

PROPOSED MPO REGIONAL MOBILITY AUTHORITY

BACKGROUND

Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPO) have been a integral part of the transportation planning and implementation process in urban areas for over fifty years. Transportation infrastructure is readily and consistently identified by voters as an urgent and critical urban need. Coordinating fragmented local governments and their respective priorities with state and federal transportation departments and agencies is the key transportation challenge in metropolitan areas.

Representation

One of the problems experienced by many MPO organizations is unequal representation on the MPO Policy Boards. Often, these boards have municipal mayors seated who represent substantially disproportionate populations: one town being 1,200 and another being 30,000 or 100,000, but each having one vote. The problem is similar to the Founding Fathers trying to balance representation in Congress between small states and large states. The solution, of course, was the establishment of the House of Representatives with proportionate representation and the Senate with equal representation, regardless of size. Achieving consensus between the two representative bodies is the ongoing work of the federal congress and most state legislatures. The representation problem remains and solutions are needed in the urban areas of the nation.

Funding

The Federal Government provides incentives to encourage urban transportation coordination through an MPO with both administrative and capital grant dollars to leverage among the local governments following a formal and official planning process. Federal transportation dollars can be obtained by an MPO working under federal guidelines, regulations and performance measures. There are transportation choices to make and it is the discretion of local and state governments on which to choose, if any.

ANALYSIS

Transportation plans and program coordination among three levels of government and many municipalities in an urban area is challenging because there are limited resources, competing priorities, political consequences and an extra-ordinary amount of time involved. Generally, most major transportation improvements take fifteen to twenty years to implement if there are no major problems or conflicts of any type. Often, major transportation improvements will require twenty to thirty years to complete. In reality, the political decision makers who pushed and supported a particular transportation improvement or program are long out of office when and if the supported transportation improvements are accomplished.

Constituents rarely understand the complexity of the transportation planning and implementation process and the time consuming nature of the business. Governments (federal, state and local) are frequently chastised for not responding rapidly to needs.

Building political consensus within an urban area is one of the primary purposes of the MPO. Preparing a transportation plan and coordinating implementation of that plan (both short range and long range) is a second primary purpose of the MPO. There is the unstated third primary purpose of the MPO and that is to do whatever is programmed as fast as possible. In other words: Do what can be done quickly.

Reality is vested in the old cliché “Rome wasn’t built in a day.” Louisiana’s urban transportation infrastructure, likewise, is not either. Too often, if not regularly, MPO plans are not considered in the programming of capital outlays. Political decision making may be neither balanced nor analyzed, but can only be described as “old time” shifting in the democratic process. There is often unrelenting determination to override research and consensus building in favor of self interest and control. There are transportation funds and projects which work through the MPO process and there are transportation funds and projects that work outside the MPO process.

Limited funding, changing politics, competition, private and public interests, short term and long term priorities, natural and man made disasters, economic impacts, weather, environment, culture, history and human nature all factor into the transportation planning and programming objectives of the MPO.

Transportation is one of many urban elements in need of coordination in metropolitan areas. Land use, utilities, drainage, climate, demographics, housing, recreation, education, economic development, sprawl, high density, and environment are part of the elements mixed among local governments with conflicting problems, goals, solutions, resources and priorities. An important recognition has been the relationship between land use, transportation, and access management. A free standing, sole purpose MPO focused on transportation capital improvement programming begs the question of urban transportation infrastructure longevity. Integration of transportation planning into the planning fabric of an urban area is integral to improved efficiencies and economics. The role and purpose of a metropolitan planning organization is more than scheduling federal and some state transportation improvements through a listing of capital projects. Genuine and comprehensive integration of community planning is needed.

The MPO has proven effective where it has been supported. Fifty years of experience has demonstrated the benefits of governmental coordination in transportation planning and implementation, but there is much room for improvement. This proposal focuses on the establishment of Regional Mobility Authorities in conjunction with the MPO.

PROPOSAL

First, the MPO Policy Board should be reflective of the population within the defined urban area. Representation should not be by governmental jurisdiction alone, but proportionate to the population. Better the MPO be represented along the lines of the U.S. House of Representatives

than the Senate. Proportionate membership would improve the participation and creditability of the process.

Second, an MPO should integrate short and long range transportation plans with the comprehensive master plans of local and state governments which encompass their defined Urbanizing Study Area.

Regional Mobility Authority

An MPO policy board with proportionate representation is ideally suited to advance and leverage limited transportation funds more effectively and integrate more rationally into local community plans and programs.

1st A proportionate representative MPO Policy Board should serve as the governing board of the Regional Mobility Authority (RMA) encompassing the same urban geography of the MPO Study Area.

2nd A primary purpose of the Regional Mobility Authority (RMA) is to support and expedite the both the short range and long range transportation plans of the MPO Area:

- a. Once a twenty year Financially Constrained Transportation Plan has been adopted by the MPO, the Regional Mobility Authority would be tasked with implementation of the programs and projects identified.
- b. Local government adoption and support of the program or project would be identified and implemented: corridor preservation, access management, zoning, setbacks, cross section design and supplemental funding would be tools to consider using.
- c. Engagement of land owners affected by the proposed project.
- d. Posted signage on scheduled improvements on location.
- e.