



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

Four Corners Rural Transportation Forum

Summary of a Conference

On August 13 – 14, 2009, 16 individuals representing 13 different transportation planning-related organizations convened in Sedona, Arizona for the 2009 Four Corners Rural Transportation Forum. Primarily representing rural, regional transportation planning organizations (often called RTPOs or RPOs) and state departments of transportation (DOTs) in Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico and Utah, the participants contributed to a two-day facilitated discussion on a variety of planning issues. This conference summary includes highlights of the discussion themes. The event was supported in part by the Federal Highway Administration through a cooperative agreement with the National Association of Development Organizations Research Foundation's Center for Transportation Advancement and Regional Development.

Conference Welcome

The conference 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.

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. Although both events received positive post-conference evaluation responses, planners from all four states expressed an interest in a conference format focused more on discussion than presentations. Partnerships on planning and economic development initiatives were developed among some transportation planning regions in the first two events, and attendees hoped that a facilitated discussion-oriented event would enhance those partnerships and spark new collaborations.

Roundtable Updates on Planning Program Structure

To begin the 2009 conference, the participants each offered some background information on state-supported regional transportation planning efforts and characteristics of their region's economy and demographics. These comments are summarized by state.

Arizona

- Through its Planning Assistance for Rural Areas program, Arizona DOT contracts with councils of governments (COGs) to function as RPOs, identifying local needs, completing short-term and long-term plans, and conducting data collection and reporting for contracts of \$125,000 per year funded through State Planning and Research funds.
- The COG regions receive a hypothetical allocation of federal Surface Transportation Funds according to a population-based formula, but the regions can agree to "borrow" from each other's allocation amounts to complete larger projects through an informal no-interest loan program.
- The COGs do not use a proportional voting structure in making transportation decisions, so the smaller communities feel that they have as much say in the process as larger communities.

- Issues are diverse among the regions: One non-metropolitan transportation planning region contains counties that are among the fastest-growing and slowest-growing counties in the nation, creating a broad range in the types of transportation pressures addressed by the RPO.

- One RPO is working with local communities and stakeholders to develop an implementation plan for multi-city transit service.

- Timely traffic information is a need; COGs may work with local agencies to provide counters and software to locals, and the data can be used to identify local and regional needs.

- Collaboration among Arizona's small MPOs and the rural COGs led to the formation of the Rural Transportation Advocacy Council, RTAC, which funds a full-time transportation liaison to work with the state legislature and Arizona DOT and provide updates on issues occurring at the national level.

Colorado

- Following passage of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) and a state law establishing Transportation Planning Regions (TPRs), Colorado DOT began to contract with COGs, cities, counties and other entities to provide local staffing to the 15 TPRs (of which 10 are rural and five are MPOs). The contracts provide DOT funds to allow each region to send a representative to statewide meetings to provide input into development of the statewide plans.

- Colorado DOT also has engineering regions in the state, which have different boundaries from the Transportation Planning Regions; when each TPR prioritizes its projects, it must compare notes with other TPRs within the same engineering region.

- Current issues for some rural regions include transit planning for 17 jurisdictions working to establish connectivity, and integrating freight issues and freight



stakeholders into the regional planning process.

- Colorado is seeking sustainable funding sources and innovative finance solutions to address its budget shortfall.

New Mexico

- RPOs were established as a statewide network staffed by COGs in 2005; RPO and COG boundaries are not identical, so some COGs staff two RPOs.
- The establishment of RPOs has been critical to local officials feeling like they have a voice in statewide planning, and it also has reinforced the benefits of regional cooperation. Through RPOs, projects are identified and ranked on a regional basis before DOT district staff advance highest ranking projects for inclusion in the statewide plan.
- The link between transportation and economic development is clear, as some rural regions are planning for transportation impacts from such projects as a new space port, hydrogen plant and geothermal energy facility, while other regions view transportation as a key part of the plan to address very high unemployment.
- RPOs are increasingly involved in the Safe Routes to School program, and are working with local communities to address obesity and public health through multi-modal transportation.

Utah

- Utah DOT has developed a pilot process of establishing RPOs to conduct transportation planning in the fastest growing areas outside of MPO boundaries. The existing RPOs are housed in and staffed by existing associations of governments (AOGs) that also staff MPOs.
- There are currently four RPOs in Utah, the first of which were established around 2003 at the request of coalitions of local governments.
- Utah DOT has staggered annual funding levels for RPOs, beginning at \$40,000 for an RPO's first year, and decreased year by year, ultimately to \$10,000 after an RPO's initial regional plan is completed. Local match also provides support.
- In other municipalities experiencing growth pressures, Utah DOT may complete an Emerging Area Plan through a charette. The process identifies trends and results in a brief solutions document.
- Local consultation in the statewide planning process occurs through a series of DOT visits to local governments in the areas of the state not covered through the MPO, RPO or Emerging Area Plan process.
- Major issues for the non-metro areas include considering bypass projects, mobility and connectivity for small communities—especially those in remote rural areas, passenger and freight rail projects, and partnerships with Tribal leaders.

Rural Consultation Process

The participants discussed the processes used for consulting with non-metropolitan local officials in the statewide planning process, as required by federal regulation.

- In Arizona, the consultation process through the COGs is undergoing review. It has consistently been recognized by stakeholders to be an effective way to communicate local needs to Arizona DOT. Local officials look to the COGs for direction on identifying the funding sources and project implementation processes for their needs.
- In other states, some rural local communities seem to have no consultation occurring, while others are successful at offering their input into the statewide planning process.
- Education of local officials is an ongoing process to ensure that newly elected or appointed officials understand the process and their role; DOT outreach and RPO assistance in conducting rural consultation cannot be effective if local officials are unaware of their opportunities to participate.

- Some COGs already conduct an orientation for their board members, but see an opportunity to include more information on their regions' role in contributing to statewide transportation planning.

Funding for Projects and Programs

The attendees discussed how RPOs have played a role in planning and implementing projects funded through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), as well as other ongoing funding issues.

- When ARRA was passed and program stipulations were released by the various agencies, local governments were overwhelmed with meeting requirements and identifying funding sources.
- Congressional staff asked local officials for project ideas, which contributed to local misperceptions of how the ARRA process would work in many regions.



- States used stimulus funds to fund projects included in the STIP; Colorado and other states were able to move forward on a backlog of projects, especially preservation projects, but still are seeking solutions to their overall funding gap.
- Some states did not select any projects to receive ARRA funding in certain rural regions. As a result, COGs and RPOs had to manage expectations as well as track program information.
- Some RPOs are working with the state DOTs to include priority projects in the statewide long-range transportation plan, but they may seek earmarks of state general funds to supplement transportation funds in order to move the projects forward.
- Transportation Enhancement projects are needed locally, but the 20 percent match requirement is difficult for many local governments to provide.
- Some local jurisdictions in the rural areas have explored impact fees for new development, while other locations are using a county or municipal sales tax to raise local funds, a county vehicle registration surcharge, or toll to fund projects through a county-level rural transportation authority for transit or highway projects. But as local solutions are sought, the appetite for statewide solutions recedes.

Rural Transportation Safety

With a majority of U.S. traffic fatalities occurring on rural roads, transportation safety was acknowledged to be an issue for RPOs, their communities and their regions' residents.

- Online tools like University of Minnesota's www.saferoadmaps.org are useful for rural planning by allowing regions to visualize safety hot zones.
- Some RPOs conduct rural safety mapping, while DOT safety staff coordinate road safety

audits to produce facility-specific reports for high-impact and low-cost safety measures.

- To make safety projects seem worthwhile to local official members of RPOs, the staff need more information about how to access safety funding, how safety projects are solicited, what information needs to be in a project application, what steps to take to identify and implement safety projects, and what data is needed to make the process and projects effective.
- Partnerships can be effective to address safety issues. Ongoing collaborations include: DOTs working with state highway patrol, RPOs and local law enforcement identifying safety issues, and COGs and rural health councils applying for Safe Community designation through the World Health Organization.
- Strategic Highway Safety Plans (SHSP) in the participating states tend to be policy- and behavior-oriented, and geared toward the Four Es—Engineering, Enforcement, Education and Emergency Services—rather than identifying a role for planning or an implementation strategy for the policy goals. In addition, although some MPOs were involved in SHSP development, DOT and RPO planners tended not to be included.
- Participants from all four states observed that their Governor's Highway Safety Representatives were often leaders in the SHSP process, and that they tended to interact mainly with DOT safety offices, and less with planning or other DOT offices.
- Safe Routes to School and bicycle safety are significant issues in small communities; law enforcement officials may assist RPOs in determining where crosswalk markings and stoplight-controlled crosswalks might be appropriate projects for the program.
- Wildlife collisions, rock falls, transportation impacts of controlled burns (especially those that get out of control), high driving speeds between and within communities, and lane



departure crashes are frequent in rural areas. Some DOTs are testing or implementing assessments and countermeasures specific to those issues in rural regions, including variable message signs that warn of wildlife detected near the roadways, cable-median barriers and enforcement partnerships.

- Utah and other states have liability concerns about safety planning; if safety hot spots are documented, state or local governments may be held liable in the court system for not fixing problems quickly enough.

Planning Program Partnerships

The attendees discussed the nature of the relationships among neighboring RPOs and regions across a state, as well as relationships with state DOTs and MPOs.

- Initiatives such as Building a Quality Arizona have been effective at bringing together planning partners from Arizona DOT, MPOs and COGs, plus the business community, state legislature and governor's office to discuss infrastructure vision and needs.
- Longstanding, productive partnerships among Arizona DOT and the rural COGs have been beneficial to conducting effective planning.
- Planning staff interactions vary widely: they are often strong between RPOs and

small MPOs in Arizona and Utah, but not in New Mexico and Colorado. Distances between communities are too great to allow members or staff to attend neighboring planning organization meetings; in addition, local government leaders may be reluctant to discuss or partner on issues outside of their region.

- Utah's RPO model—establishing pilot RPOs within associations of governments that staff MPOs—has been beneficial in providing staff expertise to the fast-growing rural area served by the RPO; local leaders who serve on MPO and RPO policy committees are already familiar with one another by serving together on the AOGs' multi-county, region-wide board.
- Freight is a significant issue necessitating partnerships among multiple state agencies and DOT offices, as well as RPOs, MPOs and local governments, since freight-sheds overlap planning boundaries and assets such as rail lines and highways are corridors that cross multiple regions. But freight transportation can also provide economic opportunities for rural regions.
- Other issues of mutual concern that may necessitate some level of collaboration on planning issues include land use and transportation planning, access management along corridors, climate change and environmental impacts.

Four Corners Transportation Forum Concluding Remarks

Throughout the 2009 Four Corners Rural Transportation Forum, the participants shared barriers and successful practices with RPO and DOT planning staff from other states. The interaction allowed attendees to identify lessons that they can implement in their own regions. Actions that group members indicated they would take include communicating issues to local government leaders, and connecting transportation to related issues such as energy efficiency, environment, safe communities, and land use. Participants determined that the event was useful for learning actionable information, and would welcome future meetings that maintained the discussion-oriented nature of the 2009 forum and included a few more planners from RPOs, DOTs and Tribes from across Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico and Utah.

2009 Four Corners Rural Transportation Forum Attendees

Jennifer Toth, Arizona DOT

James Zumpf, Arizona DOT

Bill Leister, Central Arizona AOG

Chris Fetzer, Northern Arizona COG

Kevin Adam, Arizona's Rural
Transportation Advocacy Council

Dave Barber, Western Arizona COG

George Krawzoff, Colorado DOT

Laura Lewis Marchino, Region 9 EDD of
SW Colorado, Inc.

Lesah Sedillo, Northeast New Mexico RPO

Linda Lanham, South Central New
Mexico RPO

Tony MacRobert, South Central New
Mexico RPO

Cynthia Stoehner, Southwest New
Mexico RPO

Priscilla Lucero, Southwest New Mexico
RPO

Curt Hutchings, Eastern Washington
County RPO (UT)

Emery Polelonema, Six County AOG (UT)

Shawn Seager, Wasatch County RPO (UT)

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**Center for Transportation Advancement
and Regional Development**

400 N. Capitol St, NW, Suite 390 • Washington, DC 20001

202.624.8829 • 202.624.8812 • info@nado.org

www.NADO.org • www.RuralTransportation.org