



UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

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COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT DIVISION

B-206409

MARCH 10, 1982

The Honorable John L. Burton, Chairman
The Honorable Ted Weiss
Subcommittee on Government Activities
and Transportation
Committee on Government Operations
House of Representatives



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Subject: Economy, Efficiency, and Effectiveness of
Metropolitan Planning Organizations (CED-82-47)

This report responds to your joint request of June 1,
1981, asking that we do two things:

- Study the role and function of Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPO's) in urban and regional transportation planning to determine whether they are economical, efficient, and effective.
- Review the procedures the Tri-State Regional Planning Commission (the MPO for the New York City metropolitan area) followed in approving the I-478 (Westway) highway project to determine whether the Commission was complying with Federal laws and regulations when it approved this project.

Your letter also expressed concern that MPO's may be focusing unduly on excessive and duplicative paperwork and formal regulations, inadequately concerned with substantive long-range planning and policy coordination, and insufficiently accountable for their actions and decisions.

OBJECTIVES, SCOPE, AND METHODOLOGY

To address these concerns, we visited 12 urbanized areas with populations over 200,000 and interviewed Federal, State, and local officials and MPO staffs involved in transportation planning for these urbanized areas. In addition, we reviewed several studies of MPO's; and interviewed Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and Urban Mass Transportation Administration (UMTA) headquarters and regional officials, representatives of associations, transit operators, and university professors. Enclosure I lists the agencies and organizations

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we contacted. Our review was performed in accordance with our "Standards for Audit of Governmental Organizations, Programs, Activities, and Functions."

Your questions concerning the Tri-State Regional Planning Commission's approval of the Westway highway project are the subject of a separate GAO review which we will be reporting on later.

On December 7, 1981, we briefed your office on our findings, explaining that:

- Although nearly all the officials we contacted who expressed an opinion believed that the planning process could be simplified and documentation requirements streamlined, there was no consensus about how requirements and documents should be changed.
- The adequacy of long-range planning does not appear to be a major issue, although some MPO's are having difficulty developing realistic plans because of funding uncertainties.
- MPO accountability varied because local areas have discretion in how much authority and responsibility they give to MPO's. Generally, responsibility for actions and decisions regarding plans and project programing was shared among MPO's and the State and local implementing agencies.

We also discussed our concerns relating to the absence of measurable objectives, FHWA's and UMTA's role in the planning process, and methods for allocating planning funds.

We also noted that FHWA and UMTA were obtaining the recommendations of State and local officials as part of their comprehensive review of the planning process. This review, which is to be completed in April 1982, is focused on

- defining a reduced Federal role in the planning process,
- reevaluating technical and document requirements, and
- reevaluating the way in which the planning process is funded.

FHWA and UMTA are addressing the issues identified during our work. Also, because of their review, the relatively small amount of Federal funds spent on transportation planning (\$80 to \$90 million annually) and the cost involved in determining the nationwide effects of planning process deficiencies, we agreed with your office not to initiate a detailed nationwide review but instead to summarize our work to date in this report.

METROPOLITAN PLANNING ORGANIZATIONS

MPO's are responsible for carrying out the requirements of the transportation planning process in cooperation with State and local governments. MPO's are intended to be a forum for cooperative decisionmaking by locally elected government officials.

Federal transportation planning funds are provided primarily by FHWA and UMTA. FHWA allocates funds to the States, which then reallocate the funds to each urbanized area within the State. UMTA funds, however, usually go directly to the MPO's. In fiscal year 1981, FHWA and UMTA provided about \$80 million for transportation planning; UMTA provided about \$45 million (56 percent).

The 12 MPO's we visited varied in size, organization, and responsibilities. Enclosure II provides a comparison of selected characteristics of the MPO's we visited. Following are some examples of the differences we found.

- In five urbanized areas, the MPO was responsible only for transportation planning. In the other areas, such as Atlanta, the MPO was also the regional planning agency for some other Federal programs, such as solid waste management.
- In 11 areas, locally elected officials serve on the MPO boards. However, in Portland, Oregon, the public elects board members.
- In six areas, only elected officials were voting members of the MPO. Voting members in the other areas varied and included, for example, State Department of Transportation representatives, city managers, transit operators, and citizens.

FHWA AND UMTA ARE REVIEWING THE URBAN TRANSPORTATION PLANNING PROCESS

FHWA and UMTA are reviewing the urban transportation planning process to determine what changes should be made. FHWA and UMTA's overall theme is: "What is the appropriate Federal role in urban transportation planning?" This review is expected to be completed by April 1982.

FHWA and UMTA's review has three phases. Phase I, completed in December 1981, resulted in an issues and options paper which was based on reviews of past and current studies and comments on previous regulation proposals. The paper is divided into three parts. Part I addresses overall policy questions, such as what are the goals of the process, its benefits, costs, and relationships to other programs? Part II focuses on major issues

perceived by FHWA and UMTA and proposes options for consideration. Part III asks for responses to four major questions, such as "What do you think is the appropriate Federal role in urban transportation?", and any other comments the reader may wish to make.

Phase II involved soliciting comments on the issues and options paper, particularly from groups directly affected, such as the National Association of Regional Councils, the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, and the American Public Transit Association. The issues and options paper was available for review and comment to MPO's and others on December 17, 1981. The closing date for comments was January 29, 1981.

Phase III will complete the review by recommending to the Secretary of Transportation the action FHWA and UMTA should take and will include an implementation package. Phase III is scheduled to be completed in April 1982.

VIEWS ON PAPERWORK
REQUIREMENTS DIFFERED

Nearly all the Federal, State, local, and MPO officials we contacted who expressed an opinion believed that the planning process could be simplified and the documentation requirements streamlined. However, no consensus existed about how requirements or documents should be changed. FHWA and UMTA are evaluating the Federal documentation requirements as part of their comprehensive review of the urban transportation planning process.

The planning and programing documents required by Federal regulations include a:

- Transportation plan, having both short-range and long-range objectives. This plan must be reviewed and endorsed annually.
- Transportation improvement program, which is a staged multi-year (at least 3 years) listing of projects consistent with the transportation plan. The improvement program must contain a detailed listing of all projects to be implemented with Federal funds. However, projects included in the highway safety improvement program can be excluded at the State's option. The program is prepared annually and amended as needed.
- Unified planning work program describing all the urban transportation and transportation-related activities anticipated in the next 1- to 2-year period. The work program is prepared annually and serves as a basis for Federal funding.

Complaints about excessive paperwork and regulation generally focused on two programs--the unified planning work program and the transportation improvement program--although officials' views differed. For example, an official from the Southern California Association of Governments (the MPO for Los Angeles, California) believed that preparing the unified planning work program annually left little time for the association to evaluate what it had accomplished because the planning cycle for the next year begins soon after the current year's work program is approved.

Local officials in three Virginia urbanized areas believed that the State Department of Transportation selected projects for implementation from the transportation improvement program regardless of MPO priorities. Local officials from the two Florida urbanized areas we visited also noted strong State Department of Transportation influence.

On the other hand, other officials had favorable comments about the unified planning work program and transportation improvement program. For example, an Atlanta MPO official described both highway and transit projects which were more acceptable to local governments because of project modifications made during the transportation improvement program process. This official also indicated that the modifications were cost effective.

As part of their overall review of the urban transportation process, FHWA and UMTA are looking at several issues related to Federal planning requirements. For example, in their issues and options paper they asked the following questions.

- Should there be a change in the current statutory requirement that there be a federally mandated planning process in every urbanized area regardless of size and complexity of problems?
- Should there be a change in the relationship between the urban transportation planning process and project implementation procedures? Should the provisions relating to the transportation improvement program be changed?
- What technical activities should be included in the urban transportation planning process and who should determine the activities to be included?

LONG-RANGE PLANNING CONSIDERED
DIFFICULT BY SOME MPO'S

Each of the 12 MPO's we visited was required to prepare long-range plans. Officials from five MPO's expressed concern over how realistic these plans are considering the uncertainty over the future availability of Federal, State, and local funds.

Four of these five MPO's have taken steps to deal with these uncertainties. In Atlanta, the MPO updates the long-range plan yearly based on new data. The Los Angeles MPO's long-range plan shows alternative priorities based on various funding scenarios. The two Florida MPO's prepare both a long-range plan designed to fully meet the area's projected transportation needs and a realistic plan based on expected available funding.

EXTENT OF MPO
ACCOUNTABILITY VARIES

Accountability for actions and decisions among the MPO's we visited varies. To meet statutory requirements, the Department of Transportation has mandated that MPO's be established. However, to allow State and local governments the flexibility needed to deal with each urbanized area's unique characteristics, the Department did not give MPO's sole authority and responsibility for transportation planning. Responsibility for actions and decisions regarding plans and project programming in the urbanized areas we visited was shared by MPO's and the State and local agencies, such as State highway agencies and transit operators.

The following examples illustrate some of the differences among the MPO's we visited.

- The Richmond, Virginia, MPO has limited programming authority. The Virginia Department of Highways and Transportation has responsibility for statewide transportation planning, programming, and implementation. The MPO and the Department of Highways and Transportation cooperate in preparing the programming document--the transportation improvement program. However, both MPO and the Virginia highway officials told us that once the transportation improvement program is approved the State determines project selection and priorities.
- In contrast, the Atlanta, Georgia, MPO has more influence over programming decisions. The Georgia Department of Transportation officials told us their department also has responsibility for statewide transportation planning, programming, and implementation, but that Georgia's law requires the department to work with the MPO to develop project priorities. These officials told us that the department nearly always accepts the programming decisions approved by the MPO even if the department disagrees.

FHWA AND UMTA'S REVIEW OF THE
PLANNING PROCESS COVERS KEY ISSUES

The following are the major questions we identified affecting the economy, efficiency, and effectiveness of MPO's. FHWA and UMTA are addressing these questions in their review.

- What does the Federal Government expect to achieve by funding the planning process and what is the best way to measure whether the objectives are being achieved?
- What should FHWA's and UMTA's role be in the process and how should they relate to the State agencies and the MPO's?
- Should planning funds be based on need or allocated by formula?

Presently, Federal objectives are incorporated in regulations as elements that areas must consider when developing their plans. However, the objectives are usually specified in general terms as items "to be considered" or "provided for" rather than as specific objectives.

The Department of Transportation's current study is intended to redefine the Federal role in the planning process and then review how technical and mandatory requirements would be implemented under this role. According to FHWA and UMTA officials responsible for the study, the technical and mandatory requirements are the way Federal objectives get specified and that in evaluating how to specify these requirements, they will consider what is the best way to measure whether the objectives are achieved.

State and local officials expressed concern about the different ways FHWA and UMTA interacted with them. For example, local MPO officials in Atlanta, Georgia, and Miami, Florida, noted that they had direct access to UMTA but expressed concern about having to deal with FHWA through their State Departments of Transportation. State Department of Transportation officials in Georgia, Pennsylvania, and Virginia told us that they generally liked their working relationships with FHWA but, in some cases, were not comfortable with MPO's being able to work directly with UMTA.

In a 1979 report ^{1/} we recommended that the Department of Transportation integrate the planning and review functions of FHWA and UMTA so that State and local officials receive more consistent direction and that the planning process could be reviewed from a total perspective. We believe that this is still a valid issue. FHWA and UMTA are addressing this issue in their current review.

Currently, UMTA allocates funds to urbanized areas using a formula based on past population size rather than criteria related to how much planning the urbanized area needs to do. We agree with MPO officials in Orlando, Florida, who told us that using a past population formula tends to put growing areas, which seem to have a greater need for comprehensive planning, at a

^{1/}"Stronger Federal Direction Needed To Promote Better Use of Present Urban Transportation System" (CED-79-126, Oct. 4, 1979).

disadvantage. FHWA and UMTA are addressing the issue of funding in their review and appear open to considering changes to the funding system.

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We hope this information is helpful to you. If we can be of further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact us.



Henry Eschwege
Director

AGENCIES AND ORGANIZATIONS

GAO CONTACTED

Federal Highway Administration

- Headquarters
- Region III - Baltimore, Maryland
 - Division Office, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania
- Region IV - Atlanta, Georgia
 - Division Office, Tallahassee, Florida
- Region IX - San Francisco, California
 - Division Office, Sacramento, California
- Region X - Portland, Oregon
 - Division Office, Salem, Oregon
 - Division Office, Olympia, Washington

Urban Mass Transportation Administration

- Headquarters
- Region IV - Atlanta, Georgia
- Region IX - San Francisco, California
- Region X - Seattle, Washington

California

- Los Angeles urbanized area
 - Southern California Association of Governments
 - Los Angeles County Transportation Commission
 - Orange County Transportation Commission
 - California Department of Transportation District #7
 - City of Los Angeles
 - County of Los Angeles
 - Southern California Rapid Transit District

- Sacramento urbanized area
 - Sacramento Area Council of Governments
 - California Department of Transportation
 - California Transportation Commission

- San Diego urbanized area
 - San Diego Association of Governments
 - City of San Diego
 - County of San Diego
 - Metropolitan Transit Development Board
 - San Diego Transit Corporation
 - City of Escondido

University of California
Berkeley, Institute of Transportation Studies
Irvine, Institute of Transportation Studies

Florida

Miami urbanized area
Dade County
Metropolitan Planning Organization for the
Miami Urbanized Area

Orlando urbanized area
East Central Florida Regional Planning Council
Commissioner, Orange County

Tallahassee
Florida Department of Transportation

Georgia

Atlanta urbanized area
Atlanta Regional Commission
City of Atlanta
Fulton County
Georgia Department of Transportation

Maryland

Baltimore urbanized area
Regional Planning Council
Maryland Department of Transportation

Oregon

Portland urbanized area
Metropolitan Service District
Oregon Department of Transportation, Portland Office

Salem
Oregon Department of Transportation, Salem Office

Pennsylvania

Harrisburg
Pennsylvania Department of Transportation

Virginia

Hampton urbanized area

Peninsula Area Metropolitan Planning Organization

Norfolk urbanized area

Southeastern Virginia Metropolitan Planning Organization

Richmond urbanized area

Chesterfield County Board of Supervisors

Richmond Area Metropolitan Transportation Planning Organization

Virginia Department of Highways and Transportation

Washington

Seattle urbanized area

Puget Sound Council of Governments

City of Seattle

Metro (transit operator)

Washington Department of Transportation

University of Washington, Seattle

Department of Urban Planning

Others

National Association of Regional Councils

National Association of Counties

COMPARISON OF SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS OF MPO'S VISITED

<u>MPO by Federal region</u>	<u>Governments participating in MPO</u>	<u>MPO voting members (other than elected officials)</u>	<u>Relationship with other planning agency</u>	<u>Responsibilities other than transportation planning</u>
<u>Region III</u>				
<u>Maryland</u>				
<u>Baltimore</u> Regional Planning Council and Maryland Department of Transportation	1 major city 13 municipalities 5 counties	Citizen representation	The Council is the comprehensive regional planning agency for the area. The Council and the Department are jointly designated as the MPO.	Yes
<u>Virginia</u>				
<u>Hampton</u> Peninsula Area MPO	4 cities 2 counties	Chief Administrative Officers Planning District Commission VA Dept. of Hwys. and Transportation Transit operators	Transportation Policy Committee of Planning District Commission is designated MPO. Staff is shared with Commission.	No
<u>Norfolk</u> Southeastern Virginia MPO	5 cities	City Managers Planning District Commission VA Dept. of Hwys. and Transportation Transit operators	Transportation Policy Committee of Planning District Commission is designated MPO. Staff is shared with Commission.	No
<u>Richmond</u> Richmond Area Metropolitan Transportation Planning Organization	1 major city 4 counties	Planning District Commission VA Dept. of Hwys. and Transportation Metropolitan Authority Airport Commission Transit operator Local jurisdiction technical representatives	MPO is considered separate entity from Planning District Commission. Staff is shared with Commission.	No
<u>Region IV</u>				
<u>Florida</u>				
<u>Miami</u> MPO for the Miami Urbanized Area	10 municipalities 1 home rule county	None	MPO is separate entity from South Florida Regional Planning Council. However, the Council acts in an advisory capacity to MPO.	No
<u>Orlando</u> Orlando urbanized area MPO	12 cities 3 counties	Chairman, Bi-county Expressway Authority	MPO is staffed by East Central Florida Regional Planning Council.	No
<u>Georgia</u>				
<u>Atlanta</u> Atlanta Regional Commission	1 major city 46 municipalities 7 counties	Citizens selected from equal population districts	The only regional planning agency for the urbanized area was designated as the MPO.	Yes

<u>MPO by Federal region</u>	<u>Governments participating in MPO</u>	<u>MPO voting members (other than elected officials)</u>	<u>Relationship with other planning agency</u>	<u>Responsibilities other than transportation planning</u>
<u>Region IX</u>				
<u>California</u>				
<u>Los Angeles Southern California Association of Governments</u>	121 cities 6 counties	None	The Association is responsible for long-range planning; however, county transportation commissions do short-range planning and programming.	Yes
<u>Sacramento Sacramento Council of Governments</u>	1 major city 13 cities 4 counties	None	The only regional planning agency for the urbanized area performing Federal functions was designated as the MPO.	Yes
<u>San Diego San Diego Association of Governments</u>	1 major city a/13 cities	None	Area regional planning organization is designated MPO. Metropolitan Transit Development Board is responsible for short-range transportation planning and administration of State and Federal transportation funds within its jurisdiction.	Yes
<u>Region X</u>				
<u>Oregon</u>				
<u>Portland Metropolitan Service District</u>	1 major city 23 cities 3 counties	None (Elections held for all MPO representatives.)	Coordinates planning with Regional Planning Council of Clark County (Vancouver, Washington) through joint policy committee.	Yes
<u>Washington</u>				
<u>Seattle Puget Sound Council of Governments</u>	1 major city 43 cities 4 counties 3 Indian tribes	None	The only regional planning agency for the urbanized area was designated as the MPO.	Yes

a/San Diego County has withdrawn from MPO.

ENCLOSURE 11