



REGIONAL SOLICITATION EVALUATION

NATIONAL METROPOLITAN PLANNING ORGANIZATION (MPO) PEER REVIEW

Understanding and Background

Decision-making for Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) funding programming models is driven by the need to balance regional and subregional priorities, distribute resources across the MPO planning area, and align projects with long-term regional goals. This document summarizes a peer review exercise that examined the funding structures and processes of MPOs across the country to inform the benefits, challenges and tradeoffs associated with various structures.

The peer review included two phases: a desktop analysis phase focused on gathering a high-level inventory of strategies employed by MPOs to distribute federal funds, and an interview phase focused on follow-up interviews with select peer MPOs to gain deeper insights and inform recommendations of the overall regional solicitation process.

Desktop Analysis

Methodology

The first step involved identifying a pool of peer Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) for desktop analysis. The candidates include those identified in past Met Council peer reviews for the Regional Solicitation, along with others representing similar sized metropolitan areas (see Table 1).

A matrix was then developed to document the overarching structures that peer MPOs employed in the distribution of federal funds. This matrix extended the findings from the previous Regional Solicitation Before and After Study, Phase 2, offering qualitative assessment of the role of regional planning, geographical distribution, and the processes surrounding calls for projects. The matrix is included as a separate attachment.

Table 1: Selected Peers for Desktop Analysis

	MPO	Location
1	North Carolina Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization (CAMPO)	Raleigh, NC
2	Denver Regional Council of Governments (DRCOG)	Denver, CO
3	Metro Portland	Portland, OR
4	Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC)	San Francisco, CA
5	Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG)	Detroit, MI
6	New York Metropolitan Transportation Commission (NYMTC)	New York, NY
7	North Central Texas Council of Governments (NCTCOG)	Dallas, TX
8	East-West Gateway Council of Governments (EWG COG)	St. Louis, MO
9	Baltimore Metropolitan Council (BALTOMETRO)	Baltimore, MD
10	Puget Sound Regional Council (PSRC)	Seattle, WA
11	Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning	Chicago, IL
12	Mid-America Regional Council	Kansas City, MO
13	Ohio-Kentucky-Indiana Regional Council of Governments	Cincinnati, OH
14	Broward MPO	Fort Lauderdale, FL
15	Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission	Columbus, OH
16	Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization	Austin, TX
17	Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission	Philadelphia, PA
18	Atlanta Regional Commission	Atlanta, GA

Desktop Analysis Summary Observations

Scoring/Prioritization Approach

Policy documents for various MPOs frequently revisit the challenge of balancing quantitative assessments and deliberative processes in prioritizing project types aimed at achieving specific outcomes. The distinction between "quantitative" and "deliberative" approaches in the context of project selection and funding allocation by MPOs highlights two fundamentally different methodologies used to assess and prioritize projects.

Quantitative Approach: This methodology leverages objective, measurable criteria to evaluate and rank projects. Metrics might encompass a range of factors, from the anticipated reduction in greenhouse gas emissions and cost-benefit ratios to improvements in traffic flow, public transit ridership increases, and safety enhancements. The strength of this approach lies in its objectivity and transparency, permitting a straightforward comparison of projects through numerical scores based on set criteria. However, its limitation is evident in potentially overlooking broader project impacts or strategic values, particularly those benefits that defy easy quantification, such as fostering community cohesion or promoting long-term environmental sustainability.

Deliberative Approach: Contrasting with the quantitative method, the deliberative approach prioritizes stakeholder discussions, consensus-building, and expert judgment in the decision-making matrix. It champions the diverse knowledge, experiences, and viewpoints of regional partners, local communities, and other stakeholders, employing debates and negotiations to

determine project prioritization and funding. Recognizing that not all project benefits and impacts are quantifiable, this method underscores the importance of stakeholder consensus in aligning projects with overarching regional objectives and community needs.

By integrating quantitative metrics with deliberative processes, MPOs can ensure project selection is not only grounded in measurable benefits but also in alignment with broader regional ambitions.

The review of various methodologies shows an effort to balance these elements, mitigating the risk of undue influence by dominant committee members while acknowledging the constraints of a purely quantitative framework. For instance, the Atlanta MPO's adoption of a three-tiered process delineates technical evaluation from the ultimate decision-making, a practice mirrored in other MPOs. This interplay warrants further exploration in subsequent interviews.

Funding Process

The "dual-model" approach to funding is employed by several MPOs, where a portion of funds is provided for regional projects meeting specific outcomes, and another portion is distributed to subregions for more localized project recommendations to the MPO Board for approval. About one-third of peer entities employ this model in various forms. The approach is defined by several critical decisions:

- Determining the allocation between regional and subregional funding.
- Allocating funds within each subregion, usually based on formulas incorporating population, employment, vehicle miles traveled, or other relevant metrics.
- Evaluating and prioritizing projects, typically through a standardized application or scoring method established by the MPO, with subregions conducting the analysis and making funding recommendations back to the MPO Board.

In all cases, the decision-making and funding allocation within this model are guided by the MPO to comply with federal requirements associated with regional funding sources.

Regionally Identified Projects

Many MPOs employ a process that targets funds for specific types of projects. This strategy spans from narrowly to broadly defined categories, including but not limited to travel demand management (TDM) programs and initiatives aimed at enhancing bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure. This tailored approach allows MPOs to direct funding with precision, ensuring that priority areas such as equity, active transportation, and rural development receive the necessary resources.

A notable example of this practice is the Puget Sound Regional Council (PSRC) in Seattle, which has implemented set-aside programs specifically designed to support equity initiatives and projects in rural corridors and centers. Such targeted funding mechanisms often lead to a streamlined evaluation process.

The strategic adoption of set-asides facilitates focused investment in areas deemed critical by regional stakeholders, potentially simplifying the review and approval processes by establishing clear, dedicated funding streams for these priorities. However, the applicability and effectiveness of set-asides within the Transportation Advisory Board's (TAB) framework requires

further examination, with considerations including the compatibility with existing priorities and the availability of funding to support such designated allocations.

Conclusions

The desktop analysis conducted as part of the Metropolitan Council's Regional Solicitation Evaluation revealed a diverse range of strategies employed by peer MPOs for distributing federal transportation funds. The findings highlighted the balance between quantitative and deliberative approaches in project scoring and prioritization, alongside innovative models like the dual-model approach and targeted set-aside programs.

The Transportation Advisory Board's (TAB) current procedure stands out among peers for its sophistication and transparency. This complexity might pose challenges for some stakeholders, and create limitations for achieving overarching goals, but the existing methodology does offer a justifiable approach to project selection, seeking alignment with regional objectives and prioritization studies, efforts, and networks.

Recommendations for Interview Phase

The selection of MPOs for the interview phase was guided by several key factors:

Relevance to the Metropolitan Council's Challenges: MPOs were chosen based on their experience in managing issues similar to those faced by the Metropolitan Council. This includes balancing urban and rural needs, addressing equity considerations, and integrating regional planning goals with fund distribution strategies.

Diversity of Approaches: To ensure a comprehensive understanding, MPOs representing a range of fund distribution models were selected. These included centralized, decentralized, and hybrid approaches, providing a broad perspective on how different regions tackle similar challenges.

Based on these criteria, the following MPOs were selected for follow-up discussions primarily to explore the specific process elements listed below.

- **Denver Regional Council of Governments (DRCOG):** Adoption of the dual-model process, and a shift towards a more qualitative approach in application scoring.
- **San Francisco Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC):** Streamlined application process refined over several recent calls for projects.
- **Seattle Puget Sound Regional Council (PSRC):** Set-aside programs, particularly for equity and rural areas, implementing targeted funding streams to address unique regional needs.
- **Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC):** Three-step project evaluation process, which offers a framework for integrating different project evaluation methodologies.
- **Columbus Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission (MORPC):** Seen as a similar region to Twin Cities.
- **Kansas City Mid-America Regional Council (MARC):** Seen as similar region to Twin Cities.

Peer Interviews

This section provides an overview of the interview phase peer review, including key insights into the strategies the selected MPOs employ to balance regional objectives with local needs, integrate equity considerations, and ensure transparency in their processes.

These findings serve as a preliminary summary, offering a broad understanding of the processes and approaches observed. More detailed takeaways and in-depth analysis will be incorporated as the regional solicitation project progresses into subsequent phases, where further specificity and alignment with the Metropolitan Council's strategic goals will be explored.

Methodology

Interview Process

The interviews were conducted between May 15, 2024, and June 7, 2024. Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes and was conducted via video conference to facilitate detailed discussions. The interview teams included representatives from the Metropolitan Council and consultants from the project team, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of each MPO's processes.

Interview Focus Areas:

- **Governance and Decision-Making:** Discussions centered on how decisions regarding federal fund distribution are made within each MPO, with a particular focus on the roles of various stakeholders in the process.
- **Funding Distribution Methods:** MPOs were asked to describe their approaches in allocating federal funds across different categories and geographic areas, including any specific methodologies or criteria used.
- **Project Evaluation Criteria:** The interviews sought to uncover the metrics and processes employed by each MPO to evaluate and prioritize projects for funding.
- **Stakeholder Engagement:** The extent to which local jurisdictions and other stakeholders are involved in the decision-making process was a key area of interest, particularly in terms of ensuring transparency and buy-in.

Each interview was documented, including through a recording available for further review. Common themes, best practices, and unique approaches that could be applied to the Metropolitan Council's context are summarized here. Additional detail will be incorporated to provide context for decisions related to solicitation structure and evaluation process in future Regional Solicitation Evaluation phases.

Summary of Findings

The interview phase of the peer review revealed a diverse range of strategies employed by MPOs to manage federal fund distribution. These strategies reflect the unique challenges and priorities of each region, providing valuable insights into how different governance models, solicitation structures, and evaluation processes can be effectively implemented.



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Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC)

Structure: Centralized solicitation structure

Approach: ARC (Atlanta) uses a centralized solicitation process, where all projects undergo a competitive application process with multiple evaluation phases. Projects are initially screened for eligibility, followed by a detailed assessment based on criteria such as mobility, safety, and equity. In the initial screening, ARC staff apply a set of policy filters based on project type. For example, roads that are four or more lanes must include a median to adhere to the Regional Safety Strategy and state DOT standards. Other policy filters are more general, including a requirement that all projects must be federal aid eligible and originate from a locally adopted plan. ARC places a strong emphasis on transparency, providing applicants with substantial lead time and feedback to ensure that their proposals align with regional priorities.

Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission (MORPC)

Structure: Structured with clear activity categories

Approach: MORPC (Columbus) employs a structured approach to fund distribution, categorizing applications into specific activity types such as roadway, system preservation, and bike/pedestrian projects. The process includes early feedback for applicants, allowing them to refine their proposals before final submission. MORPC combines both qualitative and quantitative criteria in its evaluations, with a focus on maintaining consistency and transparency throughout the process. This structured approach supports effective regional coordination while allowing for flexibility in project selection.

Mid-America Regional Council (MARC)

Structure: Two-step application process

Approach: MARC (Kansas City)'s fund distribution process is characterized by a two-step application approach. The first step involves assessing how well proposed projects align with regional goals, while the second step focuses on a detailed technical evaluation, including cost-effectiveness and project readiness. MARC emphasizes strong communication with local jurisdictions throughout the process, ensuring that both qualitative and quantitative criteria are balanced to meet both local and regional needs. This collaborative approach fosters strong stakeholder engagement and ensures that selected projects align with broader regional objectives.

Denver Regional Council of Governments (DRCOG)

Structure: Decentralized with sub-regional forums

Approach: DRCOG (Denver)'s fund distribution process is characterized by a dual-model structure, where 20% of funds are allocated to regionally selected projects and 80% to sub-regionally selected projects. The sub-regional forums, which consist of geographically defined groups of local agencies, are responsible for prioritizing projects within their areas. The process involves a combination of technical scoring and local agency recommendations, ensuring that the projects align with DRCOG's broader regional goals. This structure fosters strong local engagement while maintaining regional coherence.

Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC)

Structure: Hybrid with One Bay Area Grant program



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Approach: MTC (San Francisco)'s One Bay Area Grant program exemplifies a hybrid fund distribution model, where 50% of the funds are allocated to regionally selected projects and 50% to sub-regionally selected projects. Existing agencies organized around areas of the region manage the local share, prioritizing projects that align with MTC's regional objectives, such as equity, sustainability, and transit-oriented development. MTC ensures that these projects meet established regional performance measures, balancing local flexibility with regional oversight.

Puget Sound Regional Council (PSRC)

Structure: Hybrid with regional/county-level balance

Approach: PSRC (Seattle)'s fund distribution process is structured to balance regional and local priorities. Funds are allocated based on population, with resources distributed between regionally and sub-regionally selected projects. PSRC employs specific set-asides for non-motorized transportation and preservation projects, ensuring that these areas receive consistent funding. The evaluation criteria are closely aligned with the Vision 2050 plan, emphasizing safety, climate resilience, equity, and housing. This approach ensures that regional goals are met while addressing specific local needs.

Key Takeaways from Peer Review and Evaluation

The peer review, along with insights from the desktop analysis and interviews, uncovered a range of approaches that MPOs use to manage their regional solicitation processes. These observations provide a comprehensive understanding of how MPOs balance regional and local priorities, select projects, and apply evaluation criteria.

Multi-Step Application Processes with Qualitative and Quantitative Evaluations:

ARC (Atlanta) and MORPC (Columbus) use multi-step application processes blending both qualitative and quantitative evaluation methods. In DRCOG's (Denver) process, qualitative elements, such as narrative responses on regional impact and alignment with equity considerations, are used alongside quantitative data, allowing project sponsors to make a more comprehensive case beyond just technical criteria. Those scoring the applications are given a rubric to score qualitative responses on a scale of "low-medium-high." This blend of evaluation methods can offer applicants a clearer way to demonstrate their project's alignment with regional goals and readiness ..

Importance of Clear Criteria and "Guardrails":

MPOs such as ARC (Atlanta) and MORPC (Columbus) emphasize the importance of clear criteria and established "guardrails" to guide project selection. These frameworks help manage the distribution of funds and ensure that decisions align with established regional policies. Examples include setting funding targets, creating set-asides, and imposing limitations on specific project types. Such structured approaches could provide the Metropolitan Council with effective tools to manage expectations and outcomes in its fund distribution process.

Sub-Regional Structures and Localized Decision-Making:

DRCOG (Denver) and PSRC (Seattle) employ sub-regional structures that enable localized decision-making within a broader regional framework. These models allow local needs to be addressed while maintaining alignment with regional objectives. Mechanisms like sub-regional forums or county-based committees are commonly used, though the effectiveness of these structures can vary depending on the capacity of different areas to participate effectively.

Balance Between Regional Oversight and Local Flexibility:

MTC (San Francisco) and PSRC (Seattle) demonstrate a hybrid approach that balances regional oversight with local flexibility. In these models, local jurisdictions can prioritize projects that meet their specific needs, while regional entities ensure alignment with overarching goals such as equity, sustainability, and safety. This balance helps reduce conflicts across different modes and jurisdictions by reflecting varying degrees of influence from both regional and local levels.

Emphasis on Equity and Targeted Funding Streams:

Equity considerations are central to the processes of several MPOs, including MTC (San Francisco) and PSRC (Seattle). These organizations have developed targeted funding streams and set-asides to ensure that specific populations or geographic areas receive attention. These approaches support broader social goals, particularly in addressing disparities within the transportation network.

Centralized vs. Decentralized Decision-Making:

The decision-making structures observed among the peer MPOs range from centralized models, such as ARC's (Atlanta), where decision-making is more consolidated, to decentralized models like DRCOG's (Denver), where sub-regional entities play a significant role. Each model presents unique advantages and challenges, particularly in how projects are selected and aligned with broader regional goals. The Metropolitan Council could consider these models when evaluating its own structure, balancing the need for regional control with the benefits of local autonomy.

Integrating Land Use and Complete Streets Policies into Regional Project Prioritization

Some MPOs are placing greater emphasis on incorporating land use and regional policies into their solicitation processes. For example, Seattle's PSRC prioritizes projects located within regional centers and corridors, aligning funding with broader land-use strategies. Similarly, DRCOG (Denver) considers urban centers, pedestrian focus areas, and freight focus areas in its scoring criteria. In addition, several MPOs apply regional policies such as Complete Streets, creating frameworks that elevate projects aligned with multi-modal, safety, and sustainability goals.

Conclusion

The interview phase of the Metropolitan Council's peer review has offered valuable insights into how other Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) manage the distribution of federal transportation funds. The findings highlight a range of approaches, from decentralized models with strong local engagement to centralized structures with detailed evaluation processes. Each MPO's strategy reflects its unique regional priorities, governance structures, and objectives, providing a diverse set of practices that can inform the Council's ongoing efforts.

Key themes that emerged include, the integration of equity into funding decisions, the balance between regional oversight and local autonomy, and the importance of clear, structured evaluation criteria. These themes are crucial as the Metropolitan Council looks to refine its own processes to better align with its strategic goals.

As the regional solicitation evaluation moves into more detailed phases, the insights gained from this peer review will serve as a foundation for developing more specific recommendations



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and actions. The Council will continue to build on these findings, ensuring that its fund distribution strategies are responsive to the region's evolving needs and long-term goals.