

# **National Conference of State Legislatures**

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## ***Metropolitan Planning Organizations in the States***

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## MPOs Facilitate Regional Transportation Decision Making and Investment

- Transportation challenges are significantly affected by decisions on how federal and state transportation funds are invested.
- These decisions are shaped by the transportation planning efforts undertaken by the 381 metropolitan planning organizations (MPO).
- MPOs, which generally have a governing policy board consisting of local elected officials and appropriate state and public transportation officials, facilitate decision making on regional transportation issues, including major capital investment projects and priorities.

## MPOs Have Same Basic Planning Requirements, but Vary in Terms of Capacity and Additional Responsibilities

- All MPOs have the same basic federal planning requirements but their capacity varies widely.
  - Federal funding is the primary source of planning funds for most MPOs, although the level of federal funds and the reliance on this funding varies by MPO.
  - MPO staffing levels vary widely—from 1 to about 250 full or part-time staff—with an average of about 11 full-time staff per MPO.
  - In keeping with the spirit of local flexibility, MPO structures vary across the country.
  - Some MPOs have significant technical capacity to conduct travel demand modeling while a majority relies on state Departments of Transportation (DOT) or consultants.
- MPOs can also have additional planning responsibilities. For example, about one-third of survey respondents conduct environmental or water quality planning.

## MPOs Have Same Basic Planning Requirements but Vary in Terms of Capacity and Additional Responsibilities

- The role of some MPOs extends beyond transportation planning and programming.
  - Some of the largest MPOs (those representing populations greater than 200,000), in consultation with the state and public transportation operators, select projects funded under federal highway and transit programs.
  - About one-third of respondents to GAO's survey said that they also implement projects (i.e., oversee their construction), which is typically conducted by other project sponsors such as cities or the state DOT.

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## Although MPOs Face Several Key Challenges, Some Could be Addressed by Existing Proposals

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- In GAO's survey of MPOs, resource constraints were cited as a key challenge that impacts their ability to conduct transportation planning.
  - Staffing levels and the lack of trained staff make transportation planning a challenge for MPOs.
  - Limited and inflexible funding also creates challenges for MPOs.

## The Extent to Which MPO Oversight Mechanisms Improve Transportation Planning Is Unclear

- At the federal level, FTA and FHWA work together to perform federal certification reviews every four years.
  - All MPOs are also required to self-certify that they have met the federal transportation planning requirements.
  - Federal agencies also provide ongoing, informal, assistance to MPOs.
  - Many federal, state, and MPO officials with whom we spoke view informal efforts as an important aspect of oversight.
  - States' oversight of MPOs varies, ranging from formal state certification to technical assistance.

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- Federal oversight of MPOs is focused on compliance with federal rules and not transportation outcomes; to date, no MPOs have had federal funding withheld for failing to meet federal requirements.
- MPO officials generally recognize the value of using performance measures to assess results achieved, but are unsure how to implement these measures.
  - Some MPOs reported that they use performance metrics but other factors beyond these measures influence their plans.
  - Among MPOs we interviewed, there was no clear consensus about how to implement performance measures.

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- MPO officials also cited authority and technical constraints as challenges that impact their ability to conduct transportation planning.
  - The lack of project implementation and land-use authority impacts MPOs' ability to ensure that projects from their transportation plans are implemented.
  - MPO officials cited technical constraints, including data limitations and modeling capacity, as a challenge to their ability to undertake transportation planning.

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- MPO officials, industry associations, and government agencies have suggested several options for changing the roles and responsibilities of MPOs.
  - Several common elements of these proposals could address some of the resource, authority, and technical challenges:
    - Allow greater flexibility of transportation planning funds;
    - Create more variation in planning and programming requirements for MPOs, such as expanded project selection and implementation authority or abbreviated planning requirements, where appropriate; and
    - Enhance federal government investment in data gathering and/or modeling.
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# Recommendations

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In GAO-09-868, we recommended that, to improve the transportation planning process, the Secretary of Transportation take the following two actions:

1. Direct the Administrators of the Federal Highway Administration and the Federal Transit Administration to establish guidelines for MPOs to apply for, and implement, the abbreviated planning clause for small MPOs, and share these guidelines with MPOs.
2. Develop a strategy to improve data gathering and modeling efforts among MPOs, including establishing a timeline for implementing the modeling and data recommendations for the federal government in the Transportation Research Board's Special Report 288.

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## For More Information

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- *Metropolitan Planning Organizations: Options Exist to Enhance Transportation Planning Capacity and Federal Oversight*, September 9, 2009; GAO-09-868.
    - Survey e-supplement:  
<http://www.gao.gov/special.pubs/GAO-09-867SP>
  - *Statewide Transportation Planning: Opportunities Exist to Transition to Performance-Based Planning and Federal Oversight*, December 15, 2010; GAO-11-77.
    - Survey e-supplement:  
<http://www.gao.gov/special.pubs/GAO-11-78SP>
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