



Project Summary

Texas Department of Transportation

0-6483: Rural Planning Organizations - Their Role in Transportation Planning and Project Development in Texas

Background

While a formal planning and programming process is established for urbanized areas through Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPO), no similar requirement has been established for rural areas. Currently, states are required to consult with non-metropolitan local officials in transportation planning and programming but the process is not prescribed in the planning rules, and consultation practices vary.

For transportation planning purposes, an area outside of metropolitan areas that has less than 50,000 in population is considered rural, which includes incorporated areas that are outside of metropolitan area planning boundaries. Historically, the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) worked with individual rural counties to plan and program projects. This research project examined the potential role of Rural Planning Organizations (RPOs) in Texas to improve the transportation planning and programming process. RPOs are voluntary associations of local governments that plan rural transportation systems and advise state departments of transportation (DOTs) on rural transportation policy. In general, most RPOs assist state DOTs in the development and prioritization of short- and long-range transportation plans, provide a forum for rural transportation interests, and establish a link to other regional transportation planning organizations and providers.

What the Researchers Did

Researchers conducted a thorough literature review. Researchers interviewed staff and elected officials representing regional planning agencies, cities, counties, and TxDOT districts to learn about stakeholders' opinions regarding formation and potential usefulness of RPOs. The research team also identified the following RPOs that have been established in Texas and documented their histories, structures, and processes:

- Rolling Plains Organization for Rural Transportation (Childress).
- Cross Plains Rural Transportation Council (Wichita Falls).
- Heart of Texas Council of Governments Rural Planning Organization (Waco).
- Central Texas Rural Planning Organization (Belton).
- Brazos Valley Regional Planning Organization (Bryan-College Station).
- Capital Area Regional Transportation Planning Organization (Austin).
- Alamo Regional Rural Planning Organization (San Antonio).

Research Performed by:

Texas Transportation Institute (TTI),
The Texas A&M University System

Research Supervisor:

John Overman, TTI

Researchers:

Patricia Ellis, TTI
William Frawley, TTI
Ginger Goodin, TTI
Ryan Taylor, TTI

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What They Found

Highlights of the stakeholder interview results follow:

- Majority of districts and regional planning agencies support establishing RPOs.
- RPO membership should be similar to MPO policy boards, including elected officials and other decision makers representing regional planning agencies, cities, counties, MPOs, and RMAs.
- Most respondents believe that councils of government (COGs) are the most logical place to house RPOs.
- There was no clear consensus on whether RPO boundaries should mirror those of COGs or TxDOT districts.
- Districts and COGs stated that a permanent funding source is required to support RPOs, though amounts suggested varied from \$10,000 to \$75,000 annually.
- Staff sharing among RPOs and COGs and MPOs should be considered.
- Long-range rural transportation plans would be beneficial, providing direction and encouraging an organized process.
- Flexibility is the key concept to be considered when developing legislation, regulatory guidance, and overall frameworks. There are no one-size-fits-all solutions for rural transportation planning and programming issues.

Prior to the 81st Legislature Regular Session in 2009, the Sunset Advisory Commission made several recommendations for legislation to address transportation planning and programming. Key concepts from the Conference Committee Report for HB 300 provided a basis for revising the existing transportation planning and programming rules to recognize RPOs.

Later, the Texas Transportation Commission created a Rulemaking Advisory Committee to prepare draft rules for transportation planning and programming. The new rules defined the RPO's role in the transportation planning and programming process (Title 43 TAC, Chapter 16). These new rules were adopted on August 26, 2010, with an effective date of January 1, 2011.

What This Means

The TxDOT planning and programming rules require consistency among planning and programming efforts that mirrors federal planning requirements. The inclusion of RPOs in transportation planning and programming has been an evolving process in Texas and many other states. Legislation has been proposed in both the Texas Legislature and Congress to increase the participation and role of RPOs in the transportation planning process. In light of these efforts it is more a matter of when, not if, RPOs will be formally integrated into transportation planning. RPOs in Texas provide an opportunity to build upon existing transportation planning processes and organizations.

As RPOs continue to form in Texas, stakeholders should remain flexible in their views of exactly how RPOs should be structured and how they should function. The needs and potential benefits of RPOs vary as do the characteristics of rural Texas in the different parts of the state. RPOs serve a valuable role in the transportation planning and programming process by coordinating the interests and needs of rural cities and counties in areas of the state.

The *Texas Rural Planning Organization Guidebook* created as part of this project provides an overview of the transportation-planning process and requirements and addresses how RPOs can fit into the overall transportation-planning process. Also, an RPO workshop was prepared with accompanying instructor guide and participant notebook to support current and future RPOs in Texas.

For More Information:

Research Engineer - Duncan Stewart, TxDOT, 512-416-4730

Project Director - Bob Appleton, TxDOT, 817-370-6500

Research Supervisor - John Overman, TTI, 817-462-0516

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