



Regional Transportation Connector

Transportation Information for America's Small Metropolitan and Rural Communities

The Regional Transportation Connector is a bimonthly supplement to the NADO Research Foundation's Regional Transportation Online Center, which can be found on the Web at www.nado.org/rtoc

New Mexico Rural COGs Planning Every Step of the Way

Rural regions in New Mexico have historically faced significant challenges in maintaining transportation infrastructure and meeting public transportation needs.

Department (NMSHT) designated seven rural planning organizations (RPOs), drawing from the state's existing network of regional councils of government (COG).

Linda Trujillo, Program Manager for Public Transportation at New Mexico Highway and Transportation explains, "Resources do not always flow to rural areas, because the magnitude of demand just isn't there. Having international borders, several long-term high priority metropolitan projects and hundreds of tribal and local governments, makes meeting transportation demands in rural areas challenging. Planning every step of the way is a must."

According to Dan Stover, Supervisor of the Regional Planning Section at NMSHT, "The future is now and having RPOs that are experienced in building collaboration gives

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transportation engineers an opportunity to address problems today, instead of waiting six years for them to come up on the state transportation improvement plan (STIP)."

Each RPO receives approximately \$60,000 each year from the state to carry out rural transportation planning activities. Serving a three

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Defining the Process

In order to overcome challenges and ensure public involvement in regional planning, as required by the 1991 federal highway law ISTEA, the New Mexico State Highway and Transportation

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New Mexico Rural COGs from Page 1 county region, the South Central COG is an example of a regional council of government who also serves as an RPO.

In order to manage RPO tasks, such as building regional collaboration and preparing an annual listing of priority projects, the COG formed the South Central Rural Planning Organization (RPO). The COG provides staff and operational support to the RPO.

Greg White of the South Central RPO, explains why the COG and RPO relationship works, “We already had a pool of potential local leaders to serve on the five-member RPO policy committee because the majority of the South Central COG board represents rural areas.” Elizabeth Bernal, Executive Director of the COG added, “It’s easy for us to work together and to find the applicable leaders for input. It ensures quality public involvement and regional collaboration.”

Building Regional Collaboration

One of the South Central RPO’s primary focuses is to develop a central repository of regional transportation data. White commented on current accomplishments, “The South Central RPO hosted a regional round table and symposium on geographical information systems (GIS) and its efficiency in developing a central data repository. Local partners, like New Mexico State University, are now on-board and understand that accessibility to data on the regional transportation improvement plan benefits us on all planning levels.” Using GIS equipment provided by the state highway department, the RPO will be developing an inventory of infrastructure in the near future.

The RPO is also promoting regional cooperation through its efforts to enhance rural transit services, an area identified locally as a critical need. The South Central RPO intends to increase the number of van routes in the region by using vans already owned by the

COG. According to White, the COG also plans to purchase additional vehicles in October with the state’s Job Access and Reverse Commute funds.

Besides overcoming the traditional barriers in delivering rural transit services, such as geography, the RPO is also helping local communities leverage other existing resources. Trujillo explains, “Ultimately the region’s international border and the potential for having illegal immigrant users poses a liability issue and could fracture service. Also, since job access funding is designed for welfare-to-work clients, there are issues about who or

what governmental entities pay for a rider’s voucher if the rider is from a reservation. This is why collaboration facilitated by the RPO locally and by COGs already administering section 5311 rural transit programs is an important part of overcoming obstacles.”

In New Mexico, RPOs such as South Central, will continue to provide input into regional plans and proceed with other transit and improvement projects. White concluded, “As a matter of regional development, the linkages from our RPO projects, like our plan to develop a regional scenic byway loop, help create a stronger base for economic development, as well as build regional collaboration.”

For more information contact Elizabeth Bernal or Greg White of the South Central COG at (505) 744-0039.

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Making Economic Tracks with Short Line and Regional Rail Access

The nation's 400-plus short line and regional railroads serve as critical links to both national and global markets for industries located throughout small town and rural America. In fact, these important lines currently account for 29 percent of the railroad industry's route mileage, according to the American Short Line and Regional Railroad Association.

However, with the consolidation of the major rail companies and the drive for profits, many of these lines have been abandoned or neglected during recent decades. The impact has been felt particularly hard in some rural areas where the lines provided an essential connection for local industries, like those involved in bulk commodities such as grain, stone and forest products.

In a four county area of Upstate New York, the Southern Tier West Regional Planning and Development Board (RPDB) engaged in a successful 15-year battle to prevent the abandonment of a 145-mile rail stretch connecting four southwestern New York counties with two Pennsylvania counties.

According to Tom Barnes of the Southern Tier West RPDB, the regional planning board took the lead on the rail issue in the mid-1980s with the blessing of the state and four affected counties. Among its activities, the group conducted engineering and market analyses to determine the future redevelopment potential of the line. They also became a formal interested party in the federal Surface Transportation Board's merger decision in the mid-1990s, allowing them to start negotiating with the Class I railroad purchaser.

After years of effort, Southern Tier West executed an agreement with the purchasing railroad and New York State in 1998 that set the stage for the creation of a four county railroad authority with the power to consummate a sale-and-leaseback transaction.

Under the agreement, the railroad would meet certain service and maintenance obligations during the leaseback period and the authority would abate real estate property taxes on the line to provide a lower operating cost environment for the railroad.



The state legislature formally created the authority in 2000 and the sale-and-leaseback occurred in February 2001. With the authority's approval, the new Class I owner has subleased the line for 30 years to a regional railroad. Southern Tier West is providing staffing and administrative services to the authority, which is overseeing operations, securing line rehabilitation funding and pursuing support for business development along the line.

In explaining the impact, Barnes remarked, "It's a redevelopment project of major significance. Local governments in the region made huge concessions by abating millions in real estate tax revenue to keep the line alive. Losing rail access meant tax revenues would vanish, along with rail service impairing the region's economy."

Today, two-thirds of the line is back in operation, with the entire line expected to be operational by 2002. Southern Tier West projects the line will directly create and retain almost 400 jobs within the next three years.

For more information contact Tom Barnes of Southern Tier West at (716) 945-5301. Additional information on short line and regional railroads is available at www.aslrra.org.

ITS Deployment Project Helps Motorists in Northern California Region

When Phillip Dow, Executive Director of the Mendocino Council of Governments (MCOG), talks about the future of transportation planning for parts of Northern California, he includes the deployment of Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS) as a top priority.

Dow explains why ITS is a priority, “The majority of our region is rugged, rural and we often have dangerous weather conditions. It stands to reason that motorist safety is a number one concern and ITS is one of the best ways for a rural area to address safety issues.”

The Mendocino COG, the regional transportation planning organization for eight local jurisdictions, is a tested and proven player in the ITS arena. Among its most recent experiences is its active participation in the Northern California / Southern Oregon Rural ITS Areawide Travel and Safety Improvement Project (COATS).

Building on experiences gained from the COATS initiative, the Mendocino COG is now installing emergency call boxes along highway roadsides in the region. This includes knowledge of implementation activities, like understanding how to perform the proper fiber optic reviews and how to obtain encroachment permits. In addition, as a transit authority for 25 years, the COG has the motorist travel

statistics for the region to help determine the best installation locations.

Dow says the ITS goal now is to build upon the call box installations with “smart boxes” or weather sensing devices that feed into roadside electronic message boards for motorists and into local road maintenance messaging centers.

The Mendocino COG has already taken the first step to accomplish this goal by including smart boxes as a priority in the pending regional transportation improvement plan (TIP).

As the regional transportation planning organizations for the area, the COG is also responsible for facilitating the development of the regional plan and presenting it to the state department of transportation.

Dow declares, “It is our connection with the public and regional knowledge that is carving out a future for ITS deployment in our region of Northern California.”

For more information contact Phillip J. Dow, Executive Director of the Mendocino COG, at (707) 463-4470.

This article is part of a ITS article series funded under an agreement with the US Department of Transportation.

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Additional ITS information is also available at www.nawgits.com/nado/icdn.html.

Conferences:

Enabling Technologies and Transportation Innovation, August 7-8, 2001

The third and final symposium in the National Symposia on Transportation presented by the Volpe Transportation Systems Center, the event will be held at the Center in Cambridge, MA. Operational expense and regulations in technology deployment are among the discussion topics. Contact John Hopkins at: (617) 494-3455 or email hopkins@volpe.dot.gov

Rural Advanced Technology and Transportation Systems Conference, August 25-28, 2001

Radisson, Burlington, VT. Featuring workshops in areas such as telematics for rural drivers, multi-state ITS and emergency response. Contact ITS America at (202) 484-4847 or visit: www.itsa.org

National Association of Development

Organizations (NADO) 34th Annual Training Conference, August 26-28, 2001

Marriott Rivercenter, San Antonio, TX. Four tracks offer insight into regional economic development and planning, including a transportation track covering rural consultation practices, GIS/GPS as a planning tool, current regional projects, and long-term planning. Contact Kelly Novak at (202) 624-7809 or visit: www.nado.org

Transportation and Economic Development, September 23-25, 2001

Portland, Oregon, Embassy Suites Downtown. A conference coordinated by the Transportation Research Board and American Association of State Transportation and Highway Officials. NADO is among the cooperating sponsors. Contact Joe Williams of the Transportation Research Board at (202) 334-3205 or visit: www.ted2001.com

Publications:

Transportation Geographical Information Systems (GIS)

An ESRI Press publication by Laura Lang, illustrates how GIS can be used among modes of transportation planning and operations, such as airport paging, rail maintenance, highway safety and planning for congestion. Contact ESRI Press at (800) 888-4741 or visit www.esri.com

NHS Intermodal Freight Connectors: A Report to Congress

Prepared by the U.S. Department of Transportation, the report reflects the current inventory of National Highway System freight connectors, including waterports, airports, truck/rail terminals, pipeline/truck terminals and calls for improving information, coordination, funding and community awareness. (FHWA-OP-01-015) www.ops.fhwa.dot.gov



“How Can We Work Together? A Guidebook to Smart Response through Coordinating Local Public Safety & Transportation, Communication & Technology.”

The guidebook offers public safety decision makers nationwide examples of community involvement in successful emergency, police and fire response, using Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS). To order, email Kristy.Frizell@fhwa.dot.gov or visit: www.its.dot.gov/welcome.htm

Moving Ahead: The American Public Speaks on Roadways and Transportation in Communities

A combination of three surveys by FHWA and the Bureau of Transportation Statistics, the report rates public satisfaction with highways and transportation systems in communities. Transportation improvements are also rated, with respondents indicating that expansion of systems, pedestrian, and bikeways are important (FHWA-OP-01-017). Available online at www.fhwa.dot.gov/reports/movingahead.htm

Working to establish RPOs
in your state, or trying to strengthen
your existing rural transportation
planning process...

**The Best Practices Section of the
NADO Regional Transportation Online Center**

currently features RPO models from
Arizona, Connecticut, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky,
Maine, Minnesota, Missouri, New Hampshire,
New Mexico, Pennsylvania and South Carolina.

Includes information on work programs, contracts,
funding sources, lessons learned and more...



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