

RURAL TRANSPORTATION PLANNING ORGANIZATIONS (RTPOS) PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT PROCESS IN RURAL AREAS

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Cover: Alamo Regional Rural Planning Organization (ARRPO) 10-20 Year Plan; Alamo Area Council of Governments

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INTRODUCTION

The field of regional-level rural transportation planning has existed in a very small number of states since the 1970s, around the same time that many metropolitan areas were solidifying their approach to transportation planning through metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) that were formed following the 1962 Federal Aid Highway Act. Rural transportation planning greatly expanded after Congress passed the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) in 1991, with its emphasis on local participation, and the 1998 Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21) that elevated the role of rural local officials in statewide planning. In order to meet new federal requirements, states developed new outreach methods, including supporting the work of rural, regional transportation planning organizations (often called RPOs or RTPOs).

The federal planning regulation finalized in 2003 (and again in 2007 after the 2005 Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) was passed) outlined the required process for nonmetropolitan local official consultation in statewide planning. From the federal policy perspective, RTPOs were considered a stakeholder to the planning process, but they were not defined until the 2012 law Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century (MAP21) established a common set of tasks and institutional structures for the voluntary organizations.¹

What is an RTPO/RPO?

Regional Transportation Planning Organizations (RTPOs) generally operate in non-metropolitan areas to conduct outreach to the public and local officials and provide transportation planning support under contract to state departments of transportation (DOTs). A Governor may establish and designate federally recognized RTPOs to enhance the planning, coordination, and implementation of the long-range statewide transportation plan and STIP, with an emphasis on addressing the needs of nonmetropolitan areas of the State. Whether formally designated or not, regional rural planning partners can benefit state and local stakeholders. Sometimes, such organizations are also called Rural Planning Organizations (RPOs), and some states may refer to them as Regional Planning Affiliations, Regional Transportation Planning Agencies, or simply as general-purpose Councils of Governments or Regional Planning Commissions who have a rural transportation planning program. They generally exist to assist state DOTs with completing their requirements for statewide planning in rural areas and to enhance the outreach conducted to local officials and the public.

RTPOs serve as a bridge between state DOTs, local elected officials and the public. Public engagement in rural transportation planning is essential and a key RTPO task delivery to ensure

that transportation systems meet the needs of rural communities, which often face unique challenges like long travel distances, limited public transit, and lower population densities.

This issue brief will discuss the importance of public engagement and highlight successful examples from across the country. To prepare this brief, NADO Research Foundation staff reviewed the United States Department of Transportation website, Transportation Research Board publications, and several public engagement resources and documents.

BACKGROUND

Over half of the states in the U.S. had established some form of rural transportation planning prior to the enactment of MAP-21, and several states had passed their own specific statutes governing rural transportation planning. Generally, RTPOs have been created to model basic MPO structures and functions. Together with MPOs, RTPOs often offer states a consistent statewide model for conducting planning that is continuous, comprehensive, and cooperative.

As outlined in 23 CFR § 450.210 (2016) Interested parties, public involvement, and consultation-

The duties of a RTPO shall include:²

- (i) Developing and maintaining, in cooperation with the State, regional long-range multimodal transportation plans,
- (ii) Developing a regional Transportation Improvement Program for consideration by the State,
- (iii) Fostering the coordination of local planning, land use, and economic development plans with State, regional, and local transportation plans and programs,
- (iv) Providing technical assistance to local officials,
- (v) Participating in national, multistate, and State policy and planning development processes to ensure the regional and local input of nonmetropolitan areas,
- (vi) Providing a forum for public participation in the statewide and regional transportation planning processes,
- (vii) Considering and sharing plans and programs with neighboring RTPOs, MPOs, and, where appropriate, Indian Tribal Governments; and
- (viii) Conducting other duties, as necessary, to support and enhance the statewide planning process under [§ 450.206](#).

Federal and state laws outline requirements for involving the public in transportation decision-making processes. This includes providing early and continuous public involvement opportunities prior to adopting plans or programs, considering and responding to public comments, providing timely information, offering convenient and accessible public meeting locations, and engaging a wide variety of stakeholders in transportation decision-making.³

Public engagement undertaken by RTPOs creates important advantages for rural transportation planning, ensuring that plans and investments reflect the needs, priorities, and values of the communities they serve.

RTPOs will carry out the following planning tasks:



L RTP

Preparation of a Regional Long-Range Transportation Plan (LRTP).



T IP

Preparation of a Regional Transportation Improvement Program (TIP).

- Coordination of local planning, land use, and economic development.
- Provision of technical assistance to local officials.
- Participation in national, multi-State, and State policy and planning development processes.

- Facilitation of a forum for public participation in regional and Statewide planning.
- Coordination of plans and programs with neighboring RTPOs and Metropolitan Planning Organizations and tribal organizations.

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Source: USDOT RTPO 101 Factsheet Series

BENEFITS

A Transportation Research Board (TRB) project for the National Cooperative Highway Research Program (NCHRP) on Measuring the Effectiveness of Public Involvement concluded that there are six key indicators that positively impact the success of a community engagement effort (Brown et al., 2019). These are⁵:

1. Influence and Impact: Public feedback has an impact on the project decisions and ensures that organizations are not just eliciting feedback from the public as part of a “checklist.”
2. Transparency and Clarity: Trust of government agencies has increased or improved as a result of the public involvement processes, and agencies were appropriately transparent about the project.
3. Timing: Public involvement started early enough and was of sufficient length and frequency to be valuable.

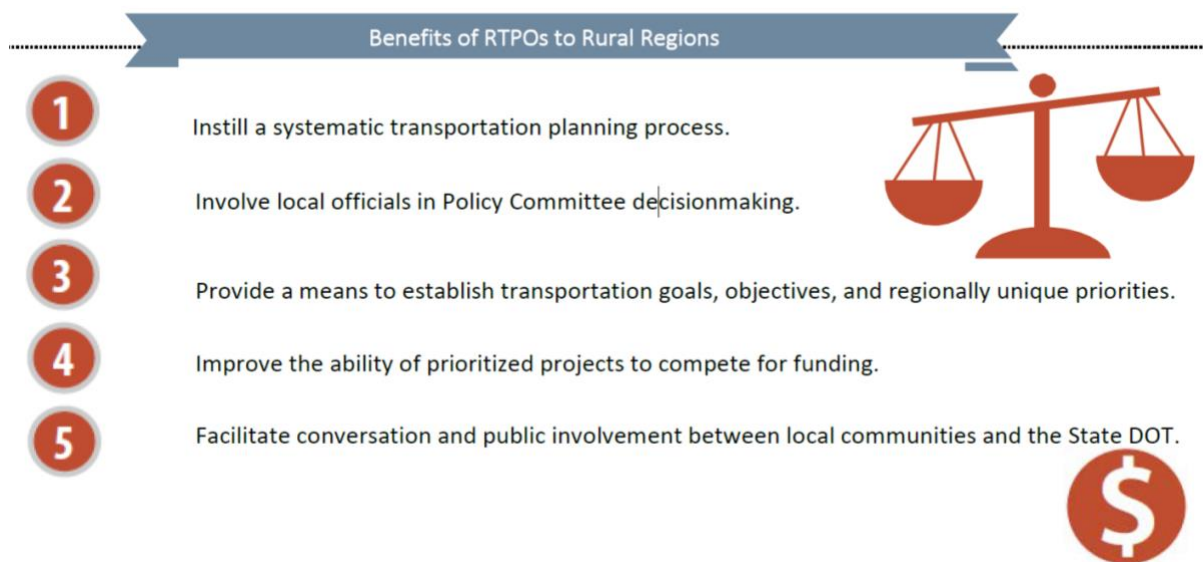
4. Inclusion: Public involvement was inclusive and representative of all targeted and affected populations.

5. Targeted Engagement: Public involvement included locations relevant to the targeted and affected populations.

6. Accessibility: Public involvement activities used multiple methods for participation.

When communities are involved, the resulting plans are more likely to be accurate, relevant, and ultimately successful. Local residents possess an intimate understanding of their neighborhoods. They know the shortcuts, the dangerous intersections, the areas where pedestrian traffic is heavy, and the places where cycling feels unsafe. This ground-level knowledge is invaluable to impactful planning efforts.⁶

Public engagement supports the education and empowerment of the public. This creates more informed and engaged citizens and fosters long-term civic participation. This also strengthens interagency and stakeholder collaboration which leads to more coordinated, holistic and innovative solutions to transportation challenges.



Source: USDOT RTPO 101 Factsheet Series

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

The 'public' in public engagement process includes anyone who resides, works, visits, has an interest in, or does business in an area potentially impacted by transportation decisions. This includes traditional transportation stakeholders, such as local government agencies, local businesses and advocacy groups including civic organizations, special interest groups, homeowner organizations, and similar entities.

Community members are a rich source of ideas that can contribute to improving transportation systems. They personally know and experience their region's transportation issues and challenges and can often be profoundly affected by transportation decisions. This is true whether they played a role in those decisions or not. Therefore, when engaging the public, it is imperative to have a proactive strategy for seeking meaningful input from those most local to the project area or those who may be disproportionately impacted by a project. This is especially true for residents in underserved communities, including those who have been historically disadvantaged, marginalized, or adversely affected by persistent poverty or other circumstances that may have limited their past participation.⁷

USDOT defines meaningful public involvement as a process that proactively seeks full representation from the community, considers public comment and feedback, and acts on that feedback to incorporate into a project, program, or plan.



Source: USDOT Promising Practices for Meaningful Public Involvement in Transportation Decision-Making

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to public engagement, but for many years, there have been tested and proved methods that many transportation agencies have relied upon. One of the most common approaches to public engagement for transportation projects are open house meetings and workshops. These are typically in-person events held in public locations such as government buildings or community centers. In-person events can be structured in a variety of ways depending on the nature of the project and the audience. These events capitalize on personal, face-to-face interaction with the community that agencies utilize to gather feedback.⁸

The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), through its Every Day Counts initiative, is promoting the expanded use of virtual public involvement strategies and techniques. Virtual tools provide increased transparency and access to transportation planning activities and project development and decision-making processes. Many virtual tools also provide information in visual and interactive formats that enhance public and stakeholder understanding of proposed projects and plans. Virtual approaches have become even more important as communities managed public health risks related to in-person events as part of the response to the Coronavirus pandemic of 2020.

The 2024 State of the Practice Report provides a comprehensive overview of public engagement practices among U.S. transportation agencies, based on input from over 400 professionals across all 50 states. It highlights widespread staffing shortages, limited resources, and a lack of dedicated engagement personnel as major barriers to effective public involvement. Despite strong leadership support, agencies struggle to meet growing expectations from stakeholders/funding agencies for inclusive and meaningful engagement. Most rely on hybrid methods—combining in-person events and digital tools like surveys and social media—but face challenges reaching diverse and underrepresented communities. The report emphasizes the need for better training, clearer goals, and the application of innovative technologies such as AI and virtual reality to enhance outreach.⁹

CASE STUDIES

CASE STUDY #1: WEBSTER COUNTY PUBLIC TRANSIT AND ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION PLAN, SOUTHWEST MISSOURI COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS, MISSOURI

The Southwest Missouri Council of Governments (SMCOG) has partnered with Webster County to develop a Public Transit and Active Transportation Plan (Plan) for the county. The Plan will focus on opportunities to improve access to transportation in the county, particularly for individuals with disabilities, individuals with low income, and older adults. The main purpose of

the Plan is to develop a set of multimodal transportation improvements that address deficiencies and provide enhancements to Webster County’s overall transportation system.¹⁰

To develop the Plan, a range of outreach methods were used:

- Community Meetings: Held at senior centers, clinics, libraries, and churches.
- Local Outreach: Planning committee members led neighborhood engagement.
- Surveys: Available online, on paper, and via QR codes in public spaces.
- Media: Promoted through social media, flyers, and press releases.
- Interactive Tools: Included maps, dot exercises, sticky notes, and plain-language materials.

Key outcomes included 220 survey responses and over 150 individuals engaged at public meetings.

This approach illustrated several key factors that lead to a successful engagement process: small group discussions in trusted, accessible venues created an environment where more meaningful dialogue was held between project managers and stakeholders; incentives for participation succeeded in expanding stakeholder turnout; partnerships with local nonprofits expanded the pool of project supporters; and iterative engagement with regular updates helped sustain engagement throughout the planning effort. This “go where people are” approach produced a more meaningful and impactful public engagement process that informed the plan creation effort. The advisory committee remains committed to supporting the outcomes of the planning process through implementation.¹¹



Source: SMCOG- Webster County Public Transit and Active Transportation Plan

CASE STUDY #2: CENTRAL OHIO RURAL PLANNING ORGANIZATION TRANSPORTATION IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM (2026-2029), MID-OHIO REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION (MORPC), OHIO

The Central Ohio Rural Planning Organization (CORPO) is MORPC's rural transportation planning organization which serves seven rural counties through a collaborative and structured planning process.

The transportation improvement program (TIP) is guided by the transportation advisory committee which includes three representatives per county—typically county engineers or commissioners—and is supported by county-level subcommittees. TIP is the four-year program of projects and strategies implementing the near-term priorities in the CORPO Transportation Plan. TIP includes a listing of the transportation projects and programs occurring in the next four years, as well as the specific funding sources committed to each of them. All projects receiving federal funds are included in the TIP. Residents and communities can use the TIP to see which transportation projects in their area are receiving funds during the four-year horizon.

CORPO staff visit each county twice annually to meet with local stakeholders, including parks departments, chambers of commerce, and environmental organizations. These meetings help tailor planning efforts to local needs and build strong community relationships. TAC provides technical assistance and recommendations to the Transportation Policy Committee which meets eight times a year.¹²

Several public engagement outreach channels are utilized to develop the TIP including web maps, social media posts, newsletters, and handouts at community events like farmers markets. Web maps have been proven to be a successful tool for sharing project



Source: Central Ohio Rural Planning Organization TIP meeting

information in a format that stakeholders can engage with. Approximately 150 public comments were received (including the MPO input) in the most recent round of planning for projects considered for inclusion in the TIP.¹³

SUMMARY

Public engagement processes are undertaken to provide information to anyone impacted by transportation decisions including residents, workers, visitors, businesses, and community groups. The lived experiences of these stakeholders offer valuable insights into local transportation challenges. Effective public engagement for transportation planning efforts requires an inclusive and proactive program of outreach activities, especially to underserved and historically marginalized communities. While there is no one-size-fits-all method, a multi-faceted approach including facilitated in-person meetings and workshops, coupled with virtual and interactive tools for widely sharing planning and project information, have proven effective in gathering meaningful feedback.

RESOURCES

- <https://www.transportation.gov/mission/office-public-liaison/public-involvement-efficient-project-delivery-workshops>
- https://www.planning.dot.gov/planning/topic_PL.aspx
- <https://rosap.ntl.bts.gov/view/dot/64744>

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