



Safe Routes PARTNERSHIP

Active Paths for Equity & Health

www.SafeRoutesPartnership.org

Introduction to Safe Routes to School

Over the past two decades, Safe Routes to School projects and programs have grown larger and more sophisticated. Walking and rolling to school has attracted great interest from leaders and decision-makers at the local, regional, state and federal levels.

As such, Safe Routes to School practitioners have been expanding their efforts to encompass policy, systems and environmental changes in their work. Regional government agencies are allies that can help advance efforts to support transportation options for students that include walking and rolling.

Safe Routes to School: A Regional Government Primer for Practitioners



Metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs), which are regional transportation planning authorities, have the ability to support Safe Routes to School by including safe walking and rolling to school within regional transportation plans and policies, providing funding to local projects, and even implementing its own programs. Understanding your MPO's process and leverage points can help you and your partners recognize new opportunities to advance walking and rolling in your communities.

Introduction to Regional Government

In 2012, Congress made changes to federal funding for Safe Routes to School that gave some metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) decision-making authority over which projects to fund and increased the importance of engaging MPOs in Safe Routes to School. Each state is required to suballocate 59 percent of its Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) based on population, meaning funds are awarded through competitions based on community size, with funds proportionately divided into pots based on population. MPOs serving a population of at least 200,000 are required to coordinate a competitive grant process for the eligible TAP funds. TAP is one of the largest sources of federal funding for Safe Routes to School.

For practitioners, this is an opportunity to engage MPOs and their local governments — and not just around the allocation of these funds, but also in a larger discussion around additional administration, programs, and funding mechanisms that can be leveraged to improve conditions for walking and rolling in the region. This action brief is designed to provide the Safe Routes to School practitioner with the basic tools to understand the complexities of a MPO's transportation decisions and procedures. A companion document, "[Safe Routes to School: A Primer for Regional Governments](#)," focuses on informing regional staff and decision-makers on the benefits of Safe Routes to School while sharing best practices in regional decisions, programs, and funding that result in more people walking and rolling to school and in daily life.

More detailed information about MPOs and ideas on how to engage MPOs around walking, rolling, and Safe Routes to School can be found in:

- > [Metropolitan Planning Organizations and Health 101](#)
- > [Metropolitan Planning Organizations & Health 201: Best Practices & Promising Opportunities for Health](#)

Regional Planning

Regional planning became a priority when the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1962 provided conditional funding to urbanized areas with more than 50,000 people with the stipulation that they must undergo regional planning with their local jurisdictions. The injection of the conditional funding not only helped to unify approaches toward making major transportation connections through the region, but also required some consensus on the value and priority of projects.



Metropolitan Planning Organizations and Regional Councils of Government

In order to meet the requirements of the Federal Aid Highway Act and receive funding from the federal Highway Trust Fund to advance regional transportation needs, MPOs were formed in areas with populations of more than 50,000. These MPOs consisted of local elected officials and their staff and focused on addressing funding priorities for highway, safety, security and transit projects.

MPOs are structured many different ways. No one organizational structure is inherently better than the other — local political demands, historical context and current transportation needs usually dictate how each MPO has been formed and administered. Many MPOs are administered by a regional council of governments (COG) or are governed by a board of directors typically comprised of elected officials from the region, relevant state officials and representatives of agencies that oversee various modes of transportation. To make informed decisions, board members often rely on technical committees and staff to provide them with relevant research and information.

MPOs construct the vision for transportation across a region. This includes if a region will focus on automobiles and additional lane miles or whether a region's transportation system will be diverse and multi-modal. An MPO lays the direction of regional transportation systems through the implementation of a planning process, which includes educating diverse audiences, funding projects, and measuring performance.



Planning and Funding within MPOs

As an entity, MPOs are required to undertake regular transportation planning processes at the regional level and to develop a 20-year long-range transportation plan (LRTP). Additionally, they develop a three- to five-year transportation improvement program (TIP), which is then incorporated into the state transportation improvement program (STIP). These two regional documents schedule the allocation of federal dollars toward regional projects through an extensive planning process. Ultimately, transportation projects must be included in the TIP to receive federal and state transportation dollars.

While this process works differently within each MPO, MPOs are required to make their planning processes, LRTPs and TIPs public as well as to encourage participation from interested stakeholders. All jurisdictions within the MPO come together to set the priorities within the LRTP and select projects included in the TIP. Transportation planners, which often include bicycle and pedestrian planners, are consulted through the MPO committee process on each jurisdiction's projects that are included in the LRTP and TIP.

In their role as gatekeepers to TAP funding, large MPOs have the authority to determine which types of active transportation projects, including Safe Routes to School, receive funding. MPOs make many decisions about how to administer TAP that affect whether or not Safe Routes to School projects are competitive—such as the funding priorities, what type of scoring criteria are used, how schools are notified about the availability of funding, whether funding is set aside for Safe Routes to School projects and more.

Read [The Role of MPOs in Advancing Safe Routes to School through the Transportation Alternatives Program](#) for profiles four MPOs, each of which used a thoughtful and innovative approach to TAP that was ultimately beneficial to the safety of children and families on the trip to and from school.

For local Safe Routes to School supporters, it is critical to learn more about your local MPO's approach to planning and funding. Research your MPO via regional and state websites and introduce yourself and offer your expertise to relevant contacts working within your MPO.

What You Can Do

As with most successful work, your success is predicated on your knowledge of the processes and the people involved. Use the following guidance as a starting point for supporting regional bicycle, pedestrian, and Safe Routes to School policy:

LEARN

- Familiarize yourself with the planning documents and the planning process/timetable available on your MPO's website. Learn more about your MPO here.
- Attend MPO board meetings, even if there is not an agenda item of interest to you.
- Subscribe to your MPO's email/social media updates and add them to your update lists.

REVIEW

- Review all documents that are publicly available and posted online. Check agendas and handouts to stay abreast of current topics.
- Review all documents that are publicly available with regard to technical committees and community advisory committees, which often work on projects before they are brought to the MPO board.

CONNECT

- Develop connections with staff and board members to offer expertise and discuss walking, rolling and Safe Routes to School priorities.
- Inform MPOs about walking, rolling, and Safe Routes to School priorities by participating at relevant MPO committees and engaging decision-makers.

PARTICIPATE

- Align with your jurisdiction's staff members who sit on MPO committees as well as with members from the community advisory committees. They can keep you up to date on issues or even become vocal educators and supporters for your issues during committee meetings.
- Invite the MPO and its board members to community bicycling and walking events that you are hosting and include them in the planning of such events.
- Be persistent. Navigating the internal processes at MPOs can feel overwhelming, but don't give up.

Align Talking Points with MPO Priorities

In addition to providing your MPO staff and board with the companion “[Safe Routes to School: A Primer for Regional Governments](#)” action brief, customize your talking points by considering the following priorities of your MPO and how they align with Safe Routes to School priorities.

- > If your MPO has the authority to determine transportation funding priorities for the region, then your talking points should describe why Safe Routes to School fits within those priorities.
- > If your MPO values connectivity across modes, then your talking points should illustrate how walking and rolling projects can help realize complete trips to school or other prioritized locations.
- > If your MPO has a multi-modal perspective, then your talking points should describe how and why walking and rolling should be included in their policies and scoring criteria.
- > If your MPO values safety and security, then your talking points should describe why walking and rolling projects should receive their fair share of funding by matching funds to mode and/or traffic-related injury and mortality data.
- > MPOs are increasingly considering the connection between transportation and health. In turn, your talking points should show how transportation planning has a major impact on physical activity rates, road safety and overall community health.
- > MPOs focus on the attainment of recommended congestion and air quality standards. Your talking points should demonstrate how Safe Routes to School can help achieve these goals.
- > MPOs are mandated to involve lower-income communities and other stakeholders in planning. Your talking points should illustrate how Safe Routes to School projects and programs excel at bringing together a wide variety of community perspectives.



Additional Resources

Most MPOs have a Citizen's Guide to Regional Transportation. Contact your MPO or find the guide on its website. It will be specific to your locale and is a very useful resource. Below are some additional links to resources that will prepare you to get active within your MPO.

- > [The Role of MPOs in Advancing Safe Routes to School through the Transportation Alternatives Program](#)
- > [Boosting Active Transportation Through Regional Transportation Plans](#)
- > [Influencing Complete Streets at the Regional Level](#)
- > [Metropolitan Planning Organizations and Health 101](#)
- > [Metropolitan Planning Organizations & Health 201: Best Practices & Promising Opportunities for Health](#)