

Draft Products from Day Two Discussions ~ June 3, 2005
Findings and Recommendations for Metropolitan Planning

Introduction

Decisions in transportation planning have great and lasting consequences for the community. While transportation planning objectives initially focused on highway construction, the importance of transportation actions has led to steady and cumulative growth in the range of concerns considered at the transportation planning table -- safety, environmental health, settlement patterns, human health, security, social equity, energy costs and other items. The colloquy was specifically focused on providing a current and comprehensive understanding of future travel behavior to allow planners both to better understand how today's decisions may or may not address tomorrow's needs and to better prepare for new planning objectives that may emerge in the future.

Understanding how travel behavior will be transformed also provides some indication of how the planning profession needs to evolve to meet those future needs. The participants at the colloquy used both a panel discussion and breakout sessions to explore aspects of the planning process. Breakout reports and notes articulate both findings on the state of the practice and recommendations aimed at how the transportation planning process can meet both present and future challenges.

The gist of the planning recommendations emerging from the colloquy discussions is that **MPOs can and should take a greater leadership role in their communities; that their activities must be informed by an enhanced knowledge base; and that the metropolitan transportation planning approach must be more comprehensive and sophisticated than ever before.** These themes are applicable to current conditions **but are increasingly essential to a future situation in which economic pressures and information technologies will complete the transition of transportation to a knowledge-based activity.** Another theme woven throughout the recommendations is that **this emerging environment poses a particular challenge to fast-growing regions.**

In short, colloquy participants believe that many transportation and transportation-related issues can be successfully confronted only with effective regional planning and inter-jurisdictional coordination. Regions that develop effective MPOs can significantly improve the efficiency of transport and land use systems, and reduce both direct costs to businesses and consumers and indirect costs to society and the environment. Regions with ineffective MPOs will fail to capitalize on many of these opportunities and the resultant (and unnecessary) inefficiencies and transport – land use incompatibilities will have negative impacts on quality of life and economic productivity in these regions.

The planning products of the colloquy effort are provided below. Findings emerging from the discussions are listed first; recommendations follow. While the recommendations could be sorted in numerous ways, they are grouped below by major themes of the colloquy's planning discussions: the need for **entrepreneurial leadership, an expanded knowledge base and a**

COLLOQUY

ON THE COMING TRANSFORMATION OF TRAVEL

redesigned planning approach. By design, most of the recommendations are directed at Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) structure, culture and activity.

Findings: Metropolitan Planning Risks and Opportunities

- 1. There are significant risks associated with metropolitan planning processes.** The presence of cooperative transportation decision-making processes provides a unique institution in every metropolitan area for comprehensive assessments of system-level options. It also provides for public accountability. Failure to successfully engage in meaningful, informed decision-making on issues ranging from urban form to the availability of modal alternatives exposes a metropolitan area to risks of significant inefficiencies and inequities which can be expected to be compounded by future events, both those foreseen and unforeseen. MPOs must be leaders in the areas of form, funding and policy.
- 2. These risks are greatest in areas experiencing rapid growth.** One theme emerging from the colloquy's exploration of thirty- to forty-year futures is a particular concern for areas experiencing high growth. Participants state that the nation is in a "moment of a large order of magnitude" that demands a reevaluation of how planning is done. In growth areas, fundamental discussions about transportation system design and operation, modal dependency, urban form, sustainability and distribution of benefits and burdens – as well as discussions about the ability and wisdom of public policy to shape the outcome – are needed immediately. MPOs in areas facing the greatest risks also enjoy the greatest opportunities for positive influence. The ability for the MPO to engage in region-shaping decisions is less present in established, slow-growth and no-growth areas and thus the need is less urgent.
- 3. Federal statutory planning requirements are a mixed blessing.** Participants express appreciation for the long-standing federal requirement for a comprehensive metropolitan transportation planning process. In the absence of the federal requirement, many MPOs would disappear – leaving a significant vacuum with respect to inter-governmental and inter-agency coordination and basic public accountability. For MPOs to have clout, they need clear authority. Yet participants express concern that the statutory federal authority given to MPOs also represents a problem, in that the federal requirements for long-range plans and Transportation Improvement Programs (and related air quality conformity exercises) "consume" the attention of many MPOs. For an MPO to be fully effective, its objective must go beyond merely fulfilling federal requirements.
- 4. Planning resources are typically not provided at a level appropriate to the scale of issues.** Participants acknowledge that the ratio of funding for metropolitan transportation planning to the funding provided for project development or construction is very small. MPO staffs ranging from a few people in the smallest areas to a few dozen in the largest regions are hard-pressed to address the ever-growing set of complex issues. Again, this gap is most pronounced in rapidly-growing communities.
- 5. At the same time, there are successful MPOs in a range of settings. The characteristics common to the most successful MPOs are entrepreneurial leadership, flexibility, credibility and relevance in subjects and activities outside the required federal process.** In the colloquy panel discussion on the MPO process and in individual breakout sessions, participants pointed to many cases in which an MPO has been able to overcome obstacles and fulfill the promise of the MPO concept – providing

objectivity and creativity, maintaining relevance and reaching successful, implementable agreements. The term “entrepreneurial” was expressly used to describe the ability of successful MPOs (often because of staff leadership) to be prepared for and to sense the correct timing for new initiatives that resonate with MPO members and other stakeholders in the community. The new initiatives are consistent with but not required by federal law or regulation.

6. **MPO stature within the local community is directly related to effectiveness of working relationships between the MPO staff and MPO participants.** Given that the MPO staff size is comparable to the “tail” on the larger “dog” of state and local governments and transportation authorities, strong working relationships between the MPO and its partners are inherent in successful planning processes. Only when the partners share ownership of the MPO process and seek value added through the process can the MPO expect to be seen as a vital decision-making forum distinct from the individual member agencies and able to go beyond the institutional constraints of those agencies. When successful, MPOs enjoy broad local support.
7. **High turnover rates within MPO boards and staffs jeopardize policy continuity and implementation.** As an institution primarily composed of local elected officials and appointed officials of member agencies, members’ tenure on an MPO board is typically brief. The same can be said for MPOs in which pay scales or job frustration perpetuates constant staff turnover. MPOs that maintain policy continuity and build credibility over time are only those that are able to instill a constructive institutional culture that retains experienced staff and persists through the changing of the political guard.
8. **Regarding potential shocks to the system identified in the colloquy, MPOs cannot be easily designed to respond to possible *short-term* system shocks (bridge failure; energy supply interruption). They can work to build a multi-layered transportation system that could adapt to short-term shocks and long-term trends.** The colloquy discussion articulated a wide range of “wild cards” that could undermine basic assumptions for the future. Participants express recognition that emergency circumstances generate their own sets of public and private response mechanisms, and that the MPO is not necessarily the place to expect emergency, real-time actions to occur. However, MPOs can help build both the basic system building blocks (transit systems, ITS services, etc.) and communications channels to facilitate both short-term emergency responses by MPO partners and longer-term system modifications to deal with unexpected, long-lasting impacts.

Recommendations: Entrepreneurial Leadership, an Enhanced Knowledge Base and a Revised Planning Approach

Entrepreneurial Leadership

- 1. The characteristics of successful MPOs must be nurtured in other MPOs.** Structured processes are required, such as peer-to-peer exchanges, best practice documentation, mentoring and formal training of staff, staff leadership and elected officials. This may build on the current “Metropolitan Capacity Building Program” but also requires new and sophisticated approaches that communicate more in terms of successful institutional culture than in terms of institutional structure, more in terms of entrepreneurial risk taking than in terms of staff administration. The needed outcome is more MPOs that are able to tailor local technical and policy activity to address emerging issues in a manner that builds on solid credibility derived from past successes. This type of MPO institutional culture is seen as critical to success in the rapidly-changing and uncertain environment suggested in the colloquy.
- 2. MPO directors need to spend a considerable portion of their energies on cultivating relationships with local leaders, elected officials, and their peers in executive positions at relevant agencies in the region.** This particular effort is required because of the critical need to maintain MPO relevance in a constantly-changing environment. Regular contact and personal credibility both offer entrée into the processes of members and stakeholders and also increases commitment to the MPO process on the part of these individuals.
- 3. MPOs must take a lead in the creation and stewardship of a shared regional vision.** Participants state that a shared, dynamic regional vision is a more effective instrument of public policy than a traditional transportation facilities plan. “Visionary leadership” is identified as one of the greatest contributions the MPO institution can provide to the metropolitan area. Visionary leadership allows short-term, local decisions to be consistent with long-term, strategic goals. Such leadership requires both the institutional culture called for in recommendation #1 above and the working relationships established through recommendation #2.
- 4. MPOs must proactively break down barriers between planning and operations and provide for an integral MPO role in metropolitan operations.** One individual reflects the sense of the whole by asserting that, “we’re not saying you don’t need a long-range perspective but there’s a whole new way of operating that doesn’t fit with a twenty-year, long-range planning process.” Another recommends that MPOs should “think long and plan short”; in other words, recognize the very significant potential for near-term operational actions to both produce benefits and generate greater knowledge of travel dynamics that, in turn, improves the MPOs perspective on long-range needs.

An Enhanced Knowledge Base

- 1. MPOs need to make a wholesale investment in data.** Participants are quite clear in identifying data as central to both the MPO's awareness of issues and its successful engagement with them. The subject matter for data needs ranges from patterns of freight movement to relationships between transportation and public health. The recommended MPO involvement in operations (at the short-term end of the spectrum) and the likely increasing concerns for environmental sustainability (at the long-term end of the spectrum) both come with substantial data needs, as does an increased emphasis on performance monitoring and outcome-based planning. Participants recommend that MPOs re-examine existing data collection efforts and consider directly sponsoring data collection at a higher scale than at present.
- 2. MPOs must foster mechanisms to maintain a strong knowledge base within the decision-making structure, including the stakeholder base.** At a minimum, there must be tools and techniques in each MPO to effectively orient new policy members and their technical representatives to the general purpose and specific institutional culture and policy set of the MPO. The greatest success may be found in MPOs that have a strong set of adopted policies that allow the MPO to maintain continuity as players change. Colloquy participants also recognize the need for a strong, capable staff and an informed stakeholder population (including private transportation and land use planners, engineers, designers and developers). Continual professional development of all parties is required to maintain a strong knowledge base.
- 3. Training in consensus-building and inclusive visioning skills is critical to MPO effectiveness.** The central role envisioned by participants for the MPO in leading regional visioning efforts requires substantial skills in this area. Training in group dynamics, process design, conflict resolution and handling difficult individuals are all called for in order to be fully successful. Additionally, visioning and "back-casting" are relatively new approaches without a solid base of literature on the "how's and "how not's"; work is required in this area.
- 4. Financial mechanisms, including innovative public-private arrangements, represent a rapidly-emerging area of need for enhanced MPO skills.** A second particular skill set cited by participants is in the area of complex financial mechanisms. Currently and to a greater degree in coming years, non-traditional financing will be used to facilitate highway and transit capital construction and to support operations. These new mechanisms include leasing arrangements, mitigation fees, variable tolling approaches, non-compete clauses, right-of-way donations and others. MPO participants, particularly MPO staff, must be conversant in this language or risk either missing available opportunities for transportation system funding or having such explorations occur outside the comprehensive planning context of the MPO forum.
- 5. Skills in consultant management must be enhanced.** A third needed skill set articulated by the participants relates to consultant management. Most MPOs rely on planning consultants for a number of critical activities, such as model development and calibration, corridor studies or alternatives analyses for new transit starts. Each of these

kinds of activities may result in dramatic implications for public policy. Participants cite a need for strong management skills to ensure the development of effective scopes of services and timely, cost-effective delivery of useful products. This is especially important if the private sector assumes a greater role in system ownership and operation. A corollary to this recommendation is that the consultant community must be nurtured just like the MPO staff in its understanding of changing environment, its skills in visioning and consensus building and other activities.

- 6. MPOs must monitor customer/consumer concerns and seek effective approaches to deal with what is seen as important at the “street level” – congestion, reliability, availability of transit options.** Balancing the need for broad long-term visioning, participants cite the need for MPO activities to be grounded in issues most pertinent to residents’ daily lives. Preoccupation with long-range settlement patterns must be accompanied with a concern for daily congestion, with attention to reducing the frequency and magnitude of incident delay, with consideration of on-time performance of transit vehicles and the like. To a certain degree, the “elephant in the room” during the colloquy – that is, the condition that is both substantial and also being ignored – is the state of the current transportation system. Both highway systems (with rapidly increasing congestion) and transit systems (with operating resources typically inadequate to provide a competitive alternative to the auto) are falling short of public expectations. Continuous monitoring of public attitudes, of public perceptions of the effectiveness of implemented actions, and of public responses to implemented actions are all essential elements of a successful MPO’s knowledge base and effective use of outcome-based performance indicators. Participants stressed the need to also monitor and consider the public’s relative priorities and willingness to make tradeoffs among such items as congestion relief, road rage, availability of useful information, quality of life, quality of the trip (quality of daily travel for all vs. peak expressway commuter travel), compliance with speed limits, walkability and quality economic development/smart growth in the articulation of planning priorities. Neither an exclusive emphasis on highway level-of-service nor a disregard for recurring daily congestion appears to accurately reflect the complex priority set of the public.

A Revised Planning Approach

- 1. The MPO planning perspective must be not only broadened (in scope) but also lengthened (in planning horizon).** The range of non-traditional subjects that strategies and objectives must cover includes CO₂ emissions; environmental justice and social equity; pricing; public health; environmental sustainability; intercity freight and passenger movement; new transportation technologies and other issues. The implications of the thirty- to forty-year expectations articulated in the colloquy are that there is a broader context for MPO decision-making than traditionally reflected in the twenty-year MPO long-range planning process.
- 2. In constructing its planning program, MPOs must focus policy discussions on those subjects that they can or should influence, while closely following those exogenous factors that have the greatest potential impact on metropolitan travel.** The discussions of future trends often return to the observation that some of the driving forces of society and the economy (indeed, some of the most significant), such as global climate

change and international terrorism, are exogenous to metropolitan transportation planning. The conclusion is that MPOs must make a carefully crafted distinction between areas of influence and exogenous conditions. The former include a wide range of aspects of the region's physical form (from site design to regional settlement patterns) and transportation system design (from the methods of service delivery to major capital investments). The latter include vehicle technology, price and availability of fuel, national policies regarding immigration, social patterns regarding family size, and other national or global trends and events. An MPO can seek success by carefully "growing" the list of items over which it has influence – into intercity freight transportation or interstate corridor management, for example – while constantly reflecting on the effectiveness of local decisions in light of global conditions. Closer cooperation with and enhancement of statewide transportation planning efforts is also warranted.

3. **To that end, visioning efforts should also incorporate scenario development as a means of incorporating the concept of uncertainty.** Traditional MPO exercises settle on a certain set of future population, employment, household and vehicle ownership forecasts before evaluating alternative transportation system designs. Typically, future land use patterns are a given before the transportation analysis begins. Further, the wide range of items that are inarguably exogenous to the MPO process are nearly universally *excluded* from consideration in current MPO planning. Colloquy participants recommend that scenario development be part of regional visioning exercises and that the scenarios engage not only in the interaction between transportation system designs and alternative metropolitan growth scenarios but also in the flexibility of the transportation / land use system to respond to a variety of outcomes in the exogenous variables.
4. **A changing environment calls for a more thorough incorporation of technology in planning activities and in resulting plans.** Participants at the colloquy indicate that technology in general and ITS in particular is at the center of the future of travel and should be a singular attention for transportation planners. This recommendation calls for MPO staffs to become more knowledgeable about the rapid changes occurring in information technology, goods movement technology and vehicle-highway technology in order to properly account for their impacts and potential benefits in regional transportation plans and programs. Participants stress that future transportation systems must be adaptive with new governance and public and private management structures to monitor, manage and use information.
5. **Education is a critical component of effective transportation / land use planning and MPOs must find their role in the educational process.** Participants state that public consciousness of transportation and its relationship to the environment and society is weak. "Education at all levels need to be enhanced – public education, higher education and job training at different levels of focus and specificity" as transportation becomes a "knowledge-based system". The MPO will need to play a critical role in this activity.
6. **Effective planning requires a close connection to project implementation.** Even in an enhanced planning process, MPOs will continue to have great influence in handing off project commitments to designers. For the increased sophistication of the MPO process to be reflected in real-world projects, MPOs must help facilitate an environmental streamlining approach that provides a smooth hand-off between the planning and project development processes. This calls for adoption across more states and MPOs of early,

NEPA-quality environmental analyses within the planning process that is evident in some locations today, along with greater accountability of designers to the MPO regarding project objectives, scope and cost.