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Multi-MPO Planning: Prospects and Practices

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The metropolitan transportation planning process is designed, primarily, to improve transportation policy making and investment decisions across a single metropolitan planning area. Federal law (23 USC §134) assigns principal responsibility for this process to metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs).

However, highway and rail corridors often traverse multiple neighboring MPO planning areas, and MPOs routinely make transportation policy or programming decisions that affect environmental conditions and economic opportunities beyond their jurisdictional borders. In fact, collaborative planning between or among MPOs—multi-MPO planning—is necessary to efficiently address transportation-related planning issues that transcend metropolitan area boundaries.

The goal of this *PAS Memo* is to help planners identify and act on opportunities to initiate or strengthen multi-MPO planning partnerships. It explains how a lack of collaboration between or among neighboring MPOs often leaves cross-boundary problems unaddressed and can undermine the efforts of individual MPOs and the cities and counties they serve. Then it summarizes how planners working for or with MPOs can help overcome barriers to multi-MPO planning.

This *PAS Memo* shares insights from a study of multi-MPO planning experiences conducted by researchers from the American Planning Association (APA) and the Georgia Institute of Technology's Center for Quality Growth and Regional Development (CQGRD), with support from the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA).

The article begins with a brief discussion of the relationship of multi-MPO multimodal transportation planning to the emerging concept of megaregional planning before exploring a range of considerations that affect collaboration between or among MPOs. It concludes by sharing lessons learned from three examples of multi-MPO planning that bridge the gap between regional- and megaregional-scale initiatives. By grounding this discussion in the universal responsibility of MPOs to engage in multimodal transportation planning, we aim to provide planners with practical guidance that acknowledges the importance of incremental, locally directed planning reforms.

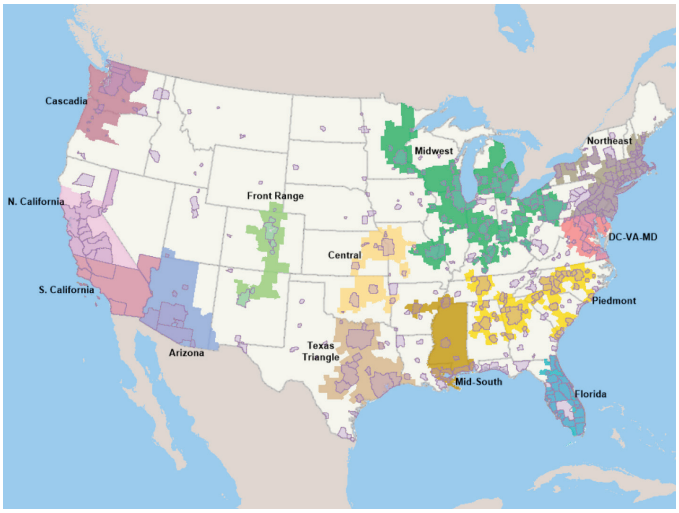


Figure 1. Defined U.S. Megaregions With MPO Planning Area Boundaries (Source: HEPGIS)

MPOs and Megaregions

Megaregions are networks of metropolitan areas that share economic, environmental, and cultural features, as well as infrastructure and geographic connections. While megaregions have no legal status or official governance mechanisms in the United States, they provide researchers and policy experts with a conceptual framework for analyzing and discussing the increasing interconnectedness and interdependencies among metropolitan areas and regions (Ross 2009).

More than 70 percent of all MPOs operate in megaregions (Figure 1), and nearly 60 percent of MPOs share planning area boundaries with at least one other MPO (Figure 2, p. 2). From a governance perspective, clusters of neighboring MPOs engaged in collaborative planning can function as the building blocks of a megaregional planning system. However, multi-MPO planning does not depend on the megaregions concept.

MPOs are natural leaders for collaborative planning efforts that span multiple metropolitan areas. Federal statutes and reg-

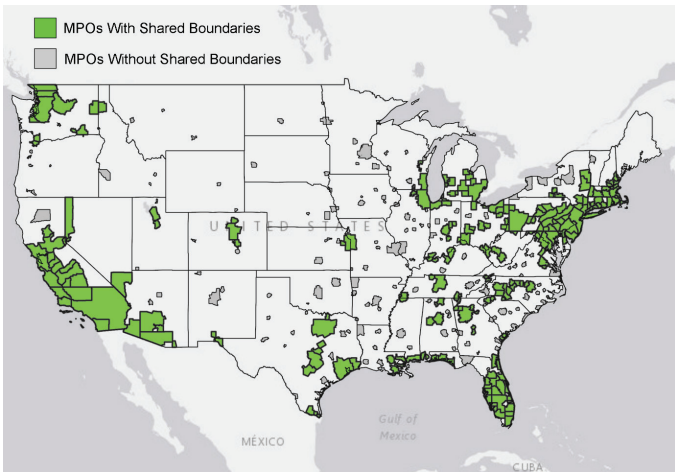


Figure 2. MPOs With and Without Shared Boundaries (Sources: HEPGIS, Esri, HERE)

ulations governing the metropolitan transportation planning process emphasize coordination among neighboring MPOs and other key stakeholders, such as transit agencies, state departments of transportation (DOTs), and economic development and environmental protection organizations.

Furthermore, many MPOs work on planning initiatives that go far beyond their core focus on transportation. *Emerging Trends in Regional Planning* (PAS Report 586) explores the ongoing evolution of regional planning in the U.S. and highlights the range of issues MPOs and other regional planning agencies are integrating into their long-range plans—including a focus on megaregions. The report includes an action agenda to help regional agencies integrate the principles, processes, and attributes described in *Sustaining Places: The Role of the Comprehensive Plan* (PAS 567) and *Sustaining Places: Best Practices for Comprehensive Plans* (PAS 578) into their plans.

In *Multimodal Planning at the Megaregional Scale* (FHWA-HEP-17-091), researchers from APA and CQGRD built on this existing work by proposing a set of practices that MPOs and local governments can incorporate in their long-range planning to address megaregional issues. While these practices point to specific issues that require collaborative planning among regional agencies, the report does not attempt to answer the question of how these agencies could initiate or sustain the relationships implied by the practices.

The Importance of Multi-MPO Planning

There are many interrelated transportation, environmental, and economic issues that can affect multimodal transportation system performance across multiple neighboring MPO planning areas. When MPOs ignore these issues or act in isolation, local communities bear the consequences of diminished transportation system conditions or performance. Consequently, each issue highlighted below represents a potential opportunity for multi-MPO planning.

Highways and rail corridors routinely cross MPO planning area boundaries. Furthermore, transportation system conditions in one MPO planning area often affect system performance in neighboring MPO planning areas. In areas where multiple MPOs share boundaries, congested corridors often span portions of multiple planning areas, and workers may routinely commute from one MPO planning area to another. In these cases, uncoordinated planning for infrastructure improvements designed to alleviate congestion may simply induce more driving (Litman 2019).

In some areas of the country with multiple neighboring MPO jurisdictions, a lack of affordable housing near employment centers is causing an increase in long-distance commuting. This can lead to economic inefficiencies as employers struggle to attract skilled workers and lower-income households struggle to access employment opportunities. Without careful coordination among MPOs, investments in interregional bus or passenger rail services may not meet the needs of interregional commuters, and interlocal competition may undermine efforts to balance the locations of jobs and housing.

Furthermore, each MPO planning area contains a mix of land uses that generate and receive freight as well as transportation infrastructure that accommodates trucks and trains passing through with shipments originating and terminating in other MPO planning areas. Air pollution generated in one MPO planning area from cars and trucks can negatively affect air quality in neighboring MPO planning areas. Meanwhile, large natural or rural landscapes, water bodies, and sensitive environmental features that provide crucial ecosystem services cross MPO planning area boundaries. If MPOs do not act in concert with their neighbors, they have little control over the extent to which their individual decisions will affect environmental conditions.

Finally, as global temperatures rise, many areas of the United States face severe multimodal transportation planning challenges associated with rising sea levels or increasingly frequent and severe storms, wildfires, or drought. Any transportation system failures associated with these challenges are likely to have ripple effects across multiple MPO planning areas. To be successful, investments in evacuation routes and infrastructure resilience enhancements must be consistent across planning area boundaries.

MPO Coordination Requirements

Federal statutes and regulations detail the requirements for a "continuous, cooperative, and comprehensive" (3-C) metropolitan multimodal transportation planning process (23 USC §134; 49 USC §5303; 23 CFR §450.300 et seq.). Because all MPOs share the same fundamental responsibility to carry out this 3-C process, these requirements provide a basis for a wide range of collaborative efforts between and among MPOs.

There are four circumstances in which federal laws or rules require neighboring MPOs to coordinate their long-range transportation planning efforts:

- Multiple MPOs share authority for planning within a single urbanized area (23 CFR §450.310(e)).
- Multiple MPOs share authority for planning within an air quality control region designated as a nonattainment area

Table 1. Examples of State Statutes That Authorize or Require Multi-MPO Planning

State	*Requirement or Opportunity for Multi-MPO Planning*	*Citation*
Florida	Authorizes any MPO to establish an interlocal agreement for collaborative planning with any other MPO in the state; requires MPOs that share planning authority for an urbanized area to prepare a joint list of regionally significant project priorities; requires MPOs to coordinate plans regarding any transportation project that crosses MPO planning area boundaries	*Florida Statutes* §339.175(6)(j); §339.175(8)(b); §339.175(8)(c)7
North Carolina	Authorizes joint committees or work groups for neighboring MPOs; requires multiple MPOs operating in a single nonattainment area under the federal Clean Air Act to adopt a unified plan for air quality conformity	*North Carolina General Statutes* §136-200.2(c)(4); §136-200.4
Utah	Requires all MPOs that share a planning area boundary to collaborate on joint transportation plans, TIPs, and project priorities	*Utah Code* §72-1-208.5(3)

for ozone or carbon monoxide under the Clean Air Act (42 USC §7407(c); 23 USC §134(g)(1); 49 USC §5303(g)(1)).

- An urbanized area principally located in one MPO planning area extends into another MPO planning area (23 CFR §450.312(h); 23 CFR §450.314(g)).
- A proposed federally funded transportation investment is located within multiple MPO planning areas (23 USC §134(g)(1); 49 USC §5303(g)(2); 23 CFR §450.314(e)).

The first three circumstances collectively account for nearly 40 percent of all MPOs. The fourth circumstance is relatively commonplace but often changes from one planning cycle to the next. In each circumstance, federal requirements encourage coordination between or among MPOs (as well as other state, regional, and local agencies) on data collection and analysis, planning assumptions, performance measurement, and public participation.

While federal statutes and regulations establish a baseline for MPO planning processes and work products, many states have statutes or regulations that provide supplemental requirements for their MPOs. In some cases, these state laws or rules specify additional opportunities for collaboration between or among MPOs. Table 1 provides some examples of these types of statutes.

Overcoming Barriers to Multi-MPO Planning

MPOs face several distinct challenges that can limit their ability or will to plan collaboratively with neighboring MPOs. In some cases, MPOs can overcome potential barriers only by investing extra effort or resources. In others, state or federal legislative or policy changes may be necessary to dramatically increase the prevalence of multi-MPO planning.

The level of urbanization and the geographic extent of an MPO planning area often affects an MPO's perspective on transportation planning issues. MPOs with different levels of urbanization or physical sizes can struggle to find common ground. Furthermore, the population of an MPO's planning area typically has a positive correlation with staff size and organizational budget (Kramer et al. 2017). While all MPOs may struggle to invest extra staff time or financial resources to support multi-MPO planning, smaller MPOs face a special challenge if expected to contribute equally (Peckett et al. 2014; Kramer et al. 2017).

In these circumstances, planners working for MPOs may have opportunities to help their policy boards understand the perspectives of neighboring MPOs. This "translation" service can be the first step toward finding mutually beneficial policies and investments.

Most MPO governing boards consist predominantly of elected officials from the constituent municipalities and counties that comprise the MPO's planning area (Kramer et al. 2017). Consequently, MPOs typically prioritize work on local and regional issues (where the MPO has clear authority and responsibility to act) over issues that transcend MPO boundaries (where MPO authority and responsibilities are often more limited, ownership is diffuse, and there is no clear governance structure) (Peckett et al. 2014).

To overcome this barrier, planners need to be able to frame multi-MPO planning in terms of local benefits. Additionally, planners can advocate for changes to federal and state statutes and regulations for MPOs to explicitly authorize and fund collaborative planning activities.

Similarly, some MPOs operate independently, while others have host organizations that affect (to greater and lesser extents) MPO staffing and work activities (Kramer et al. 2017). Furthermore, MPOs often operate on different schedules based on their date of creation, federal and state requirements for plan updates, and local preferences and capacities. This can make it difficult for neighboring MPOs to align their planning cycles to facilitate sharing data, harmonize assumptions, conduct joint planning activities, or produce joint work products.

In these circumstances, planners working for MPOs may have opportunities to help their planning boards understand the resource efficiencies of adjusting planning cycles to synchronize with neighboring MPOs. In cases where the policy board is sympathetic to the goal, planners can also

work with their counterparts in other MPOs to determine whether incremental adjustments or dramatic realignments make the most sense.

While some states, such as Florida and Utah, address multi-MPO planning directly, others do not. The differences in state rules related to transportation project funding and mandatory planning activities can make it more difficult for neighboring MPOs in different states to plan collaboratively.

Additionally, several states have separate statutes or regulations governing other regional planning processes, such as water resource management, solid waste management, or economic development. These laws or rules do not typically specify any role for the MPO in the planning process and may give entities other than MPOs access to new sources of funding or specialized tools to develop and implement plans. Without an explicit invitation to participate from the designated planning authority, MPOs may be reluctant to use limited resources on collaborative planning efforts that state and local officials could view as duplicative or redundant.

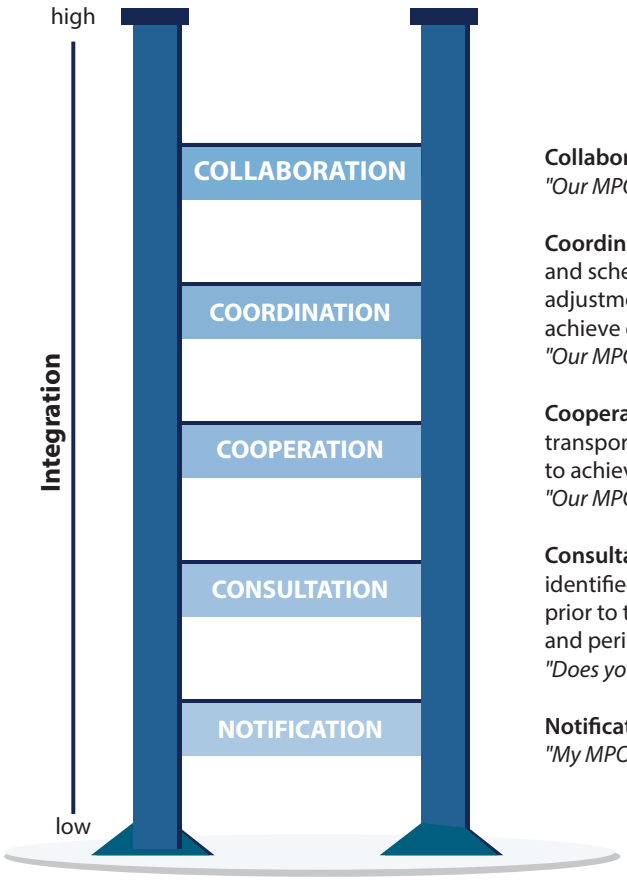
In these circumstances, planners may be relegated to participating as a community stakeholder in these processes. To overcome this barrier, planners will likely need to advocate for changes to state statutes or regulations to ensure a specific role for MPOs in regional planning processes.

Planning Across a Spectrum of Integration

Cooperation and coordination between or among multiple MPOs on long-range planning processes or activities is common. However, the level of cooperation and coordination is deeper in some areas of the country than in others, and it naturally changes over time, as conditions and priorities shift. In some cases, cooperation or coordination between or among MPOs leads to collaboration, that is, working jointly on new activities or work products. Figure 3 illustrates how cooperation, coordination, and collaboration between or among MPOs fit on a continuum of integration, summarized further in Table 2 (p. 5).

Healthy cooperation is the baseline status for effective multi-MPO planning. Cooperation minimizes the likelihood of neighboring MPOs unintentionally duplicating efforts or pursuing mutually exclusive goals. However, cooperation alone does not imply shared perspectives or strategies or maximum efficiency in carrying out the long-range transportation planning process.

Healthy coordination means that multiple MPOs are working together efficiently. At a minimum, this entails harmonizing planning assumptions and strategies to pursue shared goals within each respective MPO planning area. Coordination between or among neighboring MPOs is often most effective when there is, at least in some respects, a distribution of labor that allows each MPO to contribute in ways that play to its strengths.



Collaboration is a joint process of creation.
"Our MPOs created this together."

Coordination means the cooperative development of plans, programs, and schedules among agencies and entities with legal standing and adjustment of such plans, programs, and schedules to achieve general consistency, as appropriate (23 CFR ¬ß450.104).
"Our MPOs are using the same data, tools, and processes."

Cooperation means that the parties involved in carrying out the transportation planning and programming processes work together to achieve a common goal or objective (23 CFR ¬ß450.104).
"Our MPOs are sharing information and ideas."

Consultation means that one or more parties confer with other identified parties in accordance with an established process and, prior to taking action(s), considers the views of the other parties and periodically informs them about action(s) taken (23 CFR ¬ß450.104).
"Does your MPO have thoughts about how my MPO should do this?"

Notification is an act of one-way communication.
"My MPO is doing this."

Figure 3. A Ladder of Multi-MPO Participation (Adapted from Arnstein 1969)

Table 2. Potential Effects of Different Types of Multi-MPO Participation		
Type of Multi-MPO Participation	*Effects on Planning Activities*	*Effects on Work Products*
Cooperation	Planners have open lines of communication with counterparts; planners routinely share data, methodologies, and drafts of work products with counterparts	Plans and investment programs reflect knowledge of neighboring MPOs' goals, objectives, and investment priorities
Coordination	Planners working for neighboring MPOs use consistent data, methods, and tools; planners work with their counterparts to ensure compatible goals, objectives, and investment priorities	Plans and investment programs reflect consistency with neighboring MPOs' goals, objectives, and investment priorities
Collaboration	Planners develop and help implement joint strategies with counterparts; planners develop and help implement a holistic strategy for a combined planning area	MPOs jointly produce new plans, studies, and investment priorities

Healthy collaboration means that multiple MPOs are conducting activities or creating work products that explore interregional issues or build or reflect a consensus on interregional policy goals or investment priorities. Multi-MPO collaboratives work at a scale not explicitly addressed by federal statutes or regulations governing the metropolitan or state long-range transportation planning processes. Consequently, these collaboratives must maintain a high degree of public transparency to explain the benefits of collaborative activities and work products to skeptical community stakeholders.

Examples of Multi-MPO Planning

Researchers from APA and CQGRD conducted qualitative case study research to learn more about multi-MPO planning in three distinct areas of the country (Figure 4).

The research team, in consultation with FHWA staff, selected these three multi-MPO planning collaboratives based on their reputations for sustained coordination and collaboration over many years. Through this process, APA and CQGRD staff reviewed MPO and partner plans, improvement and work programs, studies, formal agreements, meeting records, and websites. The team also interviewed senior MPO and local government staff members in each coordination area.

The following sections provide brief snapshots of each collaborative and summarize their multi-MPO planning experiences.

San Joaquin Valley Regional Policy Council

The San Joaquin Valley ZRegional Policy Council (SJVRPC) collaborative's combined planning area comprises the southern half of California's Central Valley, with a contiguous area of more than 27,000 square miles and an estimated population of more than four million residents (Figure 5). The collaborative's name refers to a joint policy board established through a memorandum of understanding among eight MPOs (SJVRPC

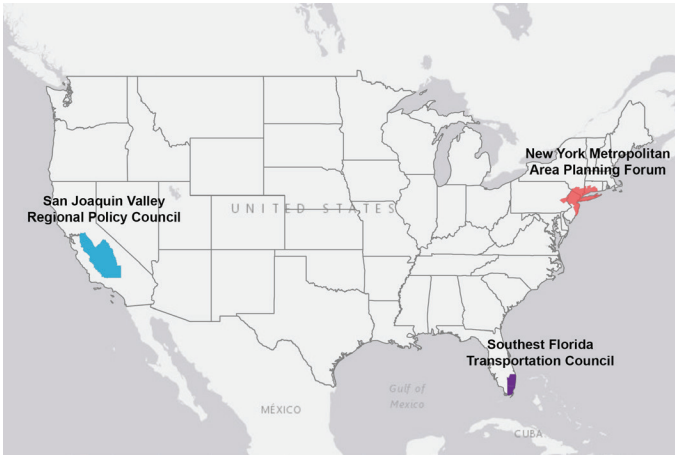


Figure 4. Multi-MPO Planning Collaboratives (Sources: HEPGIS, Esri, HERE)

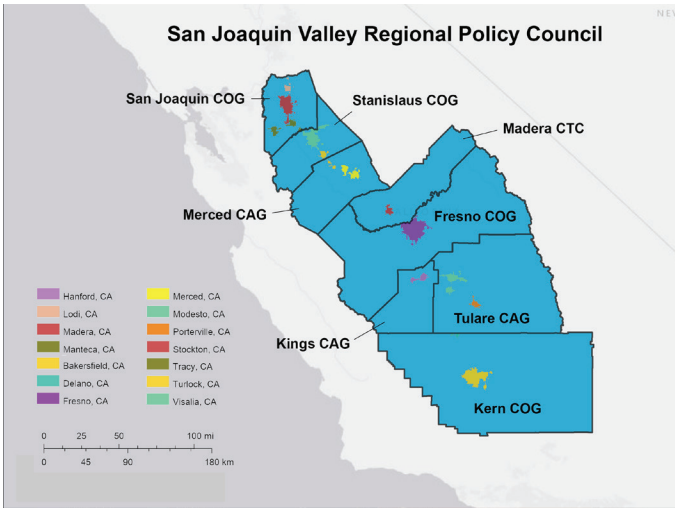


Figure 5. Constituent MPO Planning Areas and Urbanized Areas of the San Joaquin Valley Regional Policy Council (Sources: HEPGIS, Esri, HERE)

2006). Since 1992, these MPOs and their partners have been collaborating on long-range transportation planning.

California's San Joaquin Valley (SJV) is among the most productive agricultural regions in the world, and its position between the major population centers of Southern California and the San Francisco Bay Area makes it an attractive location for logistics and distribution facilities. However, the SJV suffers from poor air quality, high unemployment, and low educational attainment rates. Because it has few physical impediments to urban expansion, the SJV's urbanized areas have primarily been spreading out from city centers, rather than densifying through infill development.

In response to these challenges, the SJV MPOs have entered into multiple interlocal collaborative planning agreements (Table 3) and produced multiple joint work products (Table 4).

The SJVRPC meets in person roughly quarterly, while a staff-level coordinating committee meets monthly (SJVRPC 2019a). Beyond these regular meetings, the SJVRPC hosts an Annual Policy

Table 3. Key Interlocal Agreements Among the San Joaquin Valley MPOs

Year	*Type of Agreement*	*Parties*	*Purpose*
1992	Memorandum of Understanding	San Joaquin COG, Stanislaus COG, Merced CAG, Madera CTC, Fresno COG, Kings CAG, Tulare CAG, Kern COG + San Joaquin Valley Unified Air Pollution Control District (SJVUAPCD)	Establishes a formal commitment between SJV MPOs and SJVUAPCD for staff to coordinate the development and implementation of transportation control measures to comply with federal and state Clean Air Acts
2006	Memorandum of Understanding	San Joaquin COG, Stanislaus COG, Merced CAG, Madera CTC, Fresno COG, Kings CAG, Tulare CAG, Kern COG	Reaffirms the SJV MPOs commitment to coordinate long-range transportation planning processes and creates the SJVRPC (a joint policy board) and the San Joaquin Valley Regional Planning Agencies Executive Directors Committee (SJVRPAEDC) (a joint coordinating committee)
2009	Memorandum of Understanding	San Joaquin COG, Stanislaus COG, Merced CAG, Madera CTC, Fresno COG, Kings CAG, Tulare CAG, Kern COG + SJVUAPCD	Reaffirms the SJV MPOs and SJVUAPCD's commitment to coordinate the development and implementation of transportation control measures to comply with federal and state Clean Air Acts and extends membership in the SJVRPC to SJVUAPCD

Table 4. Key Joint Work Products of the SJVRPC

Year	*Work Product*	*Title*	*Purpose*
2007, 2011, 2014, 2018	LRTP chapter/appendix	One Valley: The San Joaquin Valley Profile	Provides a high-level overview of the SJV geographic context, population characteristics, and economic conditions and highlights coordinated planning efforts
2007–2019 (annually)	Work program	Overall Work Program	Summarizes all planned coordination work among the SJV MPOs along with necessary funding commitments
2009	Preferred growth scenario and smart growth principles	San Joaquin Valley Regional Blueprint	Presents a land-use and transportation vision to guide growth in the SJV over the next 50 years
2013, 2017	Freight plans	San Joaquin Valley Goods Movement Plan and Sustainable Implementation Plan	Analyzes conditions affecting goods movement in the SJV and includes recommendations for coordinating freight planning efforts with the SJV MPOs long-range transportation plans

Conference to discuss issues that affect the entire San Joaquin Valley and leads annual trips to Sacramento and Washington, D.C., to discuss regional concerns with state and federal legislators.

While the SJVRPC exhibits a high level of integration, parochial interests can make it difficult to reach consensus. Some counties are primarily focused on protecting their rural economies, while others are primarily oriented toward supporting job growth and housing development in urban areas.

Nevertheless, the SJVRPC illustrates several noteworthy multi-MPO planning practices:

- **Aligning long-range planning schedules.** This maximizes opportunities to share information, harmonize strategies, and speak with a unified voice.
- **Formalizing a collaborative relationship through multiple** Memorandums Of Understanding (MOUs). This has sent a powerful signal to state and federal partners as well as their respective constituencies that they are committed to working together to find mutually beneficial solutions.
- **Adopting an overall work program and shared legislative and funding priorities.** This allows the SJV MPOs to act as a counterbalance to the more populous, affluent, and heavily urbanized MPOs in their state.
- **Meeting regularly.** Monthly and quarterly meetings of the SJVRPC and staff provide a convenient mechanism for learning about projects, programs, and initiatives across the valley.
- **Contracting with private firms.** This extends the collaborative's capacity by providing planning services on behalf of all SJV MPOs.
- **Addressing collaborative planning efforts in all long-range transportation plans.** Including a chapter or appendix discussing the SJVRPC's work in each constituent LRTP provides a convenient primer for local officials and engaged citizens who may be unfamiliar with the scope and accomplishments of those efforts.
- **Sharing information with the public.** Posting information about collaborative efforts through a publicly accessible website heightens transparency.

New York Metropolitan Area Planning Forum

The New York Metropolitan Area Planning (MAP) Forum collaborative's combined planning area comprises parts of New York,

Table 5. Key Interlocal Agreements Among the MAP Forum MPOs

Year	*Type of Agreement*	*Parties*	*Purpose*
2008	Memorandum of Understanding	New York Metropolitan Transportation Council (NYMTC), North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority (NJTPA), South Western Region MPO, Greater Bridgeport and Valley MPO, Housatonic Valley Council of Elected Officials	Establishes a commitment among the member MPOs to coordinate unified planning work programs (UPWP), travel demand modeling, long-range transportation plans (LRTPs), transportation improvement programs (TIPs), and air quality state implementation plan (SIP) conformity
2017	Memorandum of Understanding	NYMTC, NJTPA, Western Connecticut COG, Connecticut Metro COG, Naugatuck Valley COG, South Central Region COG, Lower Connecticut River Valley COG, Orange County Transportation Council, Lehigh Valley Planning Commission	Reaffirms the original MAP Forum MPOs commitments; acknowledges the changes in boundaries, designations, and names of member MPOs; expands membership

Table 6. Key Joint Work Products of the MAP Forum

Year	Work Product	Title	Purpose
2009	Truck parking study	Multi-State Truck Stop Inventory & Assessment Study	Evaluates and provides recommendations for enhancing existing, formal and informal, truck services as well as for providing new services across the original MAP Forum combined planning area
2017	Resilience study	Post Hurricane Sandy Transportation Resilience Study in NY, NJ, and CT	Analyzes transportation system vulnerabilities to extreme weather events across the original MAP Forum combined planning area

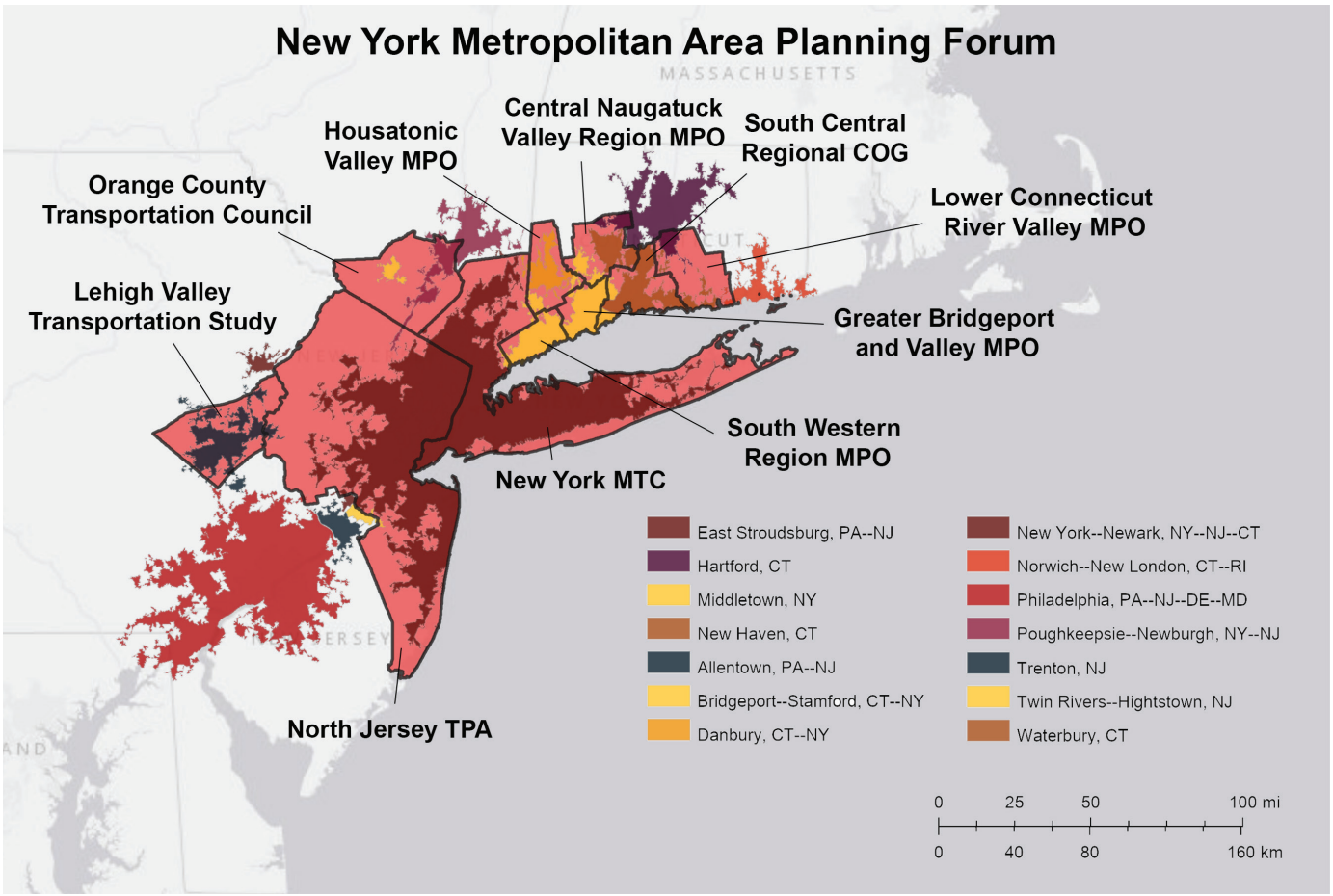


Figure 6. Constituent MPO Planning Areas and Urbanized Areas of the New York Metropolitan Area Planning Forum (Sources: HEPGIS, Esri, HERE)

New Jersey, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania, with a contiguous area of more than 10,000 square miles and an estimated population of nearly 23 million residents (Figure 6, p. 8). The collaborative's name refers to a consortium of nine agencies, representing a total of 10 MPOs, committed to cooperative transportation planning and decision making.

The combined planning area of these MPOs functions as a single commuter shed, and it includes multiple urbanized areas that cross MPO jurisdictional boundaries. In response to these conditions, the SJV MPOs have entered into interlocal collaborative planning agreements (Table 5, p. 7) and produced joint work products (Table 6, p. 7).

The MAP Forum met annually from 2008 through 2017, and in 2018 began meeting twice a year, in spring and autumn. These meetings provide the MPOs with regular opportunities to discuss issues and projects that transcend planning area boundaries. They facilitate relationship building and allow members to explore joint needs and potential areas for collaboration in the foreseeable future.

Beyond official MAP Forum meetings, members routinely communicate informally at the staff level, including sharing data and drafts of work products, and occasionally present information at other members' board or committee meetings.

Varying organization capacities and differences in state requirements and expectations for MPOs are the primary factors limiting multi-MPO planning in the MAP Forum coordination area. Member MPOs have planning area populations ranging from less than 200,000 to nearly 13 million, and the two largest MPOs, New York MTC and New Jersey TPC, have much larger budgets and staff sizes than the other MPOs. Meanwhile, some MAP Forum states grant their MPOs more autonomy to pursue activities that go beyond federal requirements than others. Furthermore, these states have different timelines for planning processes, which makes it difficult for member MPOs to synchronize their planning and programming schedules.

Nevertheless, the MAP Forum illustrates several noteworthy multi-MPO planning practices:

- **Establishing regular meetings to share information.** This helps members stay on top of emerging issues, develop an awareness of the perspectives of neighboring MPOs, and discuss shared priorities.
- **Using a division of labor.** This allows higher-capacity MPOs to supplement the expertise of lower-capacity MPOs.
- **Formalizing coordination and collaboration commitments,** without creating a new formal governance

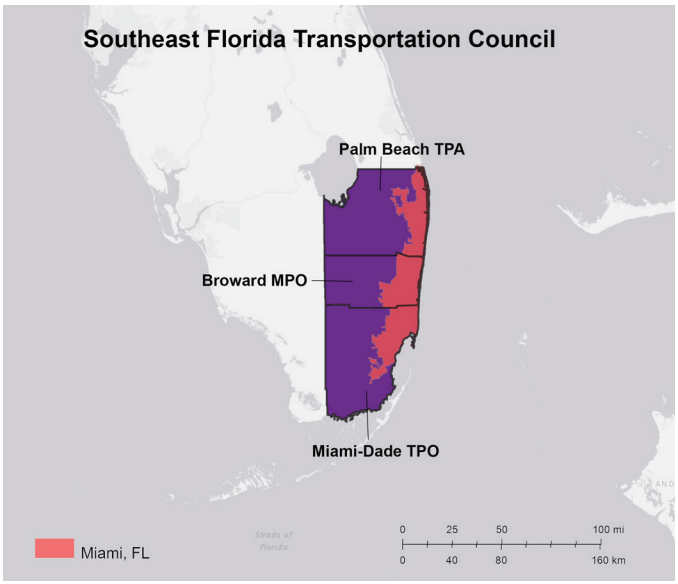


Figure 7. Constituent MPO Planning Areas and the Urbanized Area of the Southeast Florida Transportation Council (Sources: HEPGIS, Esri, HERE)

mechanism. This reduces the administrative burdens for member MPOs from different states.

- **Maintaining open lines of communication.** This helps member MPOs respond to new funding opportunities and select better projects.

Southeast Florida Transportation Council

The Southeast Florida Transportation Council (SEFTC) collaborative's combined planning area comprises the three southernmost mainland counties in Southeast Florida, with a contiguous area of more than 5,000 square miles and an estimated population of more than six million residents (Figure 7). The collaborative's name refers to a joint policy board established through an interlocal agreement among the three MPOs responsible for planning in the Miami urbanized area.

Low-density development patterns and historically auto-centric transportation investments present challenges for mobility and transportation improvements across Southeast Florida. These conditions are further reinforced by a growing population: the tri-county area is projected to increase by 1.4 million residents between 2010 and 2040 (SEFTC 2015a).

In response to these challenges and as explicitly enabled under Florida law (see Table 1, p. 3), the SEFTC MPOs have entered into multiple interlocal collaborative planning agreements (Table 7) and produced multiple joint work products (Table 8, p. 10).

Following several years of informal coordination, the three Southeast Florida MPOs created the SEFTC through an interlocal agreement in January 2006 (SEFTC 2006). This agreement stipulates that the SEFTC will develop a joint LRTP, processes for prioritizing projects and public involvement, and performance measures to gauge the effectiveness of coordination activities.

Since its establishment, the SEFTC has typically met two to four times per year to discuss long-range planning processes, priority projects, and performance measures. The SEFTC has also created five staff-level coordinating committees, which generally meet quarterly to develop recommendations to SEFTC on technical matters. Beyond this, the three MPOs jointly host an annual Safe Streets Summit that brings together local and regional stakeholders to discuss active transportation and mobility topics in a regional context.

While SEFTC MPOs are responsible for planning across a single urbanized area, the coordination area is split between two FDOT districts and two regional planning councils. Reporting to different FDOT districts adds a layer of bureaucratic complexity to the process of developing shared goals and priorities, and having multiple regional planning agency partners provides both opportunities for interregional coordination and challenges associated with building consensus.

Table 7. Key Interlocal Agreements Among the SEFTC MPOs

Year	*Type of Agreement*	*Parties*	*Purpose*
2006	Interlocal Agreement	Miami-Dade MPO, Broward MPO, Palm Beach MPO	Creates the SEFTC (a joint policy board) and establishes its duties to develop an LRTP, a process for prioritizing regional projects, a public involvement process, and performance measures to assess the effectiveness of coordination activities
2013	Memorandum of Understanding	Palm Beach MPO, Broward MPO, Miami-Dade MPO, SEFTC + South Florida Regional Transportation Authority, Florida DOT, South Florida Regional Planning Council, Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council	Establishes a multi-agency partnership to plan and implement commuter rail service

Table 8. Key Joint Work Products of the SEFTC

Year	*Work Product*	*Title*	*Purpose*
2010, 2015	LRTPs	Southeast Florida Regional Transportation Plan	Provides goals, objectives, and measures of effectiveness for the combined planning area and presents information about major funded projects across the combined planning area; 2015 version includes an expanded focus on transit, bicycle, and pedestrian mobility, freight, and operation
2007, 2009, 2012, 2015, 2016, 2017	Project priorities	SEFTC Adopted TRIP Priorities	Lists prioritized projects that qualify for Florida's Transportation Incentive Program (TRIP) Priority Projects funding, which is reserved for multi-MPO collaboratives
2010, 2014	Freight plans	Southeast Florida Regional Freight Plan	Provides an overview of the freight system in Southeast Florida, presents prioritized freight needs, and recommends strategies to improve freight transportation
2015	Resilience study	South Florida Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment and Adaptation Pilot Project	Analyzes vulnerability to sea level rise and coastal storms in Southeast Florida and recommends adaptation strategies to enhance resilience

The SEFTC illustrates several noteworthy multi-MPO planning practices:

- **Aggregating individual LRTP priorities in a joint LRTP.** This can streamline the process of developing a joint LRTP.
- **Aligning long-range planning schedules.** This maximizes opportunities to share information, harmonize strategies, and speak with a unified voice.
- **Formalizing a collaborative relationship through an intergovernmental agreement.** This sends a powerful signal to state and federal partners as well as the MPOs' respective constituencies that they are committed to working together to find mutually beneficial solutions.
- **Meeting regularly.** This provides board and staff members with a convenient mechanism for learning about projects, programs, and initiatives across the combined planning area.
- **Sharing information with the public.** Posting information about collaborative efforts through a publicly accessible website heightens transparency.

Action Steps for Planners

So far, this *PAS Memo* has framed multi-MPO planning as a necessary response to interrelated transportation, environmental, and economic issues that affect multimodal transportation system performance. And it has provided case studies that show how specific MPOs work together to make progress toward their collective goals. The following sections highlight three critical action steps for planners to help them build multi-MPO planning collaboratives for the communities they serve.

The first step is to identify shared priorities. After this, planners can help strengthen these collaboratives by leading or facilitating the process of drafting formal commitments. Finally, planners can help ensure the long-term efficacy and value of multi-MPO planning efforts by developing and monitoring performance measures.

Table 9. Examples of Potential Shared Priorities

Challenge or Opportunity	*Strategy*
Poor air quality	Expand electric vehicle infrastructure
Connected and autonomous vehicles	Support mobility as a service
Growing percentage of long-distance commuters	Expand interregional bus and passenger rail services

Identify Shared Priorities

Every planning issue that transcends MPO boundaries has the potential to be either a point of collaboration or a point of conflict for multiple neighboring MPOs. Before MPOs can plan collaboratively with other MPOs, they must have clear overlap in at least some of their priorities.

A shared priority is a collective understanding between or among MPOs that includes both a specific challenge or opportunity and the preferred strategy for responding to this challenge or opportunity (Table 9, p. 10). Shared priorities help MPOs focus their limited capacities and resources on mutually beneficial planning activities and programmatic investments.

While there is no set way to identify shared priorities, planners working for MPOs often learn about potential shared priorities through presentations or informal networking at conferences or peer exchange workshops, through formal notification and consultation processes involving neighboring MPOs, or by reviewing neighboring MPOs' planning documents.

Typically, once an MPO has identified a potential shared priority, the next step is to invite potential partner MPOs to participate in a focused conversation at a regularly scheduled policy board or technical advisory committee meeting or a special convening. Once all partner MPOs have reached a tentative agreement on the priority, they still must share this tentative agreement with their policy boards and other regional stakeholders to verify that there is a broad base of support for action.

Strong shared priorities are legitimate and widely embraced (CCI 2019). This means shared priorities must reflect the needs and desires of the stakeholders who are most likely to be affected by collaborative work. Ideally, these stakeholders either articulated the priority themselves or had a meaningful chance to shape the priority.

Additionally, strong shared priorities are appropriately scoped and sufficiently straightforward (CCI 2019). In other words, the challenge or opportunity and the associated strategy must require coordinated or collaborative action by multiple MPOs to succeed, without being overly broad or ambitious, given capacity and resource constraints. The priority should also be easy to state and explain to diverse audiences of stakeholders.

Finally, strong shared priorities are mindful of system interactions and timely (CCI 2019). The priority must be rooted in existing authorities and responsive to interactions with other priorities and actors. And the priority must be taking advantage of a special moment of opportunity (e.g., a change in leadership or public sentiment, a new funding opportunity, emerging technology, etc.).

While shared priorities are a precondition for multi-MPO planning, these priorities naturally evolve over time as stakeholders, resources, and transportation system conditions change. The issue that brought MPOs together at one point in time may eventually fade in importance. Consequently, planners working for MPOs must be willing to periodically revisit and help adjust shared priorities.

Formalize Commitments

Most coordination and collaboration between or among multiple neighboring MPOs is informal. That is, the MPOs are not parties to a written collaborative agreement, but they do have open lines of communication and may even meet regularly to discuss shared priorities. In some cases, informal collaboration is enough to establish goals and take action on shared priorities. In others, MPOs may struggle to prioritize multi-MPO collaboration in the absence of formal commitments.

Multi-MPO planning collaboratives typically formalize commitments through written agreements. These agreements define the scope and nature of collaboration and may establish a new governance structure—such as a joint policy board, coordinating committee, or unit of government—to facilitate group decision making or manage group activities. The scope and level of specificity in these agreements is often influenced by the size of the individual MPOs, geographic extent of the collaborative, and number of signatories.

While there is no set formula for initiating or negotiating multi-MPO collaborative agreements, planners often play a pivotal role in the process of developing these agreements. Meeting with staff counterparts can be the easiest way to test a potential partner's willingness to enter into a written agreement. These meetings can also help planners working for MPOs identify any potential issues or agreement provisions that might be likely to derail negotiations.

Soliciting feedback from policy boards, transit agencies, and other metropolitan stakeholders is necessary to build the necessary political support for a written agreement. By involving these stakeholders early and throughout the process, planners can enhance transparency and learn more about local concerns.

Identifying the strengths of each potential partner organization can help planners design an agreement that provides meaningful opportunities for MPOs of different sizes and capacities to play a meaningful role in the collaborative. This step can also help narrow the scope of the agreement.

Finally, listing potential joint activities or work products provides a concrete basis for subsequent discussion and negotiation. Often it makes sense to start with a relatively short list of realistic proposed commitments, rather than trying to create a comprehensive wish list of plans, projects, and governance mechanisms.

Each formal commitment requires partners to devote time or other resources. Therefore, it is also important to address how each partner will allocate resources to support the collaborative and to establish a mechanism that allows signatories to revisit the terms of the agreement, either periodically or on an as-needed basis.

Measure Performance

Federal statutes and regulations require MPOs to coordinate their transportation system goals with state and national goals and to measure progress toward achieving these goals within their respective metropolitan planning areas—but this does not address goals that transcend MPO boundaries. Consequently, collaboration between or among multiple neighboring MPOs on performance measurement is an emerging practice.

There are at least three broad categories of metrics that can provide meaningful feedback on the performance of multi-MPO planning efforts: collaboration metrics, work product

metrics, and transportation system performance metrics. Generally, these categories correspond to different stages in the development of a multi-MPO collaborative.

Collaboration metrics can provide multi-MPO collaboratives with feedback on interrelationships between or among members and help them characterize their level of effort or commitment. Planners working for MPOs can measure collaboration by documenting the following elements:

- The existence and features of interlocal agreements
- The composition of policy boards and staff committees, including joint boards and committees
- The frequency and level of engagement for any joint meetings and collaborative planning events

Work product metrics can provide multi-MPO collaboratives with feedback on consistency between or among work products and help identify instances where members may be working at cross purposes. Planners can measure work product integration by documenting the following elements:

- References to collaboration and instances of shared goals or objectives in MPO plans and studies
- Transportation improvement and overall work programs
- Other publicly accessible documents and media, including web pages or websites highlighting multi-MPO collaboration

Transportation system metrics can highlight connections between neighboring MPO planning areas to provide valuable feedback on transportation system performance across multiple MPO planning areas. Planners can measure combined planning area performance by selecting metrics that capture information about the following issues, among others:

- Passenger and freight flows across MPO boundaries
- Environmental performance
- Public health

Regardless of type, each metric must have either a direct, or at least theoretical, relationship to one or more shared goals. These goals may be mutual, meaning each MPO has established the same goal for their planning area, or collective, meaning all MPOs agree on a desirable outcome for the combined planning area of the collaborative.

Once planners have generated a list of potential metrics, it is important to screen these metrics against a shared set of criteria to evaluate their feasibility and usefulness. These criteria should, at a minimum, address the effort necessary to collect or calculate data for the metric and the degree of influence members have over the metric.

Conclusion

Multi-MPO planning is a promising approach to managing cross-boundary issues that affect multimodal transportation performance. It can help correct interregional jobs-housing imbalances and transportation network deficiencies that decrease the number of destinations that residents and visitors can safely and conveniently reach by multiple modes of transportation. It can decrease vehicle miles traveled, traffic congestion, and stormwater runoff, leading to improved air and water quality. It can promote business development strategies that emphasize local strengths over interlocal competition. And it can address the inequitable distribution of transportation system benefits and costs.

This *Memo* presents a wide range of considerations and recommendations for planners working for or with MPOs in areas of the country with multiple neighboring MPO planning areas. While multi-MPO planning is the exception and not the rule, multi-MPO collaboratives in California's San Joaquin Valley, the greater New York metropolitan area, and Southeast Florida show that it can work in a wide range of geographic and institutional contexts. Planners in other parts of the country have opportunities to foster collaboration among MPOs by leading or participating in efforts to identify shared priorities, formalize commitments, and measure performance.

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