

MPO's: A Primer
By: Howard Glassman

For many local elected officials, staff and their constituents, Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) are an enigma. Most have heard of MPOs, but know little about them or the challenges they face in completing their mission. This article will shed some light on the role of MPOs and their importance in the life of a community.

Starting in the late 1950s and peaking in the 1970s and 1980s, the major federal emphasis in transportation planning and project implementation was the completion of the Interstate system. In some instances, the new Interstates cut a path through older parts of town (often justified as "urban renewal"), dividing and disrupting established communities. Backlash from the growth of the Interstate system and the ensuing effects on older communities (also known as the "highway revolt") resulted in a growing sense that local politicians and local citizens should be given a larger role in the transportation decision-making process.

Against that backdrop, Congress approved the Surface Transportation Assistance Act of 1973 requiring the formation of an MPO for urbanized areas of more than 50,000 residents. The intent of Congress was to establish an independent governmental agency to ensure that expenditures of federal transportation funds were based on a continuing, cooperative and comprehensive (3-C) transportation planning process.

The primary role of the MPO in managing the transportation planning process is to provide a fair and neutral forum for effective regional transportation decision-making. The MPO ensures that the process includes the comprehensive consideration of all possible strategies to meet the transportation needs of the metropolitan area. It also considers the broad spectrum of community viewpoints, the collaborative participation of local communities and transportation agencies, and the meaningful involvement of the public. The primary products are a long-range transportation plan for the metropolitan area and a transportation improvement program allocating federal transportation funds for multi-modal transportation projects.

There are currently 26 MPOs designated in the state of Florida. Each one is unique in terms of membership composition, planning boundaries and organizational structure. Congress and the Florida legislature purposefully left the rules regarding MPO formation and composition broad, which enables local officials to create an MPO structure that would facilitate the most efficient and representative form of metropolitan transportation planning.

MPO membership is cooperatively designated by the Governor and local jurisdictions representing at least 75 percent of the urbanized area population. Generally, MPO Boards are comprised of elected officials representing local jurisdictions, and representatives from independent transportation authorities and other agencies as determined by the intergovernmental agreement (school boards, seaports, etc.).

In keeping with the spirit of local flexibility, MPO structures and roles vary across the state. Some MPOs are housed and staffed by a member jurisdiction, others by a Regional Planning Council and still others are independent agencies. Every MPO is required to have a Governing Board, a technical advisory committee (engineers, planners and other local staff) and a citizens advisory committee, but many have additional committees such as a bicycle and pedestrian committee or a freight advisory committee. Every MPO is required to develop required documents (a long-range transportation plan, for example), but the remaining work products are selected by the MPO within rather broad state and federal guidelines. MPOs conduct a variety of transportation studies (transit, greenway, air quality, etc.), and provide input on a broad range of issues including land use and environmental preservation.

MPOs face a variety of challenges in meeting their federal, state and local commitments. The most common and debilitating is a lack of financial resources. The gap between transportation needs and available resources grows every year. Similarly, funds for MPOs to complete their work have not kept pace with the typical MPO work load.

Another challenge is an increased focus on addressing problems on a regional level, while not losing focus on locally important issues. As Florida continues to grow and develop, the borders between neighboring metropolitan areas have become blurred. MPOs have begun to work cooperatively with each other and on regional transportation planning initiatives through formalized associations, often created through interlocal agreements. Examples include the Chair's Coordinating Committee in the Tampa Bay area, the Central Florida MPO Alliance in east-central Florida, and the Northwest Florida Regional Transportation Planning Organization. This collaborative approach allows several MPOs to work cooperatively to address the transportation needs of regions covering a number of counties, while leaving individual MPOs to address transportation issues of local concern.

The 3-C transportation planning process provides the information, tools, and public input needed for improving transportation system performance at both the local and regional level. Every community leader should be made aware of the influence MPOs have on their community and encouraged to participate in the activities of their MPO.

Howard Glassman is the Executive Director of the Florida MPO Advisory Council, which is a statewide organization representing Florida's MPOs.