

Minnesota's Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act Area Transportation Partnerships: A Substate, Multicounty Geographic Basis for Making Transportation Investment Decisions

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Some of the actions taken during Minnesota's implementation of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) are summarized. The focus is on the development of area transportation partnerships (ATPs). The establishment of ATPs was a central tenet in the development of the first state transportation improvement program (STIP). This transportation investment process is but one model for the implementation of ISTEA and the development of a STIP. Minnesota introduced the concept of ATP as a substate, multicounty geographic basis for transportation investment decisions. The partnerships depend on cooperation between all modes and state and local transportation interests. ATPs consist of a combination of local elected officials, local transportation planning representatives, and state transportation officials. These officials work, where possible, through existing organizations, such as the Minnesota Department of Transportation (Mn/DOT) districts, metropolitan planning organizations, and regional development organizations. The boundaries selected for the partnerships are based on the Mn/DOT state-aid districts, which respect county lines. The ATPs are responsible for integrating the priorities for highway and transit capital activities using federal aid for highways into a draft areawide transportation improvement program (ATIP). Draft ATIPs include a prioritized list of projects to aid in solving transportation problems and implementing the long-range objectives for the area. Each ATP is responsible for submitting an ATIP to Mn/DOT. Mn/DOT evaluates each ATIP for consistency, determines the appropriate funding level, and consolidates them into the STIP.

This paper summarizes some of the actions taken during the implementation of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) in Minnesota. This transportation investment process is one model for the implementation of ISTEA and the development of a state transportation improvement program (STIP). The focus was on the development of the first STIP. The establishment of area transportation partnerships (ATPs) was a central tenet in the development of the STIP.

Within Minnesota, the federal highway aid expended during the 1992 federal fiscal year included funds made available under both the old (pre-1992) federal aid programs and the new ISTEA programs. A conscious decision was made to opt for a modest transition period and continue the old way of doing business during fiscal year 1992. The spending plan developed for 1993 was in many ways a transition into a new way of doing business. The 1993

spending plan was reviewed by the Minnesota Department of Transportation (Mn/DOT) Modal Integration Council (representing all modes). The department's district offices shared the spending plan with constituencies that included the metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) and regional development organizations (RDOs). This review became part of the transition strategy.

The department chose to involve a broad cross section of transportation professionals, elected officials, special-interest groups, and the public in defining the directions for this new way of doing business. A statewide workshop was convened in May 1992 to create a forum to share information and build understanding among the many groups with interest in transportation issues. The workshop was attended by about 160 individuals with diverse backgrounds. The workshop shared ideas, explored possibilities, and investigated strategies for implementing ISTEA. A strong message throughout these sessions was a desire for local influence in transportation investment decisions.

Many requests, both formal and informal, called for a geographic focus to transportation decisions through public participation. Public response, however, on geographic decision making did not create a consensus on how to do it. Diverse suggestions emerged for implementing ISTEA. A new method for decision making emerged that expanded the role of local entities while maintaining some of the familiar ways of the past. Mn/DOT developed a substate geographic basis for transportation investment decisions. This was consistent with internal consensus on the district role in planning and programming.

AREA TRANSPORTATION PARTNERSHIPS

During 1993, the department began implementing this cooperative regional approach to making transportation investment decisions. Figure 1 displays the partnerships and activities necessary to produce a STIP.

What Are Area Transportation Partnerships?

Creating ATPs within the state provided a regional framework for prioritizing investments in the transportation system. Satisfying regional transportation priorities was the objective across the state. The partnerships foster improved relationships and participation

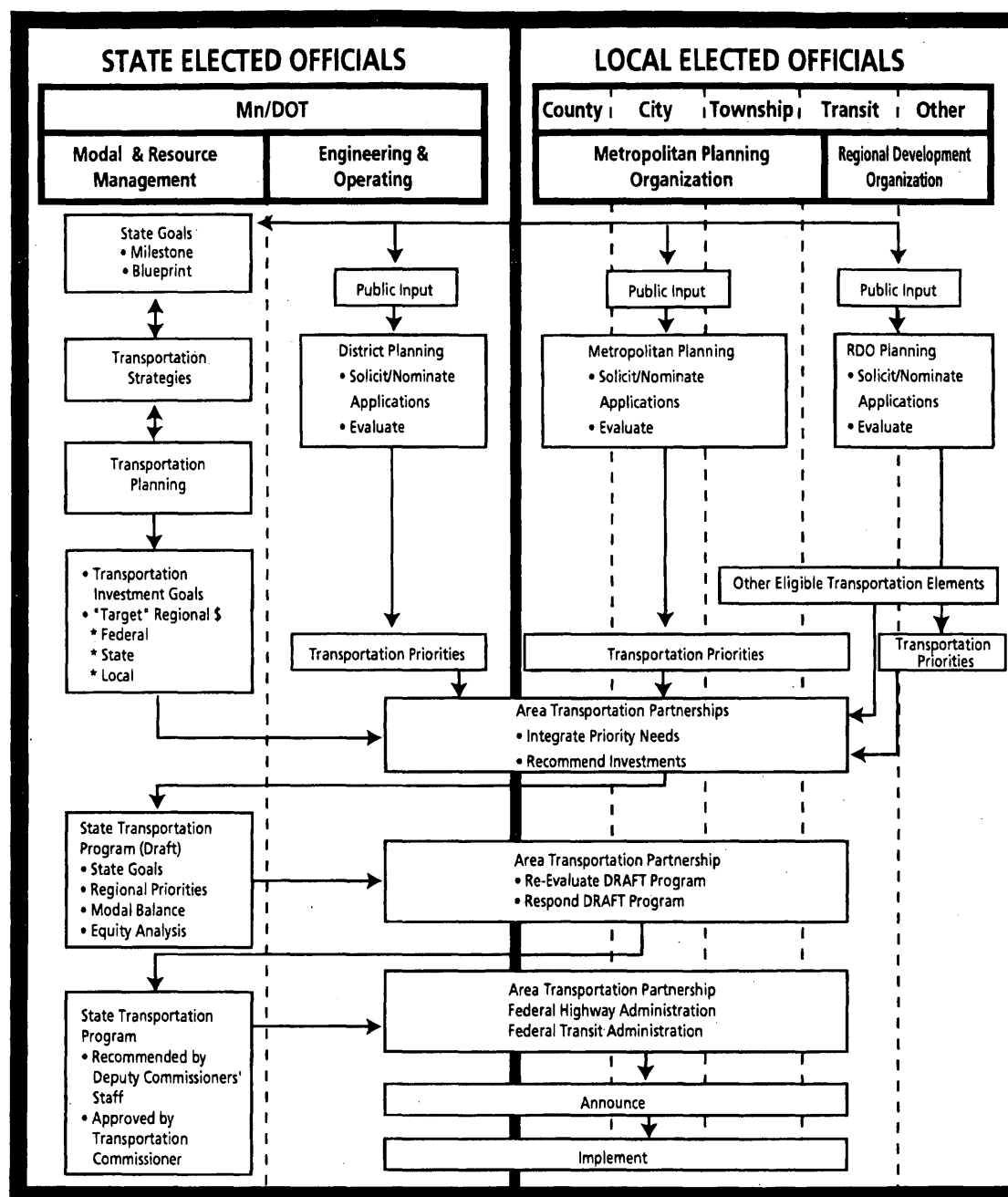


FIGURE 1 Transportation investment process.

between state and local interests. They integrate priority needs for the area and recommend investments and solutions to transportation issues.

The partnerships take their principal form from the guiding tenets of ISTEA—the cooperation between all modes and all state and local transportation interests. Membership consists of a combination of local elected officials, local transportation planning representatives, and state transportation officials. These officials work, where possible, through existing organizations such as Mn/DOT districts, MPOs, and RDOs.

The typical ATP represents a Mn/DOT district, one to three RDOs, an MPO, and special interests. The partnership includes

local officials responsible for transit operations in urbanized, small urban, and rural areas. The focus for future years is to include more elected officials and special interests.

The ATP built on the transportation planning structure that was in place or was being implemented in Minnesota. MPOs and RDOs exist in most areas and cooperated in the processes used for making decisions. They represent local government and include local elected officials who are accountable for the decisions. Using existing organizations and planning processes ensures broad-based involvement in transportation decisions.

The ATP boundaries follow county lines. The boundaries selected for the partnerships were based on the Mn/DOT state-aid

district boundary. The use of state-aid district boundaries aids the district in the coordination and staffing of the ATPs. Similar arrangements were established where there were no functioning RDOs. Where counties experienced a district-RDO boundary overlap, the affected counties were able to choose a permanent ATP based on the RDO or Mn/DOT district area.

What Are the Duties and Responsibilities of ATPs?

ATPs were critical to implementing ISTEA in Minnesota. The partnerships respond to the request for more local authority and responsibility for transportation decision making. Implementing ISTEA included developing a new integrated process for transportation investment decisions based on prioritizing transportation needs. The process ensures all eligible interest groups access to planning and decision making and fair evaluation of eligible proposals.

The ATP considers the federal transportation investment for transportation-related activities within its geographic boundary. The partnership, in integrating state and local priorities, recommends the areawide investment in transportation activities for all federal highway funds within its area. ATPs recommend a project schedule for all federal highway formula funds, recommend a realistic schedule for federal demonstration projects, and consider requests for allocated federal aid highway funds in developing the regional priorities.

Draft areawide transportation improvement programs (ATIPs) include a prioritized list of projects that aid in solving transportation problems and in implementing the long-range objectives for the area. Developing an ATIP begins with a target funding level based on the ATP's estimated share of state and federal transportation funding. A target funding level is a place to start the process, not the answer to a funding question. Targets are not allocations but are funding estimates used to assist in planning and establishing priorities. The ATP considers all sources of funding—federal, state, state aid, and local—in developing an ATIP.

The transportation investment process is driven by a declaration of statewide goals and objectives and those transportation strategies and directions described in national and state legislation. The statewide investment goals are drawn from statewide planning and policy studies and are to be used as an aid in determining priorities. The principal emphasis of the goals is to preserve and manage existing transportation systems.

Mn/DOT considered draft ATIPs prepared by each ATP for the STIP. The ATIPs were evaluated for consistency with state transportation investment goals. The eight ATIPs were consolidated into a preliminary STIP. Fiscal adjustments are made for regional priorities and statewide balance in developing a draft STIP. The ATPs reviewed and commented on the draft STIP. After considering the ATP comments and recommended adjustments, the STIP was forwarded to the Mn/DOT commissioner for review and approval. The STIP was then forwarded to FHWA and FTA for review and concurrence.

The STIP for 1994–1996 was approved in March 1994 by FHWA and FTA. The STIP was analyzed by Mn/DOT and actions recommended for future STIPs were brought to the attention of the district and ATP.

This procedure ensures that new partners, new programs, small programs, and required spending limit programs are dealt with by the ATPs. A status report on how the ATP process worked was pre-

pared. The analysis alerted ATPs to what funds were in danger of lapsing (possibly requiring more emphasis in future ATIPs), and what needed to be done to keep the ATIP in balance so that the future year(s) would not be constrained by the need to meet required minimum ISTEA spending levels.

EVALUATION OF THE FIRST YEAR

The department conducted four regional ISTEA-ATP workshops in various locations throughout the state in late 1993. The participants of these workshops represented the RDOs, MPOs, local elected city and county officials, Mn/DOT, other state and federal agencies, and local businesses and interested parties. The purpose of these workshops was to discuss a number of issues regarding ATPs and the ISTEA implementation process that were raised during development of the first STIP.

The issues discussed were grouped into four main categories. Each category included several individual subcategories. The four main categories were

- *ATPs*—makeup, membership, role, decision-making process, and boundaries;
- *Targets*—their basis, who develops them, and what funds are included and amounts;
- *Equity*—what is equity in terms of how funding is awarded to the ATP areas and how it is applied; and
- *Special programs*—what the ATP responsibilities are regarding special programs, and how special program needs can compete with the traditional highway programs.

A draft summary of recommended answers and actions was forwarded to the Mn/DOT district offices for review and comment. The comments regarding external issues discussed at the regional workshops and internal issues identified during ISTEA interoffice meetings were used in the development of guidelines and/or procedures for the ATPs and Mn/DOT to follow in developing the 1995–1997 STIP.

CONCLUSION

ISTEA has afforded Mn/DOT the opportunity to continue a movement toward increased and ongoing public involvement in decision making. The state's transportation investment process is a part of the department's emphasis on a strategic management process. The strategic management process integrates transportation planning and programming into the long-term economic future of the state.

The creation of ATPs led to the development of an integrated process for making transportation investment decisions in Minnesota at a regional level. It has encouraged the RDOs and Mn/DOT districts to enhance their transportation planning activities so that in combination with already-established MPO planning processes, they provide for a truly integrated process for developing regional ATIPs. The key factors in developing the process include flexibility, transferability, predictability, and cooperation.

The basic principles guiding the process are the following:

- A statement of statewide goals, objectives, and strategies;
- Comprehensive planning with local, regional, and state involvement;

- Planning for all modes of transportation integrated into the process;
- Multicounty geographic regions as the basis for investment decisions;
- An emphasis on the preservation and management of existing transportation systems;
- Flexible regional funding targets;
- Prioritized areawide transportation investments;
- Fairness, equity, and accessibility; and
- Use of ISTEA management systems to assist in planning and priority decisions.

Mn/DOT will evaluate equity (highway-transit-other, state-local, passenger-freight, rural-urban, intermodal and geographic activities) at the end of each funding period. The equity analysis may be a factor in state investment recommendations. The cycle will be repeated annually until there is enough familiarity to extend it to a 2-year process.

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