MPO Critique: Promise, Practice, & Prospects for Reform

TTP220

Gian-Claudia Sciara

5/09/2016
MPOs in Concept Originally

“Their role, as originally conceived, was to bring local concerns together to counteract the power of state highway departments.” - Handy and Sciara
1962 Highway Act as foothold

Photo Credit: New Orleans Preservation Timeline Project, http://architecture.tulane.edu/preservation-project/timeline-entry/956
MPOs in Concept Now

“MPOs provide a **visionary force** for change in the region... MPOs provide **leadership on regional issues** and champion change based on adopted goals and policies”

– Turnbull 2007
MPOs in Practice
MPOs in Practice

• “MPOs have been dealt a weak institutional hand, and they have not substantially altered the power of state or federal partners in the intergovernmental systems at the regional level, and they have had a limited one on local governments” – Wolf, Puentes, et al. 2007

• “Few MPOs enjoyed a mandate from either the state or from local governments to exert real control over decision-making in transportation” – Goldman and Deakin 2000
MPO Structural Limitations

• MPO boundaries and board composition determined by governor and local governments.
• MPO board is made up of local elected officials rather than regionally elected officials.
• Projects for long-range plan and transportation improvement program come from local governments, transit agencies, state DOT.

Implications for Authority, Resources, Legitimacy…
MPO Authority

• Authority for LRP and TIP
• No authority for...
  – Construction and operation of the system
  – Raising funds (e.g. imposing taxes)
  – Formula funding to transit agencies
  – Land use planning
• Leverage through...
  – Projects must be in LRP and TIP
  – LRP and TIP must be fiscally constrained
  – LRP and TIP must meet air quality conformity
MPO Resources

• Direct control over substantial share of federal funding for region

• No control over...
  – State suballocation policy
  – Local funding, e.g. county sales tax
  – Congressional earmarks

• Leverage through funding flexibility

• Another issue: Administrative funding and staffing levels
MPO Legitimacy

• Political legitimacy
  – Support of local officials who serve on MPO board for regional over local concerns
  – Central city versus suburban representation on MPO board
  – TEA-Party challenges...

• Technical legitimacy
  – Limitations of travel demand models with respect to non-auto modes, equity considerations
Metro planning: Falling short

• Boards & voting structures not representative

ﬀ Suburbs over central city
(Lewis & Sprague, 1997; Benjamin, Kinkaid & McDowell, 1994; Luna, 2013; Nelson, Sanchez, Wolf & Farquahr, 2004; Sanchez, 2006)

ﬀ Absence of transit
(Hoover, McDowell & Sciara 2004; Bond & Kramer, 2010)
Broadening of Board Membership

1977

2010

MPOs (%) with Board Seat for this Participant
“Membership should be as diverse as the region”
Metro planning: Falling short

• Decisionmaking neglects social equity
  ➢ Plans compartmentalize goals / objectives
    (Manaugh et al., 2014)
  ➢ Rural and unincorporated areas ignored
  ➢ Technical weakness
    (Karner & Niemeier, 2013;)

“Membership should be as diverse as the region”
Evidence

• Benjamin, Kincaid, and McDowell (1993) study
  – Central cities underrepresented on 78% of MPO boards
  – Only small percentage of boards used weighted voting
  – Even with weighted voting, central cities underrepresented on most

• Sanchez (2006)
  – suburban communities and white residents overrepresented
  – boards do not reflect the geographic or racial composition of the metropolitan populations
Metro planning: Falling short

- MPOs are subordinate organizations
  - No own-source revenue; “fiscal paradox” (Sciara & Wachs, 2007; Lowe, 2014)
  - State transportation department (DOT) dominance (Edner & McDowell, 2002; Lowe, 2014)
  - Parochialism (Goetz, Dempsey & Larson, 2002; Bond & Kramer, 2010)
Funding Regional Projects

MPOs direct a small slice of the federal pie (~5-10%)
Funding Regional Projects
State allocation practices greatly impact MPO funding

“The state fund allocation process is the most important factor in determining the amount of funding that will be available to assist MPOs in meeting regional transportation needs.”

(Dempsey et al. 2000)
## Funding Regional Projects

State allocation practices

### State Funding of MPO Regions Compared to Proxy Measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MPO Region</th>
<th>Percent of Revenue Received</th>
<th>Percent of Revenue Generated</th>
<th>Percent of State Population</th>
<th>Percent of State VMT</th>
<th>Percent of State Lane Miles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denver</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dallas</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phoenix</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seattle</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Dempsey et al. 2000)
# MPO Funding Programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MPO Region</th>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Est.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S.F Bay Area</td>
<td>Transportation for Livable Communities Program</td>
<td>1997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sacramento</td>
<td>Community Design Program</td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Diego</td>
<td>Pilot Smart Growth Incentive Program</td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern California</td>
<td>Compass/Blueprint Demonstration Grant &amp; Green Incentive Programs</td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
MTC’s Transportation for Livable Communities Program

• “The purpose... is to support community-based transportation projects that bring new vibrancy to downtown areas, commercial cores, neighborhoods, and transit corridors, enhancing their amenities and ambiance and making them places where people want to live, work and visit.”

• Grants to city, counties, and transit agencies that adhere to program goals and criteria
Prospects for MPO Reform
Critical Issues for MPOs

- **Geography:** increasingly interconnected regions evolving into super-regions
- **Technology:** innovations rearranging daily travel patterns in unpredictable ways
- **Equity:** balance between regional needs and equitable distribution of costs and benefits
- **Sustainability:** reducing GHG emissions while building a more resilient system
Critical to MPO Success

• Top-down support from state DOT
• Bottom-up support from local governments
• Internal support in the form of:
  – Leadership from director and MPO board
  – Technical competence and credibility

“The most successful MPOs appear to have leaders with the ability to achieve progressive collaboration and to build consensus among individuals with diverse interests, and to fashion regional solutions to common problems” - Goetz, Dempsey et al. 2002
In the Context of Intergovernmentalism...

Federal

$ with strings attached $ State

Regional

Local

Proposed projects

State System

Regional System

Local System
State Actions

• Executive willingness to revisit MPO designations in state.

• Use state funding (suballocation to regions) to encourage regional own-source revenue.

• Link local option tax authority to transportation expenditures from LRP.
Federal Actions

• Lower barriers to MPO redesignation.
  – Provide 10-15 year designation sunsets.
  – Lower threshold for agreement from local governments: representing 66% (not 75%) of planning area population.

• Use federal funding incentives to:
  – Encourage regional revenue.

• Make incentive pots available to large MPOs with population based membership & voting.

• Require MPOs to consider GHGs in plans & investment decisions
Local Action

• Coordinate and communicate with MPO about local land use & development.

• Align local option tax expenditures with LRP.

• Coordinate with MPO and other local governments when pursuing discretionary funding.
Local Action

Sustainable Communities Strategies

How to get local governments on board?