



Highlights of [GAO-09-868](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Committee on Environment and Public Works, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Metropolitan planning organizations (MPO) are responsible for transportation planning in metropolitan areas; however, little is known about what has been achieved by the planning efforts. This congressionally requested report describes (1) the characteristics and responsibilities of MPOs, (2) the challenges that MPOs face in carrying out their responsibilities, (3) how the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) provides oversight for MPOs and the extent to which this improves transportation planning, and (4) the options that have been proposed to enhance transportation planning. To address these objectives, GAO surveyed all 381 MPOs (with an 86 percent response rate) and conducted case studies of eight metropolitan areas and conducted a survey of program managers.

What GAO Recommends

GAO suggests that Congress consider making MPO transportation planning more performance based by, for example, identifying specific transportation outcomes for transportation planning and charging DOT with assessing MPOs' progress in achieving these outcomes in the certification review process. GAO also recommends, among other things, that DOT develop a strategy to improve data gathering and modeling at the MPO level. DOT agreed to consider the report's recommendations.

View [GAO-09-868](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact Phillip R. Herr at (202) 512-2834 or herrp@gao.gov. To view the e-supplement online, click on [GAO-09-867SP](#).

METROPOLITAN PLANNING ORGANIZATIONS

Options Exist to Enhance Transportation Planning Capacity and Federal Oversight

What GAO Found

MPOs vary greatly in terms of capacity and responsibilities. Some MPOs are supported by one or two staff, while others have over 100 staff. While half of MPOs represent populations of less than 200,000, some represent millions. MPOs are typically housed within a regional planning council or a city or county government agency, but also may operate as independent agencies. Most MPOs receive the majority of their planning funds from federal sources, but also receive funds from other sources such as states or localities. The technical capacity of MPOs also varies significantly, both in terms of the type of model used to develop travel demand forecasts and the number of staff available to perform such forecasts. Some MPOs have acquired additional responsibilities, such as project implementation, beyond federal requirements.

MPOs cited many challenges in our survey and interviews, primarily related to funding and staffing, authority, and technical capacity. About 85 percent of all MPOs responding to our survey cited the lack of transportation planning funding as a challenge to transportation planning. About half of our survey respondents stated that the lack of flexibility for using federal planning funds inhibits them from conducting comprehensive transportation planning. Staffing constraints, such as limited number of staff and lack of trained staff, also impact MPOs' ability to conduct transportation planning. Finally, according to our survey and interviews, some MPOs lack the technical capacity and data necessary to conduct the type of complex transportation modeling required to meet their planning needs.

DOT's Federal Transit Administration (FTA) and Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) work together to oversee MPOs, but given the process-oriented approach of the oversight, it is difficult to determine whether their oversight is improving transportation planning. MPOs representing more than 200,000 in population are subject to federal certification reviews. The certification reviews focus on procedural compliance with planning requirements, not transportation outcomes. MPOs generally view this federal process as pro forma in nature and place a greater value on informal assistance provided by both federal and state governments.

Several proposals have been developed by government and industry associations that could address some of the resource, authority, and technical challenges facing MPOs. For example,

- allowing the use of transportation planning funds for more activities could better meet the needs of some metropolitan areas;
- varying MPOs' planning requirements and authority or changing the legal definition of MPOs could address varying capacity and planning needs;
- increasing federal investment in modeling and data gathering could improve the technical capability of MPOs and bring a greater degree of reliability and consistency across MPOs to travel demand forecasting; and
- making the planning process more performance-based could allow FTA and FHWA to better assess MPOs' progress in achieving specific results.