UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT PRACTICE IN NORTH CAROLINA METROPOLITAN PLANNING ORGANIZATIONS: AN ANALYSIS OF GOALS AND TACTICS

Final Version that Reflects Reviewer Comments

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ABSTRACT

Transportation planning in the United States is conducted by a range of federal, state and local agencies, each with its own interests and constituencies. Metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) have emerged as one of the dominant forces in shaping the future of America’s major highways and transit systems. As a part of their federally-mandated duties for planning for major transportation infrastructure, MPOs have been charged with involving the public in their decision making.

Though certain state and federal public participation requirements apply to all 17 of North Carolina’s MPOs, there are differences in the ways that these organizations engage with those requirements and provide or do not provide meaningful opportunities for public involvement in the planning that they do. This paper explores and records those differences. Through a comparison of the tactics that MPOs used in their public involvement programs and the goals that MPOs set for those programs, this paper outlines several strengths and weaknesses of current practice.

Major strengths of current practice include a diversity of tactics and opportunities for involvement throughout the process. A prevalence of tactics that are more informational in nature, a lack of online participation methods, and inadequate attention on underserved groups are some of the key weaknesses.

These strengths and weaknesses suggest four key recommendations for moving forward. MPOs should pay more attention to underserved groups, seek to get feedback from residents (as opposed to educating them), move some participation online and move beyond simply meeting federal requirements.
INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

U.S. Transportation Planning and Metropolitan Planning Organizations

Transportation planning in the United States is conducted by a whole host of different actors. Federal, state, regional and local governments and agencies all interact to plan for the way people travel in a given area. Regional agencies called metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) have emerged as a key actor in the process primarily because they serve as the local gatekeepers and distributors of federal funds for transportation projects (1). MPOs develop long and short range transportation plans for a region primarily by using a modeling effort called the four step process. The process involves using a complex computer model to predict where regional travel will grow most and where future investments will need to be made (2).

Organizationally, MPOs in North Carolina usually have three different structural components—a lead planning organization, a technical coordinating committee and a transportation advisory committee. The lead planning agency is the staff group responsible for supporting the work of the two committees. The technical coordinating committee (TCC) is generally composed of planners and engineers, and functions primarily to advise the transportation advisory committee on technical matters as they relate to the planning process. The transportation advisory committee (TAC) sets regional transportation policy and prioritizes projects for funding. It is generally composed of elected officials from the MPO’s member jurisdictions. These elected officials, who are mostly mayors, county commissioners, and members of town councils, often use the MPO as a vehicle for winning funds for transportation projects for their local jurisdictions. This introduces a political element to the decisions that MPOs make and the conversations that occur internally (3).

MPOs have not always been such a strong actor in the transportation planning process. Though Article I of the U.S. Constitution gives the federal government the power to “establish Post Offices and post roads,” transportation was largely in the purview of state and local governments until the early 20th century. The Federal Aid Highway Act of 1916 was the federal government’s first major initiative in the transportation field. Intended to help create a stronger network of farm-to-market roads and boost the country’s agricultural economy, the Act instituted a cost-sharing approach to building new roads. If a state could secure 50% of the funding needed for a given road project, the federal government would kick in the remaining 50%. As time moved on, the federal role increased. A federal gas tax was instituted in the 1930s, and the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act of 1956 funded more than 41,000 miles of highway, planned cooperatively by the states and the federal government, but mostly paid for by the federal government (4).

The federal government set up MPOs through the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1962. It also mandated that MPOs use a continuing, cooperative and comprehensive planning process when thinking about transportation, partially as a reaction to the public outcry that was heard across the nation over large government infrastructure projects (5). Later pieces of legislation including the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, and the Department of Transportation Act of 1969 also emphasized the importance of public participation to the process (4).

Current federal requirements for public participation in transportation planning are largely defined by the Intermodal Surface Transportation Equity Act of 1991 (ISTEA) and the Safe, Affordable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users of 2005 (SAFETEA-LU). ISTEA reinvigorated the regional transportation planning process led by MPOs...
which was set up in the 1960s, but suffered deregulation and defunding during the 1980s. Under ISTEA, a formal public participation process was required for the first time, and that process had to be certified by the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT). SAFETEA-LU took ISTEA’s rules a step further, requiring that MPOs develop plans for public participation and emphasizing interagency cooperation (4).

**Importance of and Barriers to Public Participation in Planning**

Public participation is important to the transportation planning process for a variety of reasons. Democratic theory suggests that public participation makes “better plans and better citizens” (6). That is, participation increases plan quality by including more perspectives on the solutions to complex problems, while making citizens “better” through education and engagement. Other rationales for participation include finding out what citizens want, including the knowledge that citizens have in plans, advancing fairness and justice, gaining community support for plans, and meeting federal and state process requirements (7). Public participation can also serve as a means for finding new community needs and desires, can help communities explore what they want, and can build consensus and depolarize interests, increasing the effectiveness of the plans that are developed (8). Finally, it can help address some of the inequalities that continue to exist in the planning process and in the broader social system (9).

Despite widespread recognition of public participation’s importance to the planning process, it has historically not been implemented on a wide scale. This disconnect continues to exist for an array of reasons (10). First, many planners employ the rational planning model in their decision-making. This model calls for a technocratic planning agency to take a scientific approach to the process. Under this model, the planning agency usually has an end-state in mind and uses a regimented process of tight controls. As a result of operating under this model, agencies often struggle to effectively integrate feedback from the public into the process because while they prefer to use quantitative data to plan, much of the information garnered from public involvement is qualitative in nature. A second key issue is the complexity of the planning process itself. A lack of knowledge about how the process works often prevents citizens from becoming effective actors in it. Third, planners often do not have adequate training on how to effectively involve the public, integrate their feedback into the planning that is done, and deal with the political problems that are associated with planning. Fourth, some planning agencies tend to look down on citizen groups and view citizen participation as a waste of time and resources. Finally, there is not a genuine effort by most planning organizations to help citizen groups “raise their self-esteem” (11) so that they can become effective actors in the process.

**What is Good Public Participation?**

Measuring what is and what is not effective in involving the public in decision-making remains an elusive concept in the public participation field (12). In many ways, good public participation is like good planning; the extent to which the endeavor is a success or failure depends on the community context (13). The literature points to several different strategies for differentiating between public participation programs. One useful way is to look at some of the guidelines set by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and the Federal Transit Administration (FTA). These guidelines are more process-focused than they are technique-focused, so they do not espouse certain methods as the answer. The main issue with these guidelines is somewhat broad and vague and could be interpreted in a variety of ways.
A second way to look at what constitutes good participation is public perception. One study found that the public prefers methods that are legitimate and put all stakeholders and viewpoints on an equal playing field. They also found that the public favors a process that seeks to explore common values, focuses on creating fairness and justice, and emphasizes leadership in making policy decisions while allowing for meaningful opportunities for everyone to participate (14).

A third path to discovering the most effective participation is to learn from what has worked well in other areas at other times. A survey of MPOs and state departments of transportation (SDOTs) found that the most effective techniques tended to be a mix of personal, face-to-face meetings with the public conducted in concert with events hosted by other organizations where planners make presentations and gather feedback. The survey also found holding a number of smaller-group or one-on-one meetings as opposed to fewer large-group, public hearing-style meetings was preferable (15).

**METHODS**

To understand how and why North Carolina metropolitan planning organizations are currently involving the public in the transportation planning process, two different analyses were conducted.

**Tactics Comparison**

The first analysis conducted was a comparison of the tactics that all 17 North Carolina MPOs used as part of their public involvement programs. Long range transportation plans (LRTPs) and public involvement plans (PIPs) were obtained for each of North Carolina’s MPOs through each MPO’s website and the MPO section of the website of the N.C. Department of Transportation (NCDOT). Each plan was scored using a coding tool that is largely based on one which Aytur et al. (2011) used in their paper “Pedestrian and Bicycle Planning in Rural Communities: Tools for Active Living.” The tool used was modified from that used by Aytur et al. in several key ways. First, several tactics were added in to reflect some additional tools mentioned in the literature that might be more likely used in metropolitan transportation planning. Several types of groups mentioned in the group outreach section were also eliminated to better reflect the types of groups with which MPOs would likely interact. Finally, most parts of the tool that were not focused on public participation were cut. The Aytur study looked at broader plan quality and as such included many more elements. All additions and subtractions to the tool were made after a significant review of the literature (16).

The focus of this study was on the public involvement procedures concerning the most recent edition of the long range transportation plan (usually with an outlook toward 2035). Most MPOs have separate public involvement procedures for different types of plans. To account for this, the entire public involvement plan (PIP) was generally not coded as part of this analysis. Instead, attention was only paid to the section of the PIP that dealt specifically with the LRTP as well as any introductory or concluding material. If specific plans were not mentioned, the entire PIP was coded. The section of the LRTP that dealt with public involvement was also examined and coded. If there was conflict between the LRTP and the PIP, the LRTP was used because the LRTPs tend to describe the outreach that was actually conducted versus the outreach that was merely planned.
For the items concerning the website, each MPO website was scanned. MPO websites were found through the MPO section of the NCDOT website. To determine whether or not MPOs were present on social media, two searches were done. First, the MPO name was searched using the search functions on Facebook and Twitter. Variations of the name and any acronyms that the MPO might use were also searched. If this yielded no results, the MPO name and any possible acronyms were searched in Google along with the terms “Facebook” and “Twitter” to confirm that the MPO was not on a particular network.

Goals Comparison

The second analysis conducted was a comparison of the various goals of the public involvement programs in North Carolina MPOs. A coding sheet was drawn up based on a number of rationales for participation that appear in the literature. The ten goals listed ranged from more concrete ideas like meeting federal process requirements and collecting data on communities to more abstract ideas like creating fairness and justice in decision-making and empowering citizens (6, 7, 8, 17, 18). Space was left to collect goals outside of those listed. To allow for easier comparison, all of the 17 MPOs were listed on the same sheet.

Goals were collected from the federally required public involvement plans (PIPs), discussed in the previous section. The entirety of each plan was read to ensure adequate understanding, but special attention was paid to any sections of the plans labeled as “introduction,” “purpose,” “goals,” and the like. If such sections were not a part of the plan, the information that proceeded the actually policy objectives was examined in-depth. The ten goals listed were interpreted broadly. For example, the fourth item “educate the public about planning and planning related issues” was interpreted to include basically any form of public education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tactic</th>
<th>Number of MPOs</th>
<th>Percentage (%) of MPOs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Call-in phone numbers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Print comment cards, surveys and/or questionnaires</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>82.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online surveys</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>47.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus groups or other small-group meetings</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website blogs and listservs</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>70.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charettes</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentations at meetings of other organizations</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>35.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committee/steering committee/advisory board of stakeholders</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>23.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews with key stakeholders</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Placing ads in local media/producing news releases</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web-based public participation</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>23.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web-based participation using GIS</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conferences and workshops</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>47.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newsletter</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>41.18</td>
</tr>
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</table>
RESULTS

Tactics Comparison

North Carolina MPOs varied widely in the tactics they employed as part of their public involvement programs. The results of the tactics comparison are summarized in Table 1, on the previous page. While the average MPO used about 7.53 tactics in its public involvement program, the types of tactics used varied widely. Only one of the tactics examined—placing advertisements in local newspapers or producing press releases was used by all 17 MPOs. This makes sense since MPOs are required to provide advance notice of public meetings. Other popular tactics included the use of print comment cards, surveys or other questionnaires (fourteen MPOs) and website blogs and listervs (twelve MPOs). Nearly half of the MPOs used newsletters (seven MPOs), online surveys (eight MPOs) and conferences or workshops (eight MPOs) to try to engage the public. It should be noted that there was significant overlap between those MPOs that used print surveys and those that used online surveys.

Some of the least popular tactics included call-in phone numbers (one MPO), web-based public participation using geographic information systems (one MPO), charrettes (two MPOs), focus groups or other types of small-group meetings (three MPOs) and interviews with key stakeholders (three MPOs).

Advisory boards or steering committees, web-based participation without geographic information systems, presentations at meetings of other organizations and newsletters were also used by a relatively small number of MPOs. MPOs used some tactics that were not part of the list originally drawn up. Some of those tactics include: the use of a traveling informational van; printing and distributing brochures; producing media kits that educate the press about MPOs and their activities; and appointing a group of citizens to initiate and lead the outreach process.

Several key pieces of legislation including the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) and Executive Orders 12898 and 13166 call for specific outreach targeting specific subsets of the population that have been historically underserved (19, 20). North Carolina MPOs do a fair job of meeting these requirements. Slightly over half (ten MPOs) report conducting special outreach targeted at low-income people and racial and ethnic minorities. Only five MPOs conducted special outreach for the disabled.

Additionally, most North Carolina MPOs did not conduct outreach via social media. Searches of Facebook and Twitter revealed that only one MPO—the French Broad River MPO—used both Facebook and Twitter. The Gaston MPO used Facebook only and the Durham-Chapel Hill-Carrboro MPO used Twitter only.

The last part of the tactics analysis was a comparison of the formal organizations and groups that the MPO listed as being involved in developing the LRTP. The results of this

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Group</th>
<th>Number of MPOs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advocacy groups</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land use planning organizations/agents</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freight companies/operators</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other private sector/business groups</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental/conservation groups</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community/neighborhood groups</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social justice/civil rights groups</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic development groups</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transit providers</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other metropolitan planning organizations</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
analysis are summarized in Table 2, on the previous page. Of the 17 MPOs in North Carolina, three reported that they did not collaborate with any groups. Of the organizations that reported involvement by formal groups, the most common partner groups were community or neighborhood groups (eleven MPOs) and land use planning organizations and agencies (nine MPOs). Some of the least common included social justice or civil rights groups (two MPOs), environmental or conservation groups (four MPOs), and economic development groups (five MPOs). Some interesting groups that MPOs worked with that were not anticipated include military organizations and bases, airport authorities, and public library systems (primarily as distributors of information).

Goals Comparison

As noted in the previous chapter, the second part of the involved a comparison of the goals of MPO public involvement programs as stated in federally required public involvement plans (PIPs). The results of the analysis are summarized in Table 3, below. Though no single goal was listed across all MPOs, a few goals emerged as the most common. More than 10 MPOs listed meeting process requirements necessary to be eligible to receive federal funds, educating the public about planning or planning issues, and finding out what citizens want among public involvement program goals. Two MPOs indicated building consensus among stakeholders for the plan as one of their public participation goals, and three listed making better plans and anticipating future needs and problems better. No MPOs listed helping communities explore their wants, maintaining agency legitimacy, creating fairness and justice in decision-making, empowering citizens, or discovering solutions to planning problems among their goals for public involvement. Interestingly, six MPOs used the same language in their goals statements and three MPOs—Capital Area, Jacksonville Urban Area, and Rocky Mount—listed no goals at all.

DISCUSSION

Looking at the overall picture provided by the tactics and goals analyses, several strengths and weaknesses of public involvement programs at North Carolina MPOs emerge.

General Program Weaknesses

One key weakness is the lack of tactics directed at getting feedback on plans, especially compared to the use of tactics that are designed to simply give the public information about plans and planning procedures. Of the top three most common tactics, only one (print comment cards, surveys or other questionnaires) is designed to gather information, while the other two (placing ads in local media and/or producing news releases and
website blogs and listservs) are designed primarily to disseminate information. Additionally, all three of the least used tactics—call-in phone numbers, web-based public participation using GIS, and charrettes—are primarily intended to get feedback and not simply to distribute information. When considering the goals that MPOs put forward in their public involvement policies these results are especially interesting. Though the most common goal included in the PIPs was educating the public about planning and planning issues, which lines up well with the tactics results, the second most common goal reported was finding out what citizens want. This clearly does not correspond well with the tactics employed.

Looking at the complete goals analysis, a possible issue that emerges is the focus on the agency-focused goals versus public-focused goals. The most common goals by far were educating the public about planning and planning issues, finding out what citizens want, and meeting federal process requirements. All of these goals are more basic in nature and more focused on improving the agency’s lot. No MPOs reported discovering solutions to planning problems, empowering citizens, creating fairness and justice in decision-making, and helping communities explore what they want. These goals are more aspirational in nature and more focused on improving the public’s lot. One possible way to interpret the results of this is that the planners in North Carolina MPOs have a less than favorable attitude toward the public participation process. The fact that they don’t do more outreach could indicate that they see it as more of a requirement that needs to be fulfilled and less as a useful tool for better decision-making. This is significant because a view on the part of planners that they know what is best for communities and that participation does not or cannot provide useful information is one of the most common barriers to meaningful participation cited. Also, the fact that several MPOs used the same language and that some neglected to include goals at all is somewhat troubling. Again, it could be indicative of a view toward the public participation process, namely that it is not worth the time required for thoughtful program planning and execution.

Outreach to specific groups is another area that some significant improvement. Several different pieces of federal legislation require special considerations for traditionally underserved groups. Of particular interest are Executive Order 12898, which was issued by President Clinton in 1994, and the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990. The former deals primarily with environmental justice issues and directs federal agencies to minimize harm to minority and low-income people. Interestingly, the order specifically mentions public participation. It requires units of the federal government to provide access for minority and low-income groups to any public participation processes that they conduct. The latter prohibits any individual with disabilities from being excluded from any federal program or service. Despite these facts, nearly half of MPOs did not mention conducting specific outreach to racial or ethnic minorities and low-income people, and only about a third mentioned conducting specific outreach targeted at the disabled.

Outreach to non- and limited-English speaking groups was measured through language availability on websites. Executive Order 13166, signed by President Clinton in 2000, requires agencies that receive federal funding to give limited English speakers “meaningful access” to programs and benefits. Again, few MPOs seem to be meeting this standard, at least through what was measured in the research conducted. No MPOs had the actual LRTPs or PIPs available in a language other than English on their websites. Additionally, only four MPOs had at least one page on their website in a language other than English. Three MPOs had a page in Spanish and one MPO had one page each in Spanish and Russian. Given the federal requirements on this
subject and given that more than one in ten North Carolinians has limited English proficiency, significant improvement in this area is critical.

Though not necessarily required by state or federal law, involving interest groups and other government agencies in the transportation planning process can greatly increase the quality and effectiveness of a plan and lead to more efficient transportation investments. Indeed SAFETEA-LU specifically mentions that MPOs should develop LRTPs in “consultation with interested parties that provides reasonable opportunities for all parties to comment.” The law also specifically mentions “representatives of users of pedestrian walkways, bicycle transportation facilities, [and] the disabled” as segments of the public that should be involved (12). Several organized groups could also be considered part of the “public” more broadly in that they represent specific interests and subsets of the population that are clear constituencies of transportation systems. North Carolina MPOs overall do a fair job involving these groups. Of the 17 North Carolina MPOs, 14 reported involving some sort of formal groups in the planning process. The most common partners were community and/or neighborhood groups, land use planning organizations, transit agencies, and freight operators. Despite this fact, only seven MPOs of the overall 17 reported involving transit agencies and freight operators in the process. Part of this lack of involvement may be that transit operators give input through other means. A representative from the transit agency may sit on the transportation advisory committee, for example. It is troubling though that freight operators are not more involved in the process, since they are key users of the transportation system of a given area and can have major impacts on how the system is used.

The progress of North Carolina MPOs toward online integration also seems to be quite slow compared to most other organizations in the public and non-profit sectors. Only one MPO had active accounts on both Twitter and Facebook, with another MPO only on Facebook and a third MPO only on Twitter. Only one MPO used online public participation with geographic information systems. Though online participation techniques are not yet sophisticated enough to completely replace traditional public involvement techniques, they can be useful because they have been shown to reach and involve a younger, more educated audience (22). Because the Internet as a medium has fewer limitations than traditional techniques and because web-based participation may help some of the problems that stem from the nature of traditional techniques, it is suited to reach a segment of the residents of an area that traditional techniques can never reach (23).

A final issue is that only slightly more than half (nine) of MPOs included a public comments appendix in their long-range transportation plans. Federal law requires that if significant comments are received as part of the planning process that they be included in the final plan (24). Assuming that all agencies complied with this mandate, eight of the 17 MPOs studied did not receive significant feedback from the public as part of the process. It logically follows that if meaningful outreach was conducted, more substantive feedback would result.

**General Program Strengths**

Despite these weaknesses, several strengths were observed in public participation programs statewide. Though public hearings were not considered as a tactic because all MPOs are required to hold at least two under federal law (24), the number of public hearings was collected. Federal and state guidelines encourage holding multiple hearings both to give people multiple opportunities to participate and to receive public comments at all stages of the planning process. It has been considered important because at earlier points in the history of transportation
planning, the public was often brought in for comment too late in the process, frequently after projects or sites had been selected or even designed. Of the 12 MPOs that reported the number of public hearings held, the average was 4.75, well above the required two hearings. Looking at the comments appendices alone, at least some MPOs seem to be doing a fairly good job at getting input. Of the nine MPOs that did include an appendix of comments or summaries of comments received, the average length of that appendix was 53.78 pages, indicating that a fair amount of feedback was collected.

Though many of the techniques used were more informational in nature, most MPOs had a diverse public participation program. By nature, different levels of the interest in getting involved with transportation planning exist in the public. For example, some members of the public will be engaged, interested, and energized enough to make sure that they have influence on the final plan. A certain number of people will be clearly interested enough to want to participate but only occasionally be involved because of time constraints. Another block of people will hear and read about a planning process but may not comment at all or only make comments to others because they are not sufficiently interested. A final group will actively choose not to participate or not know about the process at all. These differing levels of interest and ability to participate mean that planners have to use an array of techniques to cast as wide a net as possible and reach diverse groups of people. Diverse tactics can also help ensure that those people who perceive themselves as stakeholders are covered by the public involvement program, because people ultimately participate when they feel that they have a stake in the process (25).

Some MPOs are also involving some interesting partners in the transportation planning process. The average number of partners involved for those MPOs that reported involving partners at all was 4.50. Interestingly, it could be argued that the two most popular partners—community groups and land use planning agencies—have less of a direct stake in the transportation planning process then some less popular partners such as transit agencies, freight operators, and advocacy groups (especially those for particular modes like bicyclists or pedestrians). Some interesting partners that North Carolina MPOs worked with in developing their 2035 LRTPs included military organizations and bases, airport authorities, and public library systems (primarily as distributors of information).

Many, though not all, North Carolina MPOs are also doing a good job of cooperating and coordinating with each other and with their non-metropolitan counterparts, rural planning organizations (RPOs). In the state’s two biggest regions—the Triangle and greater Charlotte, partnerships have been formed between MPOs and RPOs to ensure a cohesive regional planning strategy. In the Triangle, the Capital Area MPO (CAMPO) and the Durham-Chapel Hill-Carrboro MPO (DCHCMPO) now develop joint LRTPs. In the Charlotte region, four MPOs—three in North Carolina and one in South Carolina—and two RPOs have formed the Charlotte Regional Alliance for Transportation (CRAFT) to facilitate wider regional planning for transportation beyond their respective jurisdictions. Several other examples can be seen throughout the state.

Limitations of this Work

Though this study accurately describes the current tactics and goals in the public involvement programs it does have several limitations. First, it is possible that the coding process used missed some tactics used by MPOs. Two plans were examined: the MPO’s most recent public involvement plan or policy (PIP) as of November 2011 and the public involvement section of the MPO’s most recent long range transportation plan (LRTP). The tactics from each
of these plans were recorded, and if there were differences between the LRTP and the PIP, what was mentioned in the LRTP was ultimately recorded. If an MPO did not record the full extent of its program in the PIP or LRTP, then the full extent of its program was not recorded by this study.

This study is also only descriptive; it does not purport to make judgments on which MPOs have the “best” public involvement programs or which have the worst. It does not measure the extent to which the MPOs integrate feedback from the public involvement program into the actual plans that are produced, and it does not measure how the public of a given area perceives the strength of the MPO’s public participation program. Instead it serves as a jumping off point for further study that may answer these questions by providing an accurate description of current practice and pointing out some areas of improvement statewide.

**For Further Study**

The essential question that warrants more study is how best to encourage MPOs to increase the scope of their public participation programs and make the feedback received as part of the public participation process more important in the planning decisions MPOs make. As noted above, in the past this has been primarily achieved through legal process requirements. These requirements have often been imposed at the federal level and have tied the receipt of federal funds for transportation projects to meeting certain process requirements.

There is disagreement as to the effectiveness of this method. Though some argue that legal requirements are actually part of the problem because of the incentives they create (16), others argue that legal requirements for public meetings are actually less restrictive than many may initially believe. Usually, all that is required is public notice, a meeting leader, and a complete record of what took place at the meeting. Some argue these requirements allow room to be creative and to use the hearing requirement as an opportunity to hold a more collaborative work session (26).

Still others question whether planners can create effective public participation in the planning process at all. They argue that examples from history seem to indicate that plans with the highest levels of public involvement tend to be those that involved grassroots movements, where citizens demanded to have a voice in the process (5, 27). Further study may be able to reconcile these views and help understand how to institutionalize better public involvement practice.

**CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

Overall, the results of this study show that there is variation in the ways that North Carolina MPOs engage with federal requirements for public participation in the transportation planning process. While MPOs are doing a good job of providing a diverse number and type of tactics to engage members of the public with differing degrees of interest and involving members of the public throughout the many steps of the transportation planning process, there is room for improvement in several areas of public involvement practice.

First, MPOs should pay more attention to underserved groups to help increase the equity in the transportation planning process. Currently, less than two-thirds of MPOs conduct targeted outreach to people on the lower end of the socio-economic scale, people with disabilities, and people from racial and ethnic minority groups. Second, MPOs should constantly strive to gear their public involvement programs toward getting feedback from residents. At present it appears
that many programs are tailored more toward simply educating residents. Third, MPOs should try to move some of their participation online. Online participation tactics might better reach a previously untapped audience and can remove some of the barriers that traditional techniques create. Fourth and finally, MPOs should reexamine why they conduct participation processes in the first place and think beyond merely meeting federal requirements.

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