

## Case Study Findings on Metropolitan Planning Organizations

*Bruce D. McDowell, U.S. Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations*



It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to discuss the case study findings on MPOs. I would like to briefly describe the key elements of the study, a few of the major findings and our recommendations. I hope the study results will help to stimulate your thinking as you start the workshop session this afternoon.

The study conducted by the Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR) was initiated to coincide with this conference. The purpose of the study was to identify the type of help MPOs and others involved in the metropolitan transportation planning process needed to respond in a more effective and more timely manner to the requirement of the ISTEA. The results are intended to be used to assist in the development of a capacity building program focused on the identified needs.

The study started by examining a number of assumptions related to the metropolitan transportation planning process. One of the basic assumptions of the study was that the roles and responsibilities of MPOs continue to increase. Another related assumption was that the ISTEA has been a driving force in enhancing the roles of MPOs. The major changes resulting from the ISTEA were also noted. First, as a result of the ISTEA, MPOs must be more inclusive and must provide more opportunities for all groups to participate in the transportation planning process. Second, MPOs must develop stronger working relationships with the other groups involved in the planning process. Third, improvements are needed in the technical tools used in the planning process to meet the requirements of the ISTEA. Finally, the ISTEA envisions that MPOs will become more effective political bodies.

The study also started with the realization that all of the

339 MPOs are not alike. Rather, we started with the hypothesis that one size does not fit all. The ISTEA recognizes four different types of MPOs. These are large metropolitan areas that meet the EPA air quality regulations, large metropolitan areas that do not meet the air quality standards, small metropolitan areas in air quality attainment, and small metropolitan air quality non-attainment areas. Thus, the study recognized that MPOs would require different types of help to meet the ISTEA requirements.

The study further started with a realization that there were many other studies focusing on the changing roles of MPOs and that MPO staff were being asked to respond to numerous questionnaires and surveys. We were able to utilize these other studies, and the final report provides a summary of them.

The two key objectives of the study were to review the existing literature and the status of other studies and to conduct additional interviews with representatives from selected MPOs. Interviews were conducted with representatives from 18 MPOs. The MPOs were selected to provide a mix of sizes, air quality attainment status, age, and geographical locations. In each case, approximately a dozen interviews were conducted with MPO staff and board members, state department of transportation officials, federal agency representatives, transit agency personnel, and citizen group members.

The interviews focused on three general questions—what changes have been made since the ISTEA was enacted, what difficulties have been encountered in trying to make these changes, and what kind of assistance is needed to help meet the new requirements. The questions were asked in an open-ended fashion.

The results from the interviews provide an interesting perspective on the status of activities at the various MPOs and the type of assistance identified as needed. A number of changes were identified as a result of the ISTEA. Increased public participation was the most frequently noted change. Improved air quality analysis procedures were also noted in many areas. The ISTEA requirements had further enhanced intergovernmental coordination in over half the MPOs contacted. Improved relationships between the MPO and the state department of transportation were noted by just under half of the respondents. The consideration of intermodal issues in the planning process was also noted, along with increased attention to long-range planning. Thus, progress is being made in many metropolitan areas.

Conversely, almost all of the respondents indicated that increased regulatory burdens and workload levels led the difficulties in responding to the ISTEA requirements. Other problems noted included unachievable expectations, uncoordinated deadlines, disrupted relationships within the

MPO, and strained relationships with the state departments of transportation.

A number of responses were provided to the question on what type of assistance is needed to better respond to the requirements of ISTEA. For example, many of the respondents noted that help was needed in determining ways to address the freight planning requirements of the ISTEA. Conducting transportation impact analysis of the various social, economic, and environmental justice issues represents another area noted for assistance.

The third question focused on the type of help MPOs would find of benefit. The top ten most frequently made suggestions were clearer federal regulations, educational efforts for citizens and elected officials on the ISTEA provisions, increased funding for projects, flexibility to coordinate the ISTEA deadlines with local requirements, training in public participation programs and techniques, enhanced coordination among federal agencies, facilitation of flexible funding, research and information concerning the required management systems, development of a best practices clearinghouse, and more training opportunities for staff.

A total of 58 suggestions for additional assistance were provided by the respondents. These results were used to identify six different potential approaches for providing help. These included research, information, training, regulatory change, technical assistance, and additional resources. Regardless of the delivery method, eight common themes related to additional assistance were identified. These were intergovernmental cooperation, data and quantitative analysis, planning strategies and methods, the funding process, the public involvement process, requirements for financially constrained plans, implementation techniques, and prioritizing projects within the TIP.

The study concluded with six recommendations to help build the capacity of MPOs to meet the requirements of the ISTEA. The first suggests that the U.S. Department of Transportation develop a comprehensive capacity building program. The second and third recommendations build on this theme by suggesting a more supportive U.S. Department of Transportation restructuring and regulatory relief. The fourth recommendation was for the development of an ISTEA mediation, conciliation, and peer review service. The last two suggestions focused on including state departments of transportation and MPOs in the capacity building process.

In conclusion, a common theme emerging from the study was that MPOs and other agencies want help and assistance in meeting the ISTEA requirements, not further regulations. I hope the results of this study will stimulate discussion in the workshop session. Further, I hope the findings and recommendations will assist in the ongoing

discussion of the roles and responsibilities of MPOs and the other agencies and groups involved in the metropolitan transportation planning process.

This discussion has taken on new urgency because of the prospects for the shrinking federal role and the shrinking federal dollar that we heard described at the beginning of this conference.

### **Innovative Practices for Multimodal Transportation Planning for Freight and Passengers**

*Matthew Coogan, Transportation Consultant*

---

I am pleased to be participating in this conference. I would like to briefly describe a study that is just getting started and to ask for your help with the project. The study is part of NCHRP Project 8-32. There are five major components to this project. The element I will be discussing is examining innovative practices in multimodal planning. Other parts of the project include the development of a performance based planning process, the examination of integrating land use into the multimodal planning process, guidance on the development of multimodal partnerships, and the assessment of data needs in multimodal planning.

The NCHRP panel defined seven major focus areas for this study. These include statewide planning and the reorganization of statewide units for more effective multimodal planning, regional programming for multimodalism, multimodal planning consideration for compliance with the Clean Air Act Amendments, management systems and performance measurements, innovative methods of public involvement, rural applications of multimodal planning, and the financial constraints of multimodal planning.

A number of activities have been initiated on the project. First, we have started by reviewing current literature, studies, and presentations. We are developing a database with the results of this review to document current practices in multimodal planning. This information has been combined with the TRIS database to provide a comprehensive source of information on multimodal planning. The current database includes approximately 700 references. Separate bibliographies have been developed for each of the seven focus areas.

This database should provide a valuable resource for anyone interested in advancing multimodal planning and project development. Further, it should help facilitate the ongoing sharing information on best practices and project experience. We would welcome any ideas and suggestions you might have on good examples to include in the database.