

# Role of Metropolitan Planning Organizations in the 1980s

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## ABSTRACT

A new study by the U.S. Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations focuses on the adaptations in transit services, finances, institutions, and policy processes occasioned by current financial stress at all levels of government and by the devolution of national responsibilities to state and local governments. It was found in this study, in part, that (a) most metropolitan transportation planning organizations are now locally governed and staffed, (b) their planning is becoming increasingly isolated, less comprehensive, and shorter range, (c) some such organizations are experiencing strong pressure to decentralize or subregionalize, and (d) the desire for these organizations to exercise more effective areawide leadership is not matched with local approval of greater powers for them. It is concluded in the study that informal coordination techniques or new powers granted by state legislatures are the two most likely facilitators of improved metropolitan transportation leadership in the 1980s.

The U.S. Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR) has been studying metropolitan transit for slightly more than one year. The project has been sponsored by UMTA and its focus is on the adaptations in transit services, finances, institutions, and policy processes that might be needed because of (a) the financial stress that has been felt at every level of government and (b) the devolution of federal requirements and responsibilities to state and local governments. Presented in this paper is a summary of the findings relevant to the roles of the metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) officially designated to do the urban transportation planning and programming required by federal laws and regulations.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

The study is based on two original research efforts in addition to a fairly extensive literature search. The first such effort was a questionnaire survey of 56 metropolitan areas. In each of those areas (including one in every state except two), the survey targeted five different types of respondents: MPOs, the transit authorities, cities, counties, and transit unions. Each group expressed somewhat different views, enriching the study more than can be reflected in this brief presentation, although some of the differences between the way MPOs and the others saw the issues will be highlighted. The survey yielded 235 responses out of 302 that were sent, or 78 percent, a good response rate.

The other original research effort involved three case studies: New York, Chicago, and Seattle. These cases greatly enhanced the study team's ability to interpret the questionnaires.

Four of the major findings from this work are as follows:

- Most MPOs are now locally based, but the types of MPOs are still shifting.
- MPO planning is becoming increasingly isolated, less comprehensive, and shorter range.
- Some MPOs are under strong pressures to decentralize or subregionalize, at least in the larger metropolitan areas.

- The desire for more effective areawide leadership in transit affairs does not translate into a desire for a greater concentration of power at the metropolitan level.

An explanation of these findings follows.

## Types of MPOs

First, concerning types of MPOs, in 1972 42 percent were still under the thumb of the state department of transportation or highway agency; their work programs were state staffed. The percentage of that type of MPO has dropped to 4 percent at present, leaving 96 percent guided and staffed primarily by local officials.

The most frequent type of MPO now is the general-purpose regional council of governments that performs other areawide functions in addition to its MPO role; 55 percent of MPOs are in that category, although it used to be more. In the mid-1970s about 75 percent of MPOs were of this type when the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) was pushing hard to have most of the designated MPOs be the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Circular A-95 federal-aid review agency (1). However, when DOT pressure dropped off, so did the proportion of these designations. Even though the number of regional councils designated as MPOs is still growing, the total number of MPOs is growing even faster, and the regional councils are getting a smaller proportion of the new designations (Table 1).

The number of freestanding MPOs--those that are organized specifically for the MPO purpose and serve only that purpose--have leveled off and are declining slowly. These MPOs represented 3 percent of the total in 1972 and currently represent 15 percent, although they peaked at about 21 percent in 1980.

The MPOs that are designated within city or county governments are taking up the slack. These MPOs represented 18 percent of the total in 1972 and currently represent 25 percent. This trend probably results largely from the fact that many of the new MPOs are small and the city or the county may be the only government in the area with sufficient staff capacity to do this kind of technical work.

TABLE 1 Types of Section-134 Metropolitan (Transportation) Planning Organizations

Type of MPOs	1972 (2)		1976 (3)		1980 (4)		1983 <sup>a</sup>	
	No.	Percent	No.	Percent	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
Regional councils	81	37.2	205	82.3 <sup>b</sup>	152	58.9	179	54.6
City or county	38	17.4			44	17.1	83	25.3
Freestanding transportation study organization	7	3.2	30	12.1	54	20.9	52	15.8
State	92	42.2	14	5.6	8	3.1	14	4.3
Total	218	100.0	249	100.0	258	100.0	328	100.0

<sup>a</sup>MPO mailing list, supplied by U.S. Department of Transportation, September 26, 1983.

<sup>b</sup>Regional councils accounted for about 75 percent of all MPOs at their peak in the mid 1970s (7, p. 119).

### Environment of Metropolitan Planning

The second finding--that MPO planning is becoming increasingly isolated, less comprehensive, and shorter range--is supported by four trends. First, federal aid and federal requirements for metropolitan planning have declined dramatically in the past 3 years. The latest comprehensive study of the federal programs supporting regional planning at the metropolitan and substate levels showed that there were 39 such programs in 1979. Only one of those programs now remains untouched by termination, substantial budget reduction, and major deregulation. This greatly reduced federal impetus for regional planning leaves MPO planning isolated. DOT maintains the only substantial federal support for metropolitan land-use planning.

Especially significant in this federal withdrawal was the termination of the Section 701 comprehensive planning program from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Section 208 wastewater treatment planning from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Those two federal grant programs had strongly supported the land-use and comprehensive planning studies done by the regional-council-type of MPOs.

The second trend causing the growing isolation of MPO planning is that, as a result of the general decline in federal support, MPOs sought substitute revenues. They are receiving them mostly from state and local governments; however, these new funds are not for regional planning. They are instead directed toward supporting specific services for local governments--data services, sharing of specialized staff capacities among local governments that could not afford them individually, preparation of local plans by contract, achievement of economies of scale through joint purchasing, and a long list of other similar services. Thus, what is beginning to dominate the regional agenda are specific services to local governments, instead of planning.

The third trend diluting federally required urban transportation planning is that the added funds authorized by Congress for this purpose are being absorbed largely by the 70 new MPOs that have been created since 1980 as a result of the new census. In addition, those funds are having to pick up the land-use planning that previously had been funded by HUD, EPA, and other federal agencies. Therefore, the added money for MPO planning nationwide is not expanding the combined land-use and transportation planning programs of individual MPOs; in many cases, it is not even maintaining them at earlier levels.

The final trend that is deemphasizing areawide comprehensive planning is that much of the new transit planning money comes from the Section 9 block grant (Surface Transportation Assistance Act of 1982, P.L. 97-424) and in most cases does not go to the planning groups. Instead, it goes to the transit authorities. Although these funds may be transferred

from the transit authorities back to the MPOs (as a small amount already has been), most of it probably will not take this route. Even when it does, the tendency is for it to buy a specific service for the transit authority instead of to support general comprehensive planning. Examples of such services include a corridor study, a transit mall design, and other specific transit projects.

Thus, the tables have been turned on the MPOs. They used to receive all the federal transit planning money and then farm out some of it to the transit authorities for specific planning that was in line with the MPO's general planning. Now the added planning money is coming in through the transit authorities and the MPOs will have to serve the transit authorities' direct needs in order to get any of it. Consequently, to the extent that direct UMTA and FHWA funding of the MPOs may not be maintained, the MPOs increasingly can be expected to become servants of the transit authorities. In that situation, it would be increasingly difficult for an MPO to orchestrate areawide policies.

### Pressures to Decentralize Transportation Planning

The third basic finding highlighted in the study is that some of the MPOs are under strong pressures to decentralize or subregionalize. In all three metropolitan areas where ACIR prepared case studies, strong central-city versus suburb-equity questions were being raised about transit programs. Many such questions are settled by fair-share formula negotiations that establish major features of the transit system before planning even begins. How much sense does it make to plan the overall area after such formulas have fragmented it?

Moreover, the three principal federal requirements that were gluing metropolitan areas together are no longer there. Specifically, (a) the new federal regulations no longer require that MPOs be areawide; (b) there no longer have to be formal interagency agreements delineating the roles of the different groups involved in the unified planning work program; and (c) the federal requirement for interagency coordination of metropolitan planning resources that used to apply under OMB Circular A-95 has been dropped (1). It is too early to determine whether these loosened regulations will result in any significant changes in established practices, but they could.

In addition, the Section 9 planning funds as well as the Section 9 implementation funds and the urban system funds frequently go into a metropolitan area already subdivided by federal formulas. This was true in all three case study areas, and is also true in a number of other areas where the census-defined "urbanized-area" designations that drive the federal formulas do not match the metropolitan area or MPO boundaries. There also are 35 metropolitan areas

that are split by state lines, and federal funding is becoming increasingly oriented to the states.

In the three case study areas, these pressures to decentralize were evident. The New York region, instead of having one MPO (as it did for many years) now has nine. One of those MPOs is subdivided into 3 MPO subregions and 10 Section 9-designated transit block-grant recipients. It is at the smallest geographic area receiving federal funds that the transit project selection process begins. These selections are then fed up through subregional MPO committees to the MPO's executive committee and finally to the MPO's governing board. By that time, the project selections all have been decided. Therefore, if at that point the MPO decides that it wants to apply the regional plan, there is little countervailing federal pressure.

In Chicago, the Illinois-Indiana Bi-State Commission lost its funding and its staff last fall. That organization had been federally required in the early 1970s as a communication bridge between the two substate regions that share the greater-Chicago commuter market. It is not certain yet what is going to happen there, but the area has already suffered a serious setback in its areawide communication process.

In Seattle, there are four subregions within the MPO, and the basic project initiation process goes on within those subregions. Federal money is divided three ways by the urbanized area formulas before the project selection process begins.

This phenomenon is not unique. For example, certain state-dedicated revenues for transit in California are divided among the local governments within the San Francisco and Los Angeles metropolitan areas independent of the areawide plan. Thus, the pressures for subregionalization apply more broadly than in just the three ACIR case study areas.

#### Areawide Leadership Without Areawide Power?

The last finding highlighted in the study is that the strong desire for greater areawide leadership is not matched by any great desire for further concentration of power at the metropolitan level. The indicators used to measure desire for greater areawide leadership included a survey question about expanding the scope of MPO planning to encompass topics such as transit pricing, taxing, parking, deregulation of services, and enhanced public-private partnerships. About 53 percent of all respondents said that such an expansion would be a good idea.

A second indicator of the desire for greater areawide leadership was the need to establish a strategic planning process for an area's transit industry to examine the nature of services that should be provided in the future to meet changing conditions. About 83 percent of all survey respondents agreed with this suggestion.

In contrast to these desires for enhanced areawide leadership, however, ACIR found that the typical MPO now is largely a compiler of projects initiated by others as well as a constrainer of those projects. The MPOs apply the overall federal funding cap and try to get the number of projects down within that realistic funding range. Thus, rather than providing areawide leadership, the federally required transportation improvement program (TIP) prepared by the MPO basically confirms what is going on in the fragmented region.

In addition to investigating desires for greater areawide analysis, the ACIR survey tested a number of proposals that would enhance the powers of the MPOs and the transit authorities. A proposal to give MPOs more authority was rejected by about 75 percent

of all survey respondents, and a proposal to further consolidate transit authorities was rejected by two-thirds of the respondents.

It can be concluded that MPOs are seen, right now, as playing approximately the right role. The only areas in which there was a majority sentiment (57 percent of the respondents) for giving MPOs more power were the ones in which the city or county government held the MPO designation (25 percent of the cases). This probably says something about political legitimacy; that is, perhaps regional council and freestanding MPOs are not seen as legitimate parts of the political landscape.

The only transit agency reform that received a majority of support in the survey (53 percent) was one that called for separating the transit policy-making function from transit operations. Organizationally, such a setup would resemble the Regional Transportation Authority (RTA) in Chicago--an umbrella funding group for transit that operates relatively little of the service.

Regarding the next steps for improving metropolitan area coordination, the strongest survey support was for the ACIR survey proposal to use informal techniques more fully. Such techniques include temporary task forces, informal meetings and committees, and the sharing of staff expertise among cooperating agencies. This proposal was approved by 68 percent of all respondents. Thus, the primary hope for future coordination improvements in metropolitan transit--as viewed by officials at the local level--appears to rest with strengthened intergovernmental relationships rather than with a restructuring of the formal institutions in the area.

#### MPO Versus Other Views

Views of the MPOs differed from those of the average survey respondent on several points. Views of the MPOs more strongly favored expanding the scope of MPO planning, using strategic planning techniques, increasing MPO authority, and relying on informal coordination techniques. Therefore, the MPOs will try it both ways. If they cannot get more authority themselves, they will try the informal route.

MPO views were about average (i.e., highly negative) on ideas for further consolidating transit authorities and transferring transit responsibilities to either the county or the state level. These survey proposals drew almost no positive response from any group of respondents.

MPO support was weaker than that of other respondents for the idea of separating transit policy making from transit operations. Such a response was unexpected and remains unexplained unless, perhaps, the transit policy group is seen as an effective competitor for part of the MPO role.

#### CONCLUSION

The conclusion is that any substantial strengthening of metropolitan transportation powers probably would have to come from outside, not from the region itself. At present, that means that it would have to come from the state legislatures because federal influence is rapidly receding.

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Publication of this paper sponsored by Committee on Intergovernmental Relations and Policy Processes.

## Potential for a Full-Service Transit Agency

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### ABSTRACT

About 20 ridesharing programs out of a total of about 250 such programs in the United States are currently affiliated with public transit agencies. Such affiliation is a major step toward the advantages of a full-service transit agency, but its pros and cons need to be carefully considered by both the transit agency and the existing ridesharing program. Several aims sought by local ridesharing programs through their affiliation decision are identified and a similar scheme to assist in making affiliation decisions is offered; it is hypothesized that transit agencies will differ substantially in their ability to reach such affiliation goals. Results of a study of 13 ridesharing programs in transit agencies tend to confirm this hypothesis, although little quantitative evaluation information is available. Further study is recommended to remedy this lack of evaluation information and to consider the relative merits of (a) close cooperation between ridesharing and transit agencies and (b) the option of merging these two types of programs.

About 250 ridesharing programs are currently organized and providing services to employers and the public in cities across the United States. Before the 1973 oil embargo, there were no such programs in the country. Now their influence extends into most large employers, many of whom have designated transportation coordinators to help their own staff get to work with more reliability, sociability, and energy efficiency plus reduced effects on traffic congestion.

Concurrently with the increase in the number of ridesharing programs, the cost of public transit has risen rapidly. For example, total U.S. transit expenses increased by 12 percent per year between 1972 and 1980 while ridership increased by only 3 percent per year, resulting in a quintupling of transit deficits, from \$0.5 to \$2.6 billion. Increasing transit costs and deficits and the slowing or reversal of ridership increases have led to a vigorous search for countermeasures, among which the full-service transit agency is an important example.

A full-service transit agency serves a diversified travel market with correspondingly diversified resources, providing regular fixed-route bus service in areas of higher trip density and demand-oriented service such as ridesharing assistance where that would be a more economical solution. The full-service transit agency concept has also been referred to as the new partnership between public and private

agencies in providing transportation services (1,p.13):

The driving force behind the new private-public agency concept is cost-effectiveness, with the increasing knowledge that the full-blown public approach is proving too costly and inflexible to serve many of the small and unique trip demands that make up so much of today's urban scene. The time-honored business practice of market segmentation is being applied--finding the right product for each segment.

The private-public transit agency will support company-based vanpools, contract with private carriers including taxi operators where they are the most cost-effective modes, provide a computerized service to "match" persons interested in carpooling, and orchestrate the many special transportation services provided by social service agencies. It will support parking-management programs, special traffic lanes for all multi-passenger vehicles, and new programs for staggered or flexible work hours to relieve peaks of traffic congestion. It will work closely with the business community on joint financing of facilities and services and on coordinated proposals for new govern-