

**Rural Transportation
Planning Organizations
Planning Committee**

Study Report

to the

NC Board of Transportation

June 1999

**North Carolina
Board of Transportation**

**Report
on
Rural Transportation
Planning Organizations**

to the

**North Carolina
General Assembly**

June 1999

Rural Transportation Planning Organization (RPO) Study Report

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Rural Transportation Planning Organizations (RPO) Planning Committee

May 1999 RPO Study Report to the Board of Transportation

Executive Summary

The 1997-98 Session of the North Carolina General Assembly ratified the Board of Transportation Reform Bill (House Bill 1304) mandating that the North Carolina Board of Transportation (the Board) develop a plan to establish Rural Transportation Planning Organizations (RPOs) "...as a counterpart to the existing Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs)...". The Board formed an RPO Planning Committee (the Committee) to guide the Study. The Study examined federal guidance, surveyed different states, conducted an extensive in-state survey, conducted six focus groups across the state, polled staff and management of the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT), and gathered input from other groups and members of the public. This report constitutes the Committee's findings and recommendations for the Board's report to the General Assembly. A brief summary of the key recommendations follows.

RPO Membership Should be Voluntary to Provide a Unified Voice for the Region

A unanimous consensus emerged from the Study that RPOs should be formed to provide a cooperative unified voice for rural entities to advocate for their funding and project needs, and to be meaningfully involved in integrated multi-modal transportation planning and the project programming processes. Multi-modal is meant to cover the fullest possible spectrum of transportation modes. Integrated means that the consideration of each mode should take into account all other modes as fully as possible during planning and operations. There is also a strong trend in the public involvement results that formation of RPOs should be voluntary, not mandated, encouraged by incentives within general guidelines, and that the RPOs should be advisory rather than decision-making in nature. Study participants indicated also that RPOs should not be a new layer of government, and that they should not be brought into existence as an unfunded mandate.

The RPO Governing Body Should Consist Primarily of Local Government Officials

RPO governing boards should consist primarily of local elected officials, representatives of all transportation modes in the area, Chambers, and other key entities, as determined by joint Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) between the entities forming each RPO and the NCDOT, under general guidelines and incentives established by enabling statute. The RPO MOUs would specify the RPO's geographic area, mission, eligible functions, local membership, staffing, funding, level of NCDOT participation, and other procedural and operational issues. Membership of local governments and other entities in the RPOs should be voluntary.

RPOs Should Consist of Multi-County Areas, Locally Determined, with a Minimum Size Criteria

RPO geographic areas should be multi-county, with enough counties to result in their unified voice having meaning, yet not so many as to be administratively unwieldy for the RPO or the NCDOT. The Committee thus recommends a minimum of three and a maximum of fifteen whole contiguous counties, with a combined RPO area population of 50,000 or more. Eligible administrative entities within these parameters include Councils of Governments (COGs), which research indicates has the strongest support, Chambers of Commerce (Chambers), local governments, and others, in accordance with the MOU.

RPOs Should Have Four Required Core Functions with Many Additional, Optional Functions

Formation of RPOs should be conditioned on performing at least four core functions: (1) develop and prioritize transportation projects for input into the Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP); (2) coordinate of local and regional multi-modal transportation plans; (3) provide an information clearinghouse (information resource center); and, (4) provide a mechanism for meaningful public participation. Other planning functions that should be enabled, as described in the Functions Section of this report. Overall, RPOs should be involved in integrated multi-modal transportation planning at both local and regional levels.

RPOs Should Have Dedicated Transportation Planning Staff. Additional NCDOT Staff will Also be Required to Provide Technical Assistance

One full time transportation planner, depending on the size of the RPO area and amount of planning activity should staff most RPOs. To allow an RPO to function most effectively, the NCDOT will need to add staff to provide a desirable level of technical support to the local planning activities. The amount of NCDOT support will depend on the size and level of activity of the RPO. The average level of NCDOT assistance required is estimated as one new NCDOT position per two RPOs formed.

New State Funding will Need to be Provided With Mandatory Local Matching Funds at an 80/20 State/Local Ratio

Though the amount of funding required will vary by RPO according to a variety of factors, an average of \$100,000 per year was used in this Study for general consideration. Funding provisions of any enabling legislation should require local contributions at 20%, and 80% of total eligible costs provided by new state funds (not from existing NCDOT budgets). Economically Distressed Counties, designated by the North Carolina Department of Commerce, should be eligible for financial assistance. Tier One Counties should be eligible to apply for additional planning assistance grants from the NCDOT of up to \$4,000 per year. Tier Two Counties should be eligible for grants of up to \$2,000 per year. Financial assistance for both Tier One and Tier Two Counties should be capped at 80% of their local match to ensure that there is at least a minimal amount of local financial (or in-kind) participation.

Rural Transportation Planning Organizations (RPO) Planning Committee

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May 1999

Legislative Background

The 1997-98 Session of the North Carolina General Assembly ratified the Board of Transportation Reform Bill (House Bill 1304) mandating the Board, with the assistance of the Secretary and the NCDOT, develop a plan to establish RPOs as a counterpart to the existing MPOs, which are mandated by federal regulations as a condition of receiving federal financial assistance for transportation. The Board was given a deadline to provide its plan to the Joint Legislative Transportation Oversight Committee and the Joint Legislative Commission on Governmental Operations on or before June 30, 1999.

Study Process

The Board of Transportation formed an RPO Planning Committee to guide an RPO Study. HB 1304 requires that RPOs be examined "...as a counterpart to the existing Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs)..." without giving further specific guidance. The RPO Study began with a review of federal guidelines and precedents from other states for the consideration or implementation of RPOs. Unlike for MPOs, only general and indirectly related federal guidance is available, and there is a wide range of RPO arrangements in different states that no clear national trend was found.

Therefore the Study proceeded to an extensive in-state survey in January and February of Villages and Towns, Cities, Counties, Rural Transportation Providers, Chambers, COGs, the NCDOT's Division Engineers, Indian Tribes, Environmental and Tourism Groups, and Others. This survey was followed by six focus groups, consisting of representatives invited from each of these categories of organizations, across the state in March to obtain additional and more refined public input. Summaries of the survey and focus groups results are included as appendices to this report. The Committee also had input from the staff and management of the NCDOT. Presentations were made to other organizations, such as the North Carolina League of Municipalities, the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners, and other groups and members of the public.

After the Board Committee approved the set of key recommendations, meetings were held with the Transportation, Communications, and Safety Committee of The League of Municipalities, the Transportation Subcommittee Committee of the Association of County Commissioners and North Carolina Association of Regional Councils to get their reaction to the proposals. General consensus was given by each of the groups. The COG representatives specifically requested consideration of allowing counties that are entirely within MPO boundaries to be considered contiguous, and that some level of cooperation with MPO's be required in the legislation. This report constitutes the Committee's findings and recommendations for the Board's report to the General Assembly.

Study Findings and Recommendations

A unanimous consensus emerged from the Study that RPOs should be formed to provide a cooperative unified voice for rural entities to advocate for their funding and project needs, and to be meaningfully involved in integrated multi-modal transportation planning and the project programming process. There is also a strong trend in the Study results that formation of RPOs should be voluntary, not mandated, encouraged by incentives within general guidelines, and that the RPOs should be advisory rather than decision-making in nature. RPOs should also not be a new layer of government, and they should not be brought into existence as an unfunded mandate.

Governing Body

RPO governing boards should consist primarily of local elected officials, representatives of all transportation modes in the area, and other key entities. Local entities expressed the desire to determine the composition of the RPO boards. At the same time, the NCDOT has transportation planning and fiscal responsibilities in this area if the RPOs are to be funded with state monies. Hence the Committee recommends formation of RPOs through joint Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) between the local entities forming each RPO and the NCDOT, under general guidelines and incentives established by enabling statute. The MOU would establish the RPO governing structure, and then appointment decisions could be made locally to the governing body so constituted. Membership of local governments and other entities in the RPOs should be voluntary.

Geographic Area

RPO geographic areas should be multi-county, with enough counties to result in their unified voice having meaning, yet not so many as to be administratively unwieldy for the RPO or the NCDOT. The Committee thus recommends that RPOs be constituted with no less than three and no more than fifteen whole contiguous counties, with a combined RPO area population of 50,000 or more.

Within these general parameters, a wide range of specific arrangements was considered, as reflected in the appendices of this report. Of all the existing multi-county entities available to designate as an RPO (to avoid creating a new layer of government), the strongest trend was towards RPOs being based at the COGs, with the same boundaries as the COGs. The Committee thus recommends that the enabling statute should allow for but not specify COGs as an eligible entity, thus leaving the decision to local entities within broad parameters. If an RPO is formed in conjunction with a COG, it should have an independent governing board, reporting to the COG Board on an advisory basis. This Board should have broad representation, consisting primarily of local elected officials.

Functions

A condition for formation of RPOs should be that they must conduct at least four core functions: (1) develop and prioritize transportation projects for input into the Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) development process; (2) coordinate local and regional multi-modal transportation plans; (3) provide an information clearinghouse (information

resource center); and, (4) provide a mechanism for meaningful public participation.

Beyond these core functions; RPOs should be enabled to conduct any of the following planning functions. These functions are essentially the same as those for which the MPOs are eligible, consistent with the continuing transportation planning process found in Section 134 (a), Title 23, United States Code.

1. Development, Maintenance, and Comparisons of Data:

- Traffic Counts
- Traffic Accidents
- Zoning and Land Use Changes
- Dwelling Unit and Population Changes
- Air Travel
- Air Quality

2. Maintenance of Inventories:

- Base Maps
- Street and Highway Inventory
- Parking Inventories
- Transportation for Elderly and Disabled
- Transit Facility and Service Inventory
- Bicycle Facility Inventory
- Pedestrian Facility Inventory

3. Long Range Transportation Planning:

- Calculation and Tabulation of Socioeconomic Data
- Projection of Future Year Socioeconomic Data
- Coordination of Transportation Plan with Land Use Plans
- Long Range Transportation Plan Evaluation (Bicycle, Highway, Pedestrian, Public Transportation, and Rail Elements)
- Environmental Analysis
- Cost Estimates
- Airport Planning
- Corridor Identification

4. Short Range Transportation Planning:

- Transportation Improvement Program
- Short Range Transit Plan
- Development and Site Impact Analysis
- Mobility Planning
- Bicycle and Pedestrian Planning
- Planning for the Elderly and Disabled
- Goods Movement
- Energy Conservation Plan
- Financial Planning

Overall, RPOs should be involved in integrated multi-modal transportation planning at both local and regional levels. This involvement would include providing technical assistance and coordination, but not necessarily conducting the planning, though this should be enabled as a possibility in the future under appropriate circumstances.

Staffing

The Committee anticipates that most RPOs will be staffed by one full time transportation planner. Local circumstances may warrant a part-time position, if the RPO is comprised of only a few counties with a relatively less active transportation program, or more than one planner for larger areas with a greater activity level or need.

To assist the RPO staff, the NCDOT will need to add staff. Each RPO would require 20-75% of a NCDOT staff person's time based on the level of planning effort of each RPO. For RPOs performing the minimum required planning tasks, the level of NCDOT effort required would be 20-30% of a NCDOT coordinator's time. This level of effort would require one new NCDOT position per three RPOs that are formed. RPOs taking on a greater role in transportation planning will require more time on the part of the NCDOT staff, in the range of 60-75% of the NCDOT Coordinator's time, thus requiring one new NCDOT position per two RPOs that are formed. Additional financial resources may be necessary under either of these scenarios for contracting transportation planning work. Contracting may be needed as a supplement to staff planning because of the volume of work that may be involved, and when more specialized expertise is needed.

Funding

Though the amount of funding required will vary by RPO according to a variety of factors, an average of \$100,000 per year was used in this Study for general consideration. This amount is assumed to cover the expenses of one full-time planner, salaried at approximately \$40,000 annually, with an additional \$60,000 for overhead (150% overhead rate). Overhead is assumed to be relatively high because of the relatively high cost of office technology, goods, and services in some rural areas, and because of the relatively extensive amount of traveling that an RPO staff person would presumably be required to do to cover a rural area.

Funding provisions of any enabling legislation should require local contributions at 20%, and the remaining 80% of total eligible costs should be provided by new state funds (not coming from existing NCDOT budgets). New state funds should be provided because the RPOs would be providing a new and valuable service, and there is a strong sentiment that there should be no unfunded mandates. Under this cost sharing formula, a \$100,000 annual RPO budget would cost the State \$80,000, and the local entities \$20,000. In a hypothetical setting, if the local share were split evenly between the county and local levels, this would amount to \$10,000 each. If an RPO had four counties in its geographic area, the local share for each county would be \$2,500. If an RPO had ten local entities in its geographic area, the local share for each of these would be \$1,000.

Economically Distressed Counties, as designated by the North Carolina Department of Commerce, should be eligible for special financial assistance. It is therefore recommended that counties categorized as Tier One and Tier Two be considered by the NCDOT as eligible to apply for annual planning assistance grants. Tier One Counties will be eligible for additional grants of up to \$4,000 per year. Tier Two Counties will be eligible for grants of up to \$2,000 per year. Financial assistance for both Tier One and Tier Two Counties should be capped at 80% of their local match to ensure that there is at least a minimal amount of local financial (or in-kind) participation.

It is felt that based on the number of counties and population requirements that a statewide RPO budget of \$2,000,000 annually will be required to provide the State's 80% share of the planning budgets. In addition, up to \$90,000 annually could be required to fund the distressed county planning grants. An additional 10 NCDOT staff positions would require roughly \$750,000 annually.

Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs)

MOUs should be used to establish RPOs. MOUs are a form of agreement that is entered into by the various entities. The local entities seeking to establish an RPO in their region would develop an MOU, to be signed by all local members, as well as by the NCDOT. The RPO MOUs would specify the RPO's geographic area, mission, eligible functions, local membership, staffing, funding, level of NCDOT participation, and other procedural and operational issues.

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In-State Survey Summary

The NCDOT's 1999 RPO survey was mailed in January to 2,040 entities in the following categories: Board of Transportation, Division Engineers, Local and County Governments, Airports, Rural Transportation Providers, Chambers of Commerce, COGs, Metropolitan Planning Organizations, Indian Tribes, and Other State Agencies. A total of 339 surveys were returned, thus a 17% response rate, which is an adequate sample to obtain a +/- 5% margin of error, and a 95% confidence level. Local governments constituted 52%, county governments 26%, COGs 4%, and all others 22%. Responses were generally evenly distributed about how RPOs should be formed, thus no clear trend (response rates clustered between 18% and 28%).

For administrative considerations, the responses are also evenly distributed, except for a trend for County-City Combined (38%). In contrast, there is a strong trend towards using a Memorandum of Understanding (80%), while the responses are nearly evenly divided for local staffing (56%) and local funding (43%). Regarding staffing, there is another significant trend that recommends staffing by the County (35%), or by the COG (30%). There is a virtual consensus (88%) that elected County officials should participate, and a high level of support for elected Municipal officials (76%) and NCDOT officials (75%) to be involved in RPOs. Staff level (44%) and Chamber (43%) involvement are also favored, but to a lesser extent.

The most prominent functions advocated by the respondents are regional transportation planning (82%), coordination of local plans (75%), development of regional transportation priorities (69%), and serving as a forum for better interface between the NCDOT and the Legislature (63%). Other functions broadly supported are Statewide Transportation Improvement Program requests (49%), small urban, safety, and secondary road programs (48%), and actual plan development (45%). Regarding leadership, respondents most favor the County (31%), decided by the RPO's membership (26%), or the COG (22%). The majority of respondents (60%) expressed strong interest in forming an RPO, while most of the rest (33%) indicate some interest. The majority also believes that NCDOT funding, planning, and maintenance programs do not meet their needs. Lastly, numerous "other" comments are listed verbatim in the report.

Rural Transportation Planning Organizations (RPO) Planning Committee

RPO Study Report to the North Carolina Board of Transportation

June 1999

Focus Groups Summary

To obtain a better understanding of the desires of potentially involved entities statewide, the NCDOT conducted six Regional Focus Groups New Bern, Tuesday, March 23, 1999; Asheboro, Wednesday, March 24, 1999; and, Asheville Thursday, March 25, 1999. At each location, two sessions were conducted: 9:30-11:30 A.M. (Policy Group primarily consisting of elected officials and other decision makers); and, 1:30-3:30 P.M. (Technical Group primarily consisting of managers, planners, coordinators, and other staff persons). At each focus group meeting, the following entities were invited Villages and Towns, Cities, Counties, Rural Transportation Providers, Chambers of Commerce, Councils of Governments, the NCDOT's Division Engineers, Indian Tribes, Environmental, and Other.

The format and conduct of each focus group meeting were identical. Each group was given an orientation featuring the statutory basis of the study, an overview of the study process, and a brief description of the two surveys and their major findings. The groups were then given the following two general models and ten policy questions regarding how to form RPOs. It was emphasized that these models and policy matters, and several handouts, were given to facilitate the group consideration of the subject, not to lead them in any particular direction or to any specific outcome.

RPO Model #1 was based on lodging the RPOs at the COGs. The COG model would essentially involve adding the transportation planning function, or enhancing it if it already exists, with the decision-making body being the COG Board (consisting primarily of elected officials already) and the staff of the COG working with the staff from the cities and counties to provide technical support and recommendations to the RPO (COG) Board.

RPO Model #2 was based on the RPO boundaries being any other multi-county area or entity than the COGs. This model emphasizes flexibility in several ways. One way is by examining a wide range of existing jurisdictions to use as the basis for the RPO other than the COGs. For example, the RPOs could be based on the NCDOT's Highway Divisions, Regions of the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources, or Economic Development Regions. Another way is to not necessarily conform to any existing regional area, but to create special RPO areas based on local and regional conditions.

The policy issues asked of the focus groups pertained to: mission, core responsibilities, and functional areas; authority, with decision making powers, or a public forum and an information clearinghouse; geographic area; lead agencies and obtaining "buy-in"; relationships with other entities (other local entities, the MPOs, the NCDOT, the General Assembly, and others); whether formation of RPOs should be mandatory (required by the General Assembly or the NCDOT) or voluntary (formed by regional compacts), and what sorts of incentives and disincentives should be used (for example,

funding and technical assistance); staffing; and, training and education needs.

All six focus groups unanimously support the formation of RPOs as counterparts to MPOs:

- to conduct and/or coordinate rural transportation planning and related functions from an integrated multi-modal transportation perspective
- to provide a cooperative unified voice for rural entities to start allowing rural areas to get their fair share of funding and representation in transportation planning and funding processes
- composition of RPO governing bodies should be determined by local elected officials and should include local elected officials

All six focus groups also achieved consensus on all major policy issues regarding RPOs, with general trends and differences between groups as described in terms of geographic area, institutional format, functional areas, staffing, funding, mandatory versus voluntary, and other major considerations.

Regarding geographic area, a majority of focus groups recommended COG boundaries. Two focus groups suggested other multi-county arrangements (namely, NCDOT District/Divisions boundaries, and Economic Development Region (EDR) boundaries). The NCDOT District/Division boundaries were suggested for several efficiency reasons, including one expressed in another focus group as a reservation about using COG boundaries, or any other multi-county regions, due to funding complexity in relation to the Equity Formula that governs the distribution of transportation funds statewide. One focus group recommended a hybrid of RPO areas being defined institutionally along COG boundaries, but that RPO planning areas should be contiguous with NCDOT Division boundaries.

Concerns were raised in one or more focus groups that RPO areas should not be made too large or involve too many meeting sites. Specific suggestions were made that RPO areas not exceed 7-20 counties. Four focus groups believe MPO areas should be excluded from RPO areas (the other groups did not address the MPO question). One focus group suggested city and county governments should collectively choose lead agency.

Regarding institutional format, a majority of focus groups recommended an independent RPO governing body, reporting in an advisory capacity to an established Board of Directors, such as the COGs or EDRs. Two focus groups recommended simply that the RPO should be based at the COGs, and two focus groups recommended COGs should but need not necessarily be the lead agency in these areas. Several focus groups clarified that any other existing entity within the COG region could be the lead agency.

Composition of these governing bodies was unanimously recommended to include significant representation by local elected officials (towns, villages, cities, and counties. Strong support was also expressed in a majority of focus groups for representation to include Chambers of Commerce, tourism and environmental interests, all transportation modes in the RPO's area, and NCDOT representatives, matched on a regional basis to the RPO's area. Two focus groups specifically called for representation of all underserved populations, especially the segment of the populations that does not drive. Three focus groups called for representation of Indian Tribes/Communities. It was considered very important to recognize the territory, jurisdiction,

and special needs of the Indian Tribes/Communities, and that they want to participate in any RPO (and other) transportation processes. Selection of representatives to serve on these governing bodies was recommended by several methods, which involved substantial involvement or appointment by appropriate local and county officials.

Several focus groups indicated that the RPO should be an entity that is open to participation on a voluntary basis by any relevant entities in its area, but no entity in the RPO's area should be required to be a member of the COG. One focus group recommended other affiliated organizations should participate in RPO activities and on RPO committees without necessarily being represented on the board. A majority of focus groups recommended that representation of RPOs on MPO committees and vice-versa should nonetheless be mandatory, and accomplished by contractual means, such as Memorandums of Understanding, that emphasize cooperative and coordinative relationships. One focus group suggested that MPOs should be represented on a non-voting basis on RPO committees and vice-versa.

Regarding functional areas, all six focus groups recommend the main function of RPOs should be to conduct and/or coordinate rural transportation planning and related functions. Two focus groups recommend that RPOs only coordinate rural transportation planning, while a third focus group additionally recommends RPOs coordinate service delivery. Two focus groups further recommend that RPOs provide technical assistance in addition to the coordination planning and service delivery, also the development of transportation projects, and provision of a combined voice for rural entities to express these interests on a prioritized basis to the NCDOT. One group recommends RPOs actually conduct the localized rural regional transportation planning, and that such efforts be coordinated with planning efforts of the NCDOT's Statewide Planning Branch.

All of the focus groups recommend an integrated multi-modal transportation projects. Multi-modal is meant to cover the fullest possible spectrum of transportation modes. Integrated means that the consideration of each mode should take into account all other modes as fully as possible during planning and operations

Nearly all of the focus groups recommended that the RPO should provide a clearinghouse with a fully multi-modal focus, to coordinate with all transportation entities in the RPO's area. Two focus groups added that this clearinghouse function should include providing marketing information on all transportation projects and services within the RPOs area, and creating and administering a regional web presence. A majority of focus groups indicated that the RPOs should provide a public forum as a regular point of contact and collective voice for the general public and involved entities.

Individual groups had further specific suggestions of functions that RPOs should pursue: regular public hearings to provide the public with information and to receive input from the public; coordinate RPO planning activities with any land use planning in the area; develop a public ridesharing database; and, have authority to remove transportation projects from Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP). Individual groups also suggested that to do these various functions, RPOs should: form working partnership with the NCDOT; the NCDOT should have ongoing think tank to assist RPOs; and, RPOs should work together, such as through a statewide

RPOs clearinghouse and conferences. Several groups felt RPOs should only provide technical assistance and coordination at first, with the option of doing actual planning, and possibly becoming an authority to make decisions and deliver services later.

Regarding staffing, five focus groups estimated that one full-time transportation staff person would be necessary for the variety of functions and size of territory to be covered by the RPOs (one group estimated only a half-time position would be required). There was a consensus that this staff person should be a certified planner, not an engineer, that they should be based locally at the RPO, that they should be multi-jurisdictionally oriented, and that they should have a customer service focus. There was more-or-less an even split among the focus groups as to whether the planner should be provided by the RPO or the NCDOT. Two hybrid options were also suggested: (1) that the planner be an employee of the NCDOT, provided by the NCDOT, but supported by overhead provided by the COG and, (2) that the planner should be provided by the RPO, but should receive technical assistance by a locally based employee of the NCDOT, provided and supported by overhead provided by the NCDOT.

Regarding funding, most focus groups recommended a combination of local, state, and federal funds; two groups suggested primarily state and federal funds (preferring little or no local funding involved, but allowing for the possibility); and, one group advocated no local funding be used at all. The groups suggesting local RPO participants should possibly provide local funds explained that this should be done on a pro-rata buy-in basis, and to match new state funds that should be made available, and these funds together should match any eligible federal funding.

State funds being favored over local funds was explained in terms of the local people being strongly opposed to unfunded mandates imposed by the State, and new state funds are warranted because the RPO would be a new entity providing needed new services. Also, local funds are already spread too thinly, and it is the opinion of these groups that enough state and federal taxes are paid already to cover such programs without having to obtain local funds. Some of the groups expressed the view that State funds should come from existing NCDOT budgets if possible, or else the NCDOT should seek new state funding for the RPOs from the General Assembly, and that the NCDOT should recommend this funding to the General Assembly. A recommendation was made that a cost-benefit analysis should be conducted to assist planning further for the funding.

Regarding mandatory versus voluntary formation of RPOs, several focus groups expressed interest in voluntary means, based on incentives and guidelines, while the other three groups did not specifically address this question. One group added that voluntary RPO formation should be allowed by new special state enabling legislation, and another groups stated that if created, RPOs should have statutory authority and wherewithal (especially funding) for all functions they are enabled to conduct.

A variety of other major considerations were expressed by one-or-more focus groups, including the following. Formation of RPOs should take into consideration coordination with such statewide initiatives as Transit 2001 and the Passenger Rail and Transit Summit of January 11, 1999. During its first few formative years, RPOs should be provided with intensive technical

training. RPOs should not compete to get more of already limited financial resources, but should band together to increase the total amount of resources available. If the RPO concept proves successful enough over time, the RPOs should be able to take on significant decision making authority. Lastly, the Atlanta, Georgia, area exerts more influence on transportation demand of many types throughout southwestern (far western) North Carolina than other areas in North Carolina, and there was a question about how "rural" is defined.

Rural Transportation Planning Organizations (RPO) Planning Committee

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Individual Focus Group Reports

Coastal Region Policy Group

1. Geographic Area

- NCDOT District boundaries within existing NCDOT Divisions (this arrangement recognizes the funding complexity that would ensue from any other jurisdictional arrangement due to the Equity Formula that governs the distribution of transportation funds statewide)
- Exclude MPO areas coterminous with exact MPO geographic boundaries

2. Institutional Format

- MPO should be represented (non-voting) on RPO committees and vice-versa

3. Functional Areas

- coordinate rural transportation planning
- develop integrated multi-modal transportation projects
- provide a combined voice for rural entities to express common interests on a prioritized basis
- include focus on environmental protection and eco-tourism

4. Staffing

- full-time planner, not an engineer
- multi-jurisdictionally oriented
- customer service focus
- provided and funded by NCDOT

5. Funding

- local, state, and federal funds (local RPO participants should provide local funds on a pro-rata buy-in basis, and to match new state funds that should be made available, and these funds together should match any eligible federal funding)
- new state funds are warranted because the RPO would be a new entity providing needed new services
- NCDOT should recommend this funding to the General Assembly

6. Mandatory Versus Voluntary (not addressed)

7. Other Major Considerations

- how is "rural" defined?

Coastal Region Technical Group

1. Geographic Area

- Economic Development Region (EDR) boundaries
- exclude MPO areas by means to be determined upon further study
- RPO areas should not be too large or involve too many meeting sites

2. Institutional Format

- RPO governing body should be a Special RPO Advisory Board reporting to the Board of Directors of the respective EDRs
- board should consist of existing local elected officials if RPOs are legislatively required; else, board should consist of officials appointed by the County Commissioners
- each county in the RPO area should be represented on the advisory board
- Representation from the local governments of villages, towns, and cities in the RPO's area
- Representation of RPOs on MPO committees and vice-versa should be considered
- NCDOT representatives, matched on a regional basis to the RPO's area, should be included

3. Functional Areas

- coordinate rural transportation planning
- develop integrated multi-modal transportation projects
- provide a combined voice for rural entities to express these interests on a prioritized basis
- provide a clearinghouse with a multi-modal focus to coordinate with all transportation entities in the RPO's area
- provide a forum as a regular point of public contact and collective voice, including conduct of regular public hearings to provide the public with information, and to receive input from the public
- focus on the relationship between transportation and economic development

4. Staffing

- RPOs to be staffed by own full-time planner, not one provided by NCDOT

5. Funding

- state and federal funds
- local RPO participants should not have to provide local funds (such funds are not available and all budgets are stretched much too thin already)
- new state funds should be made available, warranted because the RPO would be a new entity providing needed new services
- no unfunded mandates should be imposed by the state

6. Mandatory Versus Voluntary

- voluntary

7. Other Major Considerations

- formation of RPOs should take into consideration coordination with such statewide initiatives as Transit 2001 and the Passenger Rail and Transit Summit of January 11, 1999

Piedmont Region Policy Group

1. **Geographic Area**

- COG boundaries
- conceivably more than one contiguous COG region, but not too large
- exclude MPO areas by means to be determined upon further study

2. **Institutional Format**

- COGs could but need not necessarily be the lead agency in these areas
- city and county governments should collectively choose lead agency
- lead agency should be selected from among existing entities
- representation of RPOs on MPO committees and vice-versa should be accomplished by contractual means, such as Memorandums of Understanding, that emphasize cooperative and coordinative relationships

3. **Functional Areas**

- coordinate rural transportation planning and service delivery
- develop and create cost-benefit models for integrated multi-modal transportation projects
- provide combined voice for rural entities to express these interests on a prioritized basis
- coordinate RPO planning activities with any land use planning in the area
- provide an information clearinghouse with a fully multi-modal focus to coordinate with all transportation entities in the RPO's area
- create and administer a regional web presence, including a public ridesharing database
- RPOs should form working partnership with NCDOT
- RPO should have authority to remove transportation projects from Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP)
- NCDOT should have ongoing think tank to assist RPOs

4. **Staffing**

- RPOs should be staffed by their own half-to-full time planner

5. **Funding**

- local, state, and federal funds (local RPO participants should provide local funds on a pro-rata buy-in basis, and to match new state funds that should be made available, and these funds together should match any eligible federal funding)
- local funds up to 20% of RPO budget totals to parallel MPO funding
- new state funds are warranted because the RPO would be a new entity providing needed new services
- [there was some divergence of opinion that the NCDOT should provide the state and federal funding from existing NCDOT budgets, unless NCDOT can find or facilitate the new money elsewhere]
- NCDOT should recommend this funding to the General Assembly.

6. **Mandatory Versus Voluntary**

- voluntary, based on incentives and guidelines
- if created, RPOs should have statutory authority and wherewithal for all functions they are enabled to conduct

7. **Other Major Considerations**

- during its first few formative years, RPOs should be provided with intensive technical training

Piedmont Region Technical Group

1. Geographic Area

- COG boundaries (funding complexity would ensue from this jurisdictional arrangement and should be examined in relation to the Equity Formula that governs the distribution of transportation funds statewide)
- RPO areas should not be made too large

2. Institutional Format

- COGs should be the lead agency (or other existing entity)
- governing body of the RPO should be an Independent Rural Transportation Planning Advisory Board
- representation on this board, and involvement in RPO activities, should include Indian Tribes/Communities, tourism and environmental interests, industry and commerce, and all transportation modes in the RPO's area
- RPO should be an entity that is open to participation on a voluntary basis by any relevant entities in its area, but no entity in the RPO's area should be required to be a member of the COG

3. Functional Areas

- provide technical assistance and coordination of rural transportation planning and service delivery, the development of integrated multi-modal transportation projects, and provision of a combined voice for rural entities to express these interests on a prioritized basis to NCDOT
- provide a public forum as a regular point of contact and collective voice for the general public and involved entities
- provide a clearinghouse with a fully multi-modal focus to coordinate with all transportation entities in the RPO's area, including providing marketing information on all transportation projects and services within the RPOs area
- RPOs should work together, such as through a statewide RPOs clearinghouse and conferences

4. Staffing

- RPOs should be staffed by a full-time planner who would be a NCDOT employee, provided by NCDOT, but supported by overhead provided by the COG

5. Funding

- primarily state and federal funds
- local RPO participants should have the option to provide local funds on a pro-rata buy-in basis, and to match state and federal funds, but local funding should not be required
- no unfunded mandates imposed by the State
- State funds should come from existing NCDOT budgets if possible, or else NCDOT should seek new state funding for the RPOs from the General Assembly

6. Mandatory Versus Voluntary

- not addressed

7. Other Major Considerations

- RPOs should only provide technical assistance and coordination at first, with the option of doing actual planning, and possibly becoming an authority to make decisions and deliver services later

- RPOs should also be allowed to be fluid to adapt itself in whatever way (within broad parameters) over time as it and its service area evolve
- it is very important to recognize the territory, jurisdiction, and special needs of the Indian Tribes/Communities, and that they want to participate in any RPO (and other) transportation processes

Mountains Region Policy Group

1. Geographic Area

- COG boundaries
- RPO areas should not be made so large (20 counties seems to work well)

2. Institutional Format

- RPOs should be based at the COGs, and should work in partnership with NCDOT
- governing body of the RPO should be an advisory board with enough clout to ensure the achievement of results
- board representation, and involvement in RPO activities, should include Chambers of Commerce, Indian Tribes/Communities, tourism and environmental interests, all transportation modes in the RPO's area, and all underserved populations, especially the segment of the populations that does not drive
- RPO should be an entity that is open to participation on a voluntary basis by any relevant entities in its area, but no entity in the RPO's area should be required to be a member of the COG

3. Functional Areas

- RPOs should provide technical assistance and coordination of rural transportation planning and service delivery, the development of multi-modal transportation projects, and provision of a combined voice for rural entities to express these interests on a prioritized basis to NCDOT
- provide a public forum as a regular point of contact and collective voice for the general public and involved entities
- provide a clearinghouse with a fully multi-modal focus to coordinate with all transportation entities in the RPO's area, including providing marketing information on all transportation projects and services within the RPOs area, and creating and administering a regional web presence
- RPOs should only provide technical assistance and coordination at first, with the option of doing actual planning, and possibly becoming an authority to make decisions and deliver services later

4. Staffing

- RPOs should be staffed by a full-time certified planner
- the RPO planner should receive technical assistance by a locally based NCDOT employee, provided and supported by overhead provided by NCDOT

5. Funding

- primarily state and federal funds
- local RPO participants should have the option to provide local funds on a pro-rata buy-in basis, and to match state and federal funds, but local funding should not be required (if local funding is required, it should be at the absolute minimum possible level, as local funds are already spread too thinly, and it is the opinion of this group that enough state and federal taxes are paid already)
- State funds should come from existing NCDOT budgets if possible, else the NCDOT should seek new state funding for the RPOs from the General Assembly

6. Mandatory Versus Voluntary

- not addressed

7. Other Major Considerations

- RPOs should work together across all functional areas, such as through a statewide RPOs clearinghouse and conferences
- RPOs should not compete to get more of already limited financial resources, but should band together to increase the total amount of resources available
- RPO should also be allowed to be flexible to adapt itself in whatever way (within broad parameters) over time as it and its service area evolve
- it is very important to recognize the territory, jurisdiction, and special needs of Indian Tribes/Communities, and that they want to participate in any RPO (and other) transportation processes

Mountains Region Technical Group

1. Geographic Area

- RPO institutional areas should be along COG boundaries
- RPO planning areas should be contiguous with NCDOT Division boundaries
- RPO areas should not be made too large (7 counties seems to work well)
- exclude MPO areas by means to be determined upon further study

2. Institutional Format

- RPOs should be based at the COGs
- governing body of the RPO should be an RPO Advisory Board reporting to the COG Board
- representation on this board, and involvement in RPO activities, should include local and county governments, Chambers of Commerce, Indian Tribes/Communities, tourism and environmental interests, all transportation modes in the area, and all underserved populations, especially the segment of the population that does not drive
- other affiliated organizations, such as the Blue Ridge Parkway, should participate in RPO activities and on RPO committees without necessarily being represented on the board
- RPO should be an entity that is open to participation on a voluntary basis by any relevant entities in its area, with incentives to encourage participation, but no entity in the RPO's area should be required to be a member of the COG
- Representation of RPOs on MPO committees and vice-versa should nonetheless be mandatory, and accomplished by contractual means, such as Memorandums of Understanding, that emphasize cooperative and coordinative relationships

3. Functional Areas

- provide localized rural regional transportation planning, coordinated with planning efforts of NCDOT's Statewide Planning Branch, as a component of larger plans, such as for local and regional economic development
- provide a public forum as a regular point of contact and collective voice for the general public and involved entities
- provide a clearinghouse with a fully multi-modal focus to coordinate with all transportation entities in the RPO's area

4. Staffing

- RPOs staff should be located at the COG

5. Funding

- local, state, and federal funds
- local funds provided on a buy-in basis to match new state funds, that together would match any eligible federal funds
- a cost-benefit analysis should be conducted to assist planning further for the funding

6. Mandatory Versus Voluntary

- voluntary, based on incentives and guidelines established by new special state enabling legislation

7. Other Major Considerations

- RPOs should only provide technical assistance and coordination at first, with the option of becoming an authority to make decisions and deliver services later
- RPOs should also be allowed to be flexible to adapt itself in whatever way (within broad parameters) over time as the RPO itself, transportation needs, infrastructure, and services in its service area evolve
- If the RPO concept proves successful enough over time, the RPOs should be able to take on significant decision making authority
- the Atlanta, Georgia, area exerts more influence on transportation demand of many types throughout southwestern (far western) North Carolina than other areas in North Carolina
- it is very important to recognize the territory, jurisdiction, and special needs of Indian Tribes/Communities, and that they want to participate in any RPO (and other) transportation processes

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Proposed Eligible Planning Activities

Planning activities of the Rural Transportation Planning Organizations (RPO) will vary widely across the State. In addition to minimum planning requirements, RPOs will be eligible to perform additional planning activities. RPOs should be enabled to conduct any of the proposed eligible planning functions listed in the appendices to this report, which are the same as for the MPOs, consistent with the continuing transportation planning process found in Section 134 (a), Title 23, United States Code. The list of activities is not all-inclusive; an RPO in cooperation with the NCDOT may determine additional transportation planning needs that could be performed.

1. Development, Maintenance, and Comparisons of Data: A number of conditions generally need to be continuously surveyed and compiled annually (or on a regular basis) to determine whether previous projections are still valid or whether plan assumption need to be changes. These items are generally the basic elements used to develop the Transportation Plan. Activities may include:

- Traffic Counts
- Traffic Accidents
- Zoning and Land Use Changes
- Dwelling Unit and Population Changes
- Air Travel
- Air Quality

2. Maintenance of Inventory: A base map and inventories of the physical transportation system (e.g. signalized intersections, parking (centralized areas), transit/rail inventory, bicycle and pedestrian facilities) can be kept current by recording changes as the occur. Activities may include:

- Base Maps
- Street and Highway Inventory
- Parking Inventories
- Transportation for Elderly and Disabled
- Transit Facility and Service Inventory
- Bicycle Facility Inventory
- Pedestrian Facility Inventory

3. Long Range Transportation Plan: Evaluation of the overall transportation plan will be undertaken at such time that the surveillance items indicate that travel of land development trends have begun to deviate significantly from forecasts or at such time that new data are required for facility design. It is anticipated that some reappraisal work will be required approximately every five years. The reappraisal work performed at

these intervals will determine at what level reevaluation must be executed. If all is well with the estimates and projections, little work other than minor updates will be necessary. However, if significant differences are detected between projections and actual conditions, a major update will be required. Various modal elements of the transportation plan should be coordinated to maintain an integrated multi-modal transportation system. Activities may include:

- Calculation and Tabulation of Socioeconomic Data
- Projection of Future Year Socioeconomic Data
- Coordination of Transportation Plan with Land Use Plans
- Long Range Transportation Plan Evaluation
 - Bicycle Element
 - Highway Element
 - Pedestrian Element
 - Public Transportation and Rail Element
- Environmental Analysis
- Cost Estimates
- Airport Planning
- Corridor Identification

4. Short Range Transportation Plan: An important element of the transportation planning process is a short range plan. It provides for short-term transportation needs of persons and goods, and identifies actions that present a systematic approach to addressing transportation problem areas. The short range plan needs to be consistent with the long range plan. Activities may include:

- Transportation Improvement Program
- Short Range Transit Plan
- Development and Site Impact Analysis
- Mobility Planning
- Bicycle and Pedestrian Planning
- Planning for the Elderly and Disabled
- Goods Movement
- Energy Conservation Plan
- Financial Planning

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Proposed RPO/NCDOT Staffing Needs

It is desirable that small urban areas and counties update their plans every seven to ten years. These criteria provide for an adequate level of assistance to all required urban areas and counties over an eight year cycle. Based on these criteria, it is expected that 300 areas may request transportation planning assistance over the next eight years. Taking into account the workloads of the existing staff, a backlog of over 100 studies would exist by the year 2005.

New regulations and required additional revised national ambient air quality standards are likely to add significantly to the planning staff's workload. The new standards may add up to 18 additional nonattainment areas. This will require conformity analysis for rural and small urban areas as part of the planning and TIP process. *Best Planning Practices for Incorporating Environmental Issues in Systems Planning* (BPP) and additional modeling requirements to integrate multi-modal attributes are also creating the need for additional resources and time to be spent on planning studies.

Long range transportation planning will continue to be handled by Statewide Planning Branch. NCDOT staff assigned to be RPO Coordinator would serve predominately in a coordination capacity. Job responsibilities would not include detailed assistance to the individual member jurisdictions of the RPO. NCDOT staffing needs are based on a percentage of time required to coordinate with RPOs. Each RPO would require between 20 to 75 percent of a person's time based on the level of planning effort that each individual RPO will perform.

The NCDOT will be able to provide better customer service to the rural areas of the State by creating the RPOs, and providing a NCDOT staff member to act as the coordinator. In order to see the benefit, the NCDOT will need to provide new staff positions to work with the RPOs. It is anticipated additional work will be created by the formation of the RPOs. The Coordinator will be able to absorb this additional workload as well as provide a direct contact between the RPO and the NCDOT. The RPO Coordinator will be responsible for ensuring that transportation planning for the RPO is consistent with the land use plan and provide for the efficient movement of people and goods through the region.

For RPOs performing the minimum required planning tasks, less time from the NCDOT staff member would be needed. Duties would include processing work programs, verifying payments to the RPO, attending meetings, and being a primary contact between the RPO and the NCDOT. This staff member would also be responsible for providing technical assistance to the RPOs as they are developing their TIP request list. The level of coordination for this effort would take 20-30 percent of a NCDOT coordinator's time. This level of effort would require one new NCDOT position per three RPOs that are formed.

RPOs taking on a greater role in transportation planning will require more time on the part of the NCDOT staff member. In addition to doing the tasks previously mentioned, this staff person would need to take on a stronger technical advisory role for the RPO. While it is anticipated that Statewide Planning will continue to work with local areas on the development of their long range transportation plan, the NCDOT's RPO Coordinator would need to ensure that plans for local areas within the RPO are consistent with the RPO's long range plans. This level of effort would take 60-75 percent of the NCDOT Coordinator's time and would require two new NCDOT positions per three RPOs that are formed.

While the NCDOT has many years of experience working with urban areas in the formation of Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) there will be differences in the formation and day-to-day operations between the RPOs and the MPOs. The RPOs will have different needs and will require extra coordination and education, especially during the early years of their development. The training and early coordination of both the NCDOT staff and the RPO staff are going to increase the percentage of staff time required for these positions. Also, working with multiple jurisdictions will require additional coordination, which becomes more difficult as the number of jurisdictions increase. It is recommended there be one new NCDOT staff position per two RPOs anticipated to be formed. In the absence of more staff positions, planning tasks will need to be contracted to consultants. This will require additional financial resources to adequately fund long range transportation planning needs for the rural areas of North Carolina.