



National Association of Development Organizations Research Foundation
Center for Transportation Advancement and Regional Development

Four Corners Rural Transportation Forum

Summary of a Peer Learning Exchange

On May 13-14, 2010, 16 individuals representing 12 different regional transportation planning-related organizations convened in Park City, Utah for the 2010 Four Corners Rural Transportation Forum. The participants were primarily representatives of rural, regional transportation planning organizations (often called RPTOs or RPOs) and state departments of transportation (DOTs) in Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico and Utah.

Through presentations, roundtable discussions and networking, participants shared information about best practices and emerging issues in their regions on a variety of rural transportation planning and economic development issues. Discussion topics included rural transportation safety, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Categorical Exclusion process, Utah Department of Transportation's U-PLAN interactive mapping initiative, livability in rural areas and relationship-building with Tribes. This peer exchange summary includes highlights of the discussion themes. The two-day event was supported in part by the Federal Highway Administration through a cooperative agreement with the NADO Research Foundation's Center for Transportation Advancement and Regional Development.

Forum Welcome

The forum planning committee welcomed the group to the forum and provided context about the meeting. In May 2006 and May 2007, the NADO Research Foundation's Center for Transportation Advancement and Regional Development and a regional committee conducted two conferences in Durango, Colorado. Attendees included planning and economic development staff from rural and small metropolitan planning organizations, DOT staff, local officials, and Tribal transportation planners and officials. In 2006, nearly 90 people attended the conference, and in 2007, around 60 people participated. The two events were structured with formal podium presentations, followed by group question and answer periods.

July 2010

The 2006 and 2007 events provided information on best practices and emerging issues in many topic areas, from rural air quality issues and wildlife collisions, to the process to re-align and expand a highway corridor to improve safety through Tribal and non-Tribal communities, to connecting public transit with other modes of transportation.

In 2009, the forum organizing committee convened a group of 16 rural transportation planners and practitioners in Sedona, Arizona. This event employed a facilitated discussion-based format to enhance those partnerships formed at the previous two sessions in Durango, and spark new collaborations across state boundaries. The 2010 forum followed a similar format at which attendees offered updates on recent trends in rural transportation planning and identified opportunities for future collaboration efforts.

Roundtable Updates on Planning Program Structure

To begin the 2010 conference, the participants described state-supported regional transportation planning efforts in their respective states. Each organization also provided updates on current projects in their region and shared recent successes, challenges and lessons learned. These comments are summarized by state.

Utah

- Regional development organizations in Utah are known as Associations of Governments (AOGs). Currently four metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) and five rural planning organizations (RPOs) in Utah are housed within existing AOGs. The RPOs are created and funded by the Utah Department of Transportation (UDOT), based in part on rural communities' request for an RPO. Those AOGs which house both an MPO and an RPO benefit from joint collaboration within the AOG structure.
- Utah RPOs prepare project prioritization lists and deliver them to UDOT for consideration in the State Transportation Improvement Plan (STIP), but they do not program funds or engage in construction projects. UDOT relies on RPOs to involve local officials in the state transportation planning process.
- UDOT defines "emerging areas" as rural areas that are experiencing rapid growth and are not served by an RPO or MPO. UDOT analyzes the emerging area and produces a report that documents the region's issues and maps a "common transportation vision" for future projects and improvements needed, although no continuing plan is put in place for the emerging area. In the Bear River AOG region, this document has been passed to the RPO, and RPO staff are now developing project prioritization lists to use in advocating for projects to be incorporated in the STIP.
- UDOT, the RPOs and the MPOs are on the same schedule for plan updates, which allows state legislators to compare all the proposed projects and financial assumptions simultaneously.
- For Regional Consolidated Plans to be eligible for Small Cities Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding and other U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) formula funds, AOGs must list all the capital improvements programmed in each jurisdiction within the region, which allows the AOG to coordinate with each county and gain the latest information available regarding upcoming capital improvement projects.
- The Six County AOG region is not currently served by an MPO nor an RPO, and has requested to form a RPO. However, UDOT has determined that the region's population is not sufficient to support an RPO.
- The Six County AOG created a website and a Google calendar to coordinate human services transportation among multiple agencies. The schedule is housed online and staff has coordinated with 211, the state's information and referral phone service, to provide information on the transportation schedule to



users who lack web access. Six County AOG has been promoting the service via radio announcements and flyers.

- Utah RPO representatives emphasized the importance of developing strong relationships with UDOT representatives so RPO planners can advocate for inclusion of priority projects on the STIP. The Wasatch RPO has found that one advantage of being housed within the same AOG as an MPO is that the organization can leverage the MPO staff relationships for RPO planning, technical assistance and advocacy.
- Participants discussed the importance of holding individual meetings with local officials regularly. The Six County AOG staff meets one-on-one with all local officials in their region annually to discuss regional issues. This has been a useful technique for staff in crafting relationships with area stakeholders and communicating the goals of the Six County AOG. Staff has also found that working with area stakeholders and citizen groups to explain the local planning and prioritization process is useful in facilitating effective public involvement.
- The Wasatch County RPO has developed its own travel demand model, which helps staff to better advocate for project prioritization at the state level.
- Southeastern Utah Association of Local Governments is working to develop a coordinated human services public transportation plan, although securing local matching funds and coordinating logistics with the agencies involved has been a challenge. The goal is to show how collaboration among agencies will ultimately benefit all entities involved

by enabling their operations to become more efficient.

- The Five County AOG houses an MPO and an RPO. Another RPO, the Iron County RPO, was recently created and is located within the Five Counties AOG service area. It is not yet determined what entity will administer the RPO, but it is expected to be the Five County AOG.
- The Five County AOG has found that one obstacle to coordinating transit providers has been insurance and liability issues with sharing transportation services, and they have formed a subcommittee to review these issues.

Colorado

- Colorado has 10 rural transportation planning regions (TPRs) and five MPOs. Colorado does not have a formal RPO process; rather, Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) has a centralized planning process and consults with regional organizations for input. All regions submit priority lists to the state Transportation Commission for inclusion in the STIP. CDOT relies on support from the regional organizations for local public involvement efforts.
- CDOT produces a guide for local elected officials that contains information on planning processes every two years, and is a good resource for all elected officials as well as planners and other stakeholders in regional planning and development processes.
- Colorado has been witnessing significant activity recently related to oil and gas extraction,

and CDOT is focusing on responding to the transportation-related impacts.

- CDOT has begun to incorporate transit into long-range planning and is working to improve local transit service by interconnecting small local systems on a regional level. The Region 9 Economic Development District of Southwest Colorado recently completed a regional transit feasibility study to evaluate the potential for connecting all of the transit providers in the region. Region 9 recently hired an AmeriCorps volunteer to be the region's multimodal coordinator.
- Some issues facing Region 9 are its geographic isolation, lack of freight air and rail service, lack of an interstate highway and the high cost of living coupled with a low number of high paying jobs.
- Highway 160, which passes through Region 9, is being analyzed for a corridor vision project. CDOT has developed a vision, goals and strategies and has analyzed the environmental impact in consultation with Region 9.

Arizona

- Councils of Governments (COGs) in Arizona date back to the early 1970s, when they were established by an executive order

of the governor. Because of this history, they are fortunate to have a long-standing relationship with the Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT). The COGs in Arizona have had a contractual relationship with ADOT to perform rural transportation planning for nearly 30 years. COGs have performed data collection since the beginning of their contractual relationships with ADOT.

- All COGs have identical work programs with ADOT. They share funding among four rural COGs and three small MPOs. For the past decade, the organizations have agreed to divide the money proportionally based on population.
- The rural consultation process has been in effect in ADOT for about six years, and ADOT is currently evaluating the process and looking for ways to improve or revamp it.
- Arizona COGs participate in transit planning in a coordination role. At the request of ADOT, regions convene a review panel and rank applications from non-profit organizations for Federal Transit Administration (FTA) Section 5310 funding for transit for the elderly and disabled, and make recommendations to the state. COGs also update the public human services coordination plans. They are currently exploring how to incentivize a



more coordinated approach among the various provider agencies. Planners are trying to match federal aging programs with transportation providers who receive FTA Section 5310 funds to improve efficiency and facilitate better coordination.

- ADOT is initiating a public outreach campaign to communicate the importance of transportation planning to the general public. ADOT has redesigned its website and provides materials to show citizens how transportation networks and goods shipment patterns impact their daily lives, such as the travel of produce from farm to market.
- Planners in Arizona are working to explain the land use-transportation connection to the general public as part of their focus on building livable communities. This initiative includes outreach to public schools to educate youth about these issues.

New Mexico

- New Mexico is served by six Councils of Governments (COGs), seven RPOs, four regional transit districts and five MPOs. All of the RPOs and one of the MPOs are staffed by the COGs. The RPOs perform transportation planning services but do not program funds. Each RPO develops a plan and prioritization list which they send to the state for incorporation into the STIP. The RPOs also rate and rank transit applications for human services programs.
- The state association of RPOs has an RPO information booth which they bring to all major conferences and events in the state. This marketing technique helps to showcase their projects and highlight the role of RPOs.
- Due to state financial strains, the RPOs are looking at creative ways to sustain transportation funding. In August 2009, they held a statewide townhall to vet ideas, and a standing committee strategizes creative funding techniques.
- New Mexico recently completed its first state-wide public transportation plan. One challenge has been effectively collaborating with regions that are geographically disperse. Currently, RPOs are working at the county level with public transit providers to improve collaboration.
- New Mexico planners are working to collaborate with other states on the Trail of the Ancients Scenic Byway. The Utah and Colorado segments of the Byway are already federally designated, and New Mexico and Arizona are now working to achieve federal designation of their portions of the Byway.
- The Farmington MPO is completing a bicycle/pedestrian facilities plan which will be finalized in June. The MPO is also conducting a transit study to consider expansion of the service area.
- The Northwest New Mexico RPO (NWNMRPO) has found that the economic downturn forces more collaboration and communication among transportation planners, economic development practitioners and related actors, and COGs can play a key role in facilitating communication among all parties.
- NWNMRPO has carried out extensive collaboration efforts with Tribal nations to ensure consistency and compatibility among the different organizations' plans and project priorities. NWNMRPO staff has worked to get all parties together to coordinate functional classification issues within the Federal Highway Administration highway classification system and the Bureau of Indian Affairs Indian Reservation Roads Program. NWNMRPO aims to assist New Mexico DOT to become a pilot state in coordinating these two systems.

Rural Transportation Safety

Scott Jones, Safety Programs Engineer with UDOT's Traffic and Safety Division, presented the statewide highway safety public outreach effort to the forum participants. This section summarizes the highlights of this presentation and the discussion that ensued.

Utah Strategic Highway Safety Plan

Utah's Strategic Highway Safety Plan (SHSP) developed from the federal mandate under SAFETEA-LU that directed state DOTs to promote safety, especially in rural areas. In order to obligate Highway Safety Improvement Program (HSIP) funds, state DOTs must adopt a SHSP, and a portion of the HSIP funding must go to rural roads under the High Risk Rural Roads Program (HRRRP). Utah receives \$9 million per year for HSIP, \$700,000 of which is dedicated to HRRRP.

Utah's SHSP is branded as "Zero Fatalities: A Goal We Can All Live With." Since 2006, UDOT has saturated the market with this message. An important aspect of the marketing effort has been to package the SHSP for the media and the public in a way that is easily accessible.

UDOT defined eligible rural areas for the HRRRP program as counties with a population of less than 50,000 and an above average number of crashes, when compared to other rural counties. The initiative represented a good opportunity for UDOT to work with local governments and solidify collaboration among federal, state and local decision-makers.

All public roads in these rural areas are eligible for HRRRP funds. Since most traffic volume in Utah's rural areas takes place on state roads, the majority of crashes happen on state-owned facilities. In Utah, half of all fatalities are "run off the road" (ROR), and two-thirds of RORs occur on rural roads, so the focus of the HRRRP thus far has been on eliminating RORs.

UDOT found that county governments often lacked the capacity to undertake the application process to participate in the HRRRP program, so UDOT performs the application process on rural counties' behalf. UDOT requires counties to participate in the planning process and to own and maintain all improvements. One challenge UDOT encountered was engaging counties in the process and securing commitments to own and maintain all new facilities.

UDOT relies on low-cost safety improvements such as signage improvements, rumble strips, guardrails and barriers (both cable and concrete). Signage has been the best "quick-fix" solution, and is considered low-hanging fruit because so many rural areas lack adequate roadway signage. Reflective strips are also an effective quick-fix. Because of the funding limitations, UDOT has not been able to undertake larger-scale improvement projects under the HRRRP program.

Every state is required to create a crash data database as a condition of receiving HSIP funding. UDOT provides crash data online so local governments can incorporate that information into their planning processes, with UDOT assistance. Allowing crash data to be publicly available can raise liability issues; UDOT





is working to make crash data inadmissible in court. The Wasatch RPO initially inventoried crash data, but found errors in the data and concerns about liability arose, so the inventory process has ceased.

Discussion

- ADOT is currently kicking off its rural safety program now, and will be providing funding to the COGs to distribute to local governments based on an application process. ADOT also employs a Road Safety Audit (RSA) coordinator, who is responsible for assembling a team to work with a local jurisdiction to conduct RSAs and document findings and recommendations.
- In New Mexico and Colorado, COGs use safety as a ranking criteria in developing project prioritization lists. In the Southwest Transportation Planning Region of Colorado, staffed by the Region 9 EDD, safety is the number one criteria in ranking project prioritization.
- New Mexico RPOs disseminate information about safety grants to the local governments and then assist them through the process. Local governments take the lead and COGs provide technical assistance.
- Participants indicated that the primary reason that RPOs are not more involved in transportation safety planning is a lack of staffing and funding; RPOs are simply spread too thin.
- Participants identified potential ways to link safety planning with livable communities. The increasing focus on creating livable communities, including the promotion of bicycle and pedestrian planning as well as “Complete Streets” initiatives, could align well with safety planning efforts.



NEPA Categorical Exclusion

Shane Marshall, UDOT Region 3 Program Manager, presented the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Categorical Exclusion (CE) process at the forum. The CE process is used to determine if a project can be excluded from compliance with NEPA. Many enhancement projects may be considered CE, including signage projects or other projects that do not have a significant environmental impact.

SAFETEA-LU included a provision that allows delegation of the CE review and designation process to state DOTs, to allow FHWA division offices to focus on the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) components of NEPA. Utah was one of four states to participate in the program, and received CE delegation authority in 2008. California and Alaska have full NEPA delegation, meaning that state DOTs in those states can also review EIAs and EISs. Transportation planners anticipate that future federal transportation policy will offer full delegation of NEPA review to all states.

U-PLAN Mapping Initiative

John Thomas of UDOT’s Systems Planning and Programming Group presented the U-PLAN mapping initiative, which was initiated three years ago to facilitate data access across state agencies. The original aim of U-PLAN was to allow UDOT’s Division of Planning to become more effective and efficient.

The U-PLAN initiative created a GIS-based data sharing platform wherein numerous entities (including state agencies, MPOs, RPOs, AOGs, utility providers, local governments and others)

participate in a data-sharing online application. Each entity has shared their GIS databases, which are linked through the Automated Geographic Reference Center (AGRC), the state's GIS center. AGRC manages relationships with the database owners. Since each database-manager maintains their own databases, which are linked under a peer-to-peer networking system, no single entity is tasked with maintaining all of the databases. The underlying goal of the project is to develop ways to find and connect information via one central location, so all users can access the shared data.



The startup process required a significant upfront investment, and UDOT employed consultants to help create the architecture of the system. However, maintenance is minimal because each database is maintained and updated by the entities that own it. Updates are processed in real-time and automatically linked with U-PLAN.

The application functions as an interactive online mapping tool, complete with navigation functions and multiple layers in a range of categories that can be mapped and analyzed based on user need. Data layers include information related to infrastructure, utilities, current and planned projects, environmental data, air quality, archaeological, cultural and historic resources, land use, population and demographic data and much more. Data points are clickable and linked to attribute tables and PDF documents with more information. All metadata is NEPA qualified. The program is linked to Google streetview, and

users can also download data for use in their organizations.

The primary obstacle UDOT faced in this process was building trust with data owners to share their databases. UDOT showed their partners in this process that when data is shared, gaps in information and areas that need improvement can become more clear. UDOT's method for encouraging participation was to first cultivate a level of trust and develop an understanding of the agencies' concerns. Next, UDOT worked to communicate the benefits of participation, namely increased efficiency and heightened base of knowledge for all participants. By eliminating issues of finding and securing data, agencies can focus on more substantive issues and project development. An additional incentive for participation was the prospect of gaining access to the pool of data.



photos courtesy Park City Convention and Visitors Bureau

Currently, the application is available to all public agencies or other entities that are participants in the database system, but it is not available to the public, as UDOT is still working out issues related to data ownership and placing the information in the public domain.

U-PLAN has been effective at allowing the state's resource agencies to become involved in project development at the planning stage. The program is highly transferable to other states, and holds the potential to connect vast amounts of knowledge and further increase efficiency and improve data analysis across boundaries. Through the process,

the agency has created a new paradigm for how to view ownership and sharing of information, based on the premise of collaboration.

Livable Communities

Participants discussed the recently formed HUD-DOT-EPA Interagency Partnership for Sustainable Communities, and what livability could mean for rural transportation planners. The highlights of this conversation are summarized below:

- Different types of rural communities and their defining characteristics were discussed. Participants noted the distinction between small metropolitan areas and more isolated rural areas. Bedroom communities, rural resort communities, retiree communities, historic small towns, and rural sprawl were all discussed, and it was agreed that livability can mean different things in different types of rural communities.
- Participants noted that transportation funding and planning issues are not as prominent on the public radar as other issues, such as health care or education, and the importance of developing effective public outreach campaigns to create long-term sustainable transportation and land use plans.
- Forum attendees mentioned that rural organizations need to seek out opportunities to collaborate with urban areas and promote rural-urban connections and support networks to ensure the livability of multiple community types. In the Four Corners states, urban residents appreciate the rural areas for their natural beauty and recreational opportunities, and it is important to maintain mutually supportive relationships.
- It was noted that many rural areas in the Four Corners states have a strong quality of life, which attracts both tourists and permanent residents. Treasured places that define a region need to be preserved and maintained for the long-term.
- Participants brainstormed opportunities to revitalize historic downtown areas as an economic development strategy. In the past, the Mountain West region's economy relied strongly on resource extraction, but as the local and regional economies have become more diversified there is a recognized need for reinvestment in downtowns. Issues of scale were discussed, such as maintaining a large enough population base to support downtowns, as well as branding and marketing techniques to attract visitors looking for small-town character. Older communities struggle to accommodate an aging population and attract and retain businesses that will provide jobs to the community.
- Participants identified roles regional development organizations can fill to support livable communities, such as providing technical assistance to local governments, assisting with grant applications and acting as leaders in the region to develop livable community initiatives. Several organizations represented at the forum noted that they are becoming more comprehensive in the services they provide, and are continually looking for ways to better integrate





their program work. Since COGs and AOGs are frequently viewed as neutral partners, they are fortunate to be able to transcend political issues and work directly with local leaders.

- The Southwest Colorado Action Network (SCAN), a program affiliate of the Region 9 EDD, is coordinating a regional housing strategic plan with all the housing providers in the region, and may integrate the housing plan into the region's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) as well as its Long Range Transportation Plan.

Tribal Nations

The forum included a strategy session about how to better collaborate with Tribes in rural transportation planning efforts. The key discussion points were:

- One obstacle to coordinating planning efforts with Tribal governments is that Tribes receive direct federal funding as sovereign nations, and do not typically need to work with local governments.
- Relationship building is paramount. Tribal nations historically have not trusted government institutions, so COGs and AOGs need to be aware that it takes time to cultivate relationships and build trust.
- It is also crucial to collaborate with Tribes in the initial planning stage of a project. The first task should be to convene affected landowners in a project area to develop a plan that is satisfactory to all involved.
- Participants remarked that understanding cultural differences is key to building successful relationships, and stressed the importance of devoting time to understanding how Tribes conduct meetings and form relationships.
- Participants also pointed out that environmental and archaeological issues can be critical to Tribal nations who revere sacred lands; planners can benefit from learning about these issues and belief systems and initiating conversations with Tribal representatives early on.
- Tribal Nations can place county and state roads on their prioritization lists to receive federal funding through the Indian Reservation Roads Program, if the roads traverse the Tribe's boundaries. In Region 9, located in southwest Colorado, the Southern Ute Tribe includes county roads on their road inventory and the Tribe can help offset improvements on those roads. This has facilitated more effective collaboration between the Tribe and the county government officials.
- Central Arizona Association of Governments (CAAG) developed a relationship with a Tribe in their region which ultimately led to the Tribe becoming a member of CAAG. Since then, two additional Tribes have joined CAAG.
- ADOT has a partnering committee with a Tribal nation and conducts quarterly meetings with representatives from ADOT, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, CAAG, county and municipal governments and Tribal officials. ADOT employs a Tribal coordinator and has worked with Tribes to secure enhancement grants and other funding, which has helped to demonstrate the benefits of regional transportation planning and collaboration to the Tribal nations.

Four Corners Rural Transportation Forum Concluding Remarks

Throughout the 2010 Four Corners Rural Transportation Forum, participants shared barriers and successful practices with RPO and DOT planning staff from other states. One of the major themes to emerge was the importance of relationship-building with other state and regional entities as well as Tribal nations to accomplish common goals. Other recurring topics throughout the event included the importance of regional branding to promote economic development and sustainable development.

Participants remarked that the discussion-based format of this forum that included both presentations and roundtable dialogues was useful to their program work. The forum participants set a goal of increasing state DOT participation at future Four Corners Forum events, and encouraging Tribal representatives to participate. Attendees also noted that the smaller discussion-based format would be conducive to increasing Tribal involvement.

2010 Four Corners Rural Transportation Forum Participants

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This material is based in part upon work supported by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) under Agreement No. DTFH61-06-H-00029. Any opinions, findings and conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of FHWA or the NADO Research Foundation.