

SUPPORT RURAL & REGIONAL PRIORITIES IN UPCOMING SURFACE TRANSPORTATION REAUTHORIZATION

ACTION NEEDED:

Support passage of a long term surface transportation reauthorization bill that strengthens rural and regional planning, empowers local decision-making and increases funding for local transportation priorities.

BACKGROUND:

Regional planning surged in the 1960s and was adopted to administer many domestic programs. Transportation was included in this movement, and federal transportation programs included the development of metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) in urbanized areas. Recognizing their value, states started to create additional regional transportation planning organizations (RTPOs), which are designated to serve rural areas outside of those urbanized areas covered by the federal programs.

Currently, over 330 RTPOs exist nationwide, providing essential analysis, guidance, and technical assistance to small, under-resourced rural and small metro jurisdictions. These organizations develop multi-year surface transportation project priority plans and are critical partners in helping local communities identify, apply for, and manage federal and state surface transportation funding—a role made even more apparent by the magnitude of opportunities in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA).

However, unlike MPOs, which are federally mandated and receive dedicated funding through the Metropolitan Planning (PL) program, RTPOs operate with minimal, discretionary federal support.

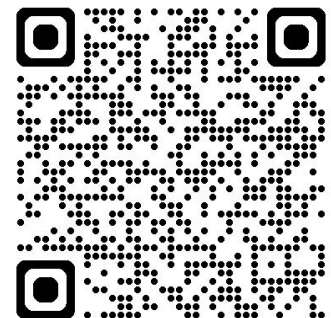
- MPOs receive dedicated funding via the Metropolitan Planning (PL) program to support their transportation planning work.
- Unlike MPOs, rural RTPOs do not receive **any** dedicated funding. RTPOs are largely reliant on State DOTs for planning funds, which limits their autonomy and technical capacity.
- The minimal funds RTPOs receive (often a portion of SPR or STBG funds) are at the State's discretion.

NATIONALLY, MORE THAN 330 RTPOs COORDINATE AND PRIORITIZE TRANSPORTATION PROJECTS FOR SMALLER, UNDER-RESOURCED RURAL AND SMALL METRO REGIONS

UNLIKE MPOs, RTPOs OPERATE WITH MINIMAL DISCRETIONARY FEDERAL SUPPORT, LIMITING IMPACT IN RURAL AMERICA

DEDICATED FUNDING FOR RTPOs WILL HELP BUILD AND SUSTAIN THE CAPACITY TO DELIVER RURAL AMERICA'S TRANSPORTATION NEEDS

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This funding disparity directly undermines RTPOs' ability to sustain the necessary capacity for comprehensive regional planning and technical assistance. Continuing this funding imbalance risks slowing project delivery and reducing Rural America's ability to adequately access federal transportation investment. Therefore, dedicated, stable federal funding is essential to enable RTPOs to fully deliver on their mandate.

NADO urges Congress to consider the following reauthorization recommendations:

- **Create a Dedicated Funding Source for RTPOs:** Mirroring the successful Metropolitan Planning funding that supports transportation planning in metropolitan areas, Congress should provide RTPOs with a minimum of \$300,000 annually to help build and sustain the capacity to provide quality support for underserved non-metropolitan areas of states and local jurisdictions. This investment will provide a foundation of support in delivering on Rural America's transportation needs.
- **Strengthen the Regional Role in Project Selection:** Elevate state "consultation" requirements with MPOs and RTPOs to "cooperation," to ensure that these local planning entities are true partners in transportation decision-making, improving accountability and aligning federal transportation investments with local needs.
- **Address Financial Barriers for Small Communities:** Reduce or eliminate local match requirements for rural communities (under 50,000 population) and for small MPOs (50,000 to 200,000 population), acknowledging that these communities are often resource-challenged. Specifically, reductions in local match are beneficial within the Section 5311 Rural Transit Program, the Safe Streets for All Program, the Rural Surface Transportation Grant Program, and the State Planning and Research Program.
- **Streamline Discretionary Grants:** Simplify and shorten discretionary grant application processes to make them less burdensome and more accessible to small metro and rural communities. Additionally, reducing the minimum award (floor) amounts for federal funding programs would allow more small-scale projects to benefit.
- **Increase and Sustain Investment in Rural Programs:** Create and retain rural set-asides for discretionary transportation programs. In particular, retain the current 50% rural set-aside for the BUILD program, and continue to uphold the 100% federal share (no match) investment level. Create similar guidelines for other transportation programs to ensure that rural communities benefit.

For further information, contact Mike Matthews at (202) 807-6296 or mmatthews@nado.org.