



U.S. Department
of Transportation

Federal Transit
Administration

TRANSIT AT THE TABLE II:

A GUIDE TO PARTICIPATION IN
METROPOLITAN TRANSPORTATION
DECISIONMAKING FOR TRANSIT
AGENCIES IN SMALL- AND MEDIUM-
SIZED METROPOLITAN AREAS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

"It all comes back to transit in fact being at the table in a meaningful way, participating over time in all of the MPO's business, and then making the case for access to funding other than FTA monies. Just showing up and asking for funding, even for a good project, without building a foundation, is less likely to be successful."

Steven Gayle, Director, Binghamton Metropolitan Transportation Study



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Acknowledgments

Throughout the study, Technical Working Group (TWG) members provided valuable insight and advice to the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) and the study team. A complete list of TWG membership may be found below. The study team also acknowledges the support of the Transportation Research Board Committee on Transportation Planning in Small- and Medium-Sized Communities (ADA30) and its chair, Ms. Libby Rushley of the Ohio Department of Transportation, for inviting study team representatives to brief the committee and suggesting potential study areas.

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Executive Summary

In large urban regions designated as Transportation Management Areas (TMAs), which are defined as areas with populations greater than 200,000², transit agencies are the direct recipients of the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) urbanized funds (Section 5307), a major portion of transit funding. In smaller, non-TMA areas, defined as those with populations between 50,000 and 200,000, FTA formula funding is distributed to each State Governor, who then makes allocation decisions. In most States, the Governor appoints the State Department of Transportation (SDOT) to make funding decisions. The SDOT then disperses these funds based on population and population density.³ Consequently, transit agencies must work with or depend upon the SDOT to identify priority transit investment needs and to access Federal transit operating and capital funds to address these needs. In these areas, the role of the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) in setting priorities for system improvements tends to be deemphasized. A reduced role for the transit agencies could limit the attention paid to the access and mobility needs that transit operations can address through formulating plans and programs. However, transit operators in small- and medium-sized metropolitan areas can overcome this problem by seeking out and actively engaging their MPOs.

This report presents the case studies and personal testimonials of a cross section of transit agency, MPO, and SDOT officials. Specifically, it

2 The Secretary of the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) may grant TMA designation to regions with less than 200,000 people upon special request from the Governor and the MPO.

3 The Federal share is not to exceed 80 percent, except it may be 90 percent for the cost of vehicle-related equipment attributable to compliance with either the Americans with Disabilities Act or the Clean Air Act, or for projects or portions of projects related to bicycles. Where applicable, the Federal share may not exceed 50 percent of a net project cost of operating assistance.

focuses on the benefits to transit programs and to the agencies that administer them that have directly resulted from transit agencies' proactive participation in metropolitan transportation planning processes. Transit agency representatives cited numerous examples of how they were able to improve their agencies' operations and staffing by working closely with the MPO in sharing resources as well as leveraging the utility of resources from others. On a programmatic and policy level, transit agency participation in the planning process has been shown time and time again to improve the influence of the agency in setting priorities for regional transportation policies, plans, and programs. Finally, transit participation in metropolitan planning has enabled the development and delivery of a higher level of transit service and mobility to communities by leveraging new funding opportunities.

Foreword

This study was sponsored by the FTA to assess the experiences, both challenges and success stories, of public transportation agencies working within the metropolitan transportation planning processes in small- and medium-sized regions. It is a follow-up to a 2004 study, entitled *Transit at the Table: A Guide to Participation in Metropolitan Decisionmaking*, which was developed for large urbanized areas, those with populations greater than 200,000. Recognizing that transportation problems and planning issues differ in small- and medium-sized areas, this report sought to identify both the similarities and the unique aspects associated with those regions.

This report details examples of transit agencies actively participating side-by-side with the MPO in regional transportation planning activities. In many of the cases presented, transit's involvement resulted in direct benefits for the agency and, more broadly, for the profile and level of service of transit in the area as a whole. These benefits would not have been realized without proactive participation in the planning process. Additionally,

further support for increased transit service may be achieved through additional sources of funding that can be directed to transit, including the Surface Transportation Planning (STP) of the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). The Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) is another source from FHWA in areas that are listed as air quality nonattainment areas. Specific examples of transit agency participation presented in this report include long-range planning, membership in committees and subcommittees, and facilitated citizen transit advocacy. In addition, the report presents several examples of cooperative funding relationships between transit operators and non-traditional partners, such as the business community.

It is also important to note that the transportation planning work activities of MPOs are set forth in Unified Planning Work Programs that FTA and FHWA jointly fund and they are intended to be multimodal. Communities where transit may be very limited today should not plan for business as usual 20 years from now.

Audience

The primary audience for Transit at the Table II includes transit managers, their staff and board members, MPO staff and Policy Board members, and SDOT staff and officials. This report also may be of particular interest to transit managers in areas likely to be designated as urbanized areas by the U.S. Census Bureau following Census 2010, thereby necessitating formation of an MPO. Once a region receives that designation, typically when the population reaches 50,000, the Governor(s) in that State (or States) where the area is located, in cooperation with local officials, must designate an organization to serve as the MPO for the metropolitan area. It is important that both the transit agencies operating in these newly designated MPO areas as well as members of the new MPO agency understand the importance of active transit involvement in the metropolitan planning process.

This report relays some of the opportunities and substantial benefits available to transit agencies and, most importantly, to the travelling public, that come with participation in that planning process.

In addition to transit agency and MPO staff and SDOT representatives, elected officials at all levels of government and interested citizens should find this report helpful in understanding how transit can secure the level of policy support and resource investment that is critical to addressing the mobility needs of stakeholders. It is hoped they will find inspiration in the stories presented and establish similar success stories in their specific regions.

Purpose

The effectiveness of coordination and cooperation between transit agencies and their decisionmaking and funding partners, including the MPO and SDOT, varies across the country. In some metropolitan areas, planning and programming efforts are closely integrated. On the other hand, there are other areas that demonstrate less coordination and produce transportation plans that are essentially separate, stove-piped modal plans that appear to be stapled together. The purpose of this study is to offer case study and testimonial support for transit agencies to proactively and consistently participate in metropolitan transportation planning processes. That way, transit options are fully integrated and incorporated within required plans and programs, resulting in significant gains in the number and types of mobility options available to communities. This report presents success stories to illustrate effective cooperation among transit stakeholders, including SDOT and MPO representatives. Moreover, it identifies cross-cutting factors that appear to have contributed to that success.

During the early stages of this project, the research team attended a small MPO conference in the Midwest. During lunch, a group of MPO, transit agency, and FTA staff members engaged in an

informal conversation with the research team when one transit manager asked a central question:

“Why does FTA need to sponsor this research? We get our projects accepted in the TIP [Transportation Improvement Program], and I am sure most agencies have no problem getting their specific projects allocated with the Federal funds they deserve.”

While some supported that manager’s perspective, many others did not. This report speaks to those who seek to improve their working relationship with their regional partners. Across the nation, including in small- and medium-sized urban areas, there is increased focus on the role of transit in building sustainable, livable, equitable, and environmentally friendly communities. This is a continuation of concepts reflected in congressional actions, originating with the passage of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) in 1991 and continuing with all subsequent reauthorizations. There has been growing interest in and support for multimodalism, increased transit service, joint provision of capital and operating funds, and collaborative planning at the regional level.

The Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) requirement for preparation of a coordinated public transportation-human services transportation plan to receive Job Access and Reverse Commute (JARC, Section 5316⁴), New Freedom (Section 5317), and elderly and disabled (Section 5310) funds is one example of improving these links. Also, while not explicitly addressed by this study, it is an excellent jumping-off point for closer coordination between small- and medium-sized metropolitan area transit operators and MPOs. Federal statutes have provided funding resources

and a mandate to include transit operators in the decisionmaking process.

The broad flexibility among Federal funding programs and the legal requirement for a multimodal transportation planning process present a picture of only the minimum-threshold requirements, not the full range of opportunities. This report documents success stories of how transit operator involvement in MPO activities has generated financial and resource-related benefits resulting in commensurate mobility gains for the communities they serve. As Ken Savage, Director of Fort Smith Transit in Arkansas, noted, “Peer programs, case studies, publications, and updates are becoming increasingly necessary to our agency to save time and create enthusiasm.”

This report, therefore, has been organized as a more robust, complete, and coherent answer to the question: “What are the benefits of transit agencies’ active participation in metropolitan transportation planning processes, and how are they achieved?” In doing so, it presents a number of effective approaches transit agencies have employed as well as observations of obstacles and benefits and recommendations for successful transit operator participation in planning for small- and medium-sized urban areas.

Importantly, this report verifies that transit operators who participate minimally in the regional planning process and who fail to participate in metropolitan transportation planning committee work and technical studies in setting a broader policy agenda may be missing important opportunities for long-term rewards. Issues discussed include interactions between the SDOT and transit agency, the level of FTA involvement, and public vs. private management of transit operations.

⁴ This report contains many references to major grant programs that FTA sponsors. Each grant program is referred to either by name and/or by a number that correlates to the section number in Title 49 of the United States Code. A description of each grant program may be found on the FTA Website, <http://www.fta.dot.gov>.

Methodology

The achievements reported in the following pages are based on discussions with transportation professionals in more than 20 small- and medium-sized metropolitan areas across the United States. Discussion participants in each region included staff and officials from transit agencies, MPOs, and SDOTs. These regions were selected based on input from FTA and the study's TWG.⁵ Selection of participants also considered innovation in service delivery methods and success in obtaining policy support and funding for transit investments. Geographic location as well as governmental structure and operating characteristics were also considered to provide a more robust and nationally diverse study sample.

A previous report, *Transit at the Table: A Guide to Participation in Metropolitan Decisionmaking*, released by Federal Transit Administration (FTA) in 2004, addressed the involvement of transit agencies in urbanized areas with populations of more than 200,000. Regional transportation planning organizational structures, funding processes, and decisionmaking issues differ between small to medium-sized regions and large regions. FTA has commissioned *Transit at the Table II* to provide insights from metropolitan areas with populations between 50,000 and 200,000.

Findings

The importance of transit's involvement in the metropolitan transportation planning process is the major theme of this report, and is supported by empirical and anecdotal evidence from various study regions. A secondary goal of this report

⁵ The TWG consisted of representatives from MPOs and transit operators in small- and medium-sized metropolitan areas, SDOTs, FTA headquarters and regional offices, and national transportation organizations. A complete list of TWG membership may be found in the front of the report.

is to provide specific responses to the transit involvement question quoted at the beginning of this chapter (i.e. "Why does FTA need to sponsor this research?"). The question is answered in three parts, each addressed in a separate chapter.

- Participation in the MPO process can improve transit agency operations and staffing resources - Chapter 2
- Participation in the MPO process can improve transit agency influence and create regional policy support for transit - Chapter 3
- Participation in the MPO process can leverage additional funding opportunities, thereby increasing the level of service operators are able to provide - Chapter 4

Each chapter provides examples and stories that illustrate the benefits of transit's place at the MPO table. While these stories are specific to the political and economic realities of the study regions and therefore may not be perfectly replicated elsewhere, they show exciting examples of how transit operations in certain regions have gained broad policy and programmatic support and have creatively tackled funding and resource shortfalls by leveraging MPO participation. It is hoped that these accounts will serve as an energizing force to relay the message that MPO involvement is important to transit operators and a critical ingredient to their success in securing both policy and financial resources. The categories of benefits gained by the transit agencies participating in this study are summarized in the matrix below.

Summary of Benefits

Metropolitan Area	Improved Transit Agency and Operations and Staffing Resources	Improved Transit Agency Influence	Additional Funding Leveraged for Multimodal Solutions
Fort Smith, AR		X	X
Flagstaff, AZ	X		X
Gainesville, FL		X	X
Cedar Rapids, IA	X	X	X
Coeur d'Alene, ID	X	X	
Bowling Green, KY		X	
Hagerstown, MD			X
Portland, ME			X
Saginaw, MI	X		
Duluth, MN	X	X	X
Missoula, MT	X	X	X
Grand Forks, ND	X	X	X
Binghamton, NY	X		X
Elmira, NY	X	X	
Mansfield, OH	X		X
Sioux Falls, SD	X		
Abilene, TX	X	X	
Richland, WA	X	X	X

Self-Assessment Checklist for Transit Operators on Their Participation in Metropolitan Transportation Planning

Key findings from the study, *Transit at the Table II: A Guide to Participation in Metropolitan Decisionmaking for Transit Agencies in Small- and Medium-Sized MPOs*, were used in preparing the following questions for transit operators in small- and medium-sized areas to use in assessing their profile and participation in metropolitan planning. The indicators are generic and not exhaustive; therefore, these questions should be regarded as only the starting point for subsequent discussions targeted to local issues.

While answering these questions may illuminate issues and opportunities, perhaps the greatest value of this work is in the resulting discussion among planning partners. The checklist may be applied effectively in facilitated group settings, as a useful catalyst to discussion, and with less attention to scores. The checklist may also be used by transit operators and other state and local officials as a starting point for discussions about the structure of a future MPO in those areas that will likely have one designated following the 2010 Census. “Yes” responses generally suggest more positive outcomes or experiences.

Transit Operator Participation in Metropolitan Transportation Planning

1. Representation on the MPO Board and Committees	YES	NO
• Do you know the name and location of your MPO?	_____	_____
• Do you have an existing relationship with any MPO staff or board members?	_____	_____
• Is there a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between your agency and the MPO?	_____	_____
• If you have an MOU, is it up to date and reflective of policy, responsibility, and / or funding changes?	_____	_____
• If you have an MOU, does it identify explicit roles for transit operators in various facets of the MPO process?	_____	_____
• Are you a voting member of the MPO Board (or have Board representation)?	_____	_____
• Are you represented on, and active in, MPO policy and/or technical committees, subcommittees, or task forces?	_____	_____
2. Involvement with Planning and Special Studies		
• Are you involved in developing the MPO’s long-range transportation plan?	_____	_____
• Do you monitor progress and products of the metropolitan transportation planning process?	_____	_____
• Does the long-range transportation plan accurately reflect public transportation and is it integrated with other travel modes?	_____	_____
• Is the MPO’s long-range transportation plan coordinated and consistent with local land use plans?	_____	_____

YES NO

- Are transit-supportive development policies and strategies included in the MPO's long-range transportation plan? _____
- Is transit properly reflected in the transportation system management, maintenance, and operations sections of the MPO long-range plan? _____
- Does the MPO plan include plans / policies that highlight the benefits of transit? _____
- Does the MPO plan consider economic development, job access, air quality, social services, human services transportation, health and safety, and / or historic preservation? _____
- Do you propose transit-related work tasks for inclusion in the Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP)? If so, are they accepted and funded? _____
- Are you involved in educating the public or promoting regional comprehensive plans and politics? _____
- Are you involved in educating the public about transit's role in regional transportation, planning, and development? _____
- Do you understand the role of the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) and Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP) in the metropolitan planning process? _____
- Does the UPWP respond to transit needs? _____

3. Involvement in Funding and Implementation

- Are you involved in identifying, prioritizing, and scheduling projects for the TIP? _____
- Do you feel that the TIP prioritization process is objective, fact-based, and that it treats transit fairly in achieving modal balance? _____
- Do you feel that you receive a fair share of the region's project funding? _____
- Is the MPO's status reporting of your TIP projects timely and reliable? _____
- Are you involved in cooperatively forecasting revenues for the long range plan and TIP? _____
- Are your revenues considered and incorporated in these estimates? _____
- Are you able to assume future revenue enhancement plans and proposals? _____
- Do you know about flexible Federal funding programs that you may be able to access through the MPO or to spend directly on transit without flexing (e.g. STP, TE, CMAQ, etc.)? _____
- Have you requested flex-funds for transit projects in the TIP? _____
- Have you secured flex-funding sponsorship of any of your projects? If not, why not? _____

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