

**Environmental Justice and Transportation Equity:
*A Review of Metropolitan Planning Organizations***

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ABSTRACT

Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) are the conduit through which billions of federal and state transportation dollars are funneled annually for regional transportation facilities. MPO transportation investments are guided by regional transportation plans focusing on short and long term improvement needs. Because transportation investments shape land use patterns, decisions by MPOs have important implications for regional land use patterns and, by implication, social and economic opportunity. For their part, MPO decisions are made by boards whose composition vary widely across the nation. They are not generally elected to serve on the MPO, however, and there are few federal requirements affecting board voting and representation. Questions arise about the potential for MPO decisions to be biased, favoring certain investments beneficial to particular metropolitan areas interests at the expense of others - with concern being expressed over whether these organizations adequately represent diverse social and economic constituencies. This paper reviews MPOs generally, and then examines social equity issues from the perspective of transportation planning actions and political representation. Particular attention is given to the variation in MPO voting structures, and transportation equity/planning activities undertaken by 50 large MPOs.

INTRODUCTION

Surface transportation policies at the local, regional, state, and national levels have a direct impact on urban land use and development patterns. The types of transportation facilities and services in which public funds are invested provide varying levels of access to meet basic social and economic needs. The way communities develop land dictates the need for certain types of transportation, and on the other hand, the transportation options in which communities invest influence patterns of urban development.

While many lament the trend toward “suburban sprawl” as unaesthetic or damaging to the environment, those who support social equity should also be concerned about this trend. Substantial investment in highway development and other transportation programs that encourage private automobile use has encouraged and supported low-density developments that extend increasingly farther and farther from the central city and to residential and commercial areas that are increasingly spread out—edgeless cities.¹ In addition to being costly to state and local governments, transportation policies that encourage these growth patterns play a substantial

role in producing some indirect, negative social and economic effects, including perpetuating residential segregation and exacerbating the inability of minorities to access entry-level employment, which is increasingly found in suburban areas. Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) are well suited to provide leadership in the areas of metropolitan development and civil rights, assuming they can achieve increased levels of political and legal status.

The federal role in transportation expanded substantially during the second half of the twentieth century. The interstate highway program of the 1950s was followed by an ambitious mass transit initiative during the 1960s and 1970s. As federally supported large central city projects, federal programs included requirements for project review at the metropolitan level. MPOs were established to play a central role in regional transportation planning and Federal transportation laws created and heavily funded these regional planning bodies to coordinate federal transportation programs. During the final decade of the twentieth century, MPOs assumed responsibilities beyond transportation planning with one of the new planning requirements being social equity, also known as environmental justice, to be included as provisions of regional plans.

Two ways to evaluate MPOs in terms of the importance they place on social or environmental equity is to examine the products of their planning activities and also the representativeness of their policy makers. This paper identifies the extent to which large MPOs incorporate environmental justice concerns into their planning processes. Three dimensions of this issue are reviewed: 1) efforts targeted at assessing the fairness of planning outcomes and promotion of social equity, 2) citizen participation in MPO processes, and 3) analysis of the extent to which MPO boards under-represent social, economic, ethnic/racial groups. The paper relies on existing research for background on MPO structure and responsibilities and then presents results of a recent survey to examine types of equity planning conducted by MPOs, forms of public participation efforts, as well as geographic representation of voting board members.

There is considerable potential for MPOs to efficiently and effectively confront questions of equity in and around the urban cores of metropolitan areas. The structure of MPOs is such that political and geographic fragmentation can be reduced, eroding the potential for continued housing market segregation, economic and social segregation in schools, and increasing

suburban affluence at the expense of central city infrastructure and other public services (Powell and Graham 2002). One challenge for MPOs is in coordinating local government competition while at the same time maintaining standards of fairness and equity relative to transportation investments.

Along with acknowledging the significant impacts their decisions have on the built environment, many MPOs have attempted to evaluate their actions in light of Executive Order 12898. Now ten years after being issued by President Bill Clinton, the question is whether MPOs have undertaken actions consistent with the mandate. Environmental justice and transportation equity analyses are examples of such actions. While scores of equity analyses were conducted during the 1970s, the practice was relatively absent until re-emerging in the late 1990s along with the rising popularity of geographic information systems (GIS) technology (see Sanchez 1998).

Overview of MPO Structure and Responsibilities

ISTEA made MPOs primarily responsible for planning and allocating transportation funding in metropolitan areas by providing funds directly to them. Although MPOs have been in existence since the 1950s, generally operating either as a subdivision of State departments of transportation (DOTs) or as a function of a regional council of governments (COGs), ISTEA and the U.S. Department of Transportation's implementing regulations made them more influential and gave them uniform functions and responsibilities. ISTEA also broadened the membership of the policy-setting boards of MPOs governing large areas, requiring that they include representatives from local governments in the region, agencies operating major transportation systems, and State officials.

ISTEA and its implementing regulations required MPOs and State planning agencies to develop 20-year regional plans outlining in detail the priorities, policies, and strategies for the region's transportation system. MPOs were also required to prepare, with community involvement, a Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) listing the transportation projects that would be undertaken within three years.

While State DOTs control the majority of overall transportation planning decisions, MPOs play an important role in shaping urban transportation policies that affect the major concentrations of population within states which also include significant numbers of minorities and low-income individuals. Both of these agencies can play an increasingly important role in

promoting social equity through the broad view of social inclusion¹. Some argue that transportation service provision; the consequences of interaction between land use and transportation decisions, and issues of spatial equity are effectively addressed on a regional basis and at appropriate stages in the planning process. To be effective, this requires balancing the roles of state, regional, and local agencies planning agencies through a coordination mechanism that does not currently exist.

ISTEA and TEA-21 established planning criteria for MPOs to consider as they review their transportation programs. These criteria went beyond specific transportation elements to include a wide range of issues where transportation projects affect other aspects of metropolitan development. The Constrained Long Range Plan (CLRP) is expected to show compliance with EPA air quality standards, consider implications of transportation projects on air quality and land use, foster economic and community development, and be sensitive to equity issues. Except for the air quality requirement, the guidance for meeting the criteria for the remaining list of policy concerns is less defined.

Addressing Equity: Environmental Justice and Transportation Planning

The issue of equity within metropolitan transportation planning processes is primarily being addressed through the environmental justice component of MPO programs. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and President Clinton's 1994 Executive Order 12898 established environmental justice as a federal policy with Clinton's order stating that "each Federal agency shall make achieving environmental justice part of its mission by identifying and addressing, as appropriate, disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of its programs, policies, and activities on minority populations and low-income populations".

Both the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) issued Environmental Justice Orders (USDOT Order 5610.2 and FHWA Order 6640.23) in 1997 and 1998 respectively. These Orders described how environmental justice elements can be incorporated into existing federal programs. The USDOT cited three core principles of environmental justice that can be used for analysis and decision-making including both procedural and substantive elements. They are:

¹ The English government defines social exclusion as "a shorthand term for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown" (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, Social Exclusion Unit, United Kingdom, n.d.).

1. “To avoid, minimize, or mitigate disproportionately high and adverse human health and environmental effects, including social and economic effects, on minority populations and low-income populations;
2. To ensure the full and fair participation by all potentially affected communities in the transportation decision-making process;
3. To prevent the denial of, reduction in, or significant delay in the receipt of benefits by minority and low income populations” (USDOT 2000, p. ii).

Three issues constitute the core of equity and environmental justice issues for MPOs. The first relates to the more formal political processes used by MPOs. Specifically, they concern the formal membership and voting processes. The second concerns the ISTEA/TEA-21 requirement for public participation in the MPO planning processes. Finally, the third equity issue concerns how the specific groups are served or underserved by the transportation programs. The remainder of this paper addresses these issues.

Fostering Citizen Involvement

ISTEA required greater citizen involvement in the MPO process and MPOs were expected to ensure increased and formal opportunities for timely and effective citizen involvement in development of the CLRP, TIP and other planning activities. In 1995, an ACIR study reported that more MPOs were making efforts to meet this requirement with seventy-eight percent of MPOs reporting various efforts to encourage citizen involvement. The report concluded that there were more opportunities for involvement available to citizens, more staff available to support these processes, development of new involvement techniques, a sense that MPOs were listening, and a feeling that this involvement would make a difference in planning processes (ACIR 1995). A follow-on 1997 ACIR study noted improvements but “that much work apparently remains to be done” (ACIR 1997).

Goetz and his colleagues at the University of Denver again confirmed the observation that MPOs were making progress in this area in a 2000 study. Their review of four MPOs in large metropolitan areas reported that the MPOs felt most successful about their citizen involvement activities. Each had extensive citizen involvement programs and felt that this

contributed to their planning efforts. Involvement early in the process seemed particularly valuable because it surfaced potentially difficult conflicts and provided time to head off litigation and delay (GAO 2002, McDowell 1999, Goldman and Deakin 2000). MPOs supported the citizen processes, but did want greater flexibility in the FHWA requirements (GAO 2002).

At the same time, it is not entirely clear that citizen involvement represents a deeply or enthusiastically held MPO value. On balance, Gage and McDowell found that at best, the MPOs directors rated their efforts as “slightly ineffective” (Gage and McDowell 1995). AASHTO and their member States have been critical of participation procedures because they seem to serve more as a “lightning rod” for controversial projects. They bring out those with strong opposition on a one-issue basis, but do not provide more continually engaged public (Goldman and Deakin 2000).

Creating citizen participation places heavy demands on MPOs capability. Traditionally, they have not invested a great deal of energy in this area. They had to find new ways to engage the public when they did not have the resources or techniques to do so. They needed to quickly learn how to involve diverse and hard to reach citizens. They confronted the problem every citizen outreach effort faces of involving people in issues beyond the single one that they usually oppose or support intensely (GAO 2002).

While McDowell saw continuing challenges, he also found evidence of progress: “Membership has expanded, consensus-building processes have been enhanced, non-traditional participants have been recruited, special workgroups and task forces have been established to explore new issue areas, new advisory councils have been set up, and weighted voting has been introduced” (McDowell 1999). MPOs, particularly in large metropolitan areas with substantial technical capability, have taken advantage of internet technologies to enhance contact with citizens outside of normal political processes. These MPOs regularly post reports, schedules of meetings, committee membership, and other materials related to their planning activities.

MPOs are increasingly performing distributional analysis to assess the incidence of costs and benefits by location and by demographic group. In addition to identifying and measuring direct impacts from policy interventions, these analyses are concerned with direct effects such as how individuals or groups adapt to interventions – such as transportation improvements. These adaptations can take the form of physical or psychological responses (such as health) as well as economic responses (such as residential relocation) and do not occur randomly within

metropolitan regions. Distributional analyses generally identify the outcomes of decision-making processes, but unfortunately like a broader range of social impact analyses, they do not identify weaknesses or biases in the system that produced such outcomes.

MPO Political Participation and Voting Bias

Several equity issues arise from the structural arrangements of membership and voting. First, since most MPOs follow the structural format of COGs, each political jurisdiction normally receives one vote. Citing the principal of one-person, one-vote, larger jurisdictions may consider themselves unfairly represented. At the same time, the smaller jurisdictions prefer the one-jurisdiction, one-vote procedure as a way to prevent larger jurisdictions, often in the urban center, from dominating planning recommendations and decisions.

Federal transportation laws do not require an organizational or vote structure that prevents bias in allocating transportation investments. Lewis and Sprague (1997) identified four major types of MPOs, each with unique voting arrangements. The most prevalent type is the COG. COGs are constituted as cooperative organizations of the local governments in a region. Typically, each participating local government in the region appoints a representative to the COG board where they serve as a fully-voting member, regardless of the size of the local government they represent.

As most MPO boards are either COG boards or adjuncts to COGs, MPO voting is usually non-proportional or unweighted based on population. This is because many MPO governing boards, especially COG-based ones, are apportioned on a one-government, one-vote basis. This gives each jurisdiction, including small suburban municipalities, as much say in MPO policy-making and allocation as central cities. Given the new challenges facing MPOs, and especially their charge for addressing regional needs explicitly, this creates tension among competing jurisdictions (Francois 1995). As Lewis observed, however, in very few cases is the MPO voting structure apportioned directly on the basis of population (Lewis and Sprague 1997, Lewis 1998). Lewis argued that metropolitan bodies such as COGs and MPOs have been structured “toward consensus, with more concern toward representing all local governments on regional boards than on establishing equitable criteria for the representation of the region’s population. This has led to serious problems of mal-apportionment in many regional organizations, including MPOs” (Lewis 1998).

As MPOs took on more regional decision-making authority (particularly in the area of allocating funds), issues of representation emerged. Lewis and Sprague reviewed the problematic nature of various voting mechanisms in MPOs and the potential for legal challenges resulting from unequal representation embedded in these voting procedures (Lewis and Sprague 1997, Lewis 1998). They reported that MPOs employed a variety of voting approaches: some used one vote per member, while others relied on variations of weighted voting. Their study of California MPOs concluded that “the average California MPO deviates from proportionate representation of its population by about one-third” (Lewis and Sprague 1997).

One approach used to lessen the impact of disproportional representation of smaller jurisdiction, some MPOs allow for weighted voting at the request of any of the member jurisdictions. Weights for board member votes can be set in proportion to the population being represented by the board member. For example, if a metropolitan region has four member jurisdictions with 100,000 persons each, equally weighted votes would account for 25 percent of the overall board vote (assuming full participation). However, if three of the four jurisdictions had 100,000 persons and the fourth had 200,000, then the voting weights would instead be 20 percent for the first three and 40 percent for the fourth. Another method gives jurisdictions additional votes in proportion to population size. In the case of the four jurisdiction example above, the first three jurisdictions would have one vote each and the fourth would have two. This method is weaker in terms of producing proportionality when population sizes varying by irregular and uneven population amounts. Following the practices of many COGs, split votes are avoided whenever possible. Controversial issues are often delayed, and resorting to weighted voting is likewise avoided in order to maintain a collaborative atmosphere among COG members.

The representational issue gets even more complicated because of the hybrid character of MPOs. They are first, a group of local government officials: hence, the concern for equitable representation for each jurisdiction. At the same time, they are also expected to include other transportation partners, often non-voting, such as the state departments of transportation and transit providers. Structural problems abound for MPOs trying to address both the equity issue of representation implied by one-person one-vote assumptions, and the need to involve important partners in the MPO planning process. A U.S. Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR) report (1997) that examined the certification documents completed by MPOs

as required by ISTEA found recurring problems associated with certain structural dimensions. About one-third of the certification reviews identified needed improvements for MPO structural arrangements with reference to board and committee processes. The report pointed out the need for MPO boards and committees to broaden their participation on boards, and policy and technical committees, particularly with state DOTs and other providers of transportation. The ACIR report urged that MPOs allow state district offices to vote a proxy for state DOT headquarters staff and that MPOs move to weighted voting. In addition, the ACIR study identified a continuing need to define the roles and responsibilities of different partners in the MPO processes, particularly in relation to the CLRPs and TIPs. Another structural recommendation of this review recognized the significance of using meetings as one of the key MPO administrative processes and the need to move toward more regular and open meeting processes (ACIR 1997).

The ISTEA/TEA-21 emphasis on multi-modalities, on partnerships with non-traditional partners, and on extensive citizen involvement has given rise to a Constitutional concern over the one-person, one-vote standard for political processes. Lewis identified representation issues that would eventually involve Constitutional questions of one-person, one-vote. The issue became still murkier when new partners were given varying degrees of formal status and voting power on decision-making boards. The inclusion of state DOTs, transit agencies, and other transportation providers into the voting mix only exacerbated the problem of identifying representation plans that would meet legal requirements (Lewis 1998). The problem is both with formal voting inequalities among jurisdictions as well as with the more informal decision making processes. Since most votes are unanimous, the more substantive deliberations occur in the technical committees and among members of the MPO rather than among elected political leaders (Lewis 1998).

Addressing Civil Rights and the Needs of Underserved Populations

The issues of political representation and citizen participation are direct examples of equity issues in the MPO process. ISTEA/TEA-21 also required MPOs to examine how traditionally underrepresented groups were engaged in MPO processes as well in the substantive issues. These policies were incorporated into ISTEA/TEA-21 and therefore, in MPO planning processes. Other, more specific provisions, followed from these general principles. For example,

transportation projects were expected to improve the mobility of the economically disadvantaged through “intermodal connections between people and jobs, goods and markets, and neighborhoods” (Bullard 1996). The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996, "welfare-to-work", and job access/reverse commute programs supported low-income populations to transition into the work place (US DOT 1998, Willis 1997). These initiatives were part the Welfare Reform legislation that created job access programs, which were designed to aid low-income populations in finding and maintaining gainful employment. Many MPOs have produced reports of various forms on “reverse commuting” projects that help individuals in the Welfare Reform program find transportation to and from their place of employment (Blumenberg and Waller 2003, Wolf and Farquhar 2003).

MPO SURVEY

A survey of 50 large MPOs assessed the level of effort put forth toward environmental justice and transportation equity issues. This included a content analysis of MPO’s “Plan of work”, 3-year plans (TIPs), 20-year plans, and State plans – many of which were available electronically. The objective was to determine whether transportation equity principles were integrated into transportation plans at the metropolitan scale and whether adequate consideration was given to public participation and accountability. The review specifically looked for language codifying enforcement or monitoring of: 1) civil rights, 2) environmental justice, 3) social justice, 4) transportation equity, and 5) citizen participation activities. Having addressed one or more of these issues through public reporting (i.e., required plans) indicates a seriousness of intent and degree of accountability.

Along with these planning efforts, the survey looked specifically at the racial or ethnic balance of MPO boards relative to the jurisdictions that they represent. This section addresses that issue as well as exploring trends in equity planning and concern about civil rights. In particular, we used the following general criteria to guide our data collection:

- Does the agency include specific language about civil rights issues in its long-range planning document?
- Does the agency have a separate policy document that deals specifically with civil rights issues?
- Does the agency devote staff time or positions (FTE) to civil rights affairs?
- Does the agency budget specifically allocate resources to civil rights staff, projects, or other activities?

- How has the agency involved the public in civil rights matters? This may include advisory committees, public meetings dedicated to civil rights issues, and other modes of citizen input.

Approach

To collect information on 50 large MPOs, we began with a search and review of individual MPO web sites. Nearly all of the selected MPOs had web sites, most of which having board member rosters posted as well as plans and other documents related to their planning activities. Follow-up telephone contacts were made in cases where certain data were not available on web sites. Individual web sites were examined because there were no comprehensive sources of information about MPO board members, plans, or activities other than listings of organizations and basic demographics of their constituencies. The data were collected between May and August 2004. The following is a descriptive analysis of the data collected (see list of selected MPOs in Appendix A).

Transportation Equity Planning Activities

This paper was interested in examining the extent to which large MPOs incorporate transportation equity, environmental justice, and civil rights concerns into their planning processes. The survey focused on whether specific language on these subjects was included in official MPO transportation plans and documents. Most MPOs addressed civil rights issues in their LRPs. Most commonly environmental justice was discussed as part of regional goals and objectives, public participation and outreach, and in discussions about regional demographic trends. Several incorporated geographic analyses showing the spatial distribution of low-income households and racial minorities². In addition, nearly 1 in 4 MPOs had produced a planning document specific to environmental justice or civil rights issues (a list of the 11 is shown in Table 1). This is compared to only 8 out of 50 U.S. States that reported having adopted environmental justice programs in 2000 (American Chemical Council 2000). Four other states reported that their environmental justice policies or programs were pending approval. Of the states with adopted policies most were focused on complying with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1961, which prohibits discrimination in any program receiving federal funds. The

² See for example: Maricopa Association of Governments, *Regional Transportation Plan* (2003) and Mid-America Regional Council, *Transportation Outlook 2030* (2001)

National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and 23 USC 109(h) also requires consideration of social impacts that may result from projects with federal support (US DOT 2003).

Table 1 Transportation Equity Planning Documents

| MPO | Plan/Document |
|---|---|
| CATS (Chicago, IL area) | Unified Work Plan |
| MTC (San Francisco Area) | 2001 RTP Equity Analysis and EJ Report |
| DVRPC (Philadelphia Area) | Environmental Justice Chronicle |
| Southeast Michigan COG | Regional Transportation Plan |
| North Central Texas COG | Mobility 2025 |
| Metropolitan Washington COG | Access for All and CLRP |
| Puget Sound Regional Council | Title VI Plan; Environmental Justice Demographics Profile |
| Boston MPO | Regional Transportation Plan |
| Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency | Title VI Plan |
| Rhode Island Statewide Planning Program | Community Participation-Title VI |
| Oahu MPO (HI) | Environmental Justice in the OMPO Planning Process |

There were some common elements among these documents with most being guided by either Title VI of the Civil Rights Act or Executive Order 12898. The underlying concern expressed was whether proposed transportation investments were biased toward particular demographic groups. To this end, most MPO efforts defined and quantified the proportion of metropolitan population within “targeted” or “protected” populations. In addition, the concentrations of these populations were mapped along with the location of transportation improvements. The objective of these mapping efforts was to illustrate the distributional equity of MPO plans. Distributional analyses represent a subset of social impact analyses and in addition to identifying and measuring direct impacts from policy interventions, social impact analysis is also concerned with direct effects such as how individuals or groups adapt to interventions. These adaptations can take the form of physical or psychological responses (such as health) as well as economic responses (such as residential relocation) and do not occur randomly within urban areas. Distributional analyses generally identify the outcomes of decision-making processes, and like a broader range of social impact analyses, do not identify weaknesses or biases in the system that produced such outcomes.

In many cases EJ plans outlined specific strategies for citizen participation as key elements to guide and implement equity planning. Most of the efforts appeared to be relatively recent so there were few longitudinal assessments of program effectiveness. This will be possible in the future given the types and range of indicators that were included in the plans. These indicators included measures of regional employment accessibility, transit accessibility, congestion levels, environmental impact, and mobility (i.e., auto ownership). Few, however, concentrated on measures of outcomes such as labor participation rates, wage levels, school attendance, or overall regional accessibility. This is also a function of the limited definition of “equity” that tends to be used in the U.S. – being narrowly focused on race and class.

By comparison, in the United Kingdom, policymakers and advocates often take a broader view of social inequity. The British effort to combat “social exclusion” is a more wide-ranging approach than the U.S. focus on employment and housing mismatches. Efforts to eradicate social exclusion address communities that are isolated from or marginalized by general society.

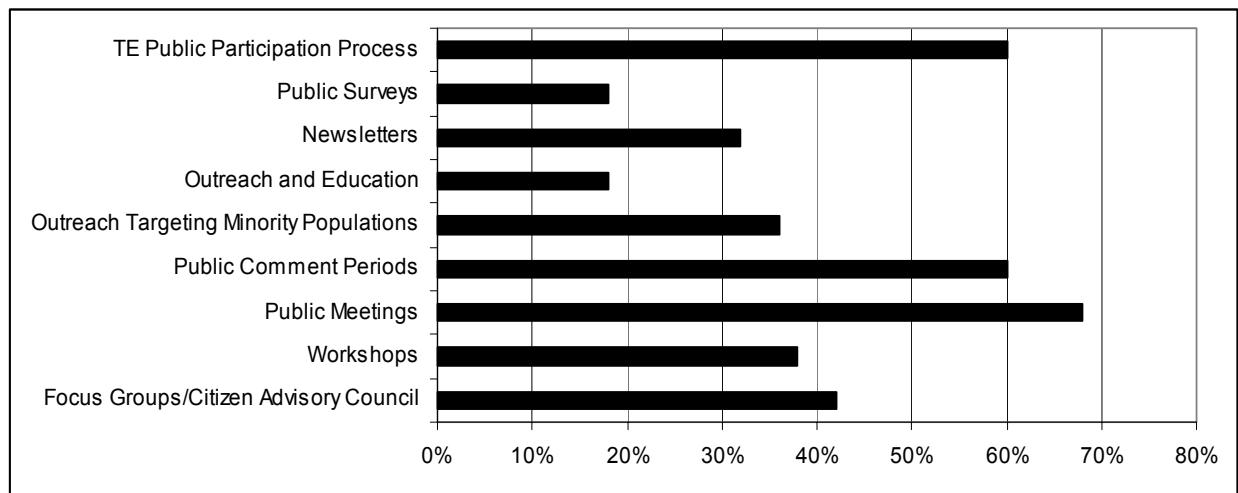
As can be seen from these examples, attempts to counter spatial inequity are usually limited to improving housing and employment access—represented in some respects by residential segregation—whereas *social exclusion* is a much broader concept. It encompasses concerns about 1) physical (personal) exclusion, 2) geographic exclusion, 3) exclusion from facilities, 4) economic exclusion, 5) temporal exclusion, 6) fear-based exclusion, and 7) space exclusion. Addressing social exclusion includes addressing problems such as lack of access to jobs, education, and training; low levels of access to public transportation at particular times of the day, which has an impact on persons without cars working late and early-morning shifts; and limited access to public and private spaces because of unsafe conditions and design.

Overall, it was unclear in nearly all cases how the results of these analyses could be used as feedback in the transportation planning and decision-making process. Emphasis was often placed on public involvement, where information from the equity analyses could be discussed and used to identify areas of potential concern. In other cases, the information generated through data analysis processes focused on social equity became inputs to regional transportation modeling (see for example Metropolitan Transportation Commission 2001).

In addition to planning documents, we looked at whether MPOs dedicated staff or budget resources, to transportation equity public participation and outreach activities. Only 15 percent of MPOs responded that they have staff specifically involved with civil rights oversight and

planning. It is interesting to note that while the selected MPOs acknowledged that they provide little support in terms of staff positions or budget resources for civil rights, close to three-quarters reported that they conduct activities that had a civil rights focus. The selected MPOs reported that on average, they conducted 3 of the types of activities shown in Figure 1. The most frequent of these being public meetings (68 percent).

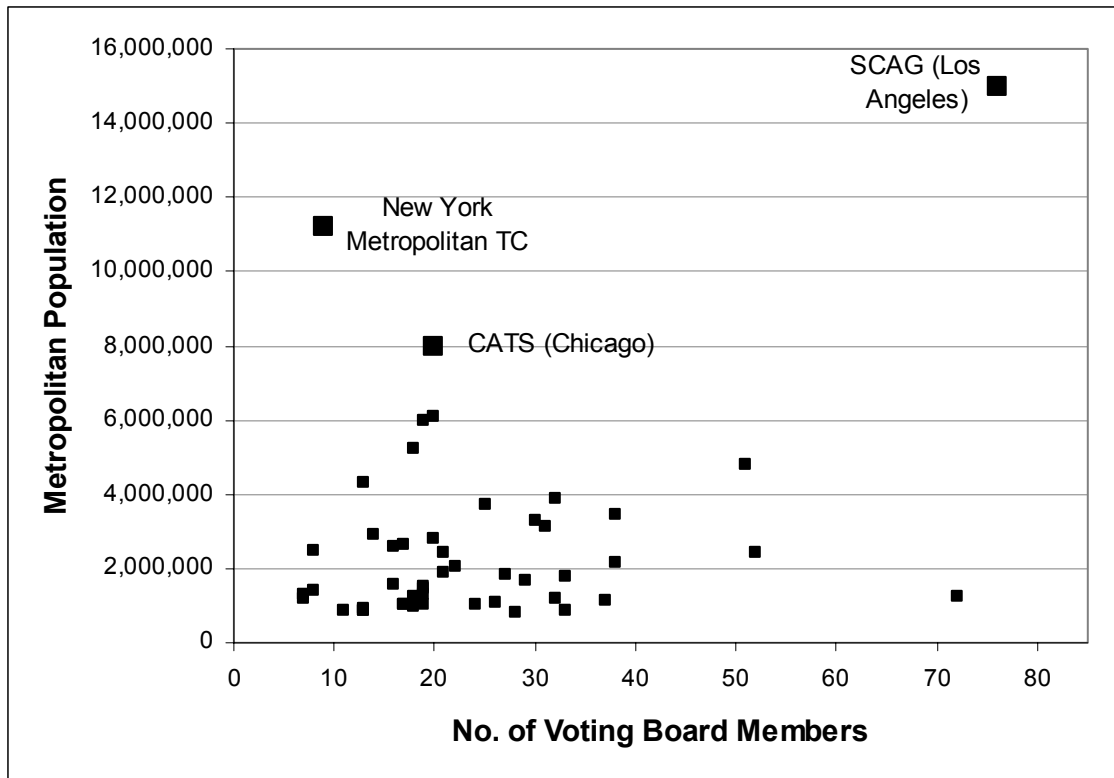
Figure 1 Transportation Equity-related Planning Activities



Board Composition

The racial and ethnic composition of MPO board members had not been previously examined systematically. Our survey assembled the rosters for the largest 50 MPOs as ranked by population. Voting members of these boards are instrumental in programming federal and state transportation funds and should ideally reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of their constituents. In this way representation is seen as being the result of every citizen having an equal chance of providing input (Nelson, Robinson, and Simonsen 1998). The selected MPO boards averaged approximately 26 voting members each, with some having as few as 7 (Greater Buffalo and Portland Metro) and others with as many as 76 (SCAG in Los Angeles). Board size was not clearly correlated with the population size of the jurisdiction. In addition, participation by non-local representatives (regional, state, and federal) on each board also increased the number of voting board members. The outliers among the MPOs were the Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles MPOs which had low per capita levels of board representation due to their population sizes of 8,000,000, 11,000,000 and 15,000,000 respectively. See Figure 2.

Figure 2 Board Size and Metropolitan Population Size



Gender

Overall, females represent about 25 percent of voting board members in the selected MPOs. No MPO boards were without female members, with an average of over six females per board. San Diego AOG, Denver Regional COG (DRCOG), Southeast Michigan COG, Hillsborough County MPO, and Metropolitan Council of Twin Cities had the highest proportion of females (each with over 40 percent). Little attention has been paid to the role of gender in local or regional government decision-making. Additional research could examine whether policy emphases are affected by higher levels of female leadership.

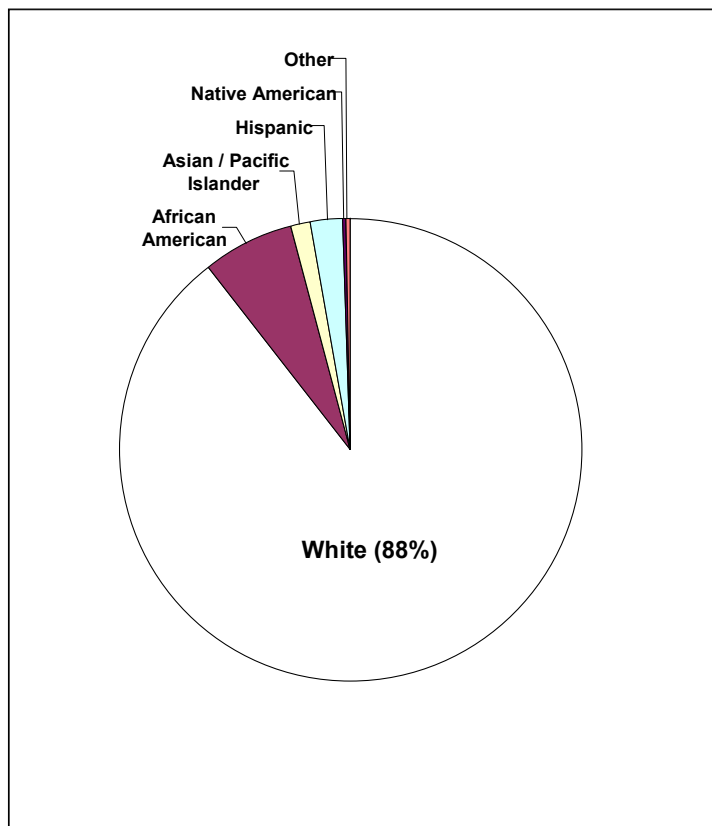
Race and Ethnicity

The voting members of the selected MPO boards were predominantly white (approximately 88 percent). African Americans represented about 7 percent of all board members, followed by Hispanics (3 percent), and Asian/Pacific Islanders (1 percent). Native Americans and “other” (combined) represented less than 1 percent of all voting board members

(see Figure 3). This compares to the overall racial/ethnic composition of these MPOs which was 61 percent white³, 15 percent African American⁴, 6 percent Asian, and 17 percent Hispanic as of 2000.

In addition, thirteen of the 50 boards included in the study had all White board members. Ten of the boards surveyed had greater than 20 percent non-white board representatives. The most racially/ethnically diverse among these were the Oahu MPO (31 percent White) and the Miami (FL) Urbanized Area MPO (46 percent White). The boards with the largest percentage of African American members were the MPOs in Miami (32 percent), Washington, DC (22 percent), and Philadelphia (17 percent). Overall there was only a slight correlation between the racial/ethnic composition of MPO boards and the racial/ethnic characteristics of their jurisdictions.

Figure 3 Racial/Ethnic Composition of Voting Board Members



³ Non-Hispanic White

⁴ Non-Hispanic Black

Board Representation

One challenge facing MPOs is that many of their boards are overrepresented by suburban interests by virtue of a “one-area, one-vote” system. When district boundaries for MPO board representatives and planning units are drawn that result in approximately equal-sized geographic areas, urban core areas that have denser populations end up being underrepresented compared with suburban zones that have lower population densities. This system influences the level of public involvement and participation of persons based on residential location—and negatively so in the case of low-income, neighborhoods of color in urban core areas. For the selected MPOs in this analysis there was not a correlation between racially diverse MPO boards and the number of EJ planning activities shown in Figure 1. This suggests that board representation as previously discussed may not lead to particular planning actions – in this case the performance of EJ oriented planning analyses. Other research suggests that MPO board and voting structures have a significant effect on the outcomes of transportation investment decisions—especially those related to public transit (see Nelson, Sanchez, Wolf and Farquhar 2004). They found that the ratio of urban to suburban votes was correlated with the allocation of transportation funds between road and transit modes. In particular, they found that for each additional suburban voter on an MPO board, between 1 and 7 percent fewer funds were allocated to transit in MPO budgets.

Although specific information about the racial and ethnic composition of MPO boards had not previously been collected, we expected that minorities were under-represented on MPO boards relative to the demographic characteristics of their constituents. For example, this was the situation facing the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG) as constituents recently challenged the representativeness of voting board members (Brooks 2004). In particular they were dissatisfied with expenditure levels for transit compared to highways in the Detroit metropolitan region, which they saw as skewing investments toward sprawl and consumption of rural land. The case has increased the visibility of board structure and procedure regarding MPO decision-making.

Summary and Conclusions

It is difficult to gauge the level of commitment to transportation equity principles by MPOs simply by describing the types of planning activities that they undertake. In addition,

while the racial and ethnic composition of voting members is an indirect measure of adequate public participation and representation, it may serve as an indicator of the degree to which minorities have a stake in regional policy making.

While planning analyses directed at equity concerns and adequate representation are two visible factors affecting MPO planning outcomes, they certainly have both practical and symbolic importance. Data collection, analysis, and system evaluation regarding fairness at least signals an awareness of potential weakness and potential corrections. Follow through and implementation, however, is the ultimate sign of organizational commitment. In addition, diverse set of representative policy-makers would ideally reflect the range of constituent preferences.

An interesting question is whether planning analysis and representative boards are either substitutes or complements within MPO structure. Is it sufficient to have thorough data collection, analysis, and monitoring of equity outcomes at the metropolitan scale despite unrepresentative board members, or do representative boards (and their consequent voting) more directly influence policy and decision-making that affect distributional equity? And finally, does the combination of planning analyses and representative boards have synergistic effects that provide a greater potential for addressing the needs of traditionally underserved populations?

Challenges

Specific challenges remain in regard to greater public participation and involvement in transportation decision making by state departments of transportation and MPOs (Sanchez, Stolz, and Ma 2003). Community-based groups that assist transportation agencies should be encouraged to improve outreach processes and strategies to identify culturally diverse groups and facilitate their involvement. In addition, these efforts are greatly needed to support the information dissemination about transportation and related land use impacts. Mechanisms are needed that allow formal recognition of coalitions of community representatives on MPO advisory committees and decision-making boards. In addition, MPOs, local governments, researchers, and community-based organizations need resources for more data collection and analysis about transportation access to basic needs such as health care, jobs, affordable housing, and public education (STPP 2003).

Along with improved information, certification of MPO compliance with the ISTEA/TEA-21 planning process is a critical area where the Federal partner can play a significant role in MPO processes. Certification is one way that the Federal agencies try to hold MPOs accountable for meeting Federal requirements. MPOs and State DOTs must conduct self-certification reviews annually. They must examine major issues they face, how they undertake planning regulations and consider the seven planning criteria, involving disadvantaged business enterprises, Clean Air Act, Civil Rights and ADA provisions, and particularly how those MPOs in designated areas not meeting air conformity standards meet special requirements (McDowell 1999). FHWA can determine that MPOs fall into one of four categories: 1) full certification, 2) certification subject to specific corrective actions being taken, 3) limited certification and 4) withheld certification (McDowell 1999). In the first round of certification reviews in 1996, no MPO had their certification withheld.

It is in the best interest of MPOs to proactively address issues of fairness in decision-making, planning, and representation, especially as it relates to allocating transportation funds. Many MPOs already have policies guided by either Title VI of the Civil Rights Act or Executive Order 12898 with several of them outlining specific strategies for citizen participation as key elements to guide planning. In addition, MPOs can protect themselves against legal challenges such as those faced by the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG) where constituents recently challenged the representativeness of voting board members and were dissatisfied with expenditure levels for transit compared to highways in the Detroit metropolitan region. Successful challenges may either be the impetus to improve MPO processes or if ignored, could undermine MPO effectiveness.

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Appendix A Selected MPOs Surveyed

| MPO | Metro | No. voting board members |
|---|------------------|---|
| Association of Central Oklahoma Governments | Oklahoma City | 33 |
| Atlanta Regional Commission | Atlanta | 38 |
| Baltimore Regional Transportation Board | Baltimore | 8 |
| Boston MPO | Boston | 14 |
| Broward County MPO | Fort Lauderdale | 19 |
| Chicago Area Transportation Study | Chicago | 20 |
| Denver Regional COG (DRCOG) | Philadelphia | 52 |
| Delaware Regional Valley Regional Planning Commission | Denver | 18 |
| East-West Gateway Coordinating Council | St. Louis | 21 |
| First Coast MPO | Jacksonville, FL | 13 |
| Genesee/Finger Lakes Regional Planning Council | Rochester | 32 |
| Greater Buffalo-Niagara Regional Transportation Council | Buffalo | 7 |
| Hampton Roads Planning District Commission | Norfolk | 16 |
| Hillsborough County MPO | Tampa | 13 |
| Houston Galveston Area Council | Houston | 25 |
| Indianapolis MPO | Indianapolis | 37 |
| Kentuckiana Regional Planning and Development Agency | Louisville | 18 |
| Mid-America Regional Council | Kansas City | 29 |
| Maricopa Association of Governments | Phoenix | 31 |
| Memphis MPO | Memphis | 19 |
| Metro (Portland Area) | Portland, OR | 7 |
| Metro Washington COG | Minneapolis | 32 |
| Metropolitan Council of Twin Cities | Washington, DC | 17 |
| Miami Urbanized Area | Miami | 22 |
| Miami Valley Regional Planning Commission | Dayton | 92 |
| Mid-Ohio RPC | Columbus | 72 |
| Metropolitan Transportation Commission (San Francisco) | San Francisco | 19 |
| Nashville Area MPO | Nashville | 24 |
| North Central Texas COG | Dallas | 13 |
| North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority | Newark | 20 |
| Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency | Cleveland | 38 |
| New York Metropolitan Transportation Council | New York | 9 |
| Oahu MPO | Honolulu | 13 |
| Ohio-Kentucky-Indiana Regional COG | Cincinnati | 27 |
| Metroplan Orlando | Orlando | 19 |
| Palm Beach County MPO | West Palm Beach | 17 |
| Pinellas County MPO | Clearwater | 11 |
| Puget Sound Regional Council | Seattle | 30 |
| Regional Planning Commission (Louisiana) | New Orleans | 26 |
| Regional Transportation Commission of Southern Nevada | Las Vegas | 8 |
| Rhode Island Statewide Planning Program | Providence | 17 |
| Richmond RPDC | Richmond | 28 |
| Sacramento Area COG | Sacramento | 33 |
| San Antonio-Bexar County MPO | San Antonio | 19 |

| | | |
|--------------------------------------|----------------|----|
| San Diego Association of Governments | San Diego | 20 |
| Southern California AOG | Los Angeles | 76 |
| Southeast Michigan COG | Detroit | 51 |
| Southeastern Wisconsin RPC | Milwaukee | 21 |
| Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission | Pittsburgh | 16 |
| Wasatch Front Regional Council | Salt Lake City | 18 |
