

DRAFT FINAL REPORT

**BEST PRACTICES STUDY
OF
METROPOLITAN PLANNING ORGANIZATIONS**

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Executive Summary

The Hampton Roads Metropolitan Planning Organization (HRMPO) is currently at a major crossroads in its growth and development. Since the establishment of the agency in 1992 through the merger of what were then two independent MPOs responsible respectively for the Northside (Peninsula) and Southside portions of the Hampton Roads region, the HRMPO has been recognized for consistently demonstrating a high level of technical abilities in the conduct of the Federally-mandated metropolitan transportation planning process. With the current regional population in excess of 1.7 million persons; home to a number of major defense installations; and serving as the staging area for one of the largest and most active commercial port operations on the East Coast, the HRMPO is the largest MPO totally contained in the Commonwealth of Virginia and ranks in the top 30 regions in the entire country. Clearly, this metropolitan area is a key economic player in Virginia, for the multistate mid-Atlantic region, and indeed for the entire country.

Yet even with all of these positive features, a number of major administrative and institutional changes are taking place in the way in which the HRMPO goes about the performance of its basic functions. Many of these changes have been evolutionary in nature, reflective of the continuing transformation of the political, economic, and demographic characteristics of the region. Others have been in response to Federal legislative changes and the associated ongoing revisions in the metropolitan transportation planning guidelines administered by the Federal Highway Administration and the Federal Transit Administration that govern the conduct of the continuing, comprehensive and coordinated transportation planning process in metropolitan areas. The emphasis on congestion management tracked changes in Federal legislation while the focus on EJ populations was in response to a Presidential Executive Order as interpreted by USDOT.

The combination of these changes has resulted in the need for a detailed reassessment of the organization's structure; an examination of how it interacts with its Federal, state, and local partners; and the creation of a more clearly defined process of how to meaningfully involve the general public in the regional planning process. While most of the country's other MPOs have engaged in similar evolutions over the course of their existence, few of them have attempted to incorporate such a high degree of change in a short period of time. Viewed from this perspective, the current HRMPO "Best Practices" assessment can be viewed as an assessment that should be periodically repeated and a process which should be both documented and widely disseminated as an illustration of how such dramatic changes can be effectively implemented in a region of such importance.

The "catalyst" for this still evolving process was the most recent Federal transportation planning process certification review report. Dated February 28, 2008, this report documented the results of the HRMPO Transportation Planning Quadrennial

Certification Review conducted on November 14-15, 2007. The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) determined that the transportation planning requirements of the MPO of the Hampton Roads Transportation Management Area (TMA) met the requirements of the Metropolitan Planning Rule at 23 CFR Part 450 Subpart C and 49 CFR Part 613 with the exception of those areas where specific corrective actions were identified. As a result of this determination, FHWA and FTA conditionally recertified the Hampton Roads transportation planning process with the understanding that the corrective actions described in the summary report would be accomplished within a specified time frame.

The Federal Transportation Planning Process Certification Review Report identified a total of 11 specific corrective actions whose resolution was required in order for the lifting of the conditional status of the Planning Certification for the Hampton Roads TMA. The corrective actions encompassed a number of administrative, organizational structure, and public involvement and public participation aspects of the regional transportation planning process. It must be noted that this is a very large number of specific corrective actions relative to other certification review processes that the research team has encountered in the past. In the case of Federal recertification reviews of other MPOs of similar size and complexity, no more than one or two corrective actions are generally cited at any one time. This large number of formal corrective actions imposed on the HRMPO underscores the importance of this “best practices” assessment.

In addition to the corrective actions identified in the recertification review report, the Federal Team also included descriptions of several programmatic recommendations that reflect national trends and initiatives intended to aid in improving the MPO planning process in the Hampton Roads region. The review process final report also cited a significant number of commendations giving credit to many of the MPO’s long-term strengths, particularly with respect to the agency’s technical analysis processes.

In developing a program to appropriately respond to the corrective actions and programmatic recommendations contained in the certification report, the HRMPO staff and the MPO Board decided on an integrated multi-step process. This included the following elements:

- Actions by the MPO staff to address many of the internal administrative concerns cited,
- Actions by the MPO Board to address some of the more easily resolved organizational and institutional issues,
- The creation of a MPO Committee made up of MPO Board members and other major regional stakeholder representatives to examine the more complex organizational and institutional issues such as the lack of formal agency bylaws, and
- The retention of an outside consultant to examine potential “best practices” being employed by at least 30 other “peer” MPOs in the United States that might have possible application in the Hampton Roads region.

The contents of this report focus on the last of these major elements and describe the manner in which a potential group of “best practices” dealing with MPO organizational and administrative processes and procedures, and the public involvement and public participation aspects of the regional transportation planning process now being employed in other parts of the country were identified for possible consideration to be implemented in the Hampton Roads region.

What is a “Best Practice” for an MPO?

This assignment for the HRMPO is at the same time straightforward and relatively complex. It is straightforward in that the basic functions required of any MPO are well-defined in Federal legislation and regulations. It is complex in that the history, heritage, issues and opportunities associated with each individual MPO in the United States differ from one another to some degree. As a result, the same basic approach cannot be directly applied to the operations of every MPO in the country. What works best for one organization might not be at all appropriate for use by another of a similar size facing similar issues. Clearly, the “best practices” for a MPO such as HRMPO will not necessarily be the same as those which are the “typical” or “standard” practices used in other metropolitan areas. Moreover, even if a specific process has been judged to be a “best practice” by another MPO itself or by the members of a Federal recertification process review team, it might still be applicable only to that particular region of the country and might well prove to be an abject failure in the Hampton Roads Region. Thus, a great deal of care and consideration must be employed when defining what is (and what is not) a “best practice.”

The analysis process employed by the members of the PBS&J/Louis Berger Group team blended the internal experiences of the HRMPO staff with the consultant team’s extensive external experiences dealing with similar issues and agencies throughout the country. The “product” of this effort is the definition of a number of potential “best practices” currently in use in other areas of the country that can potentially be implemented by the HRMPO in the achievement of its basic mission. In the identification of these potential best practices, the results of the peer MPO research effort were stratified into two basic areas:

- Best practices as they related to organizational and institutional arrangements; and
- Best practices as they related to public involvement processes.

Each of these is summarized briefly below.

Organizational and Institutional Best Practices

Notes were compiled from each of the peer group MPO interviews conducted. The responses to those questions that were considered to be “innovative” or a “best practice” were particularly noted. It is worth mentioning that “best” practices relating to organizational structure are objectively difficult to identify, so for the organizational questions innovative practices that differ from the standard are discussed.

Engaging Non-Governmental Agencies Through Auxiliary Committees

The standard practice for MPOs in the case study group was to involve one or more standing focused committees that reported to a standing technical committee by way of MPO staff reports. The variety of these standing advisory committees is noteworthy and includes the following examples:

- Citizens
- Freight
- Transit
- Aesthetics
- Sustainability
- Legislative
- Bicycle/Pedestrian
- Environmental Justice

Additionally, there are ad hoc committees that are formed to address specific issues, such as project prioritization, long-range transportation planning, and transportation improvement program development. In terms of servicing these committees, the standard practice was to have multiple staff prepare agenda packets and provide other assistance.

Best or innovative practices include situations where the advisory committee has either a non-voting or voting member on the technical or policy boards. During the discussions, another noteworthy practice was the inclusion of some non-traditional members on either the technical or policy boards. Another innovative practice identified was the adoption of a wide-open format for the freight working group, wherein anyone is invited to participate, and technical studies are eschewed for direct involvement of the members in identifying key issues of importance. This particular MPO has invested heavily in freight planning, estimating a contribution of \$3 million towards helping private rail companies conduct planning studies, for example (the railroad companies provide the local matching funds).

Best practice for servicing advisory committees with MPO staff tended towards having one, dedicated staff person at the MPO that was a specialist in the technical area of the committee (such as a bicycle/pedestrian planner or freight logistics expert). Even in these cases, other staff from the MPO often helped provide assistance on certain agenda items or to prepare for meetings.

Weighted Voting and Quorum Requirements

While the majority of the MPOs participating in the case studies do not have a weighted voting provision in their bylaws, of those that do there is a variety of approaches to weighting the votes of the policy board (votes of the technical boards were never weighted). Some were extremely complex, involving literally over a thousand weighted votes, but most were based on relatively simple population criteria. In the majority of instances, weighted voting was only employed for select issues, and could typically be requested by any voting member prior to a vote being taken by the policy committee.

Some MPOs interviewed stated that, while they have weighted voting in their bylaws, it has not been used since its inception or is used extremely infrequently.

Quorum requirements can help shape decisions in much the same way as a weighted vote, since the quorums sometimes rely on a number of weighted votes to be present before a meeting can begin. Most quorums rely on a simple majority (50% or 51%) of the unweighted and/or weighted voting members to be present. A second and common method of placing differing weights on different members was to have multiple voting members from larger jurisdictions. Generally the more complex the MPO study area, the greater the chance for an increasing complexity of quorum structures. This rule-of-thumb is most obvious in MPOs that have bi-state (or tri-state) jurisdictions, wherein members from each state have to be present in addition to a majority of voting members.

Best, or at least innovative, practices in the areas of weighted voting and quorum requirements included situations wherein every vote is a weighted vote. The MPO for New York City has adopted a consensus rule at the policy board level, and has delegated minor decisions such as TIP amendments to three technical committees formed to accommodate geopolitical boundaries of the region. Regarding novel quorum requirements, some of the larger MPOs do not necessarily require a majority of the policy board members present to have a meeting, instead opting for a 1/3 minority or a fixed number of members that amount to less than a majority to be present for a meeting to be called to order. Some MPOs have adopted a “clustering” concept when the number of government members grows too great. Under this option, a number of small cities and towns regularly appoint a representative to the MPO policy or technical boards.

Another best practice to ensure that failing to meet quorum requirements isn't an issue is to have some provision regarding a number of absences triggering a lowering of the quorum requirements. For example, any member that misses three meetings of the Charlotte (NC) MPO isn't counted against the quorum requirements.

Informal Interactions with Boards and Staff

Many of the MPOs contacted noted that they did attempt to pursue informal board meetings due to state freedom of information laws that would require advertising, etc. that would make the meeting formal. A few of the responses that were innovative included the following:

- While no informal retreats are conducted, the staff of the MPO strives to work closely and directly with the policy and technical boards to discuss agendas, resolve issues, and so forth.
- In one instance, four-to-five members of a board will meet for lunch with members of the MPO staff.
- Staff meetings are conducted in alternating months with regular meetings.

- An orientation meeting with new board members, or a handbook or presentation, is typically conducted or provided to inform new members on the roles and responsibilities of the MPOs.

Performance Metrics for the MPO and Major MPO Tasks

To capture information about performance metrics, MPO case interviews were supplemented with a review of the long-range transportation plans for all 48 candidate MPOs. The standard practice is not to present an annual or systematic update of the MPO performance to the boards; however, performance metrics like vehicle miles of travel, time spent in congested travel conditions, transit ridership, and vehicle-occupancy ratios are commonplace in describing transportation system performance for alternatives in the long-range transportation plan. A number of agencies either do not have performance metrics or cite other agencies (e.g., State DOTs or transit companies) as having their own performance metrics that the MPO relies on to track and assess performance. One MPO noted, for example, that since the MPO was not an implementing agency, it made little sense to monitor external, transportation system performance since they had no direct control over physical improvements to that system. However, it must also be acknowledged that MPOs do allocate project funding through the TIP process and are authorized to establish regional policies for transportation investments. Other MPOs stated that, while they did not have performance metrics, they place a special emphasis on creating and adhering to deadlines for their work products. In some states, notably Florida, a consistent set of performance metrics is evolving. Another potential example is in Virginia, where the Richmond MPO noted that it is considering adopting the performance metrics used in the *VTrans2035* process.

Public Involvement Best Practices

Although a number of MPO representatives cited that their organizations had received a notice of programmatic recommendations related to improving public engagement practices during recent Federal recertification reviews, only a very few indicated having received a formal corrective action citation. There was not a clear relationship to either the strength of public engagement practices or the stated influence of such actions on the activities of the MPO. Programmatic recommendations and corrective actions ran the gamut from general requests to engage the public more heavily to very specific requests, such as engaging low-income/minority (collectively referred to as Environmental Justice, or EJ, populations) groups or using free and reduced price meal program data to identify EJ communities.

Data Resources for Identifying and Communicating with Public Groups

The Hampton Roads MPO requires and utilizes a variety of data sources to identify and analyze groups of the public. The HRMPO and most of the peer MPOs studied utilize US Census data heavily, including the annual American Community Survey and Census Journey to Work items. HRMPO is taking advantage of an option to purchase more data points in the current travel behavior survey. Other data sources are not used consistently, but include third-party sources (e.g., InfoUSA and Woods & Poole employment data sets

and forecasts; state records of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and the free and reduced price meal program eligible populations) although some respondents indicated a level of inaccuracy in these datasets. The standard practice occasionally includes the preparation of new or modified data sets including traffic count information and public information surveys. Obviously, one of the more useful datasets that the MPO frequently leads on the development of is the socio-demographic baseline data and forecasts used in the computer travel demand model.

Best practice for data collection tends to rely more on cooperative agreements with transit operators, municipal/county governments, and other agencies. The Broward County (Florida) MPO public information officer, a position that is common among MPOs with more aggressive and sophisticated outreach efforts, conducts frequent meetings with the county transit operator and others to share information about upcoming events. The Cincinnati-Northern Kentucky MPO has made a goal of being the “go-to” agency in the region regarding spatial datasets. They have a full-time lead demographer and four-person (Geographic Information System) GIS staff to build and maintain databases. Another method employed, albeit without a conscious decision to create a system of metrics, is to invite a variety of different stakeholders to technical meetings to share perspectives and ideas on project planning performance and direction of the MPO.

Public Meeting Practices

Commonplace among the MPOs surveyed was the use of public meetings to gather public input and present draft planning documents. Advertised public hearings are not required in the U.S. Code (23 USC §134) but the transportation improvement program (TIP) process must include at least one public meeting addressed in the public participation plan adopted by the MPO (49 CFR §450.324). All public meetings conducted by MPOs should be conducted at accessible locations and times to the “maximum extent practicable” (49 CFR 450.210) and provide electronically accessible notices, such as through the World Wide Web (49 CFR §450.316).

The standard practice for the MPOs in the peer review included three-week to 45-day public notification of major TIP amendments and other meetings, but in some cases the timeframes were shorter, allowing for as little as 14 days for TIP actions and 30 days for updates to the long-range transportation plan. Many MPOs asked people to complete a sign-in sheet if they wished to speak at public meetings.

Nearly all of those MPOs asked responded that they held meetings at times and locations that they thought were accessible, particularly by transit modes of travel. Cost of the venue was also a factor. Both written and oral comments are sought at typical MPO meetings, as are email addresses for follow-up contacts. Financial resources and the scale/impact of the action under consideration are used to adjust the degree of public engagement effort undertaken by the MPO. Notifications of meetings typically involved some type of advertisement in the local newspaper (including foreign language oriented periodicals), mass email distribution lists, and occasionally radio advertisements.

Best practice in the area of public meetings included staggered meeting notices (e.g., at four weeks and again at two weeks); translation services at every major meeting; and tracking how the participants heard about the meeting by asking such a question on the sign-in sheet for the meeting. The Miami-Dade County MPO shares email contact databases with transit providers, the Florida DOT, turnpike authority, seaports, airports, and school board authorities with whom they meet quarterly to discuss upcoming events. This collective database has approached 35,000 contacts, many of which are, in turn, distribution lists that create a second wave of emails.

Other MPOs noted that they frequently have had difficulties in getting people to attend meetings that were not associated with a particular (or controversial) project. Best practice includes a dedicated outreach program that allows for staff to go to public events, such as Charlotte (NC) MPO staff attending annual neighborhood symposiums where they hand out postcards to attendees. Best practice for notification of meetings included such elements as full-page advertisements in large circulation newspapers, mass postcard distributions to people in a radius (e.g., ½-mile) around a project, and television advertisements. There is also a greater reliance on member governments to participate in the outreach process for meetings, especially by assisting in the distribution of notices.

Best practice for meeting formats includes sign-in sheets that note where the participant first heard about the meeting; multiple meeting series to ensure geographic extent (one MPO holds one meeting during the day and two at night to complete a series of three – sometimes these series can be as large as 10 consecutive meetings); televised meetings (in one case including a call-in feature for questions during the TIP adoption process) for board meetings; and the locations are carefully considered according to the project “market” and even where there is a high amount of foot traffic. Sometimes the selection of a meeting venue is conducted in cooperation with and input from the regional citizen’s advisory committee. This latter process was used successfully by the Pittsburgh MPO (Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission – SPC) to obtain over 3,000 public inputs during its most recent LRTP update across a 10-county region.

Visualizing Transportation Planning

The Federal planning guidelines require that visualization techniques be employed to explain the content of the TIP and long-range transportation plan. The MPOs that were contacted typically expressed uncertainty in the meaning of “visualization” but frequently cited more extensive use of mapping products especially those involving GIS databases in their day-to-day technical activities. One MPO stated that design visualizations, which is where the best use of visualization techniques could be employed (as opposed to the systems-level planning that is typically the forte of MPOs), were often more artistic than factual and should be used with a degree of caution.

Standard practice consists of an extensive use of mapping and cartographic tools to express data in a spatial format, and using newsletters or web-based content to disseminate the information. Interestingly, one MPO noted that they did not believe in newsletters, since research had previously indicated that no one reads them (this same MPO noted that instead of newsletters the staff worked closely with the media to make

their public participation events known to the general public). Where applicable, microsimulation packages such as VISSIM (and presumably SynchroProfessional) are used less often. Photographic renderings (montages) using Photoshop (Adobe) are also used by some MPOs to communicate the visual impacts or characteristics of a specific proposal. The use of websites is extensive, and many MPOs use their website to distribute information. In fact, a noticeable theme of “pushing” ever more public participants in the planning process towards the MPO website was apparent.

Best practice examples include specific actions taken by MPOs to illustrate or explain key concepts, frequently taking a certain approach or technology to greater extremes in terms of level of usage.

- Video compositions are becoming more commonplace. One MPO got Dolly Parton to do a public service announcement, while another has created an annual PSA contest. They show the winners on their website, rotating them out frequently. This has created an air of excitement for the high schools and colleges that participate and a level of recognition that otherwise would not be present. Webcasting is an offshoot of this technology, and some MPOs are using streaming video to webcast their policy board meetings.
- Hands-on techniques, such as the Strings-and-Ribbons game, continue to be used by some MPOs to gather direct input on systems-level planning priorities. A variant of Strings-and-Ribbons, called Blocks-and-Ribbons, involves the use of two colors of Lego™ blocks (representing commercial and residential development) that participants place singly or in stacks on a gridded map of the planning area.
- One MPO has challenged its staff not to use MS-PowerPoint presentations anymore, instead relying on live mapping enhanced by the datasets managed or developed by the MPO staff. This same MPO has created a video presentation they update annually that is presented to decision makers and other audiences when the MPO does a “road show” that is unfamiliar with the MPO and its work. This presentation embeds three-dimensional imagery to show large, proposed new developments, for example.
- Three-dimensional renderings using software tools such as SketchUp (Google) are becoming more commonplace, as is scenario visualization software such as CommunityViz (Scenario360). A variation of this attention to visualization is presented by the North Jersey Transportation Authority (NJTPA), which contracted to produce a web-based, interactive visioning tool (<http://www.rtp2035.org/njtpa.php>).
- While citizen’s participation guides aren’t necessarily innovative, one MPO (Hillsborough County/Tampa, FL) has modified their guide to resemble a cookbook (www.hillsboroughmpo.org/aboutmpo/aboutmpo_folders/foldercitizensguide). With sections named similar to cookbook titles like Menu Planning (What is the MPO?), Alphabet Soup (What are All Those Acronyms For?), and Cooking Tips (Where Can

I Get More Info?), the MPO has made normally dry topics more approachable to its general audience.

Reaching Out to Traditionally Underserved Populations

Environmental Justice, compliance with Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and Executive Order 12898 (Clinton) have combined to produce a lasting effect on many MPOs. However, the provisions of SAFETEA-LU have increased the public outreach responsibility further to include bicycle-pedestrian advocacy agencies and environmental resource/regulatory agencies. Hence, a careful and thoughtful approach to developing a schedule for long-range transportation plans and other major actions of the MPO has become more of an exercise in inter-agency and interpersonal coordination than in the past.

Standard practice has been to advertise in minority-oriented periodicals and newspapers; maintaining email databases of minority, elderly, low-income, and other groups; as well as taking out advertising space in English-text publications or creating in-house newsletters. There appear to be only a relatively few websites that regularly translated their information materials into Spanish (for example), even in areas with high percentages of ESL (English as Second Language) populations. Several of these MPOs suggested that this was due in part to the perceived higher expense of maintaining a parallel website while others noted this as being a relatively low cost. One of the contacted MPOs (Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission in Pittsburgh, PA) provides instant translation of its website using the AltaVista Babelfish software to convert English-text into any of eight other languages.

Training a staff person in Spanish, and having on-request Spanish translation services are fairly commonplace. At the other extreme, the Oahu MPO (Honolulu) provides telephone interpreter services in over 20 world languages to public meeting attendees. Increasingly, a reliance on mobile presentations to put MPO staff in direct contact with the public at various events has become more critical, as has working on a more cooperative basis with the mainstream, local media outlets.

Best practice methods for reaching populations traditionally underserved by transportation planning exercises are again varied, and include the following notable practices:

- One MPO (NYMTC, New York City) created a “public involvement corps” that they have used to leverage notifications; the common name for this type of technique is Speaker’s Bureau. A Speaker’s Bureau member is provided with materials and instructions that they then use to present concepts important to the community that the MPO may impact with their projects or programs.
- One MPO has hired a private firm to pay participants \$50.00 to participate in focus groups that provided input to proposed MPO programs and projects. Focus groups that aren’t monetarily compensated are also conducted in other MPOs that were contacted.

- An Environmental Justice advisory committee provides the staff of one MPO with suggestions about content, meeting locations, and participation tools.
- One trend is the decentralization of public involvement efforts, or delegating the responsibility to other agencies. METRO (Portland, OR) has noted that they are following this trend, and also hire an outside Public Involvement specialist to conduct an external audit of their public participation plan and practices. Another has identified a group of community “elders” that have standing in their individual communities or civic groups that they work with to disseminate information.
- While not yet completely standardized, the practice of hiring one or more public information specialists seems to separate larger MPOs that practice better external outreach. The public information officer prepares public participation materials, works closely with staff, cooperates with member and external organizations, and attends many outside meetings to make presentations and raise awareness of the MPO.

In some cases the MPO notes that a significant part of the challenge is to simply document all the outreach that is being done, both for internal purposes and the external federal certification review process.

Public Participation Performance Metrics and Staff Training Opportunities

The idea of applying strict performance metrics and reporting performance in regard to their external performance in public outreach is just beginning to get traction with MPOs. Somewhat more commonplace are internal or indirect performance measures, such as number of meetings; number of attendees at meetings; number of website “hits,” number of postcards / surveys returned; number of emails sent; or amount of data (e.g., email contact lists) entered into a computer database over some period of time. Similarly, training staff tends to be sporadic; no MPO mentioned a specific training curriculum to achieve a desired level of proficiency in some aspect of public relations work. One commenter noted that the idea of assessing performance using standard metrics was problematic. For example, is a large number of attendees at a public meeting indicative of a good public notification process or does it mean that the MPO has not adequately identified and mitigated public concerns?

Best practice in these related areas is mixed, but some common themes did emerge. Some MPOs clearly invested more in training, but frequently this was in partnership with their parent state or state department of transportation. Some MPOs did note that they either are or are going to start an annual report to their boards that identifies metrics for public outreach. Once again, the Miami-Dade County (Florida) MPO emerged as a best practitioner. The two public involvement staff there have merit pay increases dictated in part by how much outreach they have conducted. These metrics include percentage of comments entered into a MS-Access™ database within five days of receiving the comment; number of press releases per month; and so forth. This MPO did note that externally evaluating the success of any public involvement program was very

challenging. An example of such an external measure is the number of times the MPO is featured in the local newspaper or on television or radio programming.

As with training opportunities, sometimes the closest MPO ally is the State DOT. The Florida DOT is preparing, with the cooperation of their MPOs, a set of performance metrics for public engagement programs at the MPO level. Although some MPOs note that they produce records of meeting participation or comments received (for example), few MPOs systematically retain, track and assess that kind of data with the goal of improving their public participation processes. Similar to Florida, the New York State MPO association has worked cooperatively to pool resources from its member MPOs and develop studies and training courses for the whole in a cost-effective fashion. While many MPOs stated that they will send their employees to public engagement-related courses, at least one MPO noted that they have developed an in-house training program for their staff. Another MPO contracted with a private consultant to develop and deliver a training course on Environmental Justice matters. Several of those persons interviewed for these case studies noted that the current economic climate has restricted their ability to send people to remote training opportunities.

Concluding Remarks

There is clearly not a single, uniform list of “best practices” that is currently used by other MPOs in either the organizational/institutional or public involvement realms, much less a concise list that obviously comprises a menu of techniques that works best at HRMPO. Rather, the choices facing the agency are to select those actions for which there is both a true regional consensus and a strong commitment to allocate the necessary time and money to make the actions successful. In the final analysis, these decisions must be based on the manner in which the members of the MPO Board truly believe in the five core functions of any metropolitan planning organization:

1. Establish a setting where fair and impartial debate and discussion can take place
2. Evaluate transportation alternatives in an unbiased and objective fashion
3. Maintain a fiscally constrained, multimodal Long-Range Transportation Plan (LRTP)
4. Develop a financially constrained Transportation Improvement Program (TIP)
5. Involve the public – residents and key affected sub-groups - in the regional planning process

The process of implementing “best practices” is never ending; what is today’s “best practice” will likely become the generally accepted “standard” in 3-5 years and may even evolve and be classified as an “unacceptable” practice in 10 years. Clearly, then, regular internal and external evaluations are a part of the mix of strategies to ensure that the HRMPO is using its limited resources to reach desirable goals and outcomes. The choice of what to do now to formally address the corrective actions and the programmatic recommendations contained in the most recent Federal certification review rests with the members of the HRMPO Board.

Chapter 1 – Introduction

This assignment for the Hampton Roads Metropolitan Planning Organization (HRMPO) is at the same time straightforward and relatively complex. It is straightforward in that the basic functions required of any MPO are well defined in Federal legislation and regulations. It is complex in that the history, heritage, issues and opportunities associated with each individual MPO in the United States differ from one another to some degree. As a result, the same basic approach cannot be directly applied to the operations of every MPO in the country. What works best for one organization might not be at all appropriate for use by another of a similar size facing similar issues. Clearly, the “best practices” for a MPO such as HRMPO will not necessarily be the same as those which are the “typical” or “standard” practices used in other metropolitan areas.

The analysis process employed by the members of the PBS&J/Louis Berger Group team blended the unique features of the HRMPO with the consultant team’s extensive experience in dealing with similar issues and agencies throughout the country. The “product” of this effort is the definition of the “best practices” that can be followed by the agency in the achievement of its basic mission.

The primary impetus for this study was the most recent Federal recertification review report. Dated February 28, 2008, this report documented the results of the HRMPO Transportation Planning Quadrennial Certification Review conducted on November 14-15, 2007. The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) determined that the transportation planning requirements of the MPO of the Hampton Roads Transportation Management Area (TMA) met the requirements of the Metropolitan Planning Rule at 23 CFR Part 450 Subpart C and 49 CFR Part 613 with the exception of those areas where corrective actions were identified. As a result of this determination, FHWA and FTA conditionally recertified the Hampton Roads transportation planning process with the understanding that the corrective actions described in the summary report would be accomplished within the specified time frame. (A copy of the Final Federal Recertification Review Report is presented in **Appendix B**.)

The Federal Transportation Planning Process Certification Review Report identified a total of 11 specific corrective actions whose resolution was required in order for the lifting of the conditional status of the Planning Certification for the Hampton Roads TMA. The corrective actions encompassed a number of administrative, organizational structure, and public involvement and public participation aspects of the regional transportation planning process.

It must be noted that this is a very large number of specific corrective actions. In the case of Federal recertification reviews of other MPOs of similar size and complexity, no more than one or two corrective actions are generally cited at any one time. This large number

of formal corrective actions serves to emphasize the importance of this “best practices” assessment.

In addition to the corrective actions identified in the recertification review report, the Federal Team also included descriptions of several programmatic recommendations that reflect national trends and initiatives intended to aid in improving the MPO planning process in the Hampton Roads region. The review process final report also cited a significant number of commendations giving credit to many of the MPO’s strengths, particularly with respect to the agency’s technical analysis processes.

In developing a program to appropriately respond to the corrective actions and programmatic recommendations contained in the certification report, the HRMPO staff and Board decided on an integrated multi-step process. This included the following elements:

- Actions by the MPO staff to address many of the internal administrative concerns cited,
- Actions by the MPO Board to address some of the more easily resolved organizational and institutional issues,
- The creation of an MPO Committee made up of MPO Board members and other major regional stakeholder representatives to examine the more complex organizational and institutional issues such as the lack of formal agency bylaws, and
- The retention of an outside consultant to examine potential “best practices” being employed by other “peer” MPOs in the United States that might have possible application in the Hampton Roads region.

The contents of this report focus on the last of these major elements and describe the manner in which a potential group of “best practices” dealing with MPO organizational and administrative processes and procedures, and the public involvement and public participation aspects of the regional transportation planning process now being employed in other parts of the country could be implemented in the Hampton Roads region. The major tasks associated with the conduct of this assignment were as follows:

- **Task 1.0 – Orientation Workshop:** The Consultant Team conducted a series of face-to-face meetings and telephone interviews with various segments of the HRMPO. These outreach efforts included MPO Committee members; MPO staff; resource agencies, VDOT, transit service providers, business community leaders, and representatives of other organizations identified by the HRMPO staff. The purpose of these outreach sessions was to assess local perspectives on the current status and understanding of the MPO functions and role(s) in transportation plan, program and project development, and directions that could be taken to improve the process. A summary of the major findings and perceptions obtained through these initial outreach efforts is presented in **Chapter 2** of this report.

- **Task 2.0 – Peer Group Research:** The Consultant Team conducted and documented a series of approximately 40 case studies of similar organizations to summarize internet-based and telephone research with MPOs that have comparable organizational histories and/or exemplary public engagement practices. Questions posed to the MPO peer group respondents by the Consultant Team included the following:
 - *What are the most effective (best practices) outreach methods to apply to state legislators, local elected officials (mayors and county supervisors chairs), and (in general) local elected bodies (city and town councils and county boards of supervisors)?*
 - *What are the best practices for defining the membership of the MPO Policy Board?*
 - *What are the pros and cons associated with various weighted and unweighted voting procedures used by similar bodies at other MPOs?*
 - *What are the best practices for the number, structure, organization and function of advisory committees?*
 - *What are the best practices in terms of how to package, advertise, and conduct MPO meetings?*
 - *What are the most effective (best practices) for the public participation process and particularly effective outreach to the general public?*

The principal findings and results of this MPO peer group research effort are described in **Chapter 3** of this report.

- **Task 3.0 – Public Participation Plan/Public Engagement Toolbox:** The majority of the Corrective Actions identified during the most recent Federal Recertification Review focused on the public participation plan and public engagement elements of the regional planning process. The development of recommendations for the way in which the HRMPO could most effectively respond to these cited Corrective Actions was a principal focus of this overall project. The Consultant Team defined the primary characteristics of the public (age, race, income, etc.) to be engaged in the process; examined demographic and socioeconomic information for all area jurisdictions; and reviewed the current HRMPO mailing list to identify demographic information differentiations provided or in need of enhancement. Gaps in the regional comprehensive coverage of the mailing/e-mail address list to be addressed prior to its expanded use were identified.

Based in large part on the major findings of the MPO peer group research effort, the Consultant Team developed a group of recommendations for enhancing MPO recognition; public participation in meetings, plan updates, special projects, work programs, and TIPS, as well as performance measures (MOEs) that respect HRMPO products, public segments, and purpose of outreach as identified in Task 1.0. The Consultant Team’s recommendations focused on those improvement

actions identified in the most recent MPO recertification review. These included, but were not limited to, the following:

- Effective strategies for engaging the public in the LRTP and TIP development processes
- Effective public involvement/public awareness activities
- Effective visualization techniques
- Effective outreach to low-income and/or minority communities
- Best practices regarding MPO adherence to the requirements of Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act (including related acts and Executive Orders), limited English proficiency, and environmental justice.

The key findings and recommendations developed through this task are described in **Chapter 4** of this report. A draft version of a suggested updated public participation plan and toolkit for the HRMPO is presented in the appendix of this report.

Particularly with respect to the recommended HRMPO public participation plan it must be clearly recognized and acknowledged by all parties that the mere acceptance and adoption of this plan does not, in and of itself, achieve full compliance with the relevant corrective actions cited in the most recent Federal recertification review. Rather, this action represents merely the first in a number of steps which the MPO Board and staff, the MPO member agencies and jurisdictions, and the general public of the region must take over the next few years in order to ensure that the applicable Federal guidance is fully adhered to. The failure to appropriately document these actions has the potential to result in the withdrawal of the provisional Federal recertification and the imposition of severe constraints on the ability of the HRMPO to receive and expend Federal transportation funds.

Chapter 2 – Orientation Workshop Results/Findings

An important initial element of the project was the process of outreach to key regional stakeholders. Defining how best to assess the manner in which the current mission of the HRMPO is being achieved requires an understanding of Federal, state, and regional regulations and policy issues. It is important to remember that Virginia’s regional planning district commissions (PDCs) are a forum for regional decision-making – and that MPOs are typically only involved with the transportation and, to a lesser extent, the secondary land use, community, and air quality components of transportation. The need for the conduct of an initial outreach session with key regional stakeholders was thus viewed as an important first step in the accomplishment of this assignment, enabling the research team to affix a baseline for the current level of perception and understanding of how MPOs work in general and the state of HRMPO specifically.

This initial outreach process sought to obtain the views of a diverse group of local stakeholders in the regional planning process. These included local elected officials, local jurisdiction staff, the FHWA Virginia Division office, the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT), local public transit agencies, the Virginia Port Authority, the business community, MPO staff, and representatives of other local or regional groups suggested by various stakeholders. A specific focus of this effort was to attempt to contact all members of the MPO Committee, since their role is to respond to the major concerns cited in the Federal recertification report.

In order to solicit as diverse a range of free and open comments as possible, those contacted were informed that individual names would not be attributed to specific comments. As a result, while different individuals may have used slightly different terminology or phrasing to describe a particular situation, there was considerable overlapping agreement and confirmation with respect to what those contacted view as the major organizational, administrative, and public engagement issues currently facing the HRMPO. The comments summarized below thus represent opinions expressed by a number of individuals contacted and are not the personal views of a single individual. While there were a number of other comments cited by more than one person, those shown below are viewed as the most important to be considered by the HRMPO as it seeks to respond to the issues cited in the recertification report and enhance its leadership status as a regional transportation forum.

Former MPO “Top Down” Leadership Created Unnecessary Issues

A comment noted by most of those persons contacted was the dramatic change between the way things were once done and the way in which the MPO is currently being managed. The previous MPO/PDC Executive Director was noted as having the basic philosophy that his opinion was the only appropriate way in which things were to be done, with no opposition expected or accepted. It was also noted that public input was

actively dissuaded in the past since the technical staff were the only ones who truly knew what was needed for the region.

These same persons commented that the change in leadership and management philosophy observed over the past year has been very positive, and consistently commended the new leadership. The action to create separate PDC and MPO organizational structures and lines of command were cited by several persons as very beneficial to the region. At the same time, the commentators noted that these were only the initial steps in the change process and that much more time and a continuing high degree of commitment was required to truly implement positive results.

No One Knows What the MPO is, What it Does, or Why it even Exists

A frequent comment made was that the HRMPO is in many respects the “hidden” agency in the region. While those involved with the organization are strongly supportive and very appreciative of its technical abilities, this information does not seem to be shared widely if at all outside of the confines of the Regional Building. Several persons who have been involved with the organization for a period of at least 3-5 years commented that in the beginning they did not truly understand what their role or responsibility was and that they still have a number of unanswered questions about the Federal planning process, how the LRTP and the TIP are created, and related topics. The need for a basic training course in the function of the MPO was frequently cited. This lack of knowledge dissemination in the past was noted as possibly contributing to the limited support observed at the local, regional, state and Federal levels for funding of the transportation improvements necessary for the long term economic growth and development of the region.

Several persons also commented on the need for the HRMPO to take a more active and visible role in the regional transportation planning and project development process. It was noted that the recent issue of the Jordan Bridge closure seemed to have arisen with little notice or discussion by the MPO Board and perhaps even the staff and yet it is viewed by many as an issue of regional significance in need of prompt attention.

Public Involvement has always been the Weakest Element of the MPO Process in the Hampton Roads Region

Related to the previous comment were a number of more specific concerns that even the most technically sound and proficient agency cannot be successful in the long term if it does not actively engage the residents of the region in the decision-making process. Several commentators noted that some of the local elected officials involved with the MPO process seemed to be reluctant to allow even their own constituents to express any comments either positive or negative on specific projects or the regional planning process in general. The view was expressed that this was creating an ever-increasing level of public frustration and opposition to doing anything. In contrast, the actions of the Virginia Department of Transportation in pursuing an active public involvement process on all of its projects and the actions of many of the local jurisdictions in encouraging

greater public input from their citizens on a variety of topics were cited as examples of what the HRMPO should be doing more often.

Related comments emphasized the need to truly open up all aspects of the process to a broad cross-section of the regional population. The planned creation of a regional citizen's advisory committee for the MPO was strongly supported, with the admonition that its membership should truly reflect the diversity of the community so that it did not look just like the current leadership of the organization.

Lack of a Truly Regional View / Consensus on Many Important Issues

Most of those contacted made this comment from one perspective or another. Some of those interviewed went so far as to suggest that there is a lack of a true regional approach or consensus on anything. Several persons commented that there are long-standing political differences between those jurisdictions on the Northside (the Peninsula communities) and those on the Southside. It was also commonly noted that the larger and smaller political jurisdictions seldom seem to seek a consensus but rather seek only to protect their own parochial interests. A specific cited example was the debate over the selection of the HRTA projects, which several persons commented seemed to consciously avoid the inclusion of current regional issues such as the Hampton Roads Bridge Tunnel in favor of other "locally preferred" actions.

Perceived Lack of Trust by Residents of Local Elected Officials

As previously mentioned, a frequent comment was that the opinions of local residents do not seem to be given serious consideration by some local elected officials. Several of those interviewed noted that some local jurisdictions have very active public outreach programs in place which have contributed to a high degree of public involvement and trust while neighboring jurisdictions appear to do little in this regard. As a result, there seems to be at least a perceived lack of trust by the residents of some parts of the region that their local elected and appointed officials are truly interested in public comments on any topic. While perhaps not explicitly an HRMPO issue, its resolution across the width and breadth of the region might represent an HRMPO opportunity to demonstrate what it can do in the area of public involvement.

HRMPO is Barely "Scratching the Surface" in Terms of Having a Good Public Involvement Program

A regular comment was that the HRMPO seems to be doing only the bare minimum necessary in terms of public involvement and information dissemination. Much of this was attributed to the former way in which the agency was managed, with comments that things have appeared to be improving in recent months. At the same time, many commented that they did not perceive a true high-level commitment on the part of the current organization's leadership to engage in the type of broad-based public outreach necessary to overcome this concern.

The posting of meeting notices and agendas on the agency web site and at the front desk of the Regional Building in Chesapeake were not perceived as being a meaningful or effective example of soliciting public involvement. Similarly, the current practice of holding all MPO Board meetings during the morning hours at the Regional Building was not seen as allowing those with potential business or personal conflicts from conveniently attending these meetings. It was suggested that the occasional moving of the meeting location to the major public buildings of other member jurisdictions and holding them in the early evening hours might encourage a higher level of public participation.

While commenting that the planned establishment of a regional citizen's advisory committee was a very positive step, concerns were also expressed that without adequate leadership and direction and without a strong effort to reach out to all elements of the regional population it would be extremely difficult if not impossible to resolve the current issue in a timely fashion.

MPO Technical Process Viewed as Too Monolithic and Focused on Highway Solutions to All Issues

While recognizing the importance of the public highway system to the continuing economic development and prosperity of the region, many commented that other modes are equally important. In particular, the need to better integrate freight movement - whether by ship, barge, train, truck, or airplane - into the regional planning process and to better consider the potential roles of bicycle, pedestrian, and public transportation modes in all jurisdictions were cited by a number of persons contacted.

Recent actions to provide the regional transit agencies and the Virginia Port Authority with more active roles in the MPO Board process were favorably commented on but were viewed as only the first steps in an evolving process of expanded agency and stakeholder engagement. The concept of creating a regional freight committee or similar advisory body for the MPO was strongly supported across a wide range of perspectives.

Concluding Remarks

As summarized above, there were a wide range of issues and concerns identified by the members of the consultant team during their initial outreach efforts to a broad cross-section of regional stakeholders. If there was an emerging consensus opinion identified it was that the situation today is a significant improvement from that which existed a year ago. Yet at the same time, it was also regularly acknowledged that there is still a great deal of work to be done by all levels of the HRMPO in its efforts to seek to become a much better organization that exceeds the minimum requirements of the Federally mandated metropolitan transportation planning process in order to effectively make information available, engage stakeholders in meaningful ways, and creating a truly collaborative decision-making process.

Chapter 3

MPO Peer Group Research Findings / Potential Best Practices Identification

The Hampton Roads Metropolitan Planning Organization (HRMPO) has conducted two prior, brief surveys to analyze the organizational structures of a number of peer agencies in other parts of the country. The survey that is the subject of this chapter was designed to go into more detailed discussions on specific aspects of both organizational and public engagement practices with MPOs that are similar to HRMPO or have strong practices to share. A critical contributing factor to the credibility of any comparative case or peer group analysis is ensuring that the peers have characteristics that make the results transferable to the study subject, in this case the HRMPO.

Preparing the Candidate Peer Listing

To generate an initial short list of candidates for the MPO Peer Group Case Studies, three variables were considered in a qualitative fashion.

- Size of Population. Measured by number of residents and employees in the urbanized area. A strong peer MPO to the Hampton Roads MPO is one that was greater than one million in population; a moderate peer MPO is one that was at least 200,000 in population at the time of the 2000 US Census. The rationale for the 200,000 population threshold is simply that these larger MPOs (formally designated transportation management areas, or TMAs) have special requirements in terms of their deliverables and external federal certification processes. Smaller MPOs are still viable candidates for consideration for the public engagement best practice study where they may provide a unique approach or technique.
- Complexity. Measured by the number of jurisdictions and technical service providers (e.g., military, ports, transit authorities) in the MPO. A strong peer MPO to the Hampton Roads MPO is one that had at least one city of over 500,000 population along with a number of smaller jurisdictional members, as well as at least one technical service provider. Moderate and weak peers have smaller cities, numbers of jurisdictional members, no other major transportation stakeholders (e.g., military bases, ports, transit authorities), or more dominant center cities than is the case currently at HRMPO.
- Role. MPOs play different roles depending on the relationship with the state department of transportation (DOT), history, and relationship to member governments. A strong peer MPO to the HRMPO would be one that had authority to spend Regional Surface Transportation Program or RSTP funds; direct control over Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) funds; but did not have direct control over land use decisions. A moderately strong peer MPO would have a subordinate role to their state DOT for one or more of the funding categories mentioned above, including STP-DA; or had direct influence over land use decisions or utility extensions. A weak peer MPO would be one that served more as a planning

clearinghouse without direct influence over transit operators or state pass-through funding.

Each of these variables were assigned a rating of (S)trong, (M)oderate, or (W)eak; then re-assessed after the interview process was completed to make any necessary adjustments based on new information. In every case, the level of association between any case study MPO and the HRMPO should be considered approximate. Inter-rater reliability issues were partially addressed by having at least two MPO professionals review the initial survey results.

Although 30 – 40 case studies were identified in the initial scope of services, some additional candidates were provided under the assumption that some MPO peers could not be reached in a timely manner. This assumption was accurate, with 35 case studies being completed. The following figure (**Figure 3-1**) and table (**Figure 3-2**) indicates the complete candidate list and those MPOs that were actually interviewed.



Figure 3-1. Map of Metropolitan Planning Organizations in Peer Study.

Selected MPO Peer
1. DRCOG (Denver, CO)
2. North Central COG (Dallas, TX)
3. Capital Area MPO (Austin, TX)
4. Capital Area MPO (Raleigh, NC)
5. Miami/Dade County (Miami, FL)
6. CMAP (Chicago, IL)
7. Puget Sound Regional Council (Seattle, OR)
8. Knoxville MPO (Knoxville, TN)
9. Mecklenburg-Union MPO (Charlotte, NC)
10. New York Metropolitan Transportation Commission (New York, NY)
11. North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority (Newark, New Jersey)
12. North Front Range MPO (Cheyenne, WY)
13. Broward County MPO (Ft. Lauderdale, FL)
14. Cincinnati-Northern Kentucky MPO (Cincinnati, OH)
15. East-West Gateway COG (St. Louis, MO)
16. Greater Buffalo-Niagara RTC (Buffalo, NY)
17. Indianapolis MPO (Indianapolis, IN)
18. METRO (Portland, OR)
19. METROPLAN (Orlando, FL)
20. Mid-America Regional Council (Kansas City, KS)
21. Mid-Ohio RPC (Columbus, OH)
22. Nashville Area MPO (Nashville, TN)
23. NOACA (Cleveland, OH)
24. RTC Southern Nevada (Las Vegas, NV)
25. SACOG (Sacramento, CA)
26. San Antonio-Bexar County MPO (San Antonio, TX)
27. SEWRPC (Milwaukee/Waukesha, WI)
28. State Planning Council (Providence, RI)
29. Wasatch Front Range Regional Council (Salt Lake City, UT)
30. ACOG (Oklahoma City, OK)
31. Birmingham MPO (Birmingham, AL)
32. Capital District Transp. Committee (Albany, NY)
33. Genesee Transportation Council (Rochester, NY)
34. Hillsborough County MPO (Tampa, FL)
35. Louisville Area MPO (Louisville, KY)
36. Memphis Urban Area MPO (Memphis, TN)
37. Oahu MPO (Honolulu, HI)
38. Pima Association of Governments (Tucson, AZ)
39. Richmond Area MPO (Richmond, VA)
40. SEMCOG (Detroit, MI)
41. Maricopa Association of Governments (Phoenix, AZ)
42. MTA (San Francisco, CA)
43. ARC (Atlanta, GA)
44. BMC (Baltimore, MD)
45. MWCOG (Washington, DC/MD/VA)
46. SANDAG (San Diego, CA)
47. DVRPC (Philadelphia, PA/NJ)
48. SPC (Pittsburgh, PA)

Figure 3-2. Listing of Metropolitan Planning Organizations in Peer Study.

(Note: Shaded rows are MPOs that were initial candidates but not interviewed.)

The List of Initial Questions Posed to the Peer MPOs

Part I. Organizational Practices. Given that the HRMPO has already progressed towards identifying and implementing alternative strategies for weighted voting and reconstituting its organizational structure and bylaws, the following questions were developed in concert with information provided by responses from initial staff discussions and surveys. For example, while achieving a quorum is a problem for some MPOs, this is not the case with HRMPO; hence, there was no need to pursue that line of questioning.

The following questions were used as a starting point for the MPO peer interviews in the area of organizational arrangements. The questions were reviewed and approved by the MPO staff prior to conducting any interviews.

- O1. How are other transportation stakeholders (e.g., military bases, ports, transit authorities) represented on your technical and policy boards?
- O2. Please summarize the history of how (or if) weighted voting procedures have been developed for use by your agency's technical (if applicable) and policy boards, and describe how often they are invoked as well as any issues that have arisen.
- O3. Please summarize the quorum requirements for boards, as well as proxy voting and rules governing attendance.
- O4. Please summarize informal opportunities for interaction between the policy and technical boards, as well as between the boards and MPO staff (e.g., retreats).
- O5. Please summarize the type, role, and frequency of communication with technical and non-technical subcommittees, as well as MPO agency staffing and costs requirements (approximate annual figures for each).
- O6. As it pertains to your organizational practices for activities such as the LRTP, the TIP, the UPWP, and regional transit plans, do you have any performance metrics that you can share with the HRMPO? Why/how were your performance metrics developed?

The MPO contacted was also asked to provide digital copies, if available of bylaws, charters, prospectus, designation MOU, or other documents that supported the discussion of innovative organizational practices.

Part II. Public Engagement Practices. The MPO has traditionally been a clearinghouse within its designated region for public information on transportation issues, and is required to proactively reach out to stakeholders (43 CFR 450.316(a)(1)). The following questions are targeted at identifying specifically how MPOs around the country are engaging the public, with a secondary focus on the manner in which the agency seeks to solicit input from special populations such as low-literacy, minority, elderly, low income, and mobility limited people and households.

The following public engagement-related questions were reviewed by the HRMPO staff prior to initiating the interviews with the Peer MPOs.

- P1. Review list of possible data sources (US Census, city/county/state agencies, private marketing research firms, etc.), and prompt for other sources in use that identify, communicate with, or describe public engagement groups.
- P2. Has there been a recent (last one or two) federal certification review that has mentioned public engagement practices as either a recommended action or corrective action? If so, please summarize how you made the necessary response.
- P3. Discuss the methods for advertising and notifying the public in advance of major MPO actions, such as the long-range transportation plan, transportation improvement program, board meetings, and planning work program/unified planning work program. Inquire into variable advance notification times (15, 30, 45, or 60 days, etc.) for different MPO documents or activities.
- P4. How do you communicate or ‘visualize’ the impacts of the long-range transportation plan with the public? Inquire into recently initiated or innovative graphic information display tools that are currently being used.
- P5. How do you decide on the choice of venue for public meetings? Ask for a description of a “typical” meeting set-up including duration, graphics, presentations, opportunities for public and agency/official speaking, documentation of meeting events and discussion, etc.
- P6. What methods have you successfully employed for outreach to traditionally underserved populations (minorities, low income, elderly, limited language skills, etc.)?
- P7. As pertains to public engagement practices, do you have performance metrics that you can share with the HRMPO? Why/how were your performance metrics developed?
- P8. Does the MPO offer internal training or support specific external training opportunities in the area of community impact assessment, public engagement, environmental justice, and context sensitive solutions? If “YES”, which one(s).

As with the organizational practice discussion, the MPO contacted was also asked to provide examples of public participation tools, web site addresses, and related information that would explain or demonstrate innovative practices.

Peer Study Findings

Locating the correct person, or, as was frequently the case with large MPOs, two people to interview was sometimes a challenge to completing a particular interview. A number of MPOs could not be reached within the timeframe of this study, but the study group identified 48 candidate MPOs to get a minimum of 30 case studies. Notes for each of the questions were entered in summary form into a MS-Excel™ spreadsheet or MS-Word. Notes from each interview and question that were considered to be innovative or a “best practice” in the two subject areas of the study were entered as redface text to facilitate later retrieval. The following sections present the key findings from the interviews, identifying first the standard practice then highlighting best practices. It is worth mentioning that “best” practices relating to organizational structure are objectively difficult to identify since there is great diversity among MPO structures and local / state contexts, so for the organizational questions innovative practices that differ from the standard are discussed, but innovation may not translate to best practice in another place.

Although a number of MPO representatives cited that their organizations had received a notice of programmatic recommendations related to improving public engagement practices during recent Federal recertification reviews, only a few indicated having received a formal corrective action citation. There was not a clear relationship between past corrective/recommended actions from a recertification review to either the strength of current public engagement practices or the stated influence of such actions on the subsequent activities of the MPO. Programmatic recommendations and corrective actions ran the gamut from general requests to engage the public more heavily to very specific requests, such as engaging low-income/minority (collectively referred to as Environmental Justice, or EJ, populations) groups, starting a newsletter, or using free/reduced lunch-eligible data to identify EJ communities.

Engaging Non-Governmental Agencies Through Auxiliary Committees

The standard practice for MPOs in the case study group was to create one or more standing committees that focus on a single topic area. Each advisory committee (sometimes called task force or, less often, working group) reported to a standing technical committee by way of MPO staff reports. The variety of these standing advisory committees is noteworthy and include the following examples:

- Citizens
- Freight
- Transit / Intermodal
- Aesthetics
- Sustainability
- Legislative
- Bicycle/Pedestrian
- Environmental Justice
- Intermodal
- Economic
- Technology / ITS

Additionally, there are *ad hoc* committees that formed to address specific issues, such as project prioritization, long-range transportation planning, and transportation improvement program development. In terms of servicing these committees, the standard practice was to have multiple staff prepare agenda packets and provide other assistance.

Freight is the issue that determines the economic competitiveness of the region. The railroads have seen they can make more money by cooperating with the MPO
- Mark R. Policinski, Cincinnati-Northern Kentucky

Best or innovative practices in the area of engaging non-governmental entities include situations where the advisory committee has either a non-voting or voting seat on the technical or policy boards. It is also worth noting that the number of these advisory boards can get quite large: MAG (Phoenix, AZ) reported having 18 of these committees. This begs the question of how much staff is engaged in servicing these committees; unfortunately the answers were either very vague or had a wide range (e.g., 5% of total staff hours or one full-time equivalent per one or two committees).

During the discussions, another practice that emerged was the inclusion of some non-traditional members on either the technical or policy boards. For example, the Miami-

Dade County MPO (which is cited extensively in a later section for their public engagement practices) includes a school board representative on their policy committee as a voting member. CMAP (Chicago, IL) has environmental resource agencies that participate on their executive board – but an important distinction is that some MPOs that are married to regional planning authorities have an overarching executive board that includes more diverse (not just transportation) representation. Finally, another innovative practice by the Cincinnati-Northern Kentucky MPO is the adoption of a wide open format for the freight working group, wherein anyone is invited to participate, and technical studies are eschewed for direct involvement of the members in identifying key issues of importance. This same MPO has invested heavily in rail freight planning, estimating a contribution of \$3 million towards helping private rail companies conduct planning studies, for example (the railroad companies provide the local matching funds). Best practice for servicing advisory committees with MPO staff tended towards having one, dedicated staff person at the MPO that was a specialist in the technical area of the committee (such as a bicycle/pedestrian planner or freight logistics expert). Even in these cases, other staff from the MPO frequently provide assistance on certain agenda items or to otherwise prepare for meetings.

Weighted Voting and Quorum Requirements

While the majority of the MPOs participating in the case studies do not have a weighted voting provision in their bylaws, of those that do there is a variety of approaches to weighting the votes of the policy board (votes of the technical boards were never weighted). Some were extremely complex, involving literally over a thousand weighted votes, but most were based on relatively simple population criteria. In the majority of instances, weighted voting was only employed for select issues, and could typically be requested by any voting member prior to a vote being taken by the policy committee. Some MPOs (e.g., Cheyenne/North Front Range and Raleigh/Capital Area) have stated that, while they have weighted voting, it has not been invoked since its inception or is used extremely infrequently (e.g., Denver/DRCOG). A more commonplace way to assign a heavier voting authority to larger jurisdictions was to simply give them more votes (more seats at the table).

Quorum requirements can help shape decisions in much the same way as a weighted vote, since the quorums sometimes rely on a number of weighted votes to be present before a meeting can begin. Most quorums rely on a simple majority (50% or 51%) of the unweighted and/or weighted voting members to be present. As stated previously, a second method of placing differing weights on different members was to have multiple voting members from larger jurisdictions. The Richmond MPO (Virginia), for example, allots four voting memberships to Henrico and Chesterfield Counties, and the City of Richmond; three slots to the City of Hanover; two to Goochland, Powhatan, and New Kent Counties; and one voting membership to the remaining agencies. This last group includes the Virginia Department of Transportation, the Richmond Regional Airport Authority, and transit providers. Generally the more complex the MPO study area, the greater the chance for an increasing complexity of quorum structures. This rule-of-thumb is most obvious in MPOs that have bi-state (or tri-state) jurisdictions, wherein members

from each state have to be present in addition to a majority of voting members (e.g., Philadelphia/DVRPC).

Best, or at least innovative, practices in the areas of weighted voting and quorum requirements included Mecklenburg-Union (Charlotte (NC) or MUMPO), wherein every vote taken is a weighted vote. Interestingly, MUMPO does not exactly equate the weighted votes to a strict population rule, although the weights are “loosely” based on the decennial census population. The NYMTC (New York Metropolitan Transportation Commission), the MPO for New York City, has adopted a consensus rule at the policy board level, and has delegated minor decisions such as TIP amendments to three technical committees formed to accommodate geopolitical boundaries of the region. The idea of consensus of affected parties is promulgated throughout New York State. The CDTC (Albany, NY), for example, has employed this option for some 26 years (at least, according to the person interviewed) without serious contention arising between the members of the policy board.

Regarding novel quorum requirements, some of the larger MPOs do not necessarily require a majority of the policy board members present to have a meeting, instead opting for a 1/3 minority or a fixed number of members that amount to less than a majority to be present for a meeting to be called to order (e.g., Louisville, KY). However, CMAP (Chicago, IL) requires a super-majority of 4/5 of the policy board to be present to achieve a quorum. Some MPOs have adopted a “clustering” concept when the number of government members grows too great. Under this option, a number of small cities and towns regularly appoint a representative to the MPO policy or technical boards.

Another practice to ensure that failing to meet quorum requirements doesn’t hamper the operations of the MPO is to have a provision regarding a number of absences triggering a corresponding lowering of the quorum requirements. For example, any member that misses three meetings at MUMPO (Charlotte) isn’t counted against future quorum requirements.

Informal Interactions with Boards and Staff

Many of the MPOs contacted noted that they did attempt to pursue informal board meetings due to state freedom of information laws that would require advertising, etc. that would make the meeting formal. A few of the responses that were innovative included the following:

- While no informal retreats are conducted, the staff of the MPO strives to work closely and directly with the policy and technical boards to discuss agendas, resolve issues, and so forth.
- In one instance, four-to-five members of a board will meet for lunch with members of the MPO staff.
- Staff-level meetings conducted in alternating months with regular board meetings.
- An orientation meeting with new board members, handbook, or presentation is typically provided to inform new members on the roles and responsibilities of the MPOs.

Performance Metrics for the MPO and Major MPO Tasks

To capture information about performance metrics, MPO case interviews were supplemented with a review of the long-range transportation plans for all 48 candidate MPOs. The standard practice is not to present an annual or systematic update of the MPO performance to the boards; however, performance metrics like vehicle miles of travel, time spent in congested travel conditions, transit ridership, and vehicle-occupancy ratios are commonplace in describing transportation system performance for alternatives in the long-range transportation plan. A number of agencies either do not have performance metrics or cite other agencies (e.g., State DOTs or transit companies) as having their own performance metrics that the MPO relies on to track and assess performance. One MPO noted, for example, that since the MPO was not an implementing agency, it made little sense to monitor external, transportation system performance since they had no control over improvements to that system. Other MPOs (e.g., Kansas City/MARC, Cincinnati/OKI) stated that, while they did not have performance metrics, they place a special emphasis on creating and adhering to deadlines for their work products. In some states, notably Florida, a consistent set of performance metrics is evolving. Another potential example is in Virginia, where the Richmond MPO noted that it is considering adopting the performance metrics used in the *VTrans2035* process.

Data Resources for Identifying and Communicating with Public Groups

The Hampton Roads MPO requires and utilizes a variety of data sources to identify and analyze groups of the public. The HRMPO and most of the peer MPOs studied utilize US Census data heavily, including the annual American Community Survey and Census Journey to Work items. HRMPO is taking advantage of an option to purchase more data points in the current travel behavior survey. Other data sources are not used consistently, but include third-party sources (e.g., InfoUSA and Woods & Poole employment data sets and forecasts; state records of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and the free and reduced price meal program-eligible populations) although some respondents indicated a level of inaccuracy in these datasets. The standard practice occasionally includes the preparation of new or modified data sets including traffic count information and public information surveys. Obviously, one of the more useful datasets that the MPO frequently leads on the development of is the socio-demographic baseline data and forecasts used in the computer travel demand model.

Best practice for data collection tends to rely more on cooperative agreements with transit operators, municipal/county governments, and other agencies. The Broward County (Florida) MPO public information officer, a position that is common among MPOs with more aggressive and sophisticated outreach efforts, conducts frequent meetings with the county transit operator and others to share information about upcoming events. The Cincinnati-Northern Kentucky MPO has made a goal of being the “go-to” agency in the region regarding spatial datasets. They have a full-time lead demographer and four-person (Geographic Information System) GIS staff to build and maintain databases. Another method employed, albeit without a conscious decision to create a system of

metrics, is to invite a variety of different stakeholders to technical meetings to share perspectives and ideas on project planning performance and direction of the MPO.

Public Meeting Practices

Commonplace among the MPOs surveyed was the use of public meetings to gather public input and present draft planning documents. Advertised public hearings are not required in the U.S. Code (23 USC §134) but the transportation improvement program (TIP) process must include at least one public meeting addressed in the public participation plan adopted by the MPO (49 CFR §450.324). All public meetings conducted by MPOs should be conducted at accessible locations and times to the “maximum extent practicable” (49 CFR 450.210) and provide electronically accessible notices, such as through the World Wide Web (49 CFR §450.316).

The standard practice for the MPOs in the peer review included three-week to 45-day public notification of major TIP amendments and other meetings, but in some cases (e.g., Kansas City/MARC) the timeframes were shorter, allowing for as little as 14 days for TIP actions and 30 days for updates to the long-range transportation plan. Many MPOs asked people to complete a sign-in sheet if they wished to speak at public meetings. Nearly all of those MPOs asked responded that they held meetings at times and locations that they thought were accessible, particularly by transit modes of travel. Cost of the venue was also a factor. Both written and oral comments are sought at typical MPO meetings, as are email addresses for follow-up contacts. Financial resources and the scale/impact of the action under consideration are used to adjust the degree of public engagement effort undertaken by the MPO. Notifications of meetings typically involved some type of advertisement in the local newspaper (including foreign language oriented periodicals), mass email distribution lists, and occasionally radio advertisements.

Best practice in the area of public meetings included staggered meeting notices (e.g., at four weeks and again at two weeks); translation services at every major meeting; and tracking how the participants heard about the meeting by asking such a question on the sign-in sheet for the meeting. The Miami-Dade County MPO share email contact databases with transit providers, FDOT, turnpike authority, seaports, airports, and school board authorities with whom they meet quarterly to discuss upcoming events. This collective database has approached 35,000 contacts, many of which are, in turn, distribution lists that create a second wave of emails. Miami-Dade, which proved to possess the most robust public participation program of any interviewee, was quick to point out that public meetings are generally not the preferred outreach mechanism. Other MPOs noted that they frequently have had difficulties in getting people to attend meetings that were not associated with a particular (or controversial) project. Best practice includes a dedicated outreach program that allows for staff to go to public events, such as the Mecklenburg-Union (Charlotte) MPO attending annual neighborhood symposiums where they hand out postcards to attendees. Best practice for notification of meetings included such elements as full-page advertisements in large circulation newspapers, mass postcard distributions to people in a radius (e.g., ½-mile) around a project, and television advertisements. There is also a greater reliance on member

governments to participate in the outreach process for meetings, especially by assisting in the distribution of notices.

Best practice for meeting formats includes sign-in sheets that note where the participant first heard about the meeting; multiple meeting series to ensure geographic extent (one MPO holds one meeting during the day and two at night to complete a series of three – sometimes these series can be as large as 10 consecutive meetings); televised meetings (in one case including a call-in feature for questions during the TIP adoption process) for board meetings; and the locations are carefully considered according to the project “market” and even where there is a high amount of foot traffic. Sometimes the selection of a meeting venue is conducted in cooperation with and input from the citizen advisory committee. This latter process was used successfully by the Pittsburgh MPO (Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission – SPC) to obtain over 3,000 public inputs during its most recent LRTP update across a 10-county region.

Visualizing Transportation Planning

US Federal Code (49 USC §5303(i)(5)(C)(ii), 23 USC §134(i)(5)(C)(ii), and §5304(f)(3)(B)(ii)) require that visualization techniques be employed to explain the content of the TIP and long-range transportation plan. The MPOs that were contacted typically expressed uncertainty in the meaning of “visualization” but frequently cited more extensive use of mapping products especially those involving GIS databases in their day-to-day technical activities. One MPO stated that design visualizations, which is where the best use of visualization techniques could be employed (as opposed to the systems-level planning that is typically the forte of MPOs), were often more artistic than factual and should be used with a degree of caution.

Standard practice consists of an extensive use of mapping and cartographic tools to express data in a spatial format, and using newsletters or web-based content to disseminate the information. Interestingly, one MPO noted that they did not believe in newsletters, since research had previously indicate that no one reads them (this same MPO noted that instead of newsletters the staff worked closely with the media to make their public participation events known to the general public). Where applicable, microsimulation packages such as VISSIM (and presumably SynchroProfessional) are used less often. Photographic renderings (montages) using Photoshop (Adobe) are also used by some MPOs to communicate the visual impacts or characteristics of a specific proposal. The use of websites is extensive, and many MPOs use their website to distribute information. In fact, a noticeable theme of “pushing” ever more public participants in the planning process towards the MPO website was apparent.

Best practice examples include specific actions taken by MPOs to illustrate or explain key concepts, frequently taking a certain approach or technology to greater extremes in terms of level of usage.

- Video compositions are becoming more commonplace. One MPO got Dolly Parton to do a public service announcement, while another has created an annual PSA contest. They show the winners on their website, rotating them out frequently. This

has created an air of excitement for the high schools and colleges that participate and a level of recognition that otherwise would not be present. Webcasting is an offshoot of this technology, and some MPOs are using streaming video to webcast their policy board meetings.

- Hands-on techniques, such as the Strings-and-Ribbons game, continue to be used by some MPOs to gather direct input on systems-level planning priorities. A variant of Strings-and-Ribbons, called Blocks-and-Ribbons, involves the use of two colors of Lego™ blocks (representing commercial and residential development) that participants place singly or in stacks on a gridded map of the planning area.
- One MPO has challenged its staff not to use MS-PowerPoint presentations anymore, instead relying on live mapping enhanced by the datasets managed or developed by the MPO staff. This same MPO has created a video presentation they update annually that is presented to decision makers and other audiences when the MPO does a “road show” that is unfamiliar with the MPO and its work. This presentation embeds three-dimensional imagery to show large, proposed new developments, for example.
- Three-dimensional renderings using software tools such as SketchUp (Google) are becoming more commonplace, as is scenario visualization software such as CommunityViz (Scenario360). A variation of this attention to visualization is presented by the North Jersey Transportation Authority (NJTPA), which contracted to produce a web-based, interactive visioning tool (<http://www.rtp2035.org/njtpa.php>).
- While citizen’s participation guides aren’t necessarily innovative, one MPO (Hillsborough County/Tampa, FL) has modified their guide to resemble a cookbook (www.hillsboroughmpo.org/aboutmpo/aboutmpo_folders/foldercitizensguide). With sections named similar to cookbook titles like Menu Planning (What is the MPO?), Alphabet Soup (What are All Those Acronyms For?), and Cooking Tips (Where Can I Get More Info?), the MPO has made normally dry topics more approachable to its general audience.
- A few MPOs are actively using or contemplating computer-based decision-support systems. The Pima Association of Governments (Tucson, AZ) has employed the “ThinkTank” decision-support system, whereby up to 21 participants can anonymously enter their opinions in a group setting, reacting to information provided by a presenter or each other.

Reaching Out to Traditionally Underserved Populations

Environmental Justice, compliance with Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and Executive Order 12898 (Clinton) have combined to produce a lasting effect on many MPOs. However, the provisions of SAFETEA-LU have increased the public outreach responsibility further to include bicycle-pedestrian advocacy agencies and environmental resource/regulatory agencies. Hence, a careful and thoughtful approach to developing a schedule for long-range transportation plans and other major actions of the MPO has become more of an exercise in inter-agency and interpersonal coordination than in the past.

Standard practice has been to advertise in minority-oriented periodicals and newspapers; maintaining email databases of minority, elderly, low-income, and other groups; as well as taking out advertising space in English-text publications or creating in-house newsletters. Interestingly, there are still only a relatively few websites that translated into Spanish (for example), even in areas with high percentages of ESL (English as Second Language) populations. Several of these MPOs suggested that this was due in part to the perceived higher expense of maintaining a parallel website while others noted this as being a relatively low cost. One of the contacted MPOs (Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission in Pittsburgh, PA) provides instant translation of its website using the AltaVista Babelfish software to convert English-text into any of either other languages..

Training a staff person in Spanish, and having on-request Spanish translation services are fairly commonplace. At the other extreme, the Oahu MPO (Honolulu) provides telephone interpreter services in over 20 world languages to public meeting attendees. Increasingly, a reliance on mobile presentations to put MPO staff in direct contact with the public at various events has become more critical, as has working on a more cooperative basis with the mainstream, local media outlets.

Best practice methods for reaching populations traditionally underserved by transportation planning exercises are again varied, and include the following notable practices:

- One MPO (NYMTC, New York City) created a “public involvement corps” that they have used to leverage notifications; the common name for this type of technique is Speaker’s Bureau. A Speaker’s Bureau member is provided with materials and instructions that they then use to present concepts important to the community that the MPO may impact with their projects or programs.
- One MPO has hired a private firm to pay participants \$50.00 to participate in focus groups that provided input to proposed MPO programs and projects. Focus groups that aren’t monetarily compensated are also conducted in other MPOs that were contacted.
- An Environmental Justice advisory committee provides the staff of one MPO with suggestions about content, meeting locations, and participation tools.
- One trend is the decentralization of public involvement efforts, or delegating the responsibility to other agencies. METRO (Portland, OR) has noted that they are following this trend, and also hire an outside Public Involvement specialist to conduct an external audit of their public participation plan and practices. Another has identified a group of community “elders” that have standing in their individual communities or civic groups that they work with to disseminate information.
- While not yet completely standardized, the practice of hiring one or more public information specialists seems to separate larger MPOs that practice better external outreach. The public information officer prepares public participation materials, works closely with staff, cooperates with member and external organizations, and attends many outside meetings to make presentations and raise awareness of the MPO.

In some cases (e.g., Denver/DRCOG), the MPO notes that a significant part of the challenge is to simply document all the outreach that is being done, both for internal purposes and the external federal certification review process.

We aren't unhappy with public involvement that's being done; it's more a matter of documenting the public involvement and outreach activities that we are already doing
- Steve Rudy, Denver Regional Council of Governments

Public Participation Performance Metrics and Staff Training Opportunities

The idea of applying strict performance metrics and reporting performance in regard to their external performance in public outreach is just beginning to get traction with MPOs. Somewhat more commonplace are internal or indirect performance measures, such as number of meetings; number of attendees at meetings; number of website “hits,” number of postcards / surveys returned; number of emails sent; or amount of data (e.g., email contact lists) entered into a computer database over some period of time. Similarly, training staff tends to be sporadic; no MPO mentioned a specific training curriculum to achieve a desired level of proficiency in some aspect of public relations work. One commenter noted that the idea of assessing performance using standard metrics was problematic. For example, is a large number of attendees at a public meeting indicative of a good public notification process or does it mean that the MPO has not adequately identified and mitigated public concerns?

Best practice in these related areas is mixed, but some common themes did emerge. Some MPOs clearly invested more in training, but frequently this was in partnership with their parent state or state department of transportation. Some MPOs did note that they either are or are going to start an annual report to their boards that identifies metrics for public outreach. Once again, the Miami-Dade County (Florida) MPO emerged as a best practitioner. The two public involvement staff there have merit pay increases dictated in part by how much outreach they have conducted. These metrics include percentage of comments entered into a MS-Access™ database within five days of receiving the comment; number of press releases per month; and so forth. This MPO did note that externally evaluating the success of any public involvement program was very challenging. An example of such an external measure is the number of times the MPO is featured in the local newspaper or on television or radio programming.

For staff training opportunities, sometimes the closest MPO ally is the State DOT or a state association of MPOs. The Florida DOT is preparing, with the cooperation of their MPOs, a set of performance metrics for public engagement programs at the MPO level. Similar to Florida, the New York State MPO association has worked cooperatively to pool resources from its member MPOs and develop studies and training courses for the whole in a cost-effective fashion. While many MPOs stated that they will send their employees to public engagement-related courses (for example, NHI / NTI courses), at least one MPO noted that they have developed an in-house training program for their staff. Another MPO contracted with a private consultant to develop and deliver a training

course on Environmental Justice matters. Several of those persons interviewed for these case studies noted that the current economic climate and rescissions have restricted their ability to send people to remote training opportunities.

Chapter 4 – Public Participation – Key Findings and Actions

Who are your customers and the ones paying the bill for what you are doing? The answer is the *public*, those 1.6 million people residing in the Hampton Roads region that you as their elected or appointed public servants say you serve. By law, they are entitled to be given an active part in the transportation decisionmaking process. Since the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1950 and the Federal Transit laws originally enacted in 1964, efforts have been made to ensure that all interested persons and parties have multiple opportunities for their voices to be heard in how their transportation system is planned, designed, funded, developed, and operated. Originally the public was given the opportunity to speak to highway and transit agencies only at formal project public hearings. Because these events occurred so close to the actual point of decisionmaking, they often did not allow for an appropriate incorporation of public comments and concerns. This resulted in vigorous public resistance to the process, lengthy and expensive reevaluations and changes to designs, skepticism about whether the public could truly influence the outcome of a transportation project, loss of trust in government agencies, and a bevy of law suits.

In response, explicit opportunities for more meaningful public participation were extended to transportation planning and programming, and in conjunction with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, were further extended to the location and design process for specific transportation projects. The Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) of 1991 greatly expanded public involvement in transportation planning and programming. In addition to citizens, affected public agencies, representatives of public transportation employees, private providers of transportation, and others were identified as interested parties. The Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21) enacted in 1998 added freight shippers and representatives of freight transportation services as interested parties and required that agencies have “...a proactive public involvement process that provides complete information, timely public notice, full public access to key decisions, and supports early and continuing involvement of the public in developing plans and TIPs (Transportation Improvement Programs) . . .”. More recently, the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) (2005) added representatives of users of pedestrian walkways and bicycle transportation facilities as interested parties and continued to broaden opportunities for public participation in transportation decisionmaking. While public involvement is mandated by Federal law, there are other valid reasons to involve the public in this democratic process.

The public plays a key role in the decisions shaping what transportation systems and services will be part of their communities. Through an active public involvement effort individuals and their neighborhoods and communities are assured of neither being overlooked nor unfairly bearing the burdens of projects while reaping few of the benefits. Consulting, engaging, involving, and listening to the public through the use of multiple tools and techniques is crucial to identifying public values, needs, and characteristics; to gathering information; and to building a consensus on transportation programs and

projects. Initiating public involvement early and maintaining it continuously during the transportation decisionmaking process gives Federal, State and local decision-makers a better chance of achieving their goals, with projects being implemented in a timely fashion, addressing the concerns of people affected by them in a more cost-effective way, and developing meaningful and responsive mitigation measures. Engaging the public as an ally, rather than as an adversary can result in developing a deeper conversation and gaining more practical insights into diverse issues and concerns than if all parties acted alone and at odds to each other. By being a part of the discussion from the beginning, those that may be directly impacted may support the decisions made because they understand how those decisions were reached. Having said all that, inclusive and active public involvement simply makes for better transportation decisions.

Public participation/involvement as its name implies is the involvement or participation of the public or in most cases a number of diverse publics in the decisionmaking process. It should not be mistaken for public relations or public information; for it is neither. **Public relations** is the art or science of establishing and promoting a favorable relationship with the public. **Public information** is passive one-way communication of specific information by an agency to the public. **Public involvement** is active two-way communication between an agency such as the HRMPO and its publics. While many think public involvement is just an event, it is much more than that. It is a continuous process that begins at project inception and continues through implementation and maintenance often for a period of several decades.

To make any public involvement effort successful requires a long-term commitment on the part of any public agency whether a local government, a State DOT, or a regional MPO. That commitment can be in the form of personnel and expenditures. The individual that leads the public involvement efforts should have a minimum of 10 years experience and come from a background that reflects an understanding of community structure and a high level of comfort in working with all people. Such an individual and their assistant should ideally have worked outside of Virginia for a larger, more mature MPO with more fully developed outreach programs and diverse constituencies. Experience with many MPOs suggests that those with an educational background and work experience in fields such as social work, customer service, marketing, or retail sales are well suited for this role. The new Public Involvement Manager should report directly to the Executive Director.

The first thing the Public Involvement Manager should do is seek out and bring together information/data residing with transit agencies and at each of the cities and counties that compose the MPO. This information/data will be used to create a master mailing and email access database for individuals; advocacy, civic, ethnic, social, religious, fraternal, retired military, service clubs and groups; business organizations; third party organizations; non-profit organizations; governmental departments and agencies; health care facilities, EMS providers; unions, freight haulers, etc. If the information/data obtained from these various agencies is not sufficient to provide complete coverage of the MPO area, then buying a database from a commercial database provider should be explored. This database should have all residential and business (by Standard Industrial

Classification) postal addresses and email addresses. One of the database providers contacted showed only approximately 111,000 of the approximately 486,000 households in the MPO area (or about 23 percent) having access to the internet. The remaining approximately 77 percent of the households did not.

Whether obtained from the local entities or from a database provider, this information/data will need to be transferred to a GIS format to allow for its application in localized project and areawide technical analysis of the region's transportation issues. The low number of households with internet access means that a website or any internet access tool will only reach a small number of households and that those who have the internet access tend to be middle and upper income households, literate, and speak English. In order to be inclusive, information also will have to be placed/disseminated by tools other than computers and newspapers, both of which require subscriptions. Utilizing community-based organizations, non-profit organization, ministerial associations, and other agencies and organizations that serve the elderly, the disabled, low-income, low-literacy, limited-English-proficiency, and in many cases minority populations will be required in order to achieve an equitable distribution of information. Building this coalition in conjunction with having a Citizen Advisory Committee that reflects the diversity of the MPO is paramount to the success of this venture.

The public involvement process is a data hungry process. While it is expected that some additional data will have to be obtained, it is hopeful that much of the needed data is currently available at the MPO, although it may not be in the required format. The first step for the new Public Involvement Manger is to gain a detailed demographic understanding of the publics in the region. This can be done by answering a variety of questions about the populations within the MPO area including but not be limited to the following:

- who are they racially and ethnically (minority and non-minority);
- economically (low-income, middle-income, upper-income);
- linguistically (English or non-English speakers and/or readers),
- educationally (illiterate, low-literate, literate);
- are they religious (Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, or other) or not;
- what are their age groups (young, middle-aged, elderly);
- are they able bodied or disabled (sight, hearing or mobility constraints);
- what kind of accessibility do they have (no personal vehicle, walk, bike, carpool, use transit, are dependent on others, transportation independent);
- what is their cultural affiliation (Mexican, Korean, German, Vietnamese, Pilipino, and other); and,
- what is their work schedule (first shift, second shift, third shift, working two jobs) or are they retired, unemployed or students?

These and other questions all need to be asked and answered in order to begin to put the MPO in a position to be able to do inclusive public involvement.

The Public Involvement Manager also needs to gain a geographic understanding of the public by asking questions such as:

- where do these populations live;
- how are their communities and neighborhoods defined;
- what is their development history;
- what community facilities do they have;
- where do they meet;
- do they have access to transit;
- what are the attendance boundaries of their schools; and,
- a host of other questions.

Each of these demographic attributes and geographic locators provides insight into an individual's abilities and constraints to participate in public involvement.

The Public Involvement Manager needs to ask a third set of questions related to the community's "social fabric" such as the following:

- who are the community's formal and informal leaders,
- what are the familial relationships among residents,
- what are the dependent relationships between individuals,
- how long have the residents lived in the community,
- what roles do individuals play and services do they provide to the community, and
- others.

For the most part, the answers to these questions will not be found in the U.S. Census data files, on a website, or in a book. They will be uncovered by being in those communities, and talking and more importantly listening to the residents: By looking for what is visually evident, as well as acknowledging what is obviously present.

Much of this information can be obtained through readily accessible US Census data and presented in GIS format, other information can be accessed through the internet from non-transportation related websites that are in many instances more real time than Census. Some of these other data sources include:

- the National Institute for Literacy's 1998 publication *The State of Literacy in America* estimates the Level 1 literacy (less than fifth grade reading and comprehension skills) for adults (those 16 years old and over) in every State, county, and municipality over 5,000 people in the nation (<http://www.nifl.gov/readers/reder.htm>);
- the National Center for Education Statistics provides student information (race and ethnicity, number of those eligible for the Free and Reduced Price Meal programs, and the number of migrant students for every public schools in the nation and many private schools (<http://www.nces.ed.gov/ccdcd/schoolsearch>);

- the Modern Language Association provides information extrapolated from the 2000 Census on the top 30 languages spoken in every State, county, place, and zip code in the nation by number of speakers (<http://www.mla.org>);
- GreatSchools, Inc. is a non-profit organization that provides information (race, ethnicity, number of students eligible for the Free and Reduced Price meal programs, and English language learners) about students in public, private, and charter schools in the nation (<http://www.greatschools.net>); and
- US Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Services field office website identifies each State's main field office address, phone and fax numbers, and Officer in Charge who can provide a list of businesses that accept Food Stamps by street address, zip code, county, and name; and, identify the period when the Electronic Benefits Transfer takes place.

A list of “best practices” that were identified through in the MPO surveys and from personal knowledge is provided below. This is not a pick and chose list, but a package of “best practices” that is best used in combination as they build on each other. These “best practices” have been used successfully by others and would take a minimum amount of effort to adopt and tweak, rather than start from square one.

The first cited “best practice” is from the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission (DVRPC) in Philadelphia, PA. “...And Justice for All” is totally census driven and could be quickly replicated by the MPO’s GIS staff. The purpose of this tool is to determine which populations are bearing the burdens of a project or policy, and who is reaping the benefits. This tool speaks to equity; are the populations that are bearing the burdens also reaping the benefits, or are the populations that are bearing the burdens reaping only some or none of the benefits.

The second “best practice” is from the Miami-Dade MPO in Miami, FL. Their Community Characteristics Program is a three pronged program that identifies public involvement strategies by the demographic attributes that most often affect an individual’s abilities and constraints to participate in public involvement, a public involvement toolbox that identifies which tools and techniques best fit a targeted demographic, and an interactive GIS mapping component.

The third “best practice” is from the Volusia County MPO in Daytona Beach, FL. Their use of the “Strings and Ribbon” game as their primary public involvement outreach ignited the use of one of the most successful tools for hands-on engagement of all segments of the population equally. Since their initial use of the game more than three years ago, this tool has been adopted by a number of other large and small MPOs, and spawned a variety of spin-offs, iterations, and imitations.

“...and Justice for All”

The Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission (DVRPC) published “...and Justice for All” in September 2001, as their strategy for the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people. The DVRPC is the MPO for the nine-county, bi-state

Philadelphia-Camden-Trenton (PA/NJ) region and has an Environmental Justice Technical Advisory Committee and an Environmental Justice Participation Task Force. The DVRPC developed its environmental justice (EJ) assessment to mitigate potential direct and disparate impacts of its plans, programs, and planning process on defined minority, handicapped and lower income populations in the Delaware Valley region.

The report provides background information about what EJ is; summarizes DVRPC's existing EJ-related plans, policies, and public involvement activities; and, describes a quantitative and qualitative methodology for evaluating the long-range plan, the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP), and other programs. It proposed recommendations for policies and implementation strategies to enhance DVRPC's EJ responsibilities including an annual monitoring and evaluation process to ensure that the policies and implementation strategies remain effective.

The qualitative review of the DVRPC's existing plans and programs included a summary of EJ-related policies and goals from the adopted long-range plan (both the Year 2020 Plan and their Year 2025 Plan); the adopted Year 2025 Regional Airport Systems Plan, and the Regional Job Access and Reverse Commute Transportation Plan from 1999. Other planning document reviewed included the Southeastern Pennsylvania and Southern New Jersey Bicycle and Pedestrian Mobility Plans, a study of regional elderly mobility needs, the TIP, and the annual Unified Planning Work Program.

The more technical quantitative methodology relied primarily upon available US Census data, analyzed at the nine-county, regional scale by municipality or Census tract for various indicators of disadvantage. These categories included concentrations of the following:

- Hispanic minorities;
- non-Hispanic minorities;
- the elderly;
- the handicapped;
- carless households; and,
- number of households in poverty.

The number of factors that applied in a given Census tract or municipality represented the "Degrees of Disadvantage." In addition, "Quality of Life Factors" were defined and included the following:

- arterial highways;
- transit service;
- hospitals;
- employment centers; and,
- job access/reverse commute transportation services.

The resulting "Degrees of Disadvantage" and "Quality of Life Factors" maps were then combined to reflect the positive and negative influences of the region's infrastructure

systems (transit and highway access) and key services. These factors and data sources were expanded over time as the 2000 Census data was released and will be reevaluated as 2010 Census information is released.

The Transportation Plan and the TIP were evaluated separately using the combined map of “Degrees of Disadvantage” and “Quality of Life Factors” factors as an overlay. The resulting maps were evaluated from a geographic perspective (but also incorporating service and quality factors) to identify gaps or areas of lower quality service. Such areas could become the focus of additional actions or mitigation efforts through future DVRPC planning and implementation activities, working either county and local officials and the public. The identified disadvantaged areas also served as an “early warning” of the need to do additional local area EJ analysis as part of any subsequent environmental assessment of individual projects.

In general, the DVRPC’s Year 2025 Transportation Plan and TIP were geographically extensive in terms of the scope and scale of their recommended projects and implementation funding. Few gaps or areas of lower quality service were found using the defined overlay methodology. In fact, many of the areas having four or more degrees of disadvantage were well-located with respect to planned and programmed transportation improvements and public transit service. However, most of the region’s outlying, rural areas were not well served by public transportation, were located further from the region’s major employment centers, and had lower “Quality of Life Factors” than the more urban and suburban communities. Where possible, one way to enhance the transportation accessibility of such areas was to focus on introducing new or additional paratransit service and expanding job access services that connected outlying areas to nearby employment centers or the region’s core transit network.

DVRPC has adopted their 2030 Long Range Plan called *Destination 2030: A Vision for the Future*, and is working on their 2035 Long Range Plan called *Connections - The Regional Plan for a Sustainable Future*. The principles espoused by “...and Justice for All” have been integral to both plans. A copy of “...and Justice for All” can be found on DVRPC’s website <http://www.dvrpc.org/planning/regional/ej/chap1.htm>.

Community Characteristics Program (CCP)

Miami-Dade MPO’s CCP is a three-pronged process that addresses public involvement strategies by demographics, identifies a public involvement toolbox, and has a GIS component for visual presentation. Its website is <http://mpoportal.fiu.edu>.

The first part of the website is *Public Involvement Strategies by Demographics*. The Miami-Dade MPO formatted their demographic data by public involvement strategies into a spreadsheet with the following characteristics:

- age (seniors, working age adults, and youth);
- disability (hearing impaired, sight impaired, physically challenged, and other);
- education (college education, high school diploma, and no high school diploma);

- income (low income and middle/affluent);
- language (English, Spanish, and Creole);
- race and ethnicity (race and ethnicity); and
- vehicle ownership (non-vehicle ownership and vehicle ownership).

Click on “seniors” under “age” and it takes you to a page that provides “general, innovative, and technology” categories and across from them has the type of strategy identified as “educational, promotional, and civic engagement”. Click on “mailing lists” under the “general” heading and it takes you to another page that provides the following:

- a description of the strategy;
- recommended target groups for the strategy;
- implementation guidelines and suggestions for the strategy;
- lessons learned/challenges in using the strategy; and
- case studies of using the strategy.

The second part of the website is the Community Background Reports. These have been produced on 58 communities in the MPO area. Currently the MPO adds reports on approximately 20 – 25 new communities each year and updates those reports already online. The reports provide an array of information about each community including the following,

- physical boundaries,
- history,
- community dynamics (selected Census data) and
- sources of information.

The third component of the website is its *Interactive GIS Mapping* which graphically provides information such as the following:

- government,
- demographics,
- emergency,
- education,
- streets,
- highways,
- public transportation,
- municipalities, and
- neighborhoods.

Strings and Ribbons

“Strings and ribbons” is a fiscally constrained public involvement tool for developing and prioritizing elements of the following:

- long range transportation plan;
- short term transportation plans;
- transportation improvement programs; and,
- project specific plans.

Strings and Ribbons is used because it does the following:

- engages the public beyond traditional “mile-post” meetings,
- educates the public on why and how the long range transportation plan is developed and its process,
- educates the elected officials and professionals as to the perceived needs of the public,
- provides concrete examples of desired projects
- avoids lecturing to the public
- ensures active/true public involvement’ and allows immediate hands on participation.

“Stings and Ribbons” offers a number of advantages over traditional public involvement such as the following:

- levels the playing field by giving every resident the same amount of money and influence;
- eliminates the conflict between the public and the MPO by requiring the public to reach a consensus among themselves;
- relies on almost no written information so all residents including the low literate, limited English proficient, and visually impaired can play;
- provides project-specific recommendations;
- constructs maps that visually document the residents’ transportation choices;
- lets residents explain their choices to others;
- includes a mechanism to rank their choices under constrained conditions;
- accommodates any number of residents; and,
- takes approximately one to two hours to play.

It was created in 1998 by the Charlotte County/Punta Gorda (FL) MPO staff to do the following things:

- increase the number and diversity of participants,
- make the process more interesting and enjoyable for both their staff and the public,
- transfer complicated information more easily between their staff and the public, and
- identify specific needs in the context of cost and available revenue for their 1998 TIP.

The MPO found that the standard way of doing things wasn't working, wasn't any fun, and as a result no one showed up for their meetings. Using the "Strings and Ribbons" game was low tech, low cost, lots of fun, and people wanted to play. The participants could buy roads, transit, sidewalks, trails, bus shelters, signals, buses and drivers, landscaping, and other features. As a result, the following happened:

- the number of participants increased,
- the diversity of participants increased,
- events were more fun for both the public and the MPO staff, and
- complicated information could be easily transferred between the public and staff.

In 2001, Chicago's Center for Neighborhood Technology created a trio of "Strings and Ribbons" offshoots called "Transopoly, Neighborhood Transopoly and eTransopoly". This non-profit advocacy group utilizes Transopoly, a game played with ribbons and dots. It has provided a process for identifying transportation infrastructure needs as part of the Long-Range transportation Plan process. The game documents the public's suggested inputs to the LRTP which then is sent to the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (Chicago MPO). In past years, information has been collected at small group meetings held throughout the area. From this information, a series of small group reports was drafted and returned to the game players for them to verify that their vision, values, problems, and solutions had been correctly stated. Once public approval was obtained, an area plan was prepared. After all of the area plans were completed, one plan was created for the region. The game has been played with residents who could not read, did not speak English, were deaf or hearing impaired, and were visually impaired

In 2004, Volusia County (FL) MPO used a variation of "Strings and Ribbons" to promote public involvement in their 2025 LRTP. They played games at more than 30 different locations, engaged more than 650 people, and identified more than 1,900 projects for consideration. This allowed the Volusia County MPO to do the following:

- display each map by date of session on their website (<http://www.vcmmpo2025.com/input.html>);
- take the improvements identified by the public; and,
- prioritize them based on how frequently an improvement was listed.

The MPO defined the "public's LRTP" by taking the LRTP budget and applying it to this prioritized improvements list until the budget was expended. This list was then given to the MPO Board and modeled along with other plans. The list of groups that played the game includes, but was not limited to the following:

- high school and college students,
- Hispanic associations,
- housing authority residents,
- emergency response personnel,
- bicycle and walking clubs,
- senior groups,

- faith-based organizations,
- visually impaired groups,
- municipalities,
- friends of the library,
- school board transportation department, and
- members of the general public..

As a result, interest in the MPO process, participation at the MPO meetings increased, and “Strings and Ribbons” will be used by the MPO for their next LRTP.

In 2005, PBS&J tailored the game to help Kentucky’s 10-county Barren River Area Development District (ADD) and the 17-county Bluegrass ADD prioritize their unscheduled needs projects. The Barren River ADD had identified a total of 81 unscheduled needs projects valued at \$500 million, but only a \$166 million budget allocation had been provided by the Kentucky Transportation Cabinet. Over 30 representatives from the 10-county region gathered in Bowling Green and played the game for almost two hours. As a result of the session, one of the county judges in attendance took the game back to their county and has used it for local project prioritization.

The Bluegrass ADD had a similar list of 330 unscheduled needs projects valued at \$4.8 billion, but only a \$1.6 billion budget. Over 80 representatives from the 17-county area congregated in Lexington and played the game for almost three hours. The Bluegrass ADD was so pleased with the response that they created a DVD entitled “Bluegrass Monopoly” that described the event and sent copies to the state’s other ADDs and counties encouraging them to use the game. Prior to using the “Strings and Ribbon” game, the Bluegrass ADD had sent each representative a copy of the project listings and asked them to select which projects they thought were most important. By bringing all of the representatives together at one place and at one time, participants completed the process faster, were able to select their “pet” projects, and contributed to multi-county connector projects they never would have know were important to others in the region.

The Miami-Dade County MPO uses a variation of the “Strings and Ribbons” game called “Blocks and Ribbons”. The use of the game increased public participation in the regional planning process from only 24 people several years ago to almost 500 people this year. They plan to expand the number of venues and increase the number of events for their future transportation projects.

These “best practice” examples illustrate that dramatically increasing the level of public participation in the regional transportation planning process need not be exceedingly complex, nor must it be technologically challenging or expensive. Where the will to implement such a process exists, there are clearly demonstrated benefits to the entire region.