

# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS REGARDING METROPOLITAN PLANNING ORGANIZATIONS

## What is a Metropolitan Planning Organization?

A [metropolitan planning organization \(MPO\)](#) is a federally mandated and federally funded [transportation](#) policy-making organization in the [United States](#) that is made up of representatives from local [government](#) and governmental transportation authorities. There are over 400 MPOs.

## Why were MPOs created?

MPOs were created to ensure regional cooperation in transportation planning. MPOs were introduced by the [Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1962](#), which required the formation of an MPO for any [urbanized area](#) (UZA) with a population greater than 50,000. Federal funding for transportation projects and programs is channeled through this planning process. Congress created MPOs to ensure that existing and future expenditures of governmental funds for transportation projects and programs are based on a continuing, cooperative, and comprehensive ("3-C") planning process. MPOs have been present in metropolitan areas of the United States for more than 50 years, were conceived and have persevered because transportation networks and travel operate at scales larger than any one city or county.

## What is the scope of the metropolitan transportation planning process?

The metropolitan transportation planning process shall be continuous, cooperative, and comprehensive and provide for consideration and implementation of projects, strategies, and services that address the following:

- Economic vitality
- Safety for motorized and non-motorized users
- Increased security of the transportation system
- Increased accessibility and mobility of people and freight
- Protect and enhance the environment, promote energy conservation, improve the quality of life and promote consistency between transportation improvements and planned growth and economic development patterns
- Enhance connectivity between modes for people and freight
- Promote efficient system management and operation
- Emphasize the preservation of the existing transportation system
- Improve the resiliency and reliability of the transportation system and reduce or mitigate stormwater impacts of surface transportation
- Enhance travel and tourism

## What is the governance structure of an MPO?

An MPO includes a variety of committees as well as a professional staff. The **Policy Committee or Board** is the top-level decision-making body for the planning organization and is typically comprised of elected or appointed officials from local governments, state officials like the state Department of Transportation, representatives of different transportation modes, and may include non-voting members.

MPOs also establish a **Technical Committee** to act as an advisory body to the Policy Board for transportation issues that are technical in nature. The Technical Committee interacts with the MPO's

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professional staff on matters related to planning, analysis tasks and projects. Through this work, the Technical Committee develops recommendations on projects, programs and plans for Policy Board consideration.

Other optional committees may be formed for the long-term or to work on a current task or plan such as a Freight Advisory Committee or a Non-motorized Committee.

### **How are Policy Board members selected?**

With only few exceptions nationwide, MPO Policy Board members are not elected directly by citizens. Rather, a Policy Board member is an elected or appointed official of one the MPO's constituent local jurisdictions. Thus, the Policy Board member has legal authority to speak and act on behalf of that jurisdiction in the MPO setting. Resolutions specifically giving the mayors that authority will be part of the package that is sent to the Governor when designation of the MPO is requested.

The number of seats on each MPO governing board is established during the designation of a newly formed MPO. After initial designation, each MPO may adopt bylaws that change the number of seats, which may require a new designation process.

### **How is the Metropolitan Planning Area (MPA) Boundary chosen?**

The MPA boundary must be included in the Operating Agreement that is submitted to the Governor for designation as an MPO in accordance with [USC 23 Sec 134\(e\)](#) and [23 CFR 450.312](#):

- The boundaries of a MPA shall be determined by agreement between the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) and the Governor.
- Each MPA shall encompass at least the existing urbanized area and the contiguous area expected to become urbanized within a 20-year forecast period, as defined by the Census Bureau. Thus, the MPA boundary shall, as a minimum, cover the UZA (Urbanized Area) and the contiguous geographic area likely to become urbanized within the 20-year forecast period of the Metropolitan Transportation Plan.
- The MPA boundary should be established to reflect the most comprehensive boundary to foster an effective planning process that ensures connectivity between modes, reduces access disadvantages experienced by modal systems, and promotes efficient overall transportation investment strategies.
- The boundaries of the MPA shall include at least the boundaries of air quality nonattainment or maintenance areas, except as otherwise provided by agreement between the MPO and Governor. The Matsu Valley's urban area (officially called the Wasilla—Knik-Fairview—North Lakes urban area), as defined by the Census Bureau, does not currently contain either of these areas of air quality concern.
- Approval of MPA boundaries by the FHWA or the FTA is not required. However, MPA boundary maps must be submitted to the FHWA and the FTA after their approval by the MPO and the Governor.

### **What defines the Urbanized Area and who develops the base map of the Urbanized area?**

The Census Bureau's urban areas represent densely developed territory, and encompass residential, commercial and other non-residential urban land uses. The boundaries of this urban footprint have been defined using measures based primarily on population counts and residential population density. The proposed criteria for defining urban areas was published in the Federal Register on February 19, 2021.

Comments were received and addressed and the Census Bureau published [the Final Urban Area Criteria for the 2020 Census](#) on March 24, 2022. The reason that the Urban Area contains non-contiguous

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territory is because the criteria allows inclusion of noncontiguous territory via *hops* and *jumps*. The maximum hop distance is .5 miles, and the maximum jump distance is 1.5 miles, and no hops are allowed after a jump. Intervening low density blocks are not included in the urban area.

### What is the core work of an MPO?

The MPO develops four main plans but may also develop other modal plans such as a freight plan or active transportation plan:

1. **Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP):** Outlines the Metropolitan Planning Organization's (MPO) transportation planning activities. It is a planning document that identifies and describes the MPO's budget, planning activities, studies, and technical support expected to be undertaken in a two-year period.
2. **Public Participation Plan (PPP):** A guiding document that outlines the goals, strategies, and implementation plan for public involvement in the development of MPO plans, programs, and policies, including the MTP and TIP.
3. **Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP):** A multi-modal transportation plan that addresses a 20-year planning horizon that the MPO develops, adopts and updates every five years. It contains a fiscally-constrained list of priorities for the next 20 years.
4. **Transportation Improvement Program (TIP):** A prioritized listing/program of transportation projects covering a four-year period that is developed, adopted, and implemented by the MPO in coordination with the MTP. Projects within the TIP must also appear in the MTP. These are the projects/programs/services that are implemented as a result of the planning process of the MTP.

### Where does the funding come from for the capital projects that will be implemented from the TIP?

The primary source of funding for capital projects and programs for highways comes from [the Surface Transportation Block Grant Program](#) (STBG). The STBG promotes flexibility in state and local transportation decisions and provides flexible funding to best meet local needs. Typical projects preserve and improve the conditions and performance of roads, bridges, tunnels on public roads, pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure, and transit capital projects. [The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act](#) (IIJA) also provides several other non-programmatic grant opportunities to MPOs. In addition, other Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and Federal Transit Administration (FTA) programs may provide additional sources of funding.

### How is Matsu Valley Planning for Transportation (MVP), the proposed MPO for the urbanized area, funded?

The [Metropolitan Planning Program](#) establishes a cooperative, continuous, and comprehensive framework for making transportation investment decisions in metropolitan areas. Through this federal program, MVP, when designated, should expect to receive approximately \$400,000-600,000 annually to conduct the planning process. This requires a 9.03% non-federal share which is anticipated to be paid through membership dues of the Policy Board member jurisdictions.