



# National Symposium for Rural Transportation Planning Organizations and Metropolitan Planning Organizations

*Assessing the Structure and  
Benefits of Collaboration*



## *Table of Contents*

Executive Summary	1
Introduction	2
Symposium Keynote Address	3
State and Regional Planning Partnerships	6
Regional Planning Practice: Partnerships to Enhance the Planning Process	12
Identifying Strategies to Enhance Collaboration	17
Conclusions	20
Appendix A: Event Schedule	

## *About the National Association of Development Organizations Research Foundation*

Founded in 1988, the NADO Research Foundation is the nonprofit research affiliate of the National Association of Development Organizations (NADO).

The NADO Research Foundation identifies, studies and promotes regional solutions and approaches to improving local prosperity and services through the nationwide network of regional development organizations.

The Research Foundation shares best practices and offers professional development training, analyzes the impact of federal policies and programs on regional development organizations, and examines the latest developments and trends in small metropolitan and rural America. Most importantly, the Research Foundation is helping bridge the communications gap among practitioners, researchers and policy makers. To learn more about resources and training on regional transportation issues, visit [www.RuralTransportation.org](http://www.RuralTransportation.org).

This proceedings report was authored by NADO Research Foundation Senior Program Manager Carrie Kissel. This material is based upon work supported by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) under Agreement No. DTFH61-10-C-00050. Any opinions, findings and conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of FHWA.

The NADO Research Foundation thanks the Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations and Development District Association of Appalachia for their support of the National Rural Transportation Peer Learning Conference and the symposium.



# National Symposium for RPOs and MPOs: *Assessing the Structure and Benefits of Collaboration*

## Executive Summary

The National Association of Development Organizations (NADO) Research Foundation conducted the *National Symposium for Rural Transportation Planning Organizations (RPOs) and Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs): Assessing the Structure and Benefits of Collaboration*. Held in October 2010, this event was sponsored by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and held in conjunction with the Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations (AMPO) Annual Conference and National Rural Transportation Peer Learning Conference.

While funding continues to be limited for transportation planning and projects, issues such as climate change, livability, performance management and other topics are emerging as complex facets of planning. With an audience comprising transportation professionals from rural and metropolitan regions and state departments of transportation from across the nation, the symposium's purpose was to advance planning practice by facilitating strong interagency collaborations among RPOs, MPOs, state and local government agencies, and stakeholder groups.

Through a keynote address and a series of panels, attendees learned about models for collaboration on planning efforts from five

states: Alabama, Iowa, Missouri, North Carolina and Tennessee. Through small group discussion, attendees also engaged in further dialogue on benefits of and obstacles to collaboration, issue areas often addressed through partnerships, and institutional arrangements that facilitate relationship-building.

Key themes that emerged during the presentations and discussion included a need for organizations to commit time and effort to achieve results; branding the planning process to improve participation in decisionmaking; capacity building as an ongoing need for planning staff and planning organization members; achieving buy-in, trust, transparency, and inclusion is key to ensuring partners' participation.

Symposium participants documented ways in which they achieved collaboration, including ongoing and consistent contact with neighboring regions, state and local governments, and stakeholders; developing capacity-building materials jointly with other agencies; assessing organizational structures such as co-location of metropolitan and rural planning organizations or expanded board and committee membership to include ex officio representatives; and identifying specific project priorities or topic areas that would benefit from collaboration across agencies and regions.



## Introduction

On October 22, 2010, the National Association of Development Organizations (NADO) Research Foundation held the *National Symposium for Rural Transportation Planning Organizations (RPOs) and Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs): Assessing the Structure and Benefits of Collaboration*. This event was sponsored by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and held in conjunction with the Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations (AMPO) Annual Conference and the National Rural Transportation Peer Learning Conference, an annual event held by the NADO Research Foundation and Development District Association of Appalachia. The event brought together regional transportation professionals from rural and metropolitan areas from across the nation. This report summarizes the proceedings of the event.

The *National Symposium for RPOs and MPOs* continued previous work conducted in 2008 by the NADO Research Foundation and AMPO with support from FHWA to research relationships among RPOs and MPOs. In 2009, the NADO Research Foundation published the results of the research in the report *Metropolitan and Rural Transportation Planning: Case Studies and Checklists for Regional Collaboration*. The guide included descriptions of specific circumstances where planning organizations were able to successfully organize to address issues of common concern. The guide also produced checklists for possible actions to enhance collaboration that might be appropriate for planning staff, technical committees, policy boards, and through intergovernmental relationships such as with state departments of transportation (DOTs) and local governments.

As a continuation of prior research, the symposium delved into more depth on the nature of successful regional and intergovernmental partnerships through case studies from five states, as well as through small group discussion. The symposium sought to address several objectives:

- Stimulate discussion among planning practitioners
- Extend the notion of partnerships from solely rural and urban areas to also address various levels of government and stakeholder groups
- Identify additional topics around which partnerships may coalesce
- Identify institutional arrangements that facilitate successful partnerships
- Advance planning practice through strong cross-agency partnerships

The proceedings that follow summarize the remarks by each speaker, as well as the discussions that occurred in small groups.



## Symposium Keynote Address

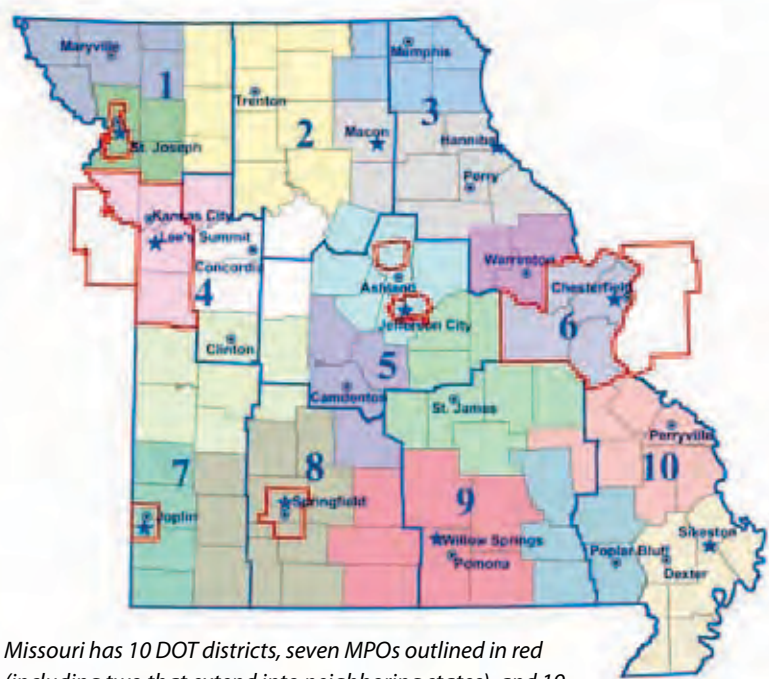
The *National Symposium for RPOs and MPOs* began with welcoming remarks by Steve Etcher, Executive Director of the Boonslick Regional Planning Commission (Warrenton, MO), and Ed Hillhouse, Executive Director of East West Gateway Council of Governments (St. Louis, MO). Missouri Department of Transportation (MoDOT) Director Kevin Keith then provided a keynote address.

### **Kevin Keith, Director** *Missouri Department of Transportation*

MoDOT Director Kevin Keith provided an overview of Missouri's planning process, known within the state as the Planning Framework, and the roles played by state and regional partners. Missouri uses a planning process that emphasizes ongoing engagement across state, regional and local levels of government. This process was developed out of recognition that there were more transportation needs than available funds, a lack of consistency in planning and project delivery across the state, a piecemeal approach to improvements, unclear roles for planning partners, and problems

with credibility in transportation due to a lack of local and public support.

According to Keith, the new Planning Framework resulted from the recognition that in the planning and project delivery process, "we can get a better result working together than we can working alone."



Missouri has 10 DOT districts, seven MPOs outlined in red (including two that extend into neighboring states), and 19 RPCs, shaded in different colors, that function as RPOs. Map courtesy of MoDOT.

Since 1994, MoDOT has contracted with Missouri's regional planning commissions (RPCs) to conduct planning and outreach activities for non-metropolitan regions. The RPCs function similarly to the state's MPOs. Their primary functions are to staff a Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC) that identifies and prioritizes community and regional transportation needs, coordinate transportation needs with local development plans, develop a regional transportation plan to be adopted by the RPC policy board, and educate and inform the public on transportation planning activities.

TAC and RPC board members are often local officials and business leaders who, after discussion about transportation needs at the regional level, become champions for those priorities in their communities. Once regional priorities have been determined within each RPC, the projects are presented at the MoDOT District Office level, and the DOT and RPCs jointly

determine what the priority projects are for the amount of funds available.

For projects of statewide significance, decisionmaking occurs on a statewide basis, with several representatives from each of the state's MPOs and RPCs participating in a meeting together. During this meeting, each region presents the project priorities that have been identified at the local and regional levels. The statewide group of planning partners votes on which projects should be included in final plans. Although the planning partners may not all agree on statewide priorities, they do have the information to know why certain projects were selected over others and that each planning partner played a valuable role in the decisionmaking process.

Keith stressed the importance of using the network of state and regional partners to generate buy-in in the regional and statewide prioritization processes. At the regional level, the TAC and RPC board members, who are responsible to the public and also are influential at the local level, become advocates of the planning process and its outcomes.

Through the prioritization of projects of statewide significance, even more individuals participate in the decisionmaking. Keith says, "We have never been able to complete every priority project that comes out of a region. But having several hundred people go through the planning process and understand the tradeoffs is something MoDOT could have never achieved by itself."


The state generally takes the lead on identifying and ranking projects related to system preservation, although the process is often collaborative.

MoDOT's major criterion for selecting preservation projects is the condition of the road or bridge, but local officials and stakeholders often weigh in on the project order to provide information about local efforts, including anticipated land use changes, economic development initiatives, and school bus routing.

Under the current Planning Framework, Missouri uses a formula to distribute funding by region across the state for maintenance projects based on the lane miles, square feet of bridge deck, and vehicle miles traveled (VMT) in each region. In addition, projects of statewide significance are funded through a formula based on VMT, employment, and population. Although deciding on the formulas was difficult, now each region knows how much funding to expect to be programmed for projects in the region.

Keith emphasized the significance of making a concerted effort to establish relationships and build support over a long period of time. Through outreach efforts and follow-through on commitments over the course of several years, MoDOT has been able to transform its decisionmaking process to gain the support of planning partners and the public. Rather than

operating through top-down decisions, the agency believes it has improved the process by making it transparent and more objective, understandable in terms of the process and the project costs, predictable, and balanced between statewide and regional priorities. Several years usually pass from the time a project is identified as a need until it is constructed, but the Planning Framework has been in place for long enough that partners have been through the process multiple times. At this point, the partners have seen many of their top priority projects constructed over the past 15 years, which helps to maintain regional and local



*Having several hundred people go through the planning process and understand the tradeoffs is something MoDOT could have never achieved by itself."*

**Kevin Keith,  
Missouri DOT**

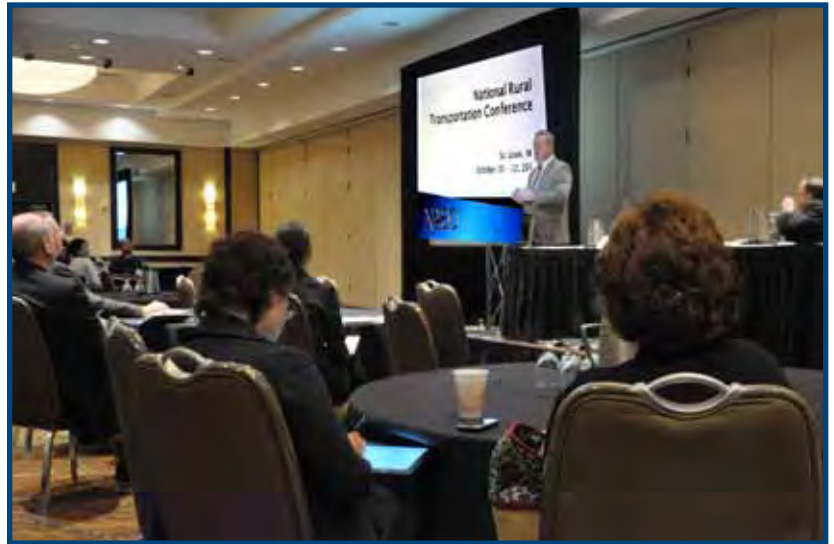


buy-in to the process and demonstrate MoDOT's commitment to local priorities.

The planning process has been very effective at connecting levels of government within the state. However, the benefits of Missouri's Planning Framework transcend regional geographies as well. Through the process of prioritizing projects of statewide significance, the RPCs and MPOs meet statewide to present their region's priorities, and they come away with an understanding of why each project that was selected rose to that level.

The cross-regional aspect to the Planning Framework was especially useful following a 2004 state bonding program that provided an additional \$1.6 billion in funding for transportation. Even though the requirements for public involvement and local consultation apply only to federal funds, MoDOT utilized the existing Planning Framework to identify needs and transportation projects to be included in scoping. Keith stressed the benefit of using the process to establish a clear, shared vision of priorities and a project-specific plan, so everyone has participated in the planning process and widely supported projects can be identified if additional funding becomes available for transportation. "You'd be surprised at the input you can get once you establish trust," Keith says.

Keith noted that another strength of the Planning Framework is its disassociation with the political process. Local officials typically make up the regional boards where priorities are identified, but state legislators and the governor do not weigh into the project selection process or select particular projects to receive earmarks. In addition, the state's independent six-member Transportation Commission approves the statewide transportation improvement program



(STIP), but it does not identify specific projects as Transportation Commission priorities.

Keith reiterated that Missouri's Planning Framework is important to MoDOT's operations because constant stakeholder participation is needed due to changeover in local elected officials and the fact that the transportation system will continue to need improvements beyond what the state can afford.

For more information on Missouri's Planning Framework, visit:

- *Practitioners Guide: Missouri's Framework for Transportation Planning and Decisionmaking:* [www.modot.mo.gov/plansandprojects/planning\\_projects/documents/PG\\_march102504.pdf](http://www.modot.mo.gov/plansandprojects/planning_projects/documents/PG_march102504.pdf)
- Missouri DOT: [www.modot.org](http://www.modot.org)
- Missouri Association of Councils of Government: [www.macogonline.org](http://www.macogonline.org)

## State and Regional Planning Partnerships

A panel of two state DOT planning professionals presented experiences from their states on partnerships among state, regional and local planning and incorporating stakeholders into the planning process.

**Jeanne Stevens, Director of Long-Range Planning**  
*Tennessee Department of Transportation*

Jeanne Stevens spoke about collaborative initiatives that improve planning and service to the public and local governments from the perspective of the Tennessee Department of Transportation (TDOT). These relationships have developed among TDOT, the state's MPOs, RPOs, and other state agencies such as the Department of Economic and Community Development.

First, Stevens addressed partnerships between TDOT and the state's 11 MPOs, four of which are transportation management areas (TMAs), and six of which are considered to be non-attainment areas for air quality. The state DOT may provide additional support through discretionary use of federal State Planning and Research funds to assist MPO areas with a variety of significant planning projects. For example, the Nashville MPO has taken on responsibility for planning for its entire air quality non-attainment area, which extends

well beyond the urbanized boundary. The additional funds assist the MPO with planning for the larger area. In addition, the funds assist regions with conducting advanced planning techniques such as scenario planning or regional transit corridor studies. Sharing master contracts among TDOT and the regions helps to quicken the procurement process, including for special planning studies such as area freight studies and regional intelligent transportation system (ITS) architecture.

State- and regional-level partnerships have also emerged in the state's rural areas. Tennessee formed RPOs statewide in 2005. Prior to that, Stevens felt TDOT had room for improvement in transparent and responsive decisionmaking. To address those issues, the state formed regional working groups to bring information to citizens and local leaders and get their feedback during the prioritization process that occurred before the RPOs' formal creation. In the non-metropolitan regions, TDOT heard feedback from local officials and the public that they would like to continue the dialogue begun through the working groups. Stevens said, "There was a desire to better connect local planning and economic and community development efforts with transportation planning, and you can't accomplish that if you don't have an ongoing conversation between the state and local levels."



*Tennessee is served by 11 MPOs (shaded in gray) and 12 RPOs. Map courtesy of TDOT.*



As a result, TDOT determined that it would contract with RPOs to support the state's efforts to consult regularly with local officials in the non-metropolitan areas and to contribute at the regional level to the state's long-range multi-modal plan. Most of the RPOs are housed in and staffed by the state's existing regional planning and development organizations (known in Tennessee as Development Districts), which are responsible for economic development planning and other functions for multi-county areas.

The RPOs have a two-tier organizational structure: an executive board comprises mainly local elected officials and includes a state senator and state representative; and a technical committee includes modal representatives such as short line rail, public transportation agencies, community airports, and inland waterway stakeholders, as well as county highway superintendents, city and county public works directors, local planners, and other local government staff. The involvement of economic development actors has been key to coordinating transportation improvements with other projects, as has the ex officio participation of neighboring MPOs and RPOs, including regional planning and development organizations located in neighboring states.

The RPOs have been successful in assisting TDOT with meeting the federal requirements for rural local official consultation in the state-wide planning process. "If you don't explain to people how projects are being selected, in the absence of any other information, they're going to assume it's political," Stevens said. As a result, the RPOs have been very valuable at maintaining state and local communication on priorities. Communicating information about specific programs such as Transportation Enhancements, Safe Routes to School, and safety programs to local jurisdictions eligible to apply for the funds has also been an advantage of establishing the RPOs.

Integrating land use decisions with transportation planning has been a benefit of improved relationships between the state and local levels.



For example, when TDOT initially reached out to local stakeholders for input, the agency displayed maps showing the transportation projects that had been identified in the state-wide plan to determine whether those were still priorities. Many local jurisdictions reported that they were planning trip-generating facilities such as new schools, municipal golf courses and subdivisions on other corridors, rather than the corridors already slated for improvement. This offered an opportunity to discuss and revise project priorities and to generate an interest in ongoing interagency coordination on those issues.

According to Stevens, a significant achievement of TDOT's commitment to partnership lies in the agency's efforts to promote brand recognition for MPOs, RPOs and the planning process. When individuals contact the state directly about transportation projects, they are consistently referred back to their MPO or RPO to participate in the regional needs identification and prioritization process. TDOT also ensures

that MPO and RPO staff receive information first so that they can perform as the designated transportation information broker in their regions.

Branding efforts will continue to be an ongoing process, and Stevens also identified several more opportunities for expanding the partnership between TDOT and RPOs. These include:

- Gathering local information from RPO staff and members to link planning and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process, including identifying locally significant natural and historic features early in project development
- Increasing responsibilities for assisting with public involvement and identifying regional stakeholders
- Expanding transit planning to focus on affordable, reliable rural commuting options, such as vanpools
- Identifying information about major employers in each rural region

Stevens addressed developing partnerships across state agencies to better serve local needs. For instance, the Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development (ECD) provides some staff assistance to local municipalities on some planning efforts, including thoroughfare plans required for new subdivision approval. TDOT is working with ECD to develop a template for such documents to provide local governments with a tool they can use to catalogue assets and maintenance needs to inform their capital improvement planning.

Even with the extensive network of partners developed in Tennessee among the state and regional agencies with responsibility for transportation and other types of planning, challenges remain. Stevens hopes that these evolving collaborations among organizations can help to address challenges such as:

- Improving the connection between land use and transportation planning; no enabling legislation for local planning exists, and

MPOs, RPOs and Development Districts have minimal roles in land use although their responsibilities in developing visions for transportation and economic development intersect with local land use issues

- Enhancing the multimodal aspects of regional transportation planning, beyond the inclusion of modal representatives on technical committees
- Emphasizing regional transportation issues while balancing the need for technical assistance on local transportation issues
- Linking economic development strategies with infrastructure, including transportation and broadband
- Information-sharing among levels of government and across regions, when the state's geography strains TDOT staff members' ability to ensure attendance at regional meetings to provide information
- Addressing staff turnover in state and regional planning agencies through joint training for new staff
- Providing support across multiple state agencies to regions pursuing Sustainable Communities goals
- Sharing data and map files across state, regional and local levels to reduce costs and improve accessibility to information

For more information on Tennessee's planning process, visit:

- TDOT Long-Range Planning Division: [www.tdot.state.tn.us/longrange](http://www.tdot.state.tn.us/longrange)
- Jeanne Stevens's presentation: [www.Rural-Transportation.org/uploads/Symposium\\_Stevens2010.pdf](http://www.Rural-Transportation.org/uploads/Symposium_Stevens2010.pdf)

## **Craig O'Riley, Planning Team Leader** *Iowa Department of Transportation*

Craig O'Riley offered an overview of Iowa's regional planning partnerships, emphasizing that there is little difference between the organizational structure, work conducted and deliverables produced by the state's MPOs and RPOs (called regional planning affiliations or RPAs in Iowa).

Following the passage of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act in 1991, the Iowa DOT sought to push some transportation decisions down to the local level rather than making all decisions at the statewide level and to improve the public participation process. For Iowa, the logical place to encourage such empowered decisionmaking seemed to be at the regional level, and that regional boundaries should follow county lines as the smallest unit of geography. As a result, the Iowa Transportation Commission adopted a new collaborative planning process in 1993.

Through the new framework, Iowa DOT offered counties located outside of MPO boundaries the options of forming an RPO based on the boundaries of the state's existing 16 regional transit agencies, joining an adjacent regional transit agency, or establishing an entirely new planning organization. Many localities chose to stay with the existing boundaries, and a total of 18 regional planning affiliations were created. In addition, Iowa also has nine MPOs covering the urbanized areas of the state, including bi-state regions on borders with Illinois, Nebraska, South Dakota and Wisconsin. RPO and MPO members include local jurisdictions such as cities and counties. Sixteen of the 18 RPOs are staffed by Iowa's statewide network of regional planning and development organizations, known in Iowa as regional councils or councils of governments. Five organizations house both an RPO and an MPO.

The average RPO covers a service area of six counties and a population base of about 100,000. Most regions receive about \$2.1

million in funding, which is used by the regions for their priority projects. In addition, they receive additional Transportation Enhancement funds and planning funds. The RPOs' project funds are allocated by the Iowa DOT primarily from Federal Highway Administration and Federal Transit Administration programs, although local RPO members provide significant local support for the planning work. For about the past six years, the state has also matched 100 percent of the \$12,000 in Federal Transit Administration (FTA) funds that are provided through Iowa DOT to the RPOs for transit funding.

Most regional planning affiliations serve fairly rural areas and have one full-time equivalent employee on their staff, although it is common for an RPO's tasks to be divided among two or more individuals who have multiple program area responsibilities. The RPOs are patterned after MPOs' organizational structure, with a policy board of local elected officials and a technical committee that includes local city and county engineers and other professionals. FHWA, FTA and Iowa DOT staff participate in the technical committee as non-voting members to serve as an informational resource to the





region, rather than as decisionmakers for the region, and demonstrate the agencies' commitment to cultivating local engagement in the planning process.

Iowa's RPOs all complete the following tasks and deliverables:

- Annual work program, describing the tasks to be completed in the contract year
- Regional Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) to list the locally identified priority projects for a multi-year period of time, although the document is updated each year to ensure that current priority projects are included
- Public participation plan and implementation of public outreach
- Long-range transportation plan, which is updated every five years to outline future demands on the transportation system and financial resources for a 20-year planning horizon
- Coordinated Human Service Transportation Plan, called Passenger Transportation Plan in Iowa, that are updated annually with coordination efforts with human service and transportation agencies and significant regional changes, with more detailed data collection of inventory of services, vehicles, and needs conducted every five years

In addition, some RPOs take on additional responsibilities in particular program areas, such as trail planning, corridor studies, traffic counts, Safe Routes to School and other programs.

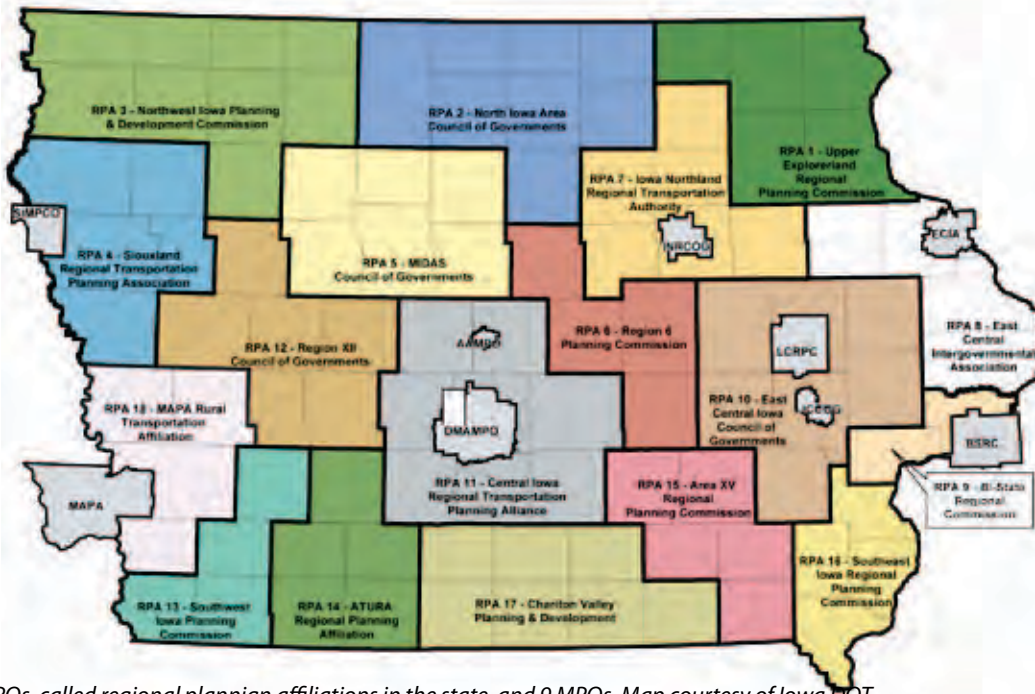
These tasks parallel the deliverables required of the state's MPOs. O'Riley says, "We've tried to ensure that the regional planning affiliations mirror MPOs, and we expect the same products from each. There are a few differences, such as no requirement to conduct transportation modeling in the RPOs, but the regional agencies all fit the same mold. The process works well, and it helps us to have consistency in the documents that come in from across the state."

O'Riley documented several institutional arrangements through which Iowa DOT has supported collaborative relationships that improve the planning process. In addition to the Office of Systems Planning, which has primary responsibility for the local planning process, Iowa DOT has six district offices, each of which has a district transportation planner on staff. The DOT district planner is assigned to work with the RPOs and MPOs located within the district's geographic boundaries. The DOT district staff serve as the main initial point of contact for the regional planning staff at the MPOs and RPOs, attending the regional meetings, answering questions, and providing a conduit to the DOT central office for more complex questions.

Another factor contributing to the planning model's success is that the Iowa DOT established quarterly meetings that are well attended by regional, DOT district, and central office planning staff. Each quarterly meeting covers a variety of topics, including current state and federal legislative issues, modal activities, state and local planning efforts, and program updates. The meetings also often cover timely special topics, such as air quality and land use.

Iowa DOT regularly solicits information about training and informational needs from RPO and MPO staff members. Training may be provided at the quarterly meetings for all the





*Iowa's 18 RPOs, called regional planning affiliations in the state, and 9 MPOs. Map courtesy of Iowa DOT.*

regional planners or directly to a single RPO or MPO when new staff need orientation. In addition, Iowa DOT has developed guidance documents to provide answers on completing planning tasks such as developing standard work program documents and reimbursement requests across the state, completing the Passenger Transportation Plans, environmental information and other topics.

Iowa DOT plans to build on current successes and make improvements to the planning process. For instance, the state is assessing its federally required local official consultation process, which the RPOs assist Iowa DOT to complete. In addition, a training course on improving public participation rates early in the planning process will enhance techniques used in the state's MPOs and RPOs. Iowa is also preparing for some regions to be designated as non-attainment under new air quality standards expected from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in 2011. Addressing Smart Planning and Livable Communities are two other areas where collaboration across levels of government will be necessary to enhance transportation planning practice.

A significant indicator of the success of Iowa DOT's relationships with MPOs, RPOs, and

their local government members occurred following the passage of the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. The legislation provided funding for transportation infrastructure, but to ensure a short-term stimulative effect on the economy, required very tight timelines for identifying projects and allocating the funds. O'Riley says, "Iowa was one of the lead states to allocate their money and develop projects. That's a result of our very robust planning process and knowledgeable partners, who could get projects in place quickly."

For more information on Iowa's planning process, visit:

- Iowa DOT Office of Systems Planning: [www.iowadot.gov/systems\\_planning/index.htm](http://www.iowadot.gov/systems_planning/index.htm)
- Metropolitan Planning Organization and Regional Planning Affiliation Profiles Document: [www.iowadot.gov/systems\\_planning/MPORPAprofiles.htm](http://www.iowadot.gov/systems_planning/MPORPAprofiles.htm)
- Iowa Association of Regional Councils: [www.iarcog.com](http://www.iarcog.com)
- Craig O'Riley's presentation: [www.RuralTransportation.org/uploads/Symposium\\_ORiley2010.pdf](http://www.RuralTransportation.org/uploads/Symposium_ORiley2010.pdf)

## Regional Planning Practice: Partnerships to Enhance the Planning Process

For the final panel of the *National Symposium for RPOs and MPOs*, two regional planning and economic development staff provided their experiences working in organizations that house both a metropolitan planning program and a rural transportation planning program. Although the metro and rural transportation programs serve different geographic segments of their larger council of governments' service area, both organizations have found several issues of common interest across their transportation programs.

**Joe McKinney, Executive Director**  
**Land-of-Sky Regional Council,**  
**Asheville, North Carolina**

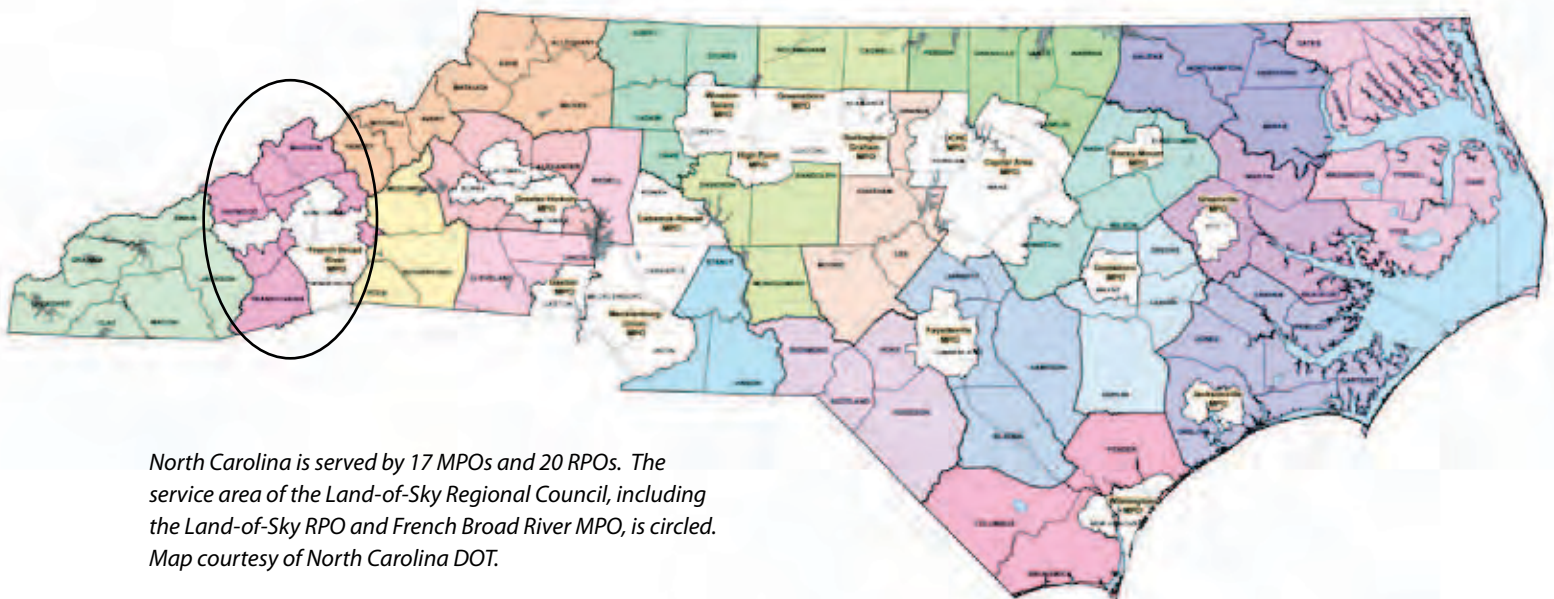
Joe McKinney, Executive Director of the Land-of-Sky Regional Council, discussed the process by which the local MPO for the region's population hub and the Land-of-Sky RPO both came to be housed within the regional planning and development organization.

In 2000, a state law was passed that mandated the establishment of RPOs to work with the

North Carolina Department of Transportation (DOT) on rural transportation planning, and in 2002, the North Carolina DOT began to contract with RPOs in a major overhaul of the state's consultation process with non-metropolitan local officials.

According to state statute, the RPOs serve all the counties outside of MPO boundaries, including a service area of three to 15 contiguous counties with a combined minimum population of 50,000. County governments were required to join the RPOs, although membership by individual municipalities was optional. The RPOs were set up to follow the boundaries of the existing network of regional planning and development organizations, most of which also staff or serve as the fiscal agent for the local RPO. In 2003, the Land-of-Sky RPO was chartered, and through strong local and staff leadership became successful at achieving regional consensus on planning priorities.

Land-of-Sky Regional Council assumed responsibility for the MPO program in their region after several years of working with local



North Carolina is served by 17 MPOs and 20 RPOs. The service area of the Land-of-Sky Regional Council, including the Land-of-Sky RPO and French Broad River MPO, is circled. Map courtesy of North Carolina DOT.



governments on rural transportation issues. The French Broad River MPO serves the City of Asheville, three counties, and several other municipalities. It had been housed within the City of Asheville, but the city and other MPO members had begun to feel that an organizational structure in which one MPO member also housed and staffed the planning organization was awkward for regional decisionmaking.

Because the MPO board had a similar composition as the regional council and RPO boards, in 2007 the MPO members determined that Land-of-Sky Regional Council might be a good fit for housing and staffing the MPO, as a neutral party outside of the MPO membership. One other co-located MPO and RPO in the state, at nearby Western Piedmont Council of Governments, provided a model for demonstrating how synergy between co-located agencies could be successfully achieved.

Land-of-Sky Regional Council is governed by an executive committee that represents four counties and the local municipalities within them and is supported by advisory committees representing the council's core program areas, including the governing boards of the French Broad River MPO and the Land-of-Sky RPO. To ensure that the MPO and RPO governing board members remain aware of common issues and projects that affect the whole region, the two transportation boards always attend a joint luncheon planned to occur between the MPO's and RPO's half-day board meetings.

McKinney says, "Although the MPO is still a new program, we've found that it works well to have both rural and metropolitan transportation planning housed in our agency. Now there's one point of contact, one agency that people can come to for information and advocacy related to transportation. That's a benefit not just for our planning staff, but also for those we serve on our boards and North Carolina DOT." The new organizational structure reduces the burden of meetings local officials may have to attend, because much of the information that was already being shared from a



regional planning and development perspective is also relevant to the MPO.

McKinney also addressed the budgetary constraints facing North Carolina and agencies within the state as a result of the economic downturn in recent years. "The efficiencies we see from working together across rural and metropolitan lines strengthen our position. When we do see budget cuts, we will still have the key staff in place so that we won't bear the same brunt that a standalone MPO or RPO is likely to face," he says.

Two of the immediate successes that McKinney attributes to the co-location of the RPO and MPO are sharing resources and identifying projects that both planning programs could devote money to, making forward progress on priority projects more likely.

Co-location of the MPO and RPO has also been an advantage in creating synergy with other stakeholder groups throughout the region to make progress toward a shared regional vision. As one of the recipients of the 2010 Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grants, Land-of-Sky Regional Council has observed significant shared momentum among groups as varied as the local chamber of commerce, environmental groups, commu-



nity foundations and nonprofits that were committed to collaborate with the regional council to pursue shared goals and ideas for sustainable development. This includes working through the region's MPO and RPO programs on initiatives that support sustainability and link transportation to economic development, environmental and land use issues.

McKinney sees a need in regional planning to take steps to ensure that individual planning documents are not developed and implemented separately from each other, but rather in a coordinated fashion across planning

elements, such as highways, transit, housing and economic development, and across local boundaries to achieve the best outcomes for the individual local governments that participate in the regional process. Land-of-Sky has found that working jointly through the adjacent RPO and MPO areas helps to facilitate coordinated planning and implementation strategies. Working closely with state and local governments and stakeholders can increase the success of addressing multiple planning issues.

McKinney closed with encouragement for the audience: "Don't be a barrier to change. I would encourage you to become champions for collaboration and to work together, especially in tough economic times, and to try to work with organizations you haven't traditionally partnered with."

For more information on Land-of-Sky Regional Council's transportation planning programs, visit the following websites:

- Land-of-Sky Regional Council: [www.landofsky.org](http://www.landofsky.org)
- Land-of-Sky RPO: [www.landofskyrpo.org](http://www.landofskyrpo.org)
- French Broad River MPO: [www.fbrmpo.org](http://www.fbrmpo.org)

*Two of the immediate successes that McKinney attributes to the co-location of the Land-of-Sky RPO and French Broad River MPO are sharing resources and identifying projects that both planning programs could devote money to, making forward progress on priority projects more likely.*

**Tom Piper,**  
**Senior Transportation Planner**  
**South Alabama Regional Planning**  
**Commission, Mobile, Alabama**

Tom Piper, Senior Transportation Planner for the South Alabama Regional Planning Commission (SARPC), provided an overview of the three-county region served by SARPC, as well as its transportation planning activities.

SARPC's service area includes a total population of about 629,000 (based on 2009 estimates), of which about 300,000 live in the Mobile urbanized area and are served through the Mobile MPO, which covers most of one of SARPC's three counties. Since 2007, the organization has also staffed the region's RPO, which serves the remainder of Mobile County as well as the other two entire counties.

After supporting a one-year pilot RPO housed in the West Alabama Regional Council, the Alabama DOT approached the state's remaining regional planning and development organizations about their interest in hosting RPOs. The RPOs' purpose and structure matched well with the additional roles and responsibilities of the planning and development organizations,

so in 2007, RPOs were established statewide.

The regional organizations that also staffed MPOs had developed significant expertise in transportation planning issues and funding streams, with capacity already existing within their staff and local government members of the MPO boards and committees. As a result, they

were able to serve as mentors for the regions that were new to transportation planning. This statewide partnership on technical issues has continued even as the regions have developed additional planning capacity through their experiences working with the RPOs, and the group still meets each year to talk about problems and possible solutions.

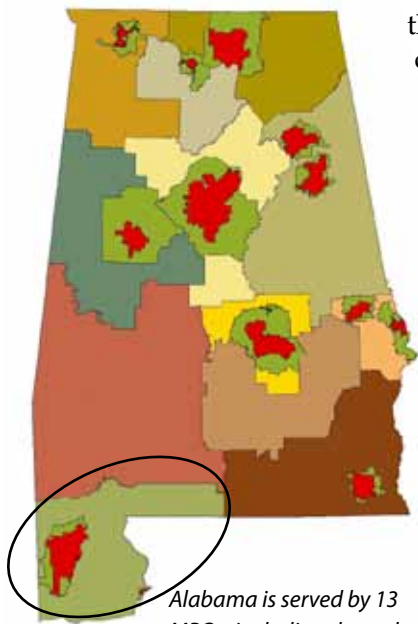
Within the South Alabama region, the same four staff members work on RPO and MPO projects, many of which involve both urban and rural members. One of these shared concerns is air quality conformity. Under the ozone standards that EPA has proposed, two of the three counties served by SARPC are expected to become non-attainment, spanning both MPO and RPO service areas. In order to prepare, the staff are expanding the geographic coverage of the MPO's travel demand forecasting model and plan to run EPA's MOVES model for the two counties expected to be in non-attainment. The RPC is also forming a joint air quality steering committee of MPO and RPO members.

In addition, SARPC is working with the Federal Highway Administration to serve as a pilot area for the second phase of the initiative *Impacts of Climate Change and Variability on Transportation Systems and Infrastructure: Gulf Coast Study*. This initiative brings together members from both the MPO and the RPO to analyze climate change as an emerging issue in transportation planning. The initial segment of the three-phase study conducted by the U.S. Climate Change Science Program provided an overview of climate change and its impacts on transportation along the Gulf Coast and was published in 2008.

The second phase of the Gulf Coast study will utilize SARPC as a pilot to develop a process for identifying critical transportation infrastructure, evaluating climate change effects, evaluating the vulnerability of the infrastructure, and conducting detailed assessments of those vulnerable assets. The study will result in lessons learned as well as tools and processes that could assist MPOs and RPOs elsewhere in







Alabama is served by 13 MPOs, including those that extend beyond state lines (MPO urban areas shown in red) and 12 RPOs. Map courtesy of SARPC, whose region is circled.

the nation with integrating climate considerations into their plans.

Piper identified several multimodal planning concerns that cross the rural and urban boundaries within the South Alabama region. As a result of strong participation by bicycle and pedestrian advocacy groups from across the region during the public involvement process of the last Long-Range Transportation Plan update, a comprehensive bicycle and pedestrian plan will be conducted in the 2011 fiscal year for the MPO area. If funding

is identified, the effort will be extended to the rural area.

In addition, SARPC is charged with compiling a Coordinated Human Services Transportation Plan, which is completed for the region as a whole. The plan documents the existing transit services, identifies unmet needs, minimizes duplication of service, and develops recommendations for the MPO service area, which receives Job Access-Reverse Commute and New Freedom funds directly from the Federal Transit Administration, as well as the rural area, which receives transit funding passed through Alabama DOT.

Considering the MPO and RPO service areas together for the coordinated plan has been of central importance because of the economic and travel connections between them. For example, one of the region's most significant needs is linking the demand response transit systems in the two rural counties to the fixed route provider serving urban Mobile County. As a result, SARPC has assisted the urban and rural providers to partner on a commuter service that

runs twice each morning and evening. Another transit partnership entails working with local governments to establish a ferry system on Mobile Bay to connect the urban and rural communities, as well as provide access to Gulf Coast beaches.

Piper also described an emerging issue that may further unite RPO and MPO programs, both within and beyond SARPC's three-county region. In September 2010, the governor established the Coastal Recovery Commission of Alabama by executive order to help the state respond to the effects of the April 2010 BP oil spill. Through a plan for recovery and resilience in the event of future natural or manmade disasters, the Commission will focus on supporting a healthy environment, society and economy by focusing on infrastructure as well as workforce development, tourism, economic development, and improving insurance for businesses and residents. SARPC already serves the public and its member local governments in such areas as infrastructure, economic development, disaster recovery, small business finance and human services. With a new statewide emphasis on disaster recovery and preparedness, resilience will likely be a central theme for future planning efforts and will bring together rural and urban stakeholders.

For more information, visit:

- South Alabama Regional Planning Commission: [www.sarpc.org](http://www.sarpc.org)
- Mobile MPO and South Alabama RPO: [www.mobilempo.org](http://www.mobilempo.org)
- *Impacts of Climate Variability and Change on Transportation Systems and Infrastructure: Gulf Coast Study, Phase I*: [www.climatescience.gov/Library/sap/sap4-7/final-report](http://www.climatescience.gov/Library/sap/sap4-7/final-report)
- Coastal Recovery Commission of Alabama: [cralabama.org](http://cralabama.org)
- Tom Piper's presentation: [www.RuralTransportation.org/uploads/Symposium\\_Piper2010.pdf](http://www.RuralTransportation.org/uploads/Symposium_Piper2010.pdf)

## Identifying Strategies to Enhance Collaboration

In addition to the panelists whose presentations are summarized in the previous sections, the attendees at the *National Symposium for RPOs and MPOs* engaged in small group discussions on the following questions:

- In what circumstances have you successfully employed a partnership approach to planning? Are there specific plan components or study areas that lend themselves to cross-regional collaboration, such as trail networks, freight studies, regional transit connections, or economic development strategies?
- What institutional structures facilitate collaboration on planning issues (such as a shared host agency, staff or board members, or ex officio representation)? What has been successful about those arrangements in your region, and what would you modify?
- What are the biggest benefits of collaboration among agencies? What are the biggest obstacles, and how could they be overcome?

The groups discussed each question, and following the final panel of two speakers, each small group reported the highlights of their discussions to the full audience. The themes that emerged from the small group discussions are presented here.

### ***Shared Issue Areas and Common Partners***

In their small groups, the participants discussed the topic areas and challenges that brought organizations and individuals together, developing relationships outside of their normal planning activities. Frequently mentioned issue areas included freight movements, air quality and environmental

impacts, economic development strategies such as planning for industrial zones, land use decisions, transit systems and carpooling programs, and recreational bicycle and pedestrian trails. These topics are addressed in a variety of ways, including through multi-regional analysis such as watershed-based planning, specific planning documents like corridor studies and bicycle and pedestrian plans, or joint advocacy to identify funding for specific projects or issues. Although the areas of common interest among organizations varied according to the state and geographic region, many of these planning areas and strategies were voiced by multiple attendees.

Attendees identified organizations they had successfully recruited as partners for various planning activities. In addition to neighboring regions, local government partners, and state DOT staff, many other groups have interests related to the significant issue areas listed above. Local health departments, as well as healthy eating or active living coalitions, have become more involved in transportation, particularly trail development and transportation's connections to land use. Groups such as local Rotary Clubs, whose members may have influ-





ence and recognition throughout the community, can help to conduct outreach. Universities may be able to provide assistance for specific projects, such as developing a questionnaire or conducting special planning studies.

In addition, local economic development practitioners may be interested in the results of freight studies and land use decisions as they market their locality to business leads. Trucking and other freight stakeholders may be able to provide detailed data about modal needs, while transit operators also offer valuable input on meeting needs of human services clients and commuters. Employers may be knowledgeable about both passenger and freight transportation needs affecting their business operations. Local fire departments, school districts and other entities can provide insight into their specific uses of the transportation system.

### ***Institutional Structures and Action Items***

Through the small group discussions, the participants discussed actions and structures that are necessary for or help to facilitate effective partnerships among organizations. Developing consistent points of contact and processes for regular communication assists with sharing information and helping other partners to identify who to contact for particular issues.

In some cases, planning partners have made the decision to house planning organizations together, such as MPOs and RPOs, so that local governments and stakeholders have just one organization to contact for information about transportation. Other institutional structures that assist with frequency and consistency of information include inviting voting or non-voting representation from neighboring regions, state agencies, or significant stakeholder groups on boards or technical committees. Throughout the *National Symposium for RPOs and MPOs*, several speakers and small discussion groups

mentioned efforts to brand the planning process, which also helps to achieve consistency and valuable participation.

Building trust through regular meetings can help to improve dialogue even where there are no formal agreements or shared projects between agencies. Even if a shared project is not needed immediately, having a history of ongoing contact can assist communities or organizations in meeting future issues together should the need arise to develop a memorandum of understanding (MOU) or partner on a planning study or priority project. To assist with dialogue, some organizations maintain regular contact through sharing newsletters and regular updates, attending one another's meetings, having quarterly or monthly meetings, or teleconferences among staff of planning organizations across a state or among neighboring regions.

Achieving buy-in at the local level from all the affected jurisdictions and groups was also viewed as a necessary action item for ensuring that a collaborative effort would be successful. This would assist with identifying significant information for a project as well as securing the necessary staff or financial resources for moving forward with an initiative.

Regular efforts to build capacity among stakeholders assists with buy-in and ensures that



planning staff, planning organizations' local members and participating stakeholder groups understand their role and have the information needed to complete their tasks. Some challenges in building capacity will be difficult to overcome. For instance, local government officials and staff, particularly in smaller jurisdictions, are often asked to attend meetings outside their day-to-day functions and areas of expertise, and turnover of board and committee members necessitates ongoing training for RPO and MPO participants.

However, training for planning staff is often completed through in-person sessions with regional planners and state agency staff, as well as through manuals and guidance documents to help professional staff complete planning studies on specific topics and to follow administrative procedures consistently. Likewise, orientations and informational presentations help regional planning staff to build capacity among RPO and MPO membership.

### ***Benefits and Obstacles***

The discussions illuminated some barriers that organizations must work through in order to achieve meaningful collaboration. In some cases, neighboring regions or organizations who might otherwise be natural partners have different priorities, and as a result may be competing for the same funding and resources. Some unique topographical features can cause disconnects in planning across geographic boundaries even where cultural and economic ties may exist.

This may make it difficult to define a geographic region that feels natural and makes structuring a partnership challenging. Existing committee structures or tools like MOUs may not be very effective at actually bringing stakeholders together to achieve results, or they may not have the level of time or commitment needed from planning staff or local officials to ensure that a collaborative project moves forward. Finally, competition over turf and

who gets credit for completing projects can also be a deterrent to working together.

The attendees agreed that multi-organizational partnerships take time and effort to build and are dependent on both staff and local planning leadership being committed to the collaborative effort and its outcomes. The groups identified benefits they had experienced from making the effort to collaborate on initiatives. These benefits included opportunities for sharing staffing and resources such as office space and communications. In addition, identifying shared priority projects or issues can leverage funding by bringing together multiple partners' funding sources to complete a project.

Expanding expertise and deepening comprehension of issues were also noted as benefits. One attendee remarked, "Planners can't be experts in everything. The more inclusive you are, the more you expand your knowledge base for making decisions and developing a comprehensive understanding of the issue at hand." Another noted that identifying even one new partner committed to the process can bring multiple new and valuable insights to the table, including through outreach to that organization's networks.



## Conclusions

Several common themes emerged throughout the presentations and small group discussions that occurred during the *National Symposium for RPOs and MPOs*. These shared themes provide some areas for consideration for organizations that wish to enhance their existing network of partners and achieve new results through collaboration.

These themes included:

- Recognition that effective partnerships take time and effort to achieve results, especially among partners who have not traditionally worked together or have differing goals
- Branding the process for transportation planning ensures that partners are aware of their roles in the decisionmaking process
- Ongoing capacity building among professional planning staff and planning organization participants is necessary to make the most out of collaborative efforts
- Without partners' trust and buy-in, collaborative planning efforts will be unlikely to progress
- Transparency in setting goals and selecting projects is as important as stakeholders feeling included in the planning process
- Providing opportunities for local government representatives to meet or communicate across regional boundaries
- Developing capacity-building materials for planning organization staff and members; this might include working with the state DOT to develop a manual or guidance on specific issues, or sharing effective board and committee orientation materials and strategies among planning organizations
- Assessing organizational structures that may enhance collaboration where needed, such as co-location of metropolitan and rural planning organizations, inviting non-voting board or technical committee representation from entities that may not currently be included, such as neighboring RPOs and MPOs or state agencies
- Identifying particular projects or issue areas that are priorities for planning organization members and would benefit from collaboration with other agencies, such as topical planning studies or shared projects

Specific action items to improve collaboration over time may include:

- Reaching out to neighboring regions (including MPOs and RPOs), stakeholder organizations and nontraditional planning partners to learn about their priority concerns
- Maintaining inclusive mailing lists so all relevant entities know of developments and meetings occurring in the planning process
- Scheduling regular communication among staff of state and regional planning organizations, such as through quarterly meetings or annual conferences and networking retreats

The *National Symposium for RPOs and MPOs* was conducted to stimulate discussion and extend partnerships among planning entities. Organizations or jurisdictions seeking to advance their planning practice may find it useful to follow the models provided by the symposium panelists from Alabama, Iowa, Missouri, North Carolina and Tennessee as well as other attendees in order to develop strategies to enhance partnerships across regional boundaries, levels of government, and among stakeholder groups. Organizations such as health agencies, chambers of commerce, modal stakeholders, economic development professionals, environmental groups, and community foundations may become valuable partners in the planning process and may help to identify shared concerns at the local, regional or state levels or in neighboring geographic areas.

# Event Schedule

## **National Symposium for Rural Transportation Planning Organizations and Metropolitan Planning Organizations: Assessing the Structure and Benefits of Collaboration**

***October 22, 2010, 7:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. • St. Louis, Missouri***

7:00 – 8:15 a.m.	Networking Breakfast
8:30 – 8:40 a.m.	Welcoming Remarks <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Steve Etcher, National Association of Development Organizations (NADO) Secretary, and Executive Director, Boonslick Regional Planning Commission (Warrenton, Missouri)</li><li>• Ed Hillhouse, Executive Director, East-West Gateway Council of Governments (St. Louis, Missouri)</li></ul>
8:30 – 9:25 a.m.	Symposium Keynote Address <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Kevin Keith, Director, Missouri Department of Transportation</li></ul>
9:25 – 10:20 a.m.	State and Regional Planning Partnerships <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Jeanne Stevens, Director of Long-Range Planning, Tennessee Department of Transportation</li><li>• Craig O’Riley, Planning Team Leader, Iowa Department of Transportation</li></ul>
10:20 – 10:30 a.m.	Networking Break
10:30 – 10:50 a.m.	Small Group Discussion: Identifying Strategies to Enhance Collaboration
10:50 – 11:35 a.m.	Regional Planning Practice: Partnerships to Enhance the Planning Process <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Joe McKinney, Executive Director, Land-of-Sky Regional Council (Asheville, North Carolina)</li><li>• Tom Piper, Senior Transportation Planner, South Alabama Regional Planning Commission (Mobile, Alabama)</li></ul>
11:35 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.	Small Group Reporting and Closing Remarks <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Matthew Chase, Executive Director, NADO and NADO Research Foundation</li><li>• Symposium Facilitator: Carrie Kissel, Senior Program Manager, National Association of Development Organizations Research Foundation</li></ul>

*Special thanks to the Federal Highway Administration for supporting the symposium under Agreement No. DTFH61-10-C-00050, and to the Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations and Development District Association of Appalachia for their support of the National Rural Transportation Peer Learning Conference and the symposium.*





400 N. Capitol St. NW, Suite 390  
Washington, DC 20001  
202.624.7806 • 202.624.8813 (fax)  
[www.NADO.org](http://www.NADO.org) • [Info@NADO.org](mailto:Info@NADO.org)  
[www.RuralTransportation.org](http://www.RuralTransportation.org)



*Special thanks to our partners*

