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TRANSIT AT THE TABLE:

A GUIDE TO PARTICIPATION IN METROPOLITAN DECISIONMAKING

“Transit plays a major role in regional planning, and every MPO should have transit at the table.”

Shirley DeLibero, former Houston Metro President and CEO



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Executive Summary

Introduction

The transit industry today has an unprecedented opportunity to meet the access and mobility needs of the metropolitan communities it serves. With the passage of landmark transportation reauthorization since 1991, Congress and the President provided significantly increased financial support and flexibility to highway and transit programs. This has greatly improved the ability of state and local decisionmakers to assemble the resources needed to implement the most appropriate mix of modal solutions. These pioneering laws also enabled transit operators to exert greater influence in transportation policy formation and decisionmaking in metropolitan areas, an important means of realizing the benefits of increased program resources and flexibilities.

This report presents the observations, perspectives, and recommendations of a cross-section of transit agencies from large metropolitan areas on how to secure strategic positions in the metropolitan planning process. More importantly, the report can be a guide on how to use those positions to win policy and program support for priority transit services. The challenges to achieving full decisionmaking partnerships in regional settings, the most effective strategies for addressing these challenges, and the rewards of partnerships are presented by transit industry leaders using their own experiences.

The conclusions presented are based upon in-depth interviews with senior officials from transit operators and metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) in 25 large urbanized areas. To ensure broad applicability of findings, the selected locales were chosen to be representative of a wide range of governmental, environmental, and operating settings.

Findings

Many of the transit operators interviewed are strategic players in their regions and at their MPOs, contributing to decisions affecting economic development and land use, as well as transportation investment priorities. They find opportunities to participate vigorously in, and get impressive policy and program support from, the broad range of MPO activities. However, the incidence and depth of transit interest and involvement in MPO activities is uneven. A number of transit operators report that they are not aware of the potential benefits in broad-based policy support and additional program resources they could realize and, therefore, do not seek MPO participation. Many of those who do participate do so minimally and have not found effective ways to capitalize upon that effort.

Some who seek stronger roles in metropolitan decision-making may be overwhelmed by the organizational complexity of MPOs and the detail and time-consuming nature of the MPO's technical work. This is particularly vexing when their attempts to get involved are met with resistance by others. Although some of the obstacles encountered are formidable and may require legislative remedies, many transit leaders have found effective ways around many of them.

Transit operators who view themselves only as service providers and do not participate in setting the broader policy agenda for their areas may be missing the best opportunities envisioned by congress and the president in recent reauthorization bills. Transit operators may be simply accepting only the program funding that is readily available through the Federal Transit Administration (FTA), even though it may be at levels far short of what they need. While this is happening, discussion of modal priorities and investment needs at the MPO policy level may be taking place without transit representation, thereby perpetuating those resource limitations.

Even some transit operators who actively pursue strategic participation in planning processes encounter challenges. And, just as transit agencies range in their level of MPO involvement from "operators only" to strategic partners, the extent to which planning at MPOs is inclusive and open to

broader multimodal representation varies. Some MPOs simply administer the federally required process, while others are strategic players — striving for comprehensive inclusion of all modes. Many transit operators believe that inadequate center city representation and other factors limit their voice in their MPO. In addition, some state departments of transportation (DOT) hold the transportation planning and programming reins much tighter than others who share information and cooperate freely with transit agencies and MPOs. Governors and state legislatures also vary widely in the extent to which they encourage transit agencies and MPOs as regional decisionmakers. Local politics may also be an issue, especially where local officials do not support transit.

Finally, many study participants reported that the outcome is only partially in the hands of the transit agency. In fact, the degree to which a "level playing field" actually exists has been the subject of extensive research and commentary. To a large degree, the impact of transit participation may lie collectively in the hands of the MPO, the state DOT, and other planning partners.

On a positive note, the study found that, regardless of the local situation, the most successful transit agencies make the most of the opportunities available to them and create others. They make an effort to establish professional rapport with the various personalities, as they come together in consensus-based decisionmaking. In the end, it is the interplay of these institutions — their policy, professional, and technical linkages — in each metropolitan area that determines the level of transit participation in decisionmaking and, ultimately, of the quality of services provided.

To meet the growing demands for service improvements in the face of increased competition for traditional revenue sources, operators are pursuing supplemental funding through such means as local tax, fee, and bond initiatives. Involvement in metropolitan planning may benefit operators both before and after such ventures. MPO endorsement may bolster advance support for the proposal. If the revenue enhancement proposal is approved, transit operators may be able to exert greater influence in regional decisionmaking because of their ability to bring new funds to the table.

Audience

While the primary audience for Transit at the Table is transit general managers and transit senior staff, important messages are included for other key MPO stakeholders. Because the overall effectiveness of an MPO rises and falls with the depth of the decisionmaking partnerships, the suggestions and strategies presented in this report represent significant opportunities for improving current practice.

Benefits of Participation and Strategies for Achievement

"You have to convince me that wrestling with my MPO is a better use of my time. There are 100 other things I could be doing." — General Manager of a Transit Agency

Participation at the MPO can result in many benefits, with some almost immediate and others longer term. Here are ten of the major benefits identified by study participants and selected strategies for achieving them.

1. **Influence** the identification of transportation issues, policy formation, and funding priorities — by being an active participant on the MPO board and/or committees
2. **Promote transit service** as a regional transportation priority — by collaborating with the business community, citizen groups, local officials, and other MPO partners. This can significantly enhance the prospects of any referenda that may be contemplated, and raise the visibility of transit service in your community
3. **Establish an image** of transit as indispensable to community well-being — by getting involved in broader issues facing your community, such as homeland security, land use and economic development, and environmental protection
4. **Win support for transit-friendly land use policies** — by promoting land use/economic development/transportation integration, leading to MPO policy support for transit-oriented development
5. **Win support for your investment needs** — by promoting early, open, and objective consideration of transit in regional corridor studies conducted by, or through the MPO. This can result in support for your capital improvement needs directly, or as a component of

another project, such as bus shelters, park-and-ride facilities, signage, sidewalks, or even a special transit right-of-way, when a highway investment alternative is selected

6. **Promote multimodal solutions** — by assuming joint sponsorship of studies with state DOTs, especially if the outcome is a shared highway/transit right-of-way or busway
7. **Get transit on the agenda** — by being involved in MPO committees such as those dealing with policy, air quality, and technical methods
8. **Strengthen your funding prospects** for your priorities/shape the transportation future — by participating fully in preparation of the long-range transportation plan and short-range transportation improvement program (TIP)
9. **Secure funding from non-traditional sources** for your priorities — by making a convincing case for your investment needs to other MPO members
10. **Accelerate delivery of your projects** — by monitoring the status of projects programmed in the TIP to note schedule changes.

Finally, share your planning concerns and questions with your FTA Regional and FHWA Division Office partners.

"Through the transportation technical committee, we make sure our issues are brought forward, discussed, and supported by the region. For example, committee members sent a letter to our congressional delegation [expressing] agreement among technical staff that Interstate MAX is the region's #1 priority."

Fred Hansen, General Manager of Tri-Met (Portland, OR)

"Transit and land use advocates [in the Bay Area] successfully advocated with MTC [Metropolitan Transportation Commission] to fund the transit rehabilitation capital shortfall."

Dorothy Dugger, Deputy General Manager, Bay Area Rapid Transit (San Francisco, CA)

Self-Assessment Checklist for Transit Operators

Key findings from the study, *Transit at the Table: A Guide to Participation in Metropolitan Decisionmaking*, were used in preparing the following questions for transit operators to use in assessing their profile and participation in metropolitan planning. The indicators are generic and not exhaustive. As such, these questions should be regarded as only the starting point for subsequent discussion focused on 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. “Yes” responses generally suggest more positive *Transit at the Table* experiences.

1. Representation on the MPO Board and Committees.

YES NO

- Is the signed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between your agency and the MPO up-to-date reflecting policy, responsibility, or funding changes?
- Does the MOU identify explicit roles for transit operators in 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 technical committees?

2. Involvement in Planning and Special Studies.

- Are you involved in developing the metropolitan area long-range plan?
- Do you monitor progress and products of the metropolitan planning process?
- Does the transportation plan integrate public transportation elements with highway, pedestrian, bicycle, air, and other modes?
- Is the metropolitan transportation plan coordinated with local land use plans?
- Are transit-oriented development policies and strategies included in the plan?
- Are transportation system management, maintenance, and operations included?
- 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, health and safety, and/or historic preservation?
- Are you involved in educating the public or promoting regional comprehensive plans and policies?
- Are you involved in corridor studies to ensure that all modes are considered?
- Do you propose work tasks for the Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP)?
- Does the UPWP respond to transit needs?

3. Involvement in Funding and Implementation.

YES NO

- Are you involved in identifying, prioritizing, and scheduling projects for the TIP?
- Do you feel that the TIP prioritization process is objective and fact-based?
- Do you feel that you receive a fair share of the region’s project funding?
- Does the TIP decisionmaking process consider flexible federal funds?
- Is the MPO’s status reporting of TIP project funding timely and reliable?
- Are you involved in cooperatively forecasting revenues for the Plan and TIP?
- Are your revenues considered and incorporated in these estimates?
- Are you able to assume future revenue enhancement plans and proposals?

4. Involvement in Planning Certification Reviews.

- Are you involved in the Planning Certification Review process?
- Do you provide materials for the FTA-FHWA desk review?
- Are you involved in the on-site review?
- Have you suggested other agencies/people for the federal team to contact?
- Have you identified issues for the federal review team to consider?