiveness of MPO decision making becomes difficult when considering both the primary and secondary goals of a given decision. Measuring secondary and sometimes-unstated goals of decision makers in the MPO process, such as benefits to constituents or other elements of society or the natural environment, can be very subjective and open to interpretation. The paper further discusses how the role of the MPO in decision making may change with its level of responsibility for implementation. For example, the MPO may fill the role of participant or coordinator for some decisions while for others the MPO acts as the facilitator or even the leader. Additionally, the long-range nature of many decisions made by MPOs makes determining the effectiveness of any given decision difficult in the short term.

2. Turochy, R. Prioritizing Proposed Transportation Improvements: Methods, Evaluation, and Research Needs. In *Transportation Research Record: Journal of the Transportation Research Board, No. 1777,* 2001, pp 123–128.

This paper discusses how oversight panels, special interest groups, and the public have been applying pressure to clarify the process by which proposed projects are prioritized and to minimize the impact of politics. The research examined the various tools employed by several state and local governments to assist in project development and cites several examples of their use.

According to the report, methods range in their application from using only objective data to incorporating subjective expert opinions. How elements of decision making are weighted in the assorted evaluation methods varied greatly. Common elements to the various methods related to economic cost, safety impacts, traffic flows, impacts on transit, and the state of current transportation infrastructure. The array of emphases given to the evaluation criteria by the various evaluation methods demonstrates that emphasizing any given criteria poses a public policy challenge that is unique to each jurisdiction. The report concluded that although there did not appear to be an ideal universal evaluation method, that use of an evaluation method was helpful to decision makers.

3. Katz, B., R. Puentes, and S. Bernstein *TEA-21 Reauthorization: Getting Transportation Right for Metropolitan America*. Brookings Institution Series on Transportation Reform, March 2003.

This report discusses the challenges ahead given the upcoming reauthorization of TEA-21. The document states that reauthorization of the laws governing highways, transit, air, and rail systems could not come at a more critical time. The document declares that the impact of recent transportation reforms have been both profound and disappointing, noting that most states have failed to use the tools and discretion afforded them by the new laws to address meaningfully the worsening transportation problems.

The document identifies some of the more pressing challenges, including congestion relief, air quality, crumbling infrastructure, a growing mismatch between jobs and workers, metropolitan sprawl, and an increasing lack of state funding. The document concludes by stating

that metropolitan transportation challenges will only be fully addressed if metropolitan areas are given more power, stronger tools, and increased capacity. For those, the federal government must demand greater performance and accountability from its state and metropolitan partners.

DISCUSSION: EFFECTIVENESS OF MPO DECISION MAKING

With the read-ahead papers as background, the entire group discussed many issues related to the effectiveness of MPO decision making. The following points were raised:

- Although one set of federal rules governs decision-making requirements, procedures, and practices for all MPOs in the country, those same MPOs also must respond to 50 different sets of state rules. Put another way, there is no one "MPO Map" defining what an MPO must do or how an MPO must do it, but instead there are a number of maps that each individual MPO must attempt to follow. This increases dramatically the complexity of the MPO decision-making process and the task of measuring effectiveness.
- The MPO decision-making process can be divided into a technical process and a political process. The technical process assembles and develops the best available data and applies analysis methodologies to evaluate the transportation needs of the community. The political process gives the region's primary transportation decision makers (including elected officials and heads of modal agencies) the data and analysis results developed in the technical process. Using the technical input along with others, the decision makers decide how to meet the transportation needs of the community. Many participants felt that it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine if the best decision always has been made and that effectiveness in this regard seems to be a matter of perspective.
- The combination of technical and political processes led to a related issue of whether a technically sound process actually matters in the MPO decision-making process. Further, how can one measure the effectiveness of the MPO decision-making process given the varying balance between technical and political in any given MPO area? Many participants felt that technical soundness does matter, but that its impact depends on the nature and dynamics of the decision-making process and the degree to which decision makers rely on the technical assessment of their staff and advisors.
- Transportation decisions can be made at a variety of levels (local, regional, state, or federal). It is not clear always that decisions being made by MPOs are occurring at the right level. One example raised was the requirement to consider freight movement in the MPO decision-making process. Although freight movement certainly does have an impact on the regional transportation system, stakeholders and decision makers in the freight industry often do not make their decisions on the metropolitan level. Large freight shipping companies may make their decisions on a national or multistate level, while the local bakery may make its freight decisions on a subregional level. The absence of a national and, in most regions, a state freight policy complicates the MPO decision-making process and makes an assessment of effectiveness in the MPO decision-making process more difficult.
- Implementing and managing the MPO decision-making process takes significant resources, particularly given the level of effort expended on public participation activities and the task mix of the given MPO (corridor studies, on-call technical services, etc.). Therefore, resource availability is critical to the MPO decision-making process.

- Metropolitan transportation planning, due to both regulation and local interest, is becoming increasingly multimodal in nature. As a result, the complexity of the MPO decision-making process is continuously increasing. Measuring or comparing the effectiveness of the MPO decision-making process must consider the level of complexity each MPO faces.
- Increasingly, MPOs are including operational improvements (intelligent transportation systems, access management improvements, etc.) in their short- and long-range transportation planning decision-making processes. This new balance between projects and activities that optimize system operational efficiency and traditional construction projects further complicates the MPO decision-making process and any effort to evaluate effectiveness.
- It is becoming increasingly clear that the health of the economy has an impact on the MPO decision-making process and the priorities of the MPO. The MPO now must consider not only the ability of the transportation network to provide the safe and efficient movement of people and goods, but also how the transportation network supports the economy of the region. MPOs are trading off the need for congestion relief projects against projects that enhance the economic development potential of the region.
- The visibility and recognition of the MPO role in shaping the future of the region can be viewed as a double-edge sword. On one side, increased attention enhances the ability of the MPO to involve a wider mix of interests in the decision-making process and increasing the weight of the resulting decisions. On the other, increased attention can weigh down the process to a point where it becomes less efficient and potentially less effective.

"BIG PICTURE" DISCUSSION

Participants were asked by the chair to discuss the "big picture" of MPO decision making based on the read-ahead paper discussion and on their own experiences and expertise. The discussion centered on three key issue areas:

1. What are the key elements in the MPO decision-making process?
2. Who are the key players (both formal and informal) in the MPO decision-making process?
3. What are the barriers or opportunities to effective MPO decision making?

During the extensive discussion centering on the three key issue areas, participants made the following observations:

1. **Key elements** of successful MPO decision making include
   - Firmly establishing the rules of engagement for participants in the MPO decision-making process and following them;
   - Defining participants and their individual roles in the MPO decision-making arena;
   - Recognizing that the MPO is not the only decision maker in the region;
   - Prompting and managing regional change within the MPO decision-making process;
   - Managing and participating in concurrent political processes while maintaining the integrity of the MPO decision-making process;

– Recognizing and interacting with transportation stakeholders and stakeholder groups, including those that are not part of the traditional MPO decision-making process;

– Fulfilling the traditional MPO role established by federal (and sometimes state) regulation while being nimble enough to fill nontraditional transportation and other roles as, in many cases, the only agency covering an entire metropolitan area;

– Balancing unbiased and competent technical analysis by the MPO staff against information provided by special interests who participate actively in the decision-making process when the MPO identifies regional transportation needs and priorities;

– Being taken seriously requires understanding and finding a niche in the regional mix of decision-making processes and making others aware of the MPO's ability to fill that niche; and

– Managing MPO Policy Board turnover and other political cycles through orientation and ongoing education.

2. **Key players (both formal and informal)** in the MPO decision-making process include

– In broad terms:

- Anyone required by state or federal law,
- Anyone with the capacity to veto or otherwise challenge an MPO decision, and
- Anyone whose participation ensures a sense of fairness or justice to the system.

– In specific terms:

- MPO Policy Board members;
- Professional staff of member agencies and other jurisdictional planners in the region;
- MPO staff;
- Other elected and appointed officials;
- Other regional service providers;
- Economic development agencies, Chambers of Commerce, and representatives from other area business organizations;
- Professional (those that represent organized special interests) and regular citizens (those that represent their own interests); and
- Individuals who have influence over the opinion of decision makers outside of the official public involvement process.

3. **Key barriers or opportunities** to effective MPO decision-making include

– Increased MPO responsibility and visibility due to additional federal and state requirements and considerations (transportation security, freight movement, etc.);

– Tailoring the transportation planning process to meet the changing needs of various stakeholders;

– Training MPO staff to deal with the increasingly active involvement of professional citizens in the MPO decision-making process; and

– Identifying interests that are missing from the MPO decision-making process, recognizing why they are not participating in the process, and making appropriate efforts and changes to encourage their desired participation.

CAPACITY BUILDING NEEDS

The mission of the U.S. Department of Transportation's Transportation Planning Capacity Building (TPCB) Program is to help decision makers, transportation officials, and staff in MPO and state DOT settings resolve the increasingly complex issues they face when addressing transportation needs in their jurisdictions. On a practical level, this comprehensive program provides information, training, and technical assistance to help transportation professionals create plans and programs that respond to the needs of the many users of their local transportation systems.

Informed by the detailed discussions held during the first part of the roundtable, participants listed potential technical assistance, training, and guidance needs. The list includes a mix of training materials, case studies and best practices research, and technical assistance:

1. Developing and implementing MPO organizational strategies, including ways to integrate strategic planning mechanisms and tools such as organizational measures of effectiveness;
2. Customer service, including methods for defining who the MPO customer is and tools for reaching the identified customer base;
3. Tailoring the MPO process for different customers and clearly defining the role of key players;
4. MPO Executive Director management training focusing on such subjects as "managing up"—effectively managing the agenda of the MPO Policy Board—and making effective use of other MPO committees;
5. Policy Board member training and education on decision making in the MPO process;
6. Implementing media relation strategies to facilitate MPO effectiveness and productivity;
7. Identifying and cultivating leadership in the MPO decision-making process;
8. Effective use of technical communication tools;
9. Innovative programming;
10. Enhancing interagency cooperation;
11. Techniques for developing a project prioritization process and applications;
12. Conducting surveys and using survey results in the MPO decision-making process;
13. Using scanning tours to familiarize MPO Policy Board members and other stakeholders with regional and local transportation issues and initiatives;
14. MPO Policy Board and staff mechanisms and techniques for dealing with professional citizens and other volunteers who are becoming increasingly active in the MPO decision-making process;
15. Fiscal capacity analysis; and
16. Consideration of the staff limitations and dispersion of suballocation should be incorporated in capacity building products and was assigned a medium priority.

It should be noted that many members of the group believed that research and products should be sensitive to variations in the sizes of the MPO audience. For example, while Transportation Management Area and small urban MPOs may face similar issues in their decision making and other processes, the mechanism for addressing those issues may be very different and occur in very different environments.

LONG-TERM TRB RESEARCH TOPICS

One of the purposes of the TRB Committee on Metropolitan Policy, Planning, and Processes is to identify research topics that will enhance the ability of MPOs to effectively and efficiently meet the current and future transportation needs of their communities. The participants developed a list of research topics that they believed would advance the state of the MPO decision-making practice.

Potential TRB research topics are as follows:

1. What types and forms of data should be made available at a geographic level most useful in the MPO decision-making process? Where is that data currently located (if it exists at all)? What are the appropriate mechanisms for making that data available to MPOs? What implications would improved data availability have for gauging the effectiveness of the MPO decision-making process?
2. How do MPOs currently gauge the effectiveness of their services using performance measures and how does the use of performance measures influence the decision-making process? Does the implementation of an evaluation system or process using performance measures, or both, provide accountability in the MPO decision-making process?
3. What are the various national models for MPO organization and funding, and how are they defined, regulated, and implemented at the state, regional, and local levels? Further, how are MPOs recognized legally from state to state? How can the effectiveness of various organizational and funding models be measured?
4. How are MPOs currently using market research and pubic opinion surveys in the MPO decision-making process? What is the impact relative to public accountability and measuring the effectiveness of the process?
5. What creates or determines a culture of leadership in an MPO, and how can that indigenous leadership be harnessed to make the MPO decision-making process more effective?
6. What is the appropriate approach for integrating freight considerations into the MPO decision-making process? Does the appropriate approach vary based on the size of the MPO, the scale of freight movement through a given metropolitan area, the various players in the freight movement market, or other factors in the movement of freight?

CONCLUSION

The first National MPO Peer Exchange included a wide-ranging discussion of the MPO decision-making process and more specifically the effectiveness of that process. Participants included many of the active stakeholders in the MPO decision-making process. It is hoped that the resulting list of short-term and long-term research needs reported in this Circular will advance the state of MPO practices across the country and provide MPOs of all sizes with usable input for improving their individual transportation planning practices.

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