Unraveling the Acronyms

In regional transportation planning, there are so many government agencies and planning organizations involved that you can’t tell the players without a scoreboard. So here’s the rundown:

**Federal Agencies**

Over the last two generations, the federal government has played an important role in developing national transportation policy and in providing the lion’s share of federal funding for transportation projects. The federal role has changed in many ways during recent years, especially because of the new priorities created under ISTEA the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act and TEA-21 (the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century). Nevertheless, the federal government remains a key player.

Most federal transportation functions are consolidated under the U.S. Department of Transportation. Two agencies within DOT are critical to the transportation programming/funding process in California: the Federal Highway Administration and the Federal Transit Administration.

These two agencies work together to administer ISTEA and its transportation programming and funding requirements. In this capacity, they oversee the work of state, regional, and local transportation agencies.

The Federal Highway Administration is responsible for all federally sponsored highway programming and funding. FHWA oversees the preparation of each state’s State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP), which is required under federal transportation law. FHWA also oversees the distribution of federal highway money.

The Federal Transit Administration, formerly the Urban Mass Transit Administration, is in a parallel position; FTA administers all federally sponsored programming and funding for transit-related projects. Historically, FTA has worked more directly with local and regional transportation agencies than has FHWA, which has used Caltrans as an intermediary. This relationship is partly because of the fact that federal transit funds are often used for operations as well as capital projects.

However, rail construction projects funded with FTA money must be in the STIP.

**State Agencies**

In California, state agencies play important roles in the transportation programming and funding process: The California Transportation Commission and the California Department of Transportation, usually referred to as Caltrans.

The California Transportation Commission’s primary role is to allocate all federal funds and all state funds, including gas tax and sales tax revenue. The CTC’s main programming vehicle is the State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP). This document includes a seven-year plan for all transportation capital projects to be funded.

Caltrans, one of the state government’s largest single agencies, is responsible for engineering and planning, and for the construction and maintenance of all state highways and major arterials and roads. Caltrans also provides funding for a variety of other transportation projects and programs, ranging from dedicated rail lines to transportation demand management programs to the landscaping of scenic highways.

**Regional and Local Transportation Agencies**

The hierarchy of regional and local agencies that engage in transportation planning, programming, and funding can be confusing. Indeed, state and federal transportation agencies can sponsor local and metropolitan agencies to engage in a wide variety of transportation activities. State and federal laws typically attach a different name (and, hence, a different acronym) to the agency performing each activity.

* Caltrans was known as the Division of Highways, a unit of the Department of Public Works, until 1972.
To make matters even more confusing, several of these functions are often performed by the same local agency. But in each metropolitan area, the array of regional and local transportation functions will be divided differently among the different agencies. Here, then, is a list of the functions performed by local agencies and their acronyms.

The metropolitan planning organization, or MPO, is a regional agency designated by the U.S. Department of Transportation to carry out several functions specifically required under federal transportation law. Among other things, the MPO is charged with preparing a Regional Transportation Plan, the long-range plan for transportation in that particular region.

The Regional Transportation Planning Agency, or RTPA, is an agency designated by the state to carry out certain functions required by state law. In particular, the RTPA must prepare the Regional Transportation Improvement Program, or RTIP, which is a regionwide inventory list of transportation projects to be funded in the short term. The RTPA is also charged with administering additional requirements imposed on air quality "nonattainment areas." These areas are designated by ISTEA as either Transportation Management Agencies (TMAs) or Urban Zoning Agencies (UZAs).

The Congestion Management Agency, or CMA, is an agency designated under both state and federal law to prepare each county's Congestion Management Plan, or CMP. The state-mandated congestion management planning was part of the 1990 gasoline tax increase. ISTEA picked up the congestion management provisions the following year.

The County Transportation Commission or County Transportation Authority performs a variety of functions that differ from county to county. Among other things, the CTC/CTA might be charged with administering local transportation funding programs (such as a transportation sales tax) and might also be the operator of the local transit system.

The Air Quality Management District or Air Pollution Control District (AQMD or APCD) is responsible for preparing regional air quality plans under the federal Clean Air Act. Under federal law, the Regional Transportation Plan and the air quality plan must be in conformance with one another. Therefore, AQMDs and APCDs have significant interaction with MPOs over Regional Transportation Plans.

In many cases, one local agency will perform most or all of these functions. Often this agency is the regional Council of Governments, or COG—an association of local governments that performs many other regional planning functions under state and federal law.

For example, in the five-county region comprising Greater Los Angeles, the MPO is the Southern California Association of Governments, or SCAG, which is the regional COG. However, the RTPA and CMA functions are carried out by individual county transportation commissions. In Los Angeles County, the county transportation commission has been succeeded as part of the giant L.A. County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), which is also the region's chief transit operator.

The Bay Area has a completely different structure. The Bay Area Metropolitan Transportation Commission, or MTC, serves as both the MPO and the RTPA, thereby combining many transportation-related functions. But the MTC is not the designated CMA for the nine Bay Area counties; that function is filled by county-level entities such as the Santa Clara County OMT.

However, unlike L.A., where SCAG serves as both the COG and the MPO, the MTC is separate from the Bay Area's COG, the Association of Bay Area Governments. The two agencies are housed in the same building and share support services, and recent legislative proposals have called for their merger, but those proposals have continually failed to pass.