



MULTIMODAL PLANNING AT THE MEGAREGIONAL SCALE

TASK 1 – ESTABLISH BASELINE CONDITIONS

In Task 1, the project team worked to assess the current state of megaregional planning through three tasks: (1.1) a review of existing literature on megaregions and comprehensive planning, (1.2) identification of criteria for a scan of local and regional plans, and (1.3) a scan of local and regional long-range plans to characterize how megaregional issues are being addressed. The findings are described below.

1.1 Literature Review

The project team reviewed a broad set of literature on megaregions and comprehensive planning, focused in four key categories: (1) megaregions, (2) comprehensive plan guidance, (3) state planning enabling laws, and (4) intergovernmental cooperation. In all, a total of 125 resources were reviewed.

Megaregions

In total, the team reviewed 52 resources related to the megaregions concept. These included publications by the Center for Quality Growth and Regional Development (CQGRD) at Georgia Tech, the Regional Plan Association, and the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, among others. This literature discusses megaregions as an important issue for planning and broadly falls into two categories: (1) conceptual literature on defining megaregions and megaregional governance and (2) literature focused on specific megaregional issues. This latter category of literature is heavily focused on transportation, particularly high-speed rail and freight.

The literature on megaregions highlights that there are differing, though overlapping definitions for megaregions. The two primary definitions are the Regional Plan Association's America 2050 megaregions, which includes 11 megaregions; and CQGRD's, which includes 10 megaregions. The literature also focuses more heavily on several of these megaregions, including the Northeast megaregion, as well as the Cascadia, Piedmont, and Texas Triangle megaregions.

Comprehensive Planning

The team reviewed a total of 18 key resources on comprehensive plan guidance. Of these, one specifically addressed the concept of megaregions, which it references as an important concept, but one that is not currently well accommodated by the scope of planning law.

State Enabling Legislation

The team reviewed state planning enabling laws for each of the 41 states included in CQGRD's defined megaregions; there was no mention of megaregions. This makes it less likely that local comprehensive plans will address megaregions.

Intergovernmental Cooperation

The team reviewed 14 key resources on intergovernmental cooperation in planning. Three of these discussed megaregions, although only one provided an example of megaregional planning.

Resources reviewed as part of the literature review reflect that megaregions are being discussed as an important concept for planning, particularly transportation planning. However, the literature on comprehensive planning and intergovernmental cooperation currently provides little practical guidance on how to incorporate these concerns into plans or how to work across local and regional boundaries to achieve megaregional outcomes.

1.2 Establish Scan Criteria

After completing the literature review, the project team established the following criteria for conducting a scan of local and regional plans:

- For Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSA) with populations greater than one million within the 10 megaregions previously defined by CQGRD
 - Regional long-range planning documents
 - Local comprehensive plans for MSA principal cities
 - Comprehensive plans for other cities serving as hub and transfer points in the (draft) Highway Primary Freight Network

In addition to the criteria for plans to evaluate, the project team established the following criteria to use for determining the strength of megaregional language in plans:

- Is the discussion of megaregions explicit or implicit?
- How strong is the language addressing megaregions on a scale of 0–3
 - 0 – None. Does not reference megaregions.
 - 1 – Weak. Mentions the megaregion as a relevant concept, but does not include in goals or recommendations.
 - 2 – Moderate. Mentions the megaregion as a relevant concept. Includes in goals or recommendations, but does not require specific actions.
 - 3 – Strong. Mentions the megaregion as a relevant concept. Includes in goals or recommendations. Requires specific actions.
- What topics does the megaregional language address (transportation/infrastructure, economies, environment, equity)?

1.3 Conduct Scan

Through the scan, the project team collected 179 plans. Review of these plans revealed that relatively few local and regional plans explicitly acknowledge the megaregional concept. Findings include:

- While relatively few plans explicitly acknowledge the megaregional concept, it is more common in plans that have been more recently adopted.
- It is also more common in plans from within well-established megaregions (i.e., megaregions are mentioned more frequently in plans from communities and metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) in the Northeast).
- Discussions of megaregional-scale high-speed rail are also relatively common in plans adopted within the past five years.
- Megaregional issues are addressed with greater frequency in regional plans than in local comprehensive plans.
- Transportation is the most frequently addressed megaregional issue, followed by the economy.
- Most plans had weak language (mentioning the megaregion as a relevant concept, but not including goals or recommendations) when addressing megaregions. No plans used strong language, including specific actions.

Because there can be different definitions for megaregions, plans that discuss the megaregional concept may identify a community in a different way from how we classified the community (our system is based on the defined megaregions for this research). For example, the plans for both Buffalo and Rochester discuss megaregions. While we identify these cities as being in CQGRD's Northeast megaregion, Buffalo's comprehensive plan discusses the city's location with the Golden Horseshoe megaregion, and Rochester's comprehensive plan identifies the city as part of the Regional Plan Association's Great Lakes megaregion and the Royal Town Planning Institute's Tor-Buff-Chester megaregion.

Summary of Findings

The findings from the literature review and scan of local and regional plans indicate that there are gaps, barriers, and opportunities within the current state of practice. In terms of gaps, relatively few plans are addressing megaregions. When megaregions are addressed, the focus is on transportation or economic potential, while the literature indicates that megaregional planning also offers opportunities to address environmental and equity issues.

There are also barriers to incorporating the megaregional concept into plans. These include awareness of the concept among local and regional planning agencies and questions of megaregional governance and institutional support structure. Additionally, a lack of federal and state enabling laws on megaregional planning means that intergovernmental cooperation on megaregional issues is ad hoc and nonstandardized, which may be a barrier to intergovernmental cooperation on the megaregional scale.

Some more recent plans are adopting the concept, even if only as background, and MPOs are establishing mechanisms for cross-border collaboration. Several long-range regional transportation plans call for increased collaboration on the megaregional scale. These include the New York Metropolitan Council's (NYMTC) *Plan 2040 Regional Transportation Plan: A Shared Vision for a Sustainable Region* (adopted 2013), which addresses the need for increased collaboration on the megaregional scale and discusses the memorandum of understanding signed between NYMTC and surrounding MPOs.