

5 easy pieces TRANSPORTATION

Metropolitan Planning Organization Reform



OVERVIEW

Since the early 1990s, federal law has increased the authority of Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs),¹ and pending federal legislation is likely to give them additional spending powers and responsibilities.²

Yet, as important arms of local government, MPOs are problematic. In part this is because their powers are often limited to listing road projects without power to implement a systematic plan, or to make land-use decisions in concert with transportation decisions.³ And most MPOs are highly undemocratic, without population-proportional board membership (see Figures 1 and 2 on next page)⁴. In most cases cities are underrepresented and suburban or exurban areas overrepresented.⁵ This situation skews outcomes; for example, boards with balanced membership tend to fund transit at higher levels than do boards skewed toward suburban/exurban membership.⁶ Finally, MPOs have little responsibility for state and national policy goals regarding environment, equity, or economic development.⁷

Some MPOs produce laudable outcomes,⁸ but most do not live up to their potential to foster efficient, equitable, and environmentally sound metro areas.⁹ Most could benefit from reforms that:

1. Give MPOs sufficient authority to guide regional planning rather than to simply approve or veto local requests for federal funds.
2. Establish elected board members or population-proportional appointments.
3. Institute performance standards aligned with state and national policies.

5 Easy Pieces on Transportation

1. Pay-As-You-Drive Insurance
2. Fix it First
3. “Complete Street” Roadways
4. Locate State Office Buildings Downtown
5. Metropolitan Planning Organization Reform

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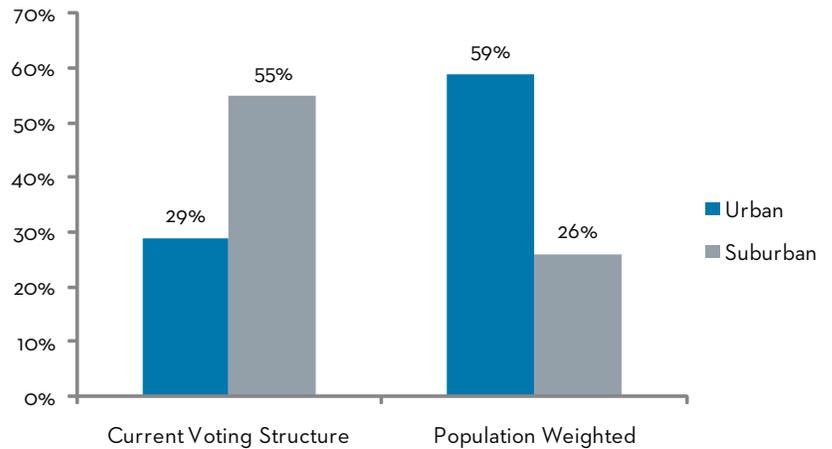


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BENEFITS

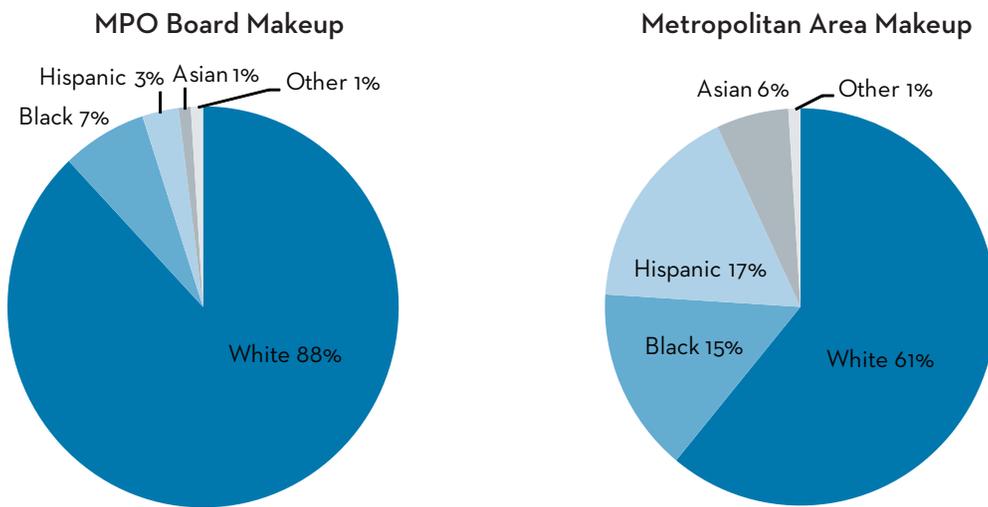
- Traffic congestion, travel costs, environmental quality, access to jobs, housing affordability, and many other determinants of the metro-area economy and quality of life are all affected by transportation and land-use planning. Poorly functioning MPOs can degrade metro areas' economies and living standards. Improving MPO function will become more critical as MPOs get additional federal funding and duties.
- As federal interest in MPOs increases, effective MPOs will be well-positioned to attract new funding for data collection in support of new performance standards.¹⁰ They will also be able to shape future federal policy regarding MPO functioning and goals.

Figure 1
DIFFERENCES BETWEEN UNWEIGHTED AND POPULATION WEIGHTED VOTING ON MPO BOARDS (2004)



Source: Brookings Institution's Metropolitan Policy Program.

Figure 2
RACIAL/ETHNIC COMPOSITION OF MPO VOTING BOARD MEMBERS AND CURRENT COMPOSITION OF THE CORRESPONDING METROPOLITAN AREAS



Source: Brookings Institution's Metropolitan Policy Program.

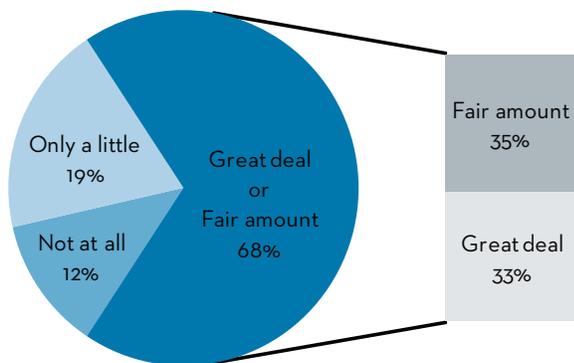
COSTS

Reforming MPOs so that their planning is more effective should save money as transportation becomes more efficient. But moving from undemocratic and ineffective forms may involve transition costs, and may involve a political battle as overrepresented governments and interests try to keep their advantage.

PUBLIC PERCEPTION

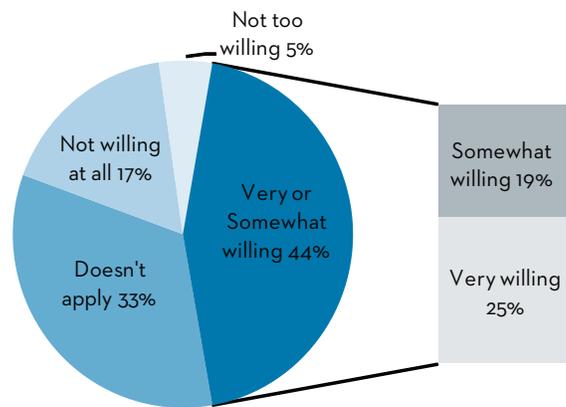
Public awareness of MPOs varies with the metro area, but is often very low, as ineffective MPOs without taxing authority attract little interest. Strengthening MPOs with new powers would certainly raise their public profile. And while MPOs are not well known, the policy issues they deal with certainly are, from sprawl to the environmental/energy impact of driving. It should be noted that both of these issues have relatively strong support (see Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3
HOW MUCH DO YOU PERSONALLY WORRY ABOUT
... URBAN SPRAWL AND LOSS OF OPEN SPACES?



Source: Gallup Poll, March 2008.

Figure 4
[TO IMPROVE THE COUNTRY'S ENERGY SITUATION]
HOW WILLING WOULD YOU BE TO...
USE PUBLIC TRANSPORT TO WORK OR SCHOOL
MORE THAN HALF THE TIME



Source: Energy Learning Curve Survey, January 2009.

EXAMPLES OF IMPLEMENTATION

- States can enable or establish MPOs as regional institutions with land use, transportation, and growth management powers. Two MPOs with such powers are [Portland's Metro](#) and [Minneapolis-St. Paul's Metropolitan Council](#). These organizations have experienced greater employment growth and less fiscal inequality amongst localities than those of peer MPOs.¹¹ Another example of change in this direction was the California law [2001-02 California Chapter 743](#) (S.B. 1703), enacted in September 2002, consolidating San Diego's transit agencies with its MPO, [SANDAG](#).¹²
- The structures of most large MPOs are grandfathered and not subject to modern federal rules that require population proportionality and mandate that board members be elected officials or agency heads. Only newly created MPOs and those that are voluntarily reconstituted face such scrutiny. As an example of the latter, the Madison, Wisconsin, MPO was relocated from one agency to another through an [Intergovernmental Agreement Restructuring and Redesignating the Madison-Area MPO](#). This move forced a board reorganization in 2007 that added representation for municipalities and reduced representation for unincorporated areas to better match the population. In addition the change installed local decision-makers as appointed members.
- Some states have specified board membership. In [Section 339.175 \(3\) \(a\) Florida Statutes](#), the law requires that "[t]he voting membership of an M.P.O. shall consist of not fewer than 5 or more than 19 apportioned members, the exact number to be determined on an equitable geographic-population ratio..."¹³
- States can charge MPOs with advancing important policy goals. [2007-08 California Chapter 728](#) (S.B. 375), enacted in September 2008, requires that MPOs adopt "sustainable communities strategies" to reduce greenhouse gases. The plans, which guide subsequent funding decisions, must be approved by the California Air Resources Board.

ENDNOTES

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12. FHWA/FTA, "MPO and Transit Authority Consolidation in San Diego." Washington, 2008.
13. Fla. Stats. 339.175 (3) (a).