

An Equity Analysis of Transportation Funding

By Thomas W. Sanchez, Ph.D

The primary function of Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) is to adopt long-range transportation plans that govern the use and allocation of hundreds of billions of public dollars. The equity impact of their actions and decisions is a matter of great importance to low-income communities and communities of color.

Decisions about community and regional development are most successful within a democratic framework. Effective outcomes are achieved when those participating have “a full awareness of their interests and have sufficient power to assure representativeness and equity in outcomes.”¹ However, in order to express those desires and preferences in a meaningful way, the public must be provided with the capacity to participate. A crucial component of any democratized planning process is the demystification of the decision-making process and transparency in communication of alternatives to and consequences of proposed policies.

Legal mandates related to environmental justice (EJ) and social equity in the activities of MPOs are included in Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the 1994 Executive Order 12898, which states, that “...each Federal agency shall make achieving environmental justice part of its mission by identifying and addressing, as appropriate, disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of its programs, policies, and activities on minority populations and low-income populations.” Meaning, MPOs must not only treat EJ communities equally in terms of the opportunities afforded them for meaningful public participation, those opportunities must equal those offered to the most “important” stakeholders.

Federal regulations recognize that MPOs must give EJ communities the extra assistance they need to take full advantage of those opportunities. As a consequence, MPOs are expected to provide EJ and other participating communities with:

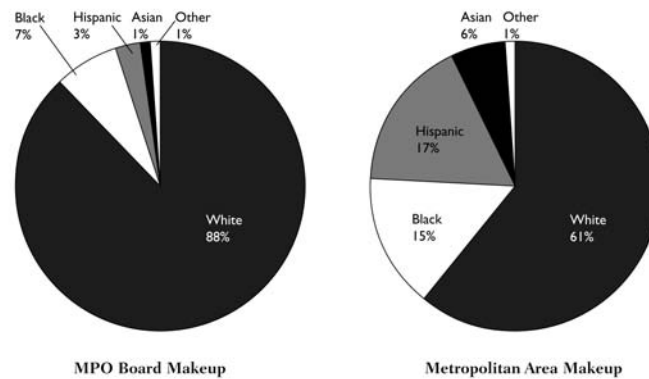
- Sound information and analysis that may be reasonably required to articulate the actions that best respond to their needs, preferences, and desires.
- Continuous, rather than intermittent, engagement for more effective participation in the decision-making process. Lapses in communication and engagement between planners and stakeholders inevitably lead to substantive gaps in knowledge, especially when the decisions at stake are long-term and span multiple years.
- A continuous and accessible flow of information to facilitate transparency. Well-documented practices that are open to checks on accountability are vital for stakeholders to understand processes leading to decision-making.

The literature on public participation shows that bottom-up approaches, which involve and respond to initiatives from EJ communities are more likely to result in active, meaningful participation by the communities because of their greater investment and ownership in the process.

Democratic Input Through Democratic Structures

Voting members of MPOs are instrumental in programming federal and state transportation funds and should ideally reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of their constituents, so that every citizen is seen to have an equal chance of providing input.² A survey of the 50 largest MPOs, as ranked by population, showed that the size of the MPO board does not always correlate with the size of its jurisdiction. While the average was about 26 voting members per MPO, the

Racial/Ethnic Composition of MPO Voting Board Members and Current Composition of the Corresponding Metropolitan Areas



range was between seven (Greater Buffalo and Portland Metro) and 76 (SCAG in Los Angeles). Participation by non-local (regional, state, and federal) representatives on each board also increased the number of voting members. The outliers among the MPOs were Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles, each of which had low per capita levels of board representation relative to their population sizes of eight, 11, and 15 million respectively.

Gender. Females represent about 25 percent of voting members among MPOs surveyed and averaged over six per board. No MPO board was without females. San Diego AOG, Denver Regional COG, Southeast Michigan COG, Hillsborough County MPO, and the Metropolitan Council of Twin Cities had the highest proportion (over 40 percent each) of females. Additional research could examine whether policy emphases are affected by higher levels of female leadership.

Race and Ethnicity. The voting members of the selected MPO boards were predominantly white (approximately 88 percent) with about seven percent African Americans, three percent Hispanics, and one percent Asian/Pacific Islanders. Native Americans and “other” (combined) groups represented less than one percent of all voting members. By comparison, in 2000, the overall racial/ethnic composition of these MPOs was 61 percent white, 15 percent African American, six percent Asian, and 17 percent Hispanic.

In addition, 13 of the 50 MPOs in the study had all white members and only 10 had greater than 20 percent non-white members. The most racially and ethnically diverse group was the Oahu MPO (only 31 percent white) and the Miami Urbanized Area MPO (only 46 percent white). The MPO boards with the largest number of African Americans were in Miami (32 percent), Washington, D.C. (22 percent), and

Philadelphia (17 percent). Overall, there was only a slight correlation between the racial/ethnic composition of the MPO boards and the race/ethnicity of their jurisdictions.

The Urban-Suburban Tug-of-Wars

Many MPO boards are overrepresented by suburban interests because of a “one-area, one-vote” system. District boundaries for MPO board representatives and planning units are drawn in approximately equal-sized geographic areas, so urban core areas that have denser populations than suburban zones end up being underrepresented. This system influences the level of involvement and participation of persons based on residential location—negatively so, in the case of low-income, neighborhoods of color in urban core areas.

For the MPOs in this analysis, no correlation was seen between racially diverse MPO boards and the number of EJ planning activities. This suggests that board representation may not necessarily lead to particular planning actions, such as the performance of EJ oriented planning analyses. Other research suggests that MPO board and voting structures have a significant effect on the outcomes of transportation investment decisions—especially those related to public transit.³ In particular, they found that for each additional suburban voter on an MPO board, one to seven percent fewer funds were allocated to public transit in MPO budgets.

Although specific information about the racial and ethnic composition of MPO boards was not previously collected, we expected minorities to be underrepresented relative to the demographic characteristics of their constituents. This was the situation recently with the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments when constituents challenged the representativeness of voting board members.⁴ In particular, constituents

By the Numbers

The Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) of the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area has 14 voting members. Twelve are appointed by local elected bodies, such as Boards of Supervisors. The Association of Bay Area Governments and the Bay Conservation and Development Commission appoint the other two voting members of the commission. (There

are also three non-voting members representing the federal and state transportation agencies and the federal housing department.) Thirteen of the 15 voting members are white, 12 of them are male. Urban/suburban status is harder to call because sometimes an urban office holder is appointed by a suburban-dominated regional body as its representative. Roughly speaking, there are six urban

and nine suburban-oriented voting members.

Although the MTC sports an Advisory Council, an Elderly and Disabled Advisory Committee, and a Minority Citizens Advisory Committee, for years, transportation justice advocates have documented MTC's failure to respond to significant input from these committees, on its investment priorities.—Ed.

were dissatisfied with expenditure levels for transit compared to highways in the Detroit metropolitan region, which they saw as skewing investments toward sprawl and consumption of rural land. The case has increased the visibility of MPO board structures and procedures regarding decision-making.

The Charms and Challenges of MPOs

It is difficult to gauge the level of commitment of MPOs to transportation equity principles simply by describing the types of planning activities that they undertake. Moreover, the racial and ethnic composition of voting members is only an indirect measure of adequate public participation and representation, although it may serve as an indicator of the degree to which minorities have a stake in regional policy making.

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

An interesting question is whether planning analysis and representative boards are substitutes for or complements within the MPO structure. Is it sufficient to have thorough data collection, analysis, and monitoring of equity outcomes at the metropolitan scale despite unrepresentative board members, or do representative boards (and their consequent voting) more directly influence policy and decision-making that affect distributional equity? Finally, does the

combination of planning analyses and representative boards have synergistic effects that provide a greater potential for addressing the needs of traditionally underserved populations?

Specific challenges remain in regard to greater public participation and involvement in transportation decision-making by state departments of transportation and MPOs.⁵ Community-based groups that assist transportation agencies should be encouraged to improve outreach processes and strategies to identify culturally diverse groups and facilitate their involvement. Such efforts are greatly needed to support information dissemination about transportation and related land-use impacts. Mechanisms are needed that allow formal recognition of coalitions of community representatives on MPO advisory committees and decision-making boards. In addition, MPOs, local governments, researchers, and community-based organizations need resources for more data collection and analysis about transportation access to basic needs, such as healthcare, jobs, affordable housing, and public education.⁶ ■

Endnotes

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