Metro Power

With ISTEA, MPOs have found there's no such thing as politics as usual.

By James H. Andrews

The numbers are vast. St. Louis's East-West Gateway Coordinating Council encompasses 230 municipalities, eight counties, parts of two states and two federal regions, 4,487 square miles, 2.4 million people.

Or take the Orlando Metropolitan Planning Organization in Florida: more than 1.2 million people, 2,548 square miles of land (plus lots of water), 23 municipalities, three counties, an airport authority, and two transportation agencies.

These two organizations, like the other 338 MPOs across the country, are in the midst of big changes. They are redefining their responsibilities and altering the political landscape in which they work. Like most MPOs, they have developed plans, won federal money, and completed projects—many of which have been in the pipeline for some time. In some cases, the MPOs have influenced decisions that only state highway departments made in the past.

Many of the changes can be traced to the landmark Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991. ISTEA, combined with the Clean Air Act amendments adopted in 1990, raised great expectations that regional decision making would change. ISTEA advocates saw the MPOs as the institutional mechanism for shifting federal transportation policy. The law prescribed balanced consideration of everything that goes into modern transportation—highways, transit, bicycles, pedestrians, freight traffic—and linked it to land use, pollution control, and environmental protection.

The law also said plans were to be made with vigorous public participation. [See "Refreshing ISTEA," February 1993.]

Because the law goes far beyond transportation, however, many MPOs have used it to address social and economic issues. From the federal point of view, ISTEA is now the nation's main metropolitan planning program, and one of the few sources of federal money going into metropolitan planning, says Sheldon Edner, community planner in the environment and planning office of the Federal Highway Administration.

Where they've been MPOs have been around for over 35 years, organized by states and localities to meet planning requirements for highway and transit grants. They are a mixed bag, some covering entire urban areas, some splitting their region with other MPOs. (Tampa has three MPOs.) More than half have their own staff, but some use regional planning council staffs. A few MPOs are just a post office box, says Edner.

Under federal guidelines, MPOs and their boundaries are established by agreement between the states and local governments. MPO resources vary greatly, as do their mandates. Most MPOs don't build or operate anything, although some do. For instance, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission in the San Francisco Bay Area runs freeway call box and service patrol programs in cooperation with the state.

The main responsibility of MPOs is planning—deciding what should be built, improved, coordinated, and enhanced. But they have no authority to implement their objectives. "Most MPOs are essentially voluntary in nature," says East-West Gateway's executive director,
The table below describes New Castle County, Delaware, and Cecil County, Maryland, the territory of the Wilmington Area Planning Council, in terms of population, employment, commuting, and other factors at three points in time. WILMAPCO refuses to accept the commuting projections for 2020, adopting strategies to reduce the automobile share.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1960</th>
<th>1990</th>
<th>2020</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>355,854</td>
<td>507,429</td>
<td>638,047</td>
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<tr>
<td>Household Size</td>
<td>Avg. persons per household</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>2.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>People Employed</td>
<td>119,377</td>
<td>277,792</td>
<td>344,254</td>
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Where We Work:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>In Region</th>
<th>Out of Region</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In Region</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of Region</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>14%</td>
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</tbody>
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Commute Mode:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>1960</th>
<th>1990</th>
<th>2020</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Automobile</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Transit</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walk/Bike</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congested Roads</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg. Trip Length</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td>7.4 mi.</td>
<td>8.8 mi.</td>
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Farmland 223,574 acres 188,696 acres 153,818 acres

Les Sterman.

For the past several years, MPOs have derived their authority primarily from federal transportation funding requirements. Not surprisingly, MPOs strongly support ISTEA. The Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations (a program of the Washington-based National Association of Regional Councils) says it will push for ISTEA’s reauthorization next year.

"ISTEA restructured the whole federal-state relationship," says Janet Oakley, the MPO association’s transportation director. It "has lived up to its promises."

Bruce McDowell, AICP, director of government policy research at the U.S. Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations, has been studying MPOs for years. He, too, sees ISTEA as a boost to MPOs, but he also notes that many MPOs have complained about the disparity between resources and responsibilities. With extra funding has come "a lot more regulation and a lot more work," he says.

McDowell will report to the Federal Highway Administration this summer on how ISTEA can be improved and MPO capacities strengthened. Among his suggestions: Simplify MPO planning requirements, focus on performance and results, lighten the burden on smaller MPOs, and make federal review an MPO learning and self-improvement process.

Inside view

One thing hasn’t changed since ISTEA was enacted: MPOs still struggle for agreement among local officials and state transportation departments, which are often represented on the MPO board.

Under ISTEA, as in the past, local elected officials often balk at the thicket of regulations through which their projects must pass and the difficulties of balancing priorities within the fiscal constraints of federal law.

But some officials, like those in the Thurston Regional Planning Council in Olympia, Washington, have decided that "government interference" is not so bad. There was some blood on the floor in the beginning, says executive director Harold Robertson, AICP, but the MPO has won local officials’ support. Initially, the council refused to certify funding for some local projects, which "certainly got people’s attention," Robertson says. The MPO’s regional plan established a desirable development pattern, with density targets, including minimums. Elected officials on the council understood the implications for local planning and zoning and went on to help enact these standards in their own jurisdictions.

Two issues tend to pit MPOs against the state, according to Christopher Bender, communications coordinator at the Surface Transportation Policy Project, a Washington-based advocacy group. One is the question of who has ultimate authority to choose the transportation projects that will be funded under ISTEA. The other is getting enough information from the state so that the MPO can plan within the limits of available funds.

The state controls information that MPOs need, does not share it willingly, and sends its highway officials to Washington to try to kill ISTEA, says William Newton, AICP, of the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission in Worcester. Some highway officials want to go back to "June Cleaver time," says Janet Oakley.

Some state highway departments are likely to mount strong opposition to ISTEA reauthorization. Already, the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials has come out against renewing the enhancements requirement, claiming the fiscal set-asides for safety and enhancements burden the states, limit flexibility, and add unnecessarily to the number of funding categories.
St. Louis reorganizes
Les Sterman, an 18-year veteran of the East-West Gateway Coordinating Council, says his agency is just beginning to tap its powers under ISTEA. The council was organized as an MPO in 1965 to plan for transportation needs in the St. Louis metropolitan area, which includes three counties in Illinois. The council has 21 members, 14 of them elected chief executives of the counties and municipalities, others representing transportation agencies in Missouri and Illinois.

Under ISTEA, Sterman says, many MPOs, including his, are beginning to find the political strength they need. His opposite number in the Missouri highway department, district engineer Freeman McCullah, agrees and says he is putting off retirement so he can help with the change.

"We're in the early stages of what we think ISTEA intended," McCullah says. Now, he says, the state highway department is a player but "we don't dictate projects.... My job is to go to Jefferson City [the state capital] and tell them what St. Louis is going to do."

The old way, he adds, was for the highway department to go to the MPO and tell it, "Here's where the money will be spent; we want you to approve it." How well the MPO does its job now, McCullah believes, depends on the quality of information the state provides. This kind of politics depends on knowledge rather than deals.

A common knowledge base is one of the goals of a memorandum of understanding executed this spring by the East-West Gateway Coordinating Council and the Missouri Highway and Transportation Commission. They agreed to follow common planning principles, create a jointly staffed project team, and together carry out project planning and programming. As part of this effort, the state will provide a three-year capital budget for state and federal funds every year.

The MPO has moved ahead in other ways. "We dismantled the typical pro forma citizen participation committees we had in the past," Sterman says. "We recognized we essentially have to work in the framework of the community." The staff's activities are "a lot more project-based," he says. Its tool box of public participation techniques includes visioning sessions, surveys, open houses, workshops, and guidebooks. "You won't see us standing up front in big auditoriums much anymore," Blair Forlaw, the council's policy and programming director, wrote in STPP's April newsletter. "We have minimized our acronyms. And the voices you hear in our meeting rooms are far more varied than they used to be."

The council has also adopted a broad social and economic agenda, integrating transportation planning and community development. "Bridges to Work" is a research and demonstration project aimed at narrowing the social and economic gulf between urban core and suburban residents. And part of the council's regional plan is a program called "Access to Opportunity," which relies on improved integration of existing transportation systems. The council worked with a regional jobs organization to select a new light rail station site, design a reverse commute program, and link roadway improvements to community development.

Putting the region first
Harold Barley, the first executive director of Orlando's MPO, says his top priority is to make planning truly regional.

Before starting his new job in March, Barley worked for more than 20 years for the Metropolitan Area Transit Authority serving Washington, D.C., and its Maryland and Virginia suburbs. He says he thinks the MPO board chose him because they liked his experience in solving transportation problems in a "complex political environment."

Barley says his other priorities are intermodality, funding, and public involvement that extends beyond ISTEA requirements. Involvement includes educating the public about the present situation and what can be done about growth...
and quality of life. “Educating the public is a large part of the funding challenge,” he says.
The MPO’s 2020 plan, adopted last December, is “financially feasible,” Barley says, but there is a $2 billion shortfall. Barley says he is confident the money can be found if people understand what they are paying for and if the MPO is accountable to its constituents.

On a recent trip to Tallahassee, Barley says, he learned that legislators were discuss-

Oregon Metro Faces the Ultimate Test

Metro, the regional government for Portland, Oregon, and its suburbs, faces a big test this year. The Metro Council must decide whether to expand the area’s urban growth bound-

ary by up to 9,000 acres. It’s a decision that has already stirred lively debate in the fast-growing region.

Metro is unusual among metropolitan governments because its council is elected and because it carries more weight than most. The Metro Council has the power to adopt and enforce regional plans that set densities and specific housing allocations in the region’s 24 cities and three urbanized counties. It makes all of the region’s major transportation policies.

And, since 1994, when voters approved a charter that converted the council from a 13-member volunteer group to one with seven members who receive part-time salaries, its influence and visibility have grown.

Originally created in 1979 in response to the state’s growth planning mandate, the area’s urban growth boundary encompasses 233,000 acres within the region’s cities and surrounding counties. There was little pressure for expansion during the 1980s, when the boundary contained an abundance of vacant land and the region’s economy was stagnant; only minor additions were approved. The current push for change is based on a steady influx of newcomers, many of them drawn by emerging high-tech industry. Over the past four years, the three-county region and adjacent Clark County, Washington, have absorbed 110,000 new residents, bringing the current population to about 1.6 million. Another half million are expected over the next two decades.

Oregon’s statewide planning system requires the region to ensure a 20-year supply of land for development. If current development patterns continue, however, land will run out in 12 years, according to Metro’s estimates. For the first time, Metro has decided to establish “urban reserves”—areas for future growth. The Region 2040 plan, much discussed in its current draft form, looks at possible urban reserve areas containing 22,000 acres.

In February, the Metro Council voted for a full study of the urban reserve areas, and a decision about them could come in August. The debate focuses mainly on two areas south and east of Portland, and many residents there have spoken out against the designations at Metro Council hearings.

Metro’s related discussion about whether to expand the growth boundary has elicited opposition from a group calling for a “zero option,” that is, no expansion at all. Meanwhile, developers clamor for more land, and some suburban officials express nervousness about the higher densities that could result without an expansion.

Now the regional government is looking for a way to satisfy all these groups. Mike Burton, Metro’s executive officer, has suggested expanding the growth boundary by 4,000 acres while gradually increasing residential density from the current average of four units an acre to five by 2015. Average lot size would drop from 8,000 square feet to 6,200 square feet. The plan provides a specific formula for each jurisdiction’s expected share of the region’s growth. But the political ground is constantly shifting. As the zero option has gained momentum, Burton has concluded that no expansion would be needed if local governments made even greater density changes to their plans.

A Metro opinion survey conducted in February showed that people in the Portland area have mixed feelings about growth. About half said growth should occur mostly in developed areas, but 87 percent said they expected the urban growth boundary to be moved to accommodate more people. Views about higher densities were split.

On the council, the strongest advocate of expansion is home builder Don Morissette. He hired three faculty members at Portland State University’s Center for Urban Studies to help challenge some of Metro’s growth assumptions. In his view, much of the land now remaining within the growth boundary is on hillsides and cannot be developed at higher densities.

The Portland State study concluded that Metro’s urban growth plan cannot be achieved because higher land prices and smaller lot sizes will push people to distant communities outside the urban fringe. The study suggests that pressure for redevelopment will reduce the supply of low-cost housing, forcing more people into housing assistance programs and increasing homelessness.

“I don’t think Metro has woken up to the fact that 500,000 people is a lot of people,” he says. “Only the wealthy will be able to afford a back yard in the 2040 plan.”

So far, however, political sentiment seems to favor containment rather than expansion. Burton has pushed for a Metro Council decision on the growth boundary this fall, but competing political pressures are slowing discussions. Increasingly, local leaders are speculating that the process could drag on into the winter.

Gordon Oliver

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