

How Metropolitan Planning Organizations Plan for and Fund Bicycling and Walking Investments

The new transportation law, MAP-21, gives Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) more responsibility for distributing federal transportation funds. MPOs serving areas with more than 200,000 residents are required to run a competitive grant program to distribute federal funds from the Transportation Alternatives (TA) program.

As a result of these new rules, many transportation stakeholders — including MPO professionals, federal policy makers, and bicycling and walking advocates — are interested in learning best practices to effectively integrate bicycling and walking needs into the MPO planning and funding process in general, and related to the competitive grant program in particular.

General Best Practices

In general, successful communities have three things:

- Political leadership
- Capable, and ideally supportive, staff
- Regular funding stream

Planning

- Integrate bicycling and walking projects and/or strategies into the region's Long Range Transportation Plan
- Involve community members in identifying needs and priorities, which lead to goals
 - Conduct a constituent survey; this can demonstrate public support for goals
 - Include health questions in the regional household travel survey
 - Frame transportation planning around a way of life people can identify with
- Collect data on bicycling and walking rates, including bike and walking to school
 - Make sure the MPO shares the data back down to local governments and stakeholders.
 - For Safe Routes to School programs: track communities with school level plans and utilize data from International Walk to School Day organized by the National Center for Safe Routes to School.

- Integrate bicycling and walking projects into other planning documents.
 - Example: In Chicago, the Regional Comprehensive plan points to greenways and trails plan
 - Capture all needs, including bike/ped, in county-level transportation plans
 - Create recognized projects list
 - Work with stakeholders to develop sub-plans
- Support local planning and focus on walking/bicycling improvements at the local level by:
 - Funding local planning initiatives
 - Working with local officials to identify local priorities
 - Helping them bundle small projects into regionally significant projects
 - Integrating elements from regional plans (e.g. priority corridors and complete streets) into local plans. This shows a united commitment to biking and walking among regional and local levels.
- Create a (geo-coded) database of bikeways
 - Include local, regional and sub-regional plans
 - This align levels of the different plans and builds support for funding when everybody's on board

Funding

- Establish a transparent process with clear and measurable selection criteria should be clear and measurable. This reduces “politics” and creates credibility.
- Pass and implement a Complete Streets policy to ensure all projects meet the needs of all relevant road users
- Establish an active MPO Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee (BPAC)

Funding approaches:

- Use performance measures to tie funds to regional goals and objectives (make sure you have appropriate data).
- Use a percentage set-aside for bike/ped projects in STP and CMAQ (Examples: Nashville, Seattle). The set-aside needs to be high, otherwise it can limit spending.
- Focus on health (Example: Nashville). Map unhealthy areas and give extra points in the scoring process to projects that promote health.

- Focus on a mode-shift goal (Example: Chicago).
- Focus on bicycling/walking level of service.

Best Practices for Transportation Alternatives Competitive Grant Program

- Involve Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee (BPAC) members and bicycling stakeholders in establishing applications, selection criteria, and project selection decisions.
- Project selection criteria should:
 - Be transparent and public
 - Be clear and measurable
 - Emphasize bicycling and walking
- For instance, the project selection criteria in Kansas City includes consideration for
 - Non-motorized transportation
 - Mobility and safety
 - Intermodal connections
 - Quality of life
 - Reducing Single Occupancy Use and improving air quality
 - Equity and safety (additional suggestion)

 - Score and rank projects based on user counts, adjacent business
- Have a balanced composition on your project selection committee, including:
 - Bicycling advocates
 - Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee (BPAC) members
 - Transit representatives
 - Park representatives
 - Accessibility representatives
 - Some, but not predominantly, public works staff
 - Safe Routes to School advocates and/or school representatives
 - Representatives from local communities

- Communicate clearly and work with communities to develop high-quality bike/ped applications. The bike/ped outcome is only as good as applications.
- Conduct field checks.
 - MPO staff (and committee members, as well, if possible) go to a proposed site
 - Take photos for selection committee — e.g. herd path shows the need for a sidewalk. (Some MPOs require photo as part of application.)
 - Determine if cost estimates are in line
 - If time doesn't allow for field checks, utilize Google Street view.
- In the first months of MAP-21, quickly get the process going; delays can be politically damaging to bike/ped in the future.
 - Fund good, fast, existing Safe Routes to School (SRTS), Transportation Enhancements (TE), and Recreational Trails (RTP) projects as Transportation Alternatives — and spend down existing TE, SRTS, RTP funds
 - Fund incomplete projects that have been stalled due to lack of funding
- Revisit the process (application, criteria, committees) after each funding round to make improvements.