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About MPOs: A Brief History

(Excerpts from U.S. DOT's 1988 Report,
Urban Transportation Planning in the United States: An Historic Overview)

While the earliest beginnings of urban transportation planning go back to the post-World War II years, the federal requirement for urban transportation planning emerged during the early 1960's. The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1962 created the federal requirement for urban transportation planning largely in response to the construction of the Interstate Highway System and the planning of routes through and around urban areas. The Act required, as a condition attached to federal transportation financial assistance, that transportation projects in urbanized areas of 50,000 or more in population be based on a continuing, comprehensive, urban transportation planning process undertaken cooperatively by the states and local governments -- the birth of the so-called 3C, "continuing, comprehensive and cooperative planning process."

By July, 1965, all the 224 existing urbanized areas had an urban transportation planning process underway. At that time, qualified planning agencies to conduct the transportation planning process were lacking in many urban areas. Therefore, the Bureau of Public Roads (predecessor to the Federal Highway Administration) required the creation of planning agencies or organizational arrangements that would be capable of carrying out the required planning process. Hence, Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) quickly came into being because of the growing momentum of the highway program and the federal financing of the planning process. However, some MPO-like organizations had existed since the 1950's to prepare special urban transportation studies under the auspices of the state highway agencies in some major areas such as Chicago, Detroit, New York, and Philadelphia.

The Housing and Urban Development Act of 1965 amended the Section 701 Urban planning assistance program established under the Housing Act of 1954 by authorizing grants to be made to "...organization s composed of public officials whom he (the Secretary of HUD) finds to be representative of the political jurisdictions within a metropolitan or urban region..." for the purposes of comprehensive planning. This provision encouraged the formation of regional planning organizations controlled by elected rather than appointed officials. It gave impetus to the formation of such organizations as councils of governments, and encouraged local governments to cooperate in addressing problems in a regional context. With the formation of these organizations, initially, the majority of MPOs were regional councils. However, since the 1980's, a number of MPOs have been formed which are either "free-standing", or a housed within city or county organizations. Currently, less than half of the MPOs are housed within regional councils.

The urban transportation planning process flourished during the 1960's and 1970's. This was a period of emphasis on development and implementation of the technical foundation for the 3C planning process, and the technical capacity building within the MPOs. By 1968 most urbanized areas had completed or were well along in their 3C planning process, and the emphasis shifted to implementing a continuing transportation planning process to maintain the responsiveness of planning to the needs of local areas. During the 1970's improvements were made to the planning process to require shorter-range capital improvement programs along with long-range plans, to better integrate urban transportation planning at the local level, and to place more emphasis on non-capital intensive measures to reduce traffic congestion as alternatives to major construction projects. Environmental

concerns and the energy crises of the 1970's gave further impetus to shorter term planning horizons and a corridor level focus as well as the integration of environmental and energy concerns within the planning process.

The decade of the 1980's ushered in a new mood in the nation to decentralize control and authority, and to reduce federal intrusion into local decisionmaking. The joint FHWA/UMTA urban transportation planning regulations were rewritten to remove items that were not specifically required by statute. The new regulations required a transportation plan, a transportation improvement program (TIP) including an annual element, and a unified planning work program for areas of 200,000 or more in population. The planning process was to be self-certified by the states and MPOs as to its conformance with all requirements when submitting the TIP. Essentially, only the end products were specified while the details of the process were left to the states and MPOs. This represented a major shift in the evolution of urban transportation planning. The result was an urban transportation program and process that languished, and the loss of much of the technical capacity that has been built up in the MPOs.

ISTEA reversed the trend of deterioration with its renewed emphasis on the metropolitan transportation planning process. The legislation was designed to put in place a framework to guide the operations, management and investment in a surface transportation system that is largely in place. ISTEA strengthened the metropolitan planning process, enhanced the role of local elected officials, required stakeholder involvement, and encouraged movement away from modal parochialism toward integrated, modally mixed strategies for greater system efficiency, mobility and access.

For more information, see the in-depth [history of MPOs](#) which can be found in the *NJTPA Quarterly*.

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