

# Sustaining Multi-MPO Collaboration

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## Introduction

The metropolitan transportation planning process is designed, primarily, to improve transportation policy making and investment decisions across a metropolitan planning area. Federal law ([23 USC §134](#)) assigns principal responsibility for this process to metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs).

While cooperation and coordination between or among multiple MPOs on long-range planning processes or activities is common, the level of cooperation and coordination often changes over time, as conditions and priorities shift. In some cases, cooperation or coordination between or among MPOs leads to interregional collaboration, that is, working jointly across multiple metropolitan planning areas on new activities or work products.

This paper explores the mechanisms and conditions that facilitate collaboration between or among multiple neighboring or proximate MPOs. The first section provides a summary analysis of the state of the practice. The next section discusses programs and practices that can help strengthen and maximize the value of multi-MPO collaboration. The paper concludes with profiles of three areas of the country where multiple MPOs have sustained collaborative planning efforts for more than a decade.

## Key Points

Joint planning activities between MPOs can involve different levels of participation by each of the MPOs due to the preference to be non-binding and flexible, lack of resources to commit to a formal collaboration, temporal needs, and bureaucratic or political complexities. Agreements and MOUs between MPOs can vary in level of detail in order to provide the preferred level of flexibility and commitment.

Multi-MPO collaboratives sometimes begin with a few MPOs, and expand over time to include more members, wider areas, or expanded scope of issues.

Differences between MPOs can deter collaboration. These differences include level of urbanization, different work schedules, staff availability and organizational capacity, funding restrictions, administrative structure and operations, MPO policy board composition and priorities, and expectations set by state legislation and policies.

Nonetheless, collaborations allow MPOs to address cross-jurisdictional issues such as environmental challenges, population growth challenges, interregional transit improvements and freight management more comprehensively to remain economically competitive. Collaborations also help to ensure consistency of analysis, pool resources and expertise, and acquire funding for interregional projects.

Researchers from the American Planning Association and the Georgia Institute of Technology's Center for Quality Growth and Regional Development conducted qualitative case study research to learn more about how and why neighboring and proximate MPOs in three distinct areas of the country are coordinating their long-range planning efforts. The research team, in consultation with Federal Highway Administration staff, selected these three "multi-MPO coordination areas" based on their reputations for sustained coordination and collaboration over many years.

Initially brought together by air quality interdependency, MPOs in the San Joaquin Valley (SJV) have engaged in relationship-building over 14 years of collaboration enabling the expansion of collaborative activities to meet growing complexity, and the willingness to establish the San Joaquin Valley Regional Policy Council (SJVRPC) as a joint policy board facilitated by the San Joaquin Valley Regional Planning Agencies Directors Committee (SJVRPADC).

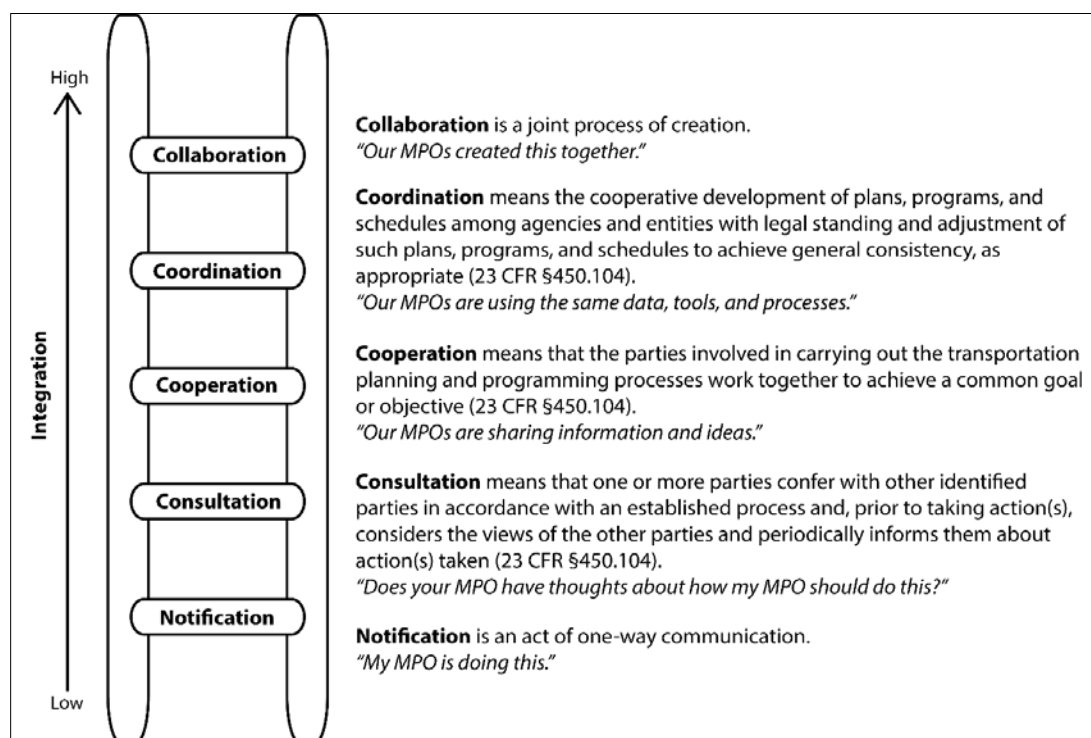
The New York Metropolitan Area Planning Forum (MAP Forum) includes MPOs serving vastly different population sizes, causing differences in economic activity, resources, and the demand and complexity of transportation planning. Aside from the requirement of an annual meeting, these MPOs have an MOU that is less explicit, allows for flexibility, and emphasizes voluntary participation. The MAP Forum offers members a “win-win” situation where larger MPOs collaborate with smaller neighboring MPOs to address their economic and growth challenges, while smaller MPOs lean on the larger MPOs for technical expertise and the collaboration’s administrative needs.

Establishment of Southeast Florida Transportation Council (SEFTC) was streamlined because Florida requires collaboration between contiguous MPOs. Florida’s Transportation Regional Incentive Program (TRIP) incentivizes joint development of a regional transportation plan and prioritized list of regional projects.

## State of the Practice

MPOs work together in numerous ways, ranging from ad hoc informal consultation to more formalized and structured collaborations involving joint policy boards or coordinating committees and joint work products. Figure 1 illustrates how cooperation, coordination, and collaboration between or among MPOs fit on a continuum of integration. This ladder of multi-MPO participation reflects the stages that often occur in the relationship-building process between MPOs.

Figure 1. A ladder of multi-MPO participation, adapted from Arnstein (1969).



In a recent nationwide survey of MPOs, more than three-quarters of respondents reported participating in at least one type of collaborative activity with a nearby MPO (Kramer et al. 2017). Table 1 lists a sample of these activity types.

However, this survey did not establish whether the joint activities and products reported in table 1 were the result of a broader, sustained commitment to common goals and actions, or if they were ad hoc or temporary. Furthermore, the respondents did not characterize their respective levels of participation in these efforts.

Multi-MPO collaborative efforts can be informal or formal. Both types of collaboration have value, and in some instances, MPOs with a history of informal collaboration have evolved toward formal collaboration.

Table 1. Multi-MPO collaborative activities reported in nationwide survey of MPOs (adapted from Kramer et al. 2017, p. 2-12)

Collaboration Type	Number	Percent
Met with leadership on a regular basis	145	69.0%
Performed other joint planning tasks or projects	133	63.3%
Signed a memorandum of understanding or an interlocal agreement	120	57.1%
Jointly purchased data, software, hardware, or technical services	68	32.4%
Conducted joint air quality planning activities	63	30.0%
Conducted joint public involvement activities	57	27.1%

Developed a regional transportation plan	41	19.5%
Conducted planning and environmental linkages activities	36	17.1%
Developed a joint Metropolitan Transportation Plan / Long Range Transportation Plan	24	11.4%
Developed a joint Congestion Management Process (CMP)	19	9.0%
Other	37	17.6%

## Informal Collaboration

In this paper, we define informal collaboration as actions and activities undertaken between two or more parties that are voluntary and not under the obligation of a formal agreement. In the context of collaborative regional governance, informal collaborative mechanisms can take the form of informal networks, working groups, or more complex self-organizing systems for policy coordination to name a few (Feiock 2012).

Informal collaboration, through mechanisms such as informal networks, provide the greatest local autonomy. With informal collaboration, policy network structures can emerge in an unplanned or ad-hoc manner, providing the greatest flexibility to address regional issues as they arise. Voluntary associations of decision makers, such as working groups, provide an effective platform for information sharing and coordination of activities through consistent interactions. These interactions reinforce a shared understanding of issues and expectations and can help participants make informal group decisions. However, obligations tend to be socially enforced rather than legally binding (Feiock 2012).

Informal MPO interactions include telephone calls or correspondence between MPOs to notify or consult and meetings, seminars, workshops, or conferences between staff or leadership from different MPOs where information is shared and discussed. These informal activities may, or may not, involve cooperating to enhance consistency, or collaborating to create new activities or products (The highest rung in the ladder of multi-MPO participation illustrated in Figure 1).

In some states, statewide MPO associations can also facilitate informal collaboration. Nine states currently have MPO associations that provide a forum to discuss issues that affect multiple MPOs (AMPO 2019).

In Table 1 we observe that more than 63 percent of MPOs perform joint planning tasks or projects with other MPOs, but only 57.1 percent report having signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) or interlocal agreement with other MPOs. This suggests that collaborations on joint planning tasks or projects can develop voluntarily (informally) without being governed by a formal agreement, or may occur as a result of a commitment expressed in a formal agreement.

MPOs often report working together informally as a precursor to committing to formal agreements. This is not surprising since the formalization of collaborative agreements is inevitably the outcome of a common need, goal, or purpose. However, the existence of common interests is not always sufficient to motivate or enable formalization of commitments. Reasons that some collaborations remain informal may include the preference to be non-binding and flexible, highly functional existing informal collaborations,

lack of resources to commit to a formal collaboration, the perception that the need is temporal, and bureaucratic or political complexities.

## Formal Collaboration

Written agreements form the basis for formal collaboration between or among neighboring or proximate MPOs. These agreements define the scope and nature of collaboration and may establish a new joint policy board, coordinating committee, or unit of government to facilitate group decision-making or manage group activities. A written agreement between or among MPOs can contain legally enforceable commitments, but more commonly serves as a nonbinding, public statement of intent.

Multi-MPO collaborative agreements may be labeled as memorandums of understanding or agreement (MOUs or MOAs), interlocal agreements, or some other term or phrase intended to convey the nature of the agreement. This label may be statutorily defined as legally binding by the state or states governing the parties of the agreement (e.g., a joint powers agreement in California). Otherwise, the label does not determine the legal status of the agreement. In these instances, the stated purpose and the nature of the obligations determine whether an agreement between or among MPOs is legally enforceable.

An agreement does not need to be legally binding to be an effective instrument for structuring commitment toward collaboration and to defining the common goals and actions that are key to developing and sustaining relationships among the signatories. Multi-MPO collaborative agreements can vary in level of detail in order to provide the preferred level of flexibility and commitment. The scope and specificity of the agreement appears to be directly proportional to the commitment to collaboration. However, many factors contribute to preventing some MPOs from operationalizing agreements that are too explicit; these MPOs may prefer less explicit agreements that allow exploration and flexibility to adopt mechanisms suited to different issues and challenges.

Furthermore, the scope and level of specificity in these agreements is often influenced by the size of the individual MPOs, geographic extent of the collaboration, and number of signatories. At one end of the spectrum, multiple MPOs may sign an agreement describing the formation, membership, rights, powers, and operations of a joint policy board and defining the scope and nature of collaborative planning activities and joint work products. At the other end of the spectrum, multiple MPOs may sign an agreement outlining areas of mutual interest and opportunities for action without describing any specific commitments.

Multi-MPO collaborative agreements often contain one or more of the following commitments:

- Periodic joint staff, coordinating committee, or policy board meetings
- Data sharing or coordination
- Project-based or periodic joint planning activities
- Project-based or periodic joint work products (including models, plans, or studies)

## Practices that Affect Collaboration

Common issues that require interregional collaboration include environmental stewardship, goods movement, and congestion management. However, a variety of factors affect the ability of neighboring or proximate MPOs to collaborate. Understanding these factors, and the inherent differences between MPOs, is one of the first steps in evaluating ways to encourage multi-MPO collaboration. The following section describes common themes that support or hinder interregional collaboration.

## Supporting Structures and Systems

There are several approaches that can help MPOs collaborate more efficiently or effectively. These include pooling resources, assigning roles and responsibilities based on organizational capacities, and joint meetings and events.

### Member MPOs Pooling Resources to Increase Resource Efficiency

Most MPOs struggle to find sufficient financial resources to meet both core transportation planning demands and maintenance of transportation assets and infrastructure (Kramer et al. 2017). Requirements for performance-based planning and a desire to improve transportation planning by developing alternate future scenarios and conducting special studies, such as corridor plans, multimodal plans, and freight studies, impose additional financial burdens on MPOs (Kramer et al. 2017). Thus, financial incentives and resource efficiency are strong drivers for multi-MPO collaboration.

For example, MPOs in Florida have a direct financial incentive for collaborating. The Florida DOT's Transportation Regional Incentive Program (TRIP) provides state matching funds for "regionally significant" transportation projects identified and prioritized by multiple neighboring or proximate MPOs, and MPOs must enter into an interlocal agreement to be eligible for the funds (Florida DOT 2019).

### Larger MPOs Supporting Smaller MPOs

The nationwide survey of MPOs conducted by Kramer, Carroll, and Karimi (2017) provides further insights into the impacts of differences in level of funding and administrative structure. According to this survey, professional staff in hosted and smaller MPOs are typically required to be generalists due to budgetary constraints. In fact, the median number of employees in MPOs that were able to support specialist staff ranges from eight (for transit specialization) to 22.5 (for socio-cultural impacts specialization). On average, MPOs reach eight employees when their planning area is about 1,300 square miles or represent about 310,000 people (Kramer et al. 2017). The same survey suggests that larger MPOs were more likely to have a staff member who spends more than half their time on scenario planning, while small and mid-sized MPOs struggle with even managing the performance-based planning and programming required for their core work products. MPOs reported needing to contract with additional consultants or increase use of interns to conduct performance-based planning and programming (Kramer et al. 2017).

Taken together, the observations above suggest that collaboration between smaller and larger MPOs may give smaller MPOs access to specialist staff and expertise from larger MPOs. This would allow smaller MPOs to better address transportation planning issues, including interregional congestion. Importantly, multi-MPO collaboratives could help MPOs to pool efforts and resources to investigate new and emerging issues and technology, such as autonomous vehicles and internet-connected infrastructure.

### Joint Advocacy and Collaborative Events

Common examples of multi-MPO collaborative events include regular joint policy board meetings, conferences, committee meetings, and working group meetings. While the frequency, timing, and protocols may vary, they collectively serve as effective platforms for communication, information sharing, and consensus building. Member MPOs typically rotate hosting responsibilities for these events. Formal agreements between or among MPOs often specify requirements for these meetings.

Joint events and meetings flatten the learning curve for new and emerging problems. Periodic meetings create continual opportunities to learn about emerging challenges,



develop an awareness of what neighboring MPOs are thinking about, and to identify opportunities for joint action, including taking advantage of new funding opportunities.

Collaborative events and meetings provide opportunities to compare experiences and share recommended practices. Regular conversations around long-range planning and other regional issues can prevent redundancies in investment decisions, and the ability to learn from other's efforts prevents investing in projects that are less likely to succeed.

These events and meetings also allow MPO members to formulate joint positions and bring issues to the attention of federal agencies, such as the Federal Highway Administration or the Federal Transit Administration, collectively, rather than through a series of one-off conversations. A unified voice also helps collaborative MPOs to better advocate for and secure more state and federal funding and to have a greater influence over legislation and policy decisions.

## Common Barriers to Multi-MPO Interregional Collaboration

Many factors that deter MPOs from working together are practical in nature, and some MPOs may not be able to invest extra effort or resources to overcome them. Other factors that deter collaboration are legislative or institutional, and addressing these would require legislative or policy changes.

### Diversity of Population Density and Urbanization

Populations served by MPOs vary greatly. Some of the smallest MPOs serve less than 50,000 residents (MPOs whose populations have declined since their initial designation). Meanwhile, the top 10 most populous MPO jurisdictions range from the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) with a 2010 population of 18,051,203 people across 6 counties and 38,649 square miles, to the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) with a 2010 population of 4,818,052 people across 20 counties and 4,550 square miles (USDOT n.d.). The diversity of urbanization and population densities significantly affect the complexity of transportation planning, resources available and required, and the necessary approaches to be adopted. Since multi-MPO collaboratives may span large geographical areas and different economic activities, the diversity between MPOs often results in different policies and strategic direction, which may discourage greater interregional collaboration.

### Rearrangement of Timelines and Work Schedules

The core work products of MPOs, as defined in [23 CFR §450](#) Subpart C, are the development of long-range transportation plans (LRTPs), transportation improvement programs (TIPs), and unified planning work programs (UPWPs). The development of these products may involve collection of data and the conduct of studies and assessments. The complexity of work needed is dependent on factors such as the urbanization level and circumstances of each MPO planning area, funding availability, and policy direction. The processes involved in the development of work products may include public engagement and endorsement by technical committees, and endorsement by the MPO policy board. Different MPOs may have commitments to different timelines and schedules. Consequently, for multi-MPO collaboratives to develop a joint transportation plan or a joint chapter for inclusion in a transportation plan, some rearrangement of work schedules involving multiple stakeholders may be necessary. Changes in time and work schedules is, at best, inconvenient and may not be possible if restricted by other resource constraints, work demands, and commitments.

### Administrative Burden and Availability of Staff

MPOs have consistently expressed that delivery of their core work products and goals necessarily take priority over participation in multi-MPO collaboratives. Workload and staff

availability are among factors that have made collaboration between or among neighboring or proximate MPOs difficult. In addition to time spent in meetings, multi-MPO collaboratives often involve time spent on communication, coordination, and additional administrative tasks. This additional demand on staff and resources can deter MPOs from participating more actively in multi-MPO collaboratives (Peckett et al. 2014). Of note, in multi-MPO collaboratives where there is marked disparity in staffing and budgetary resources, the expectation of commitments from member MPOs would have to be adjusted to account for the impact of this disparity in the ability of each member MPO to commit resources toward the collaboration.

### Differences in Funding and Boundary Constraints

Standard MPO funding includes Metropolitan Planning funds (PL Funds), described in [23 USC §104](#) (b)(6) and (b)(5)(D); Metropolitan Transit Planning funds, described in [49 USC §5305](#)(d); and Surface Transportation Block Grants (STPBG), described in [23 USC §133](#)(d). This funding is disbursed to MPOs based on state-specific formulas and population.

Since federal funding typically requires matching local funds, many MPOs raise local funds by collecting local contributions (Kramer et al. 2017). The most common source of local funding is the collection of dues from local governments based on population numbers. Other sources of local funding include collection from local transit agencies, funds raised from public and non-profit sectors, and collection from local government based on number of voting members on the MPO policy board, lane miles, vehicle miles travelled, or other transportation usage measures (Kramer et al. 2017).

Inevitably, differences in state funding formulas and MPO-specific adoption of local funding mechanisms result in differences among MPOs in their ability to support operational needs, pay for tasks, and fund transportation projects. Smaller MPOs report that they may have to accumulate funds over multiple years before they are able to fund a major planning activity or have enough floating capital to undertake a major infrastructure project. For larger MPOs, the greater demand and complexity of their area may mean that they still struggle to fund the full range of their needs, despite receiving more funding compared to smaller MPOs (Kramer et al. 2017).

When using funds for activities and projects that are part of a multi-MPO collaborative, attention is needed to ensure that any use of funds raised from state or local sources, including DOT district funding, comply with required policies, procedures, restrictions, and boundaries of all participating MPOs. MPOs that belong to different states or even different DOT districts must be mindful when assigning costs for joint projects that cross MPO boundaries.

### Differences in MPO Administrative Structure and Operations

Kramer, Carroll, and Karimi (2017) have delineated five types of MPO administrative structures: freestanding independent MPO, leaning independent MPO, component MPO, dual purpose MPO, and all-in-one agency. The differences between the types of MPO administrative structures generally relate to whether (1) an MPO has autonomy over its own finances, staff hiring, and operations; (2) an MPO is hosted by another organization; (3) staff in an MPO are shared with its host and are responsible for non-MPO work; (4) the director of an MPO can only be hired and fired by the MPO board, and (5) an MPO is discernible from its host.

MPO hosting arrangements are usually made when an MPO is initially designated and may be altered later in response to changes in the MPO planning area. A freestanding MPO meets all its operational needs by itself, while a leaning independent MPO receives services such as payroll, human resource, accounting, purchasing, and grants management from another



organization under a severable contract. For other types of MPO administration, the MPO is hosted, and the director reports to the host organization. The director of a component MPO reports to the host organization for administrative functions, but takes policy direction from the MPO board and does not usually supervise staff performing non-MPO duties. A dual-purpose MPO takes policy direction from the MPO board, but takes staff direction from the host agency board. Staff frequently shift between performing duties for the MPO and the host agency; however, the MPO board has a different (albeit somewhat similar) composition with the host agency board. An all-in-one agency is indiscernible from its host because it is governed by a board with identical membership, operates under the same name, and staff perform MPO and non-MPO duties such as land-use planning.

Respondents to a nationwide survey of MPOs reported experiences and views of the advantages and disadvantages of MPO administrative structures (Kramer et al. 2017). Several hosted MPOs reported that the host “interferes” with MPO policy setting and implementation and that the needs of the MPO and its transportation planning duties may not receive the same level of attention than issues of the larger host organization. Since a hosted MPO is subjected to the contracting, budgeting, and human resources policies of its host, approvals are often needed that affect a broad range of MPO operations including ability to hire, attract, and retain staff and consultants. The added administrative layer could make it more difficult for a hosted MPO to collaborate with other MPOs.

### Differences in MPO Policy Boards

Within an MPO, policy direction is determined by a policy board that is typically comprised of municipal elected officials, municipal elected executive officials, county commissioners, and county elected executive officials (Kramer et al. 2017). [23 USC §134\(d\)](#) states that the MPO structure shall consist of local elected officials, officials of public agencies that administer or operate major modes of transportation in the metropolitan area, and appropriate state officials. This allows flexibility for state and local legislation to determine the requirement for additional members on MPO policy boards and the voting rights of board members. The ability of states and local governments to determine composition and voting rights of MPO policy boards results in diversity in MPO board composition and policy direction across the nation (Kramer et al. 2017).

### Other Differences in Legislation and Policies

In addition to funding distribution formulas and MPO policy board composition that differ between states, different states tend to have different transportation policy directions and economic priorities that could complicate consensus-building in a multi-state collaborative. These differences in policies and priorities may cause MPOs to collaborate on some matters where there is higher likelihood of agreeing on common goals and priorities, but to refrain from collaborating on other matters where there may be conflicts of interest or where policies and priorities differ.

Additionally, state statutes and regulations set the expectations and establish the detailed form, function, and operations of transportation planning and administration in the state. These do not just affect how MPOs operate, but also the expected roles of and collaboration with other organizations that are directly or indirectly involved in transportation planning and administration including the state department of transportation (DOT), major transportation operators, school boards, and regional planning authorities

Interregional issues such as environmental management and freight movement, often cross state boundaries. Therefore, some multi-MPO collaboratives may necessarily be comprised of MPO members from different states. These collaboratives would, therefore, need to navigate differences between state legislation and policies in attempts to achieve their collective goals and purposes.

## Multi-MPO Coordination Area Experiences

Researchers from the American Planning Association (APA) and the Georgia Institute of Technology's Center for Quality Growth and Regional Development (CQGRD) conducted qualitative case study research to learn more about how and why neighboring and proximate MPOs in three distinct areas of the country are coordinating their long-range planning efforts (see figure 2).

*Figure 2. Multi-MPO Coordination Areas*



The research team, in consultation with Federal Highway Administration staff, selected these three “multi-MPO coordination areas” based on their reputations for sustained coordination and collaboration over many years. Through this process, APA and CQGRD staff reviewed MPO and partner plans, improvement and work programs, studies, formal agreements, meeting records, and websites. The team also interviewed senior MPO and local government staff members in each coordination area.

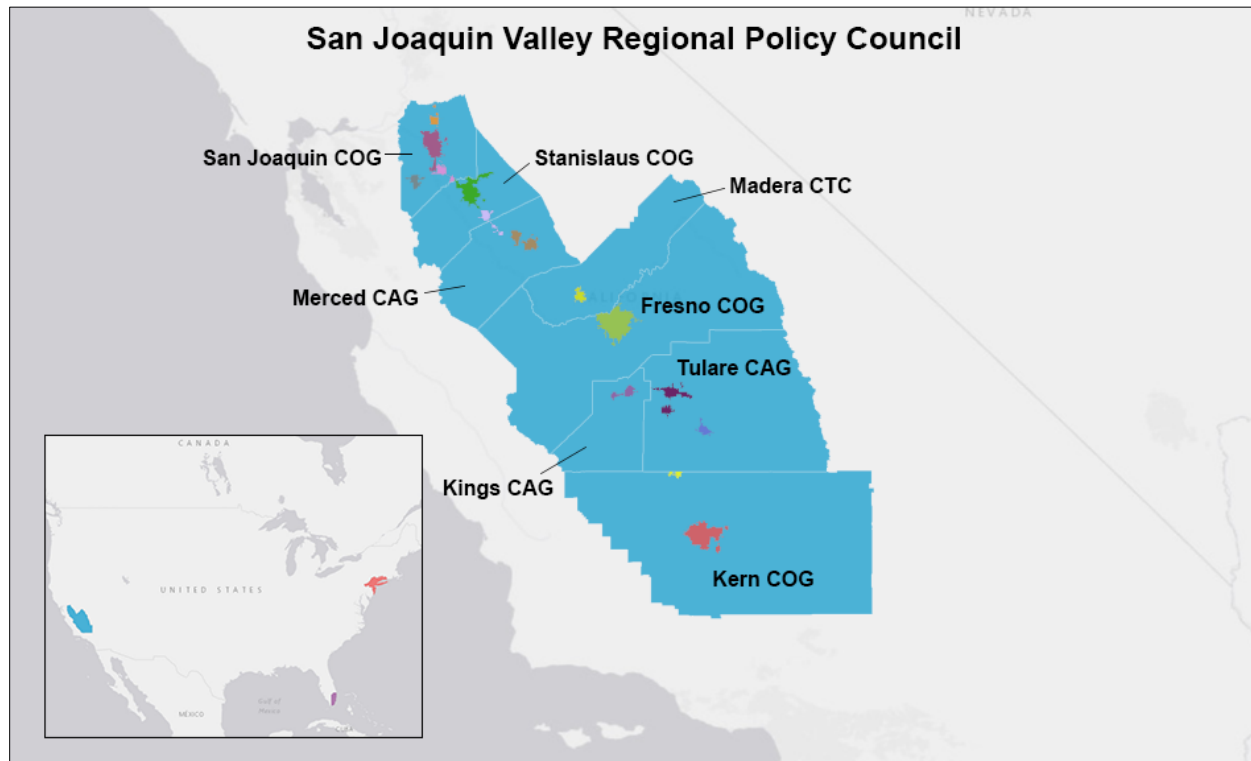
The preceding paragraphs provided an overview of the organization of multi-MPO interregional collaborations, and factors that are barriers and incentives to collaboration. The following sections highlight factors that were key to sustained collaboration in each case study coordination area.

### San Joaquin Valley Regional Policy Council

The San Joaquin Valley Regional Policy Council (SJVRPC) coordination area comprises the southern half of California's Central Valley, with a contiguous combined planning area of more than 27,000 square miles and an estimated population of more than four million residents. The coordination area name refers to a joint policy board established through a memorandum of understanding among eight MPOs (SJVRPC MOU 2006). Since 1992, a wide

range of transportation, environmental, and economic issues have motivated these MPOs and their partners to collaborate on long-range transportation planning.

*Figure 3. Constituent MPO planning areas and urbanized areas of the San Joaquin Valley Regional Policy Council coordination area (Sources: HEPGIS, Esri, HERE, NPS, Garmin, NGA, USGS, NPS)*



### Informal Coordination

Air quality attainment is especially challenging in the San Joaquin Valley (SJV) because it is surrounded by mountains that block airflow and trap pollution. Prior to 1991, SJV MPOs met informally on an as needed basis to discuss transportation planning and air quality management issues.

### Formal Agreements

In March 1991, the eight SJV counties agreed to form the San Joaquin Valley Unified Air Pollution Control District (SJVUAPCD). In 1992, the SJV MPOs approved a memorandum of understanding (MOU) (effective September 21, 1992) to coordinate regional planning activities (SJVVPAs MOU 2006). Shortly thereafter, the SJV MPOs and SJVUAPCD signed an MOU (effective October 29, 1992) to coordinate transportation control measures to implement the district's air quality attainment plan and the state's implementation plan (SJVUAPCD MOU 1992). This agreement established a staff working committee, specified a method for developing transportation control measures, and stipulated the district would consult with the MPOs on any of its plans or programs that affect transportation planning and that the MPOs would consult with the district on any of its plans programs that affect air quality.

The SJV MPOs reaffirmed their commitment to coordinate regional planning activities through an updated MOU dated September 21, 2006. Specifically, it stipulated that the MPOs would coordinate population, housing, employment, land use, and air quality forecast methodologies; prepare regional transportation plans addressing common transportation issues; prepare transportation improvement programs to implement transportation control

measures; coordinate with the SJVUAPCD on emission reduction projects; coordinate with the state department of transportation (Caltrans) on transportation system planning; coordinate MPO planning efforts with state and federal agencies; develop and use a coordinated transportation and traffic modeling database; prepare interregional studies for corridor or plan alternatives; coordinate on passenger and freight rail issues; lead growth management activities; and acting as a forum for policy issues of mutual interest.

To help achieve these aims, the MOU established the San Joaquin Valley Regional Policy Council (SJVRPC) to provide guidance on interregional policy issues, represent the MPOs in public forums, and approve an annual work program and budget. It stipulated that the SJVRPC must meet at least twice a year. It also established the San Joaquin Valley Regional Planning Agencies Executive Directors Committee (SJVRPAEDC) to advise the SJVRPC and to implement the annual work program.

In 2009, the SJV MPOs and SJVUAPCD reaffirmed their commitment to ensure the continued compliance of regional transportation plans with state and federal air quality requirements (effective September 9, 2009). Specifically, it stipulated that SJVUAPCD would join the SJVRPC; all parties would participate in regular conference calls with state and federal agencies; all parties would use the latest planning assumptions and emission factors, conduct regional emissions analyses, and coordinate motor vehicle emission budgets; all parties would coordinate on state and federal policy positions; the SJV MPOs would take the lead in developing transportation control measures and establishing and maintaining transportation conformity; the SJV MPOs would coordinate with SJVUAPCD to update that status of transportation control measure implementation; all parties will coordinate on greenhouse gas emission reductions and any future state and federal air quality regulations; the SJV MPOs would consult with SJVUAPCD before allocating Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality funds to projects; all parties will continue to coordinate transportation and land-use planning through a valley-wide initiative; all parties would work to achieve a unified position on air quality and transportation projects; and each party would establish a resolution coordination procedure and point of contact.

### Jointly Funded Staff Support

In addition to the establishment of the SJVRPC and the SJVRPAEDC in the 2006 MOU, the SJV MPOs also resolved to jointly fund staff support for the collaboration. Each MPO's contribution to the joint funding of support staff is proportional to its population. This joint funding provides for the appointment of a private planning firm to serve as the "Valleywide Coordinator" to support the SJVRPC and the SJVRPAEDC activities, as well as the appointment of a private air quality modeling firm to serve as the "Air Quality Coordinator" to provide modeling services and analyses that each MPO uses in its long-range transportation plan and transportation conformity work (SJVRPC 2018a). Fresno COG manages the contract for the Valleywide Coordinator, while San Joaquin COG manages the contract for the Air Quality Coordinator, on behalf of the other MPOs.

### Joint Policy and Joint Advisory Committees

The SJVRPC is comprised of two elected officials from each of the SJV MPO's policy boards and one representative of the San Joaquin Valley Unified Air Pollution Control District (SJVRPAs MOU 2006 & SJVUAPCD MOU 2009). This board has the authority to adopt an annual work program and budget for valley-wide activities and to represent the San Joaquin Valley before the California Transportation Commission, the state executive branch, and state and federal legislative bodies (SJVRPAs MOU 2006).

The SJVRPC meets in person roughly quarterly, with the SJV MPOs rotating hosting duties. Members who can't join in person can participate via teleconference. Each meeting typically constitutes a mix of informational reports from member and partner agencies, action items,

and a public comment period. Over the past two years, the SJVRPC has adopted regional transportation and legislative priorities, resolutions taking positions on state legislation, letters of support for specific projects, and annual work plans (SJVRPC 2019).

The SJVRPAEDC is comprised of the executive director of each of the SJV MPOs. It is responsible for implementing the SJVRPC’s annual work program, creating the agenda for SJVRPC meetings, and coordinating and directing all administrative work necessary to develop plans addressing interregional issues (SJVRPAs MOU 2006).

The SJVRPAEDC meets in person monthly, with the SJV MPOs rotating hosting duties. Members who can’t join in person can participate via teleconference. Each meeting typically constitutes a mix of informational reports from directors, partner agencies, and the Valleywide Coordinator; issue discussions; and recommendations for SJVRPC agenda items or actions. Over the past two years the SJVRPAEDC has discussed (among other topics) long-range transportation plans, sustainable communities strategies, air quality, legislative affairs, funding priorities, and interregional corridor and goods movement studies (SJVRPC 2019).

Other collaborative mechanisms adopted by the SJVRPC include the hosting of an Annual Policy Conference to discuss issues that affect the entire San Joaquin Valley (SJCOG 2018c) and annual trips to Sacramento and Washington D.C. to discuss concerns of San Joaquin Valley with state and federal legislators (SJVRPC 2018d, SJVRPC 2018e).

### Barriers: Differences in Levels of Urbanization and Economic Activity

Spanning a contiguous area of more than 27,000 square miles, the SJVRPC is an expansive multi-MPO interregional collaborative with some divergent priorities and relatively low population density. Each county in the SJVRPC coordination area has its own MPO. Managing rapid urbanization and differences in economic activity between counties can cause differences in transportation planning priorities and strategies that can potentially hinder collaboration. Nonetheless, when the MPOs in the San Joaquin Valley signed the MOU in 1992, they were brought together by their environmental interdependencies and the 1991 formation of the San Joaquin Valley Unified Air Pollution Control District (SJVUAPCD). As air quality attainment is a federally mandated task for MPOs, collaboration between the eight San Joaquin MPOs and the SJVUAPCD was essential.

*Table 2. Key components of the San Joaquin Valley Regional Policy Council coordination area*

MPO	Counties	Planning Area Extent (sq. mi.)	2017 Pop. Est.	UZAs
San Joaquin COG	San Joaquin	1,425	745,424	Stockton; Tracy; Manteca; Lodi
Stanislaus COG	Stanislaus	1,514	547,899	Modesto; Turlock (partial)
Merced CAG	Merced	1,971	272,673	Merced; Turlock (partial)
Madera CTC	Madera	2,152	156,890	Madera
Fresno COG	Fresno	6,016	989,255	Fresno
Kings CAG	Kings	1,391	150,101	Hanford

MPO	Counties	Planning Area Extent (sq. mi.)	2017 Pop. Est.	UZAs
Tulare CAG	Tulare	4,838	464,493	Visalia; Porterville
Kern COG	Kern	8,161	893,119	Bakersfield; Delano

## New York Metropolitan Area Planning Forum

The New York Metropolitan Area Planning (MAP) Forum coordination area comprises parts of New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania, with a contiguous combined planning area of more than 10,000 square miles and an estimated population of nearly 23 million residents. The coordination area name refers to a consortium of nine agencies, representing a total of 10 MPOs, committed to cooperative transportation planning and decision-making.

An MOU between the New York Metropolitan Transportation Council (NYMTC), the North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority (NJTPA), the South Western Region MPO (SWRMPO), the Greater Bridgeport/Valley MPO (GBVMPO), and the Housatonic Valley Council of Elected Officials established the MAP Forum in 2008. In 2017, MAP Forum members revised the MOU to account for changes in boundaries, designations, and names of member MPOs, as well as to include new members: the Central Naugatuck Valley Region MPO (CNVRMPO), the South Central Region Council of Governments (SCRCOG), Lower Connecticut River Valley MPO (River MPO), Orange County Transportation Council (OCTC), and Lehigh Valley Transportation Study (LVTS). Figure 5 illustrates how these changes affected the geographic extent of the MAP Forum.

Figure 4. Constituent MPO planning areas and urbanized areas of the New York Metropolitan Area Planning Forum coordination area (Sources: HEPGIS, Esri, HERE, NPS, Garmin, NGA, USGS, NPS)

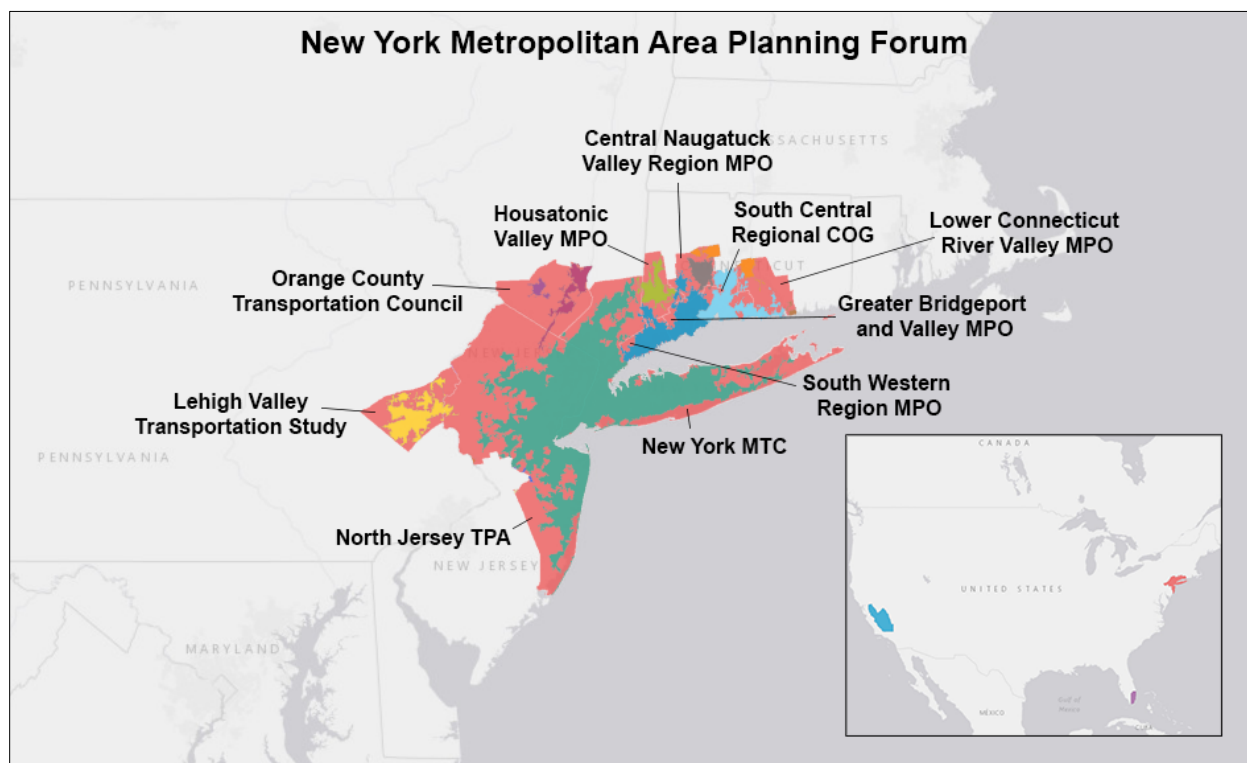
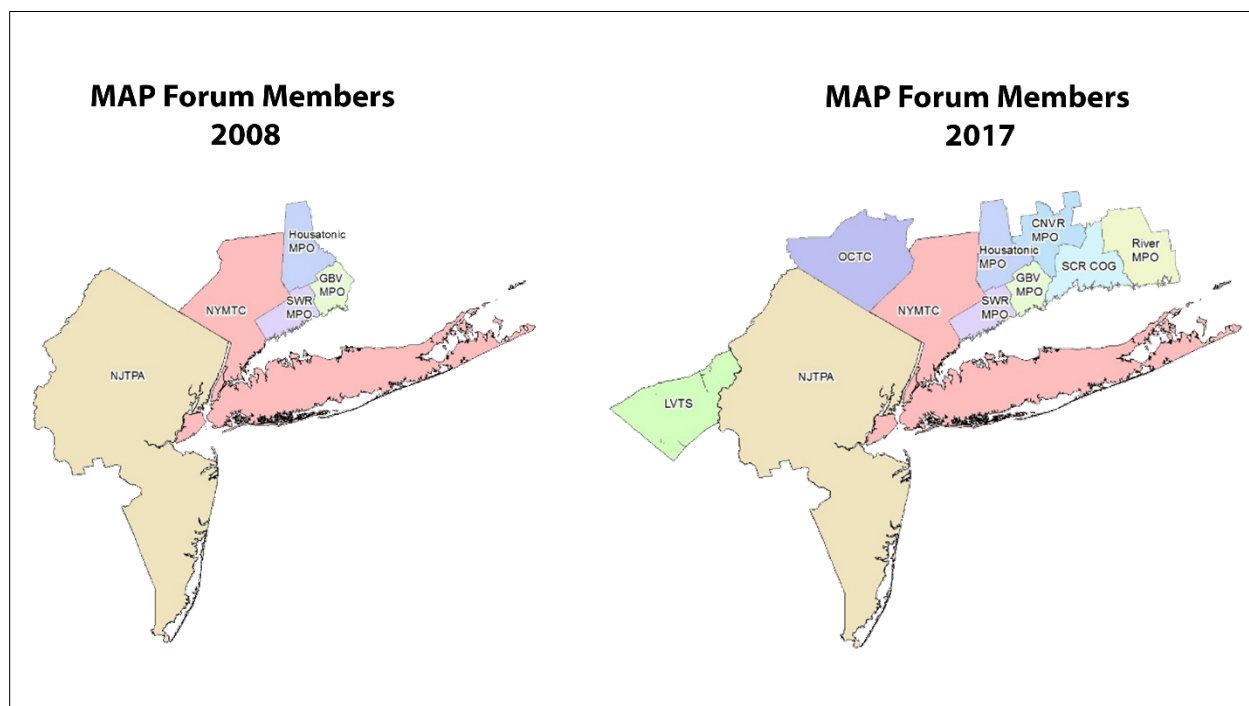




Figure 5. The geographic extent of the MAP Forum in 2008 vs. 2017 (Map source: COGRD)



### Preference for Informal Collaboration

Interviews with members of the MAP Forum revealed a preference for flexibility in their formal agreement (NJTPA, unpublished interview, Jan 9, 2019; NYMTC, unpublished interview, Jan 10, 2019). Among the reasons highlighted for a preference towards flexibility (and informal collaborative mechanisms) is the marked differences between the MPO members in terms of urbanization, economic activity and niches, staff and budgetary resources, and the demand and complexity of transportation planning. Population represented by MAP Forum members range from a population of 173,196 people in the Lower Connecticut River Valley Regional Council of Governments (River COG) planning area to a population of 12,893,600 people in the NYMTC planning area in 2017. The MAP Forum is composed of MPOs from different states, synonymous with jurisdictional and political variations in legislation and priorities, making flexibility and informal collaboration the preferred choice over formal joint planning products

The MAP Forum includes two MPOs that are among the top five most populous MPOs in the nation. According to the 2010 US census data, NYMTC is the second most populous MPO in the nation with a population of 12,367,508 people, while NJTPA is the fifth most populous MPO with a population of 6,579,801 people (USDOT n.d.). All other MPOs that are members in the MAP Forum are markedly less populous. In fact, the third most populous MPO in the MAP Forum, the Lehigh Valley Transportation Study (LVTS), has less than one-tenth of the population represented by NJTPA (see table 3).

Even though the MAP Forum MOU is less explicit and allows for more flexibility compared to the MOU and interlocal agreement of the other coordination areas highlighted in this paper, the sustainability of the MAP Forum since 2008 is evidence of its role in bringing member MPOs together to allow for relationship-building and reinforcing commitment towards collaboration.

## Relationship Building Through Formal and Informal Communication

Aside from the requirement for the MAP Forum to hold an annual meeting of MPO Executive Directors and appropriate key managers, the revised MOU does not provide for a joint policy board, administrative entity, explicit administrative procedures, or mandatory joint products. The MOU recommends actions and joint tasks, but maintains that participation is voluntary, and to the extent practicable (MAP Forum MOU 2017).

The annual MAP Forum meeting has served as a mechanism to ensure opportunity for information exchange and discussion of ideas. The commitment to meet facilitates relationship-building, and the involvement of Executive Directors allows members to explore joint needs and potential areas for collaboration in the foreseeable future. The success and utility of this meeting has since led to the practice of *two* joint meetings each year since November 2017: one meeting in spring and one meeting late fall.

While the MAP Forum MOU focuses on federally mandated planning products, the diversity of issues discussed in MAP Forum meetings gives insight into the motivations and attractiveness of working together. Members have discussed freight planning, sustainability planning, multimodal or transit planning, and coordination on tools and scenario modeling at MAP Forum meetings. Undoubtedly, benefits from multi-MPO collaboration on these issues incentivizes sustained participation of member MPOs in the MAP Forum. However, it is worth noting that the usefulness of collaborating on these issues may not be sufficient to sustain collaboration without the public commitment as expressed in the MAP Forum MOU and the provision of MAP Forum meetings as opportunities for communication and relationship-building.

Members prefer informal and voluntary methods of creating a shared long-term vision for their coordination area over more formally mandated procedures, which are legally and administratively challenging. Individual MPOs in the MAP Forum may do a presentation of their LRTP to their neighboring agencies and share information with boards and committees without asking them to conjoin their votes. Other informal methods include the sharing of data and products and exchanging ideas and information as separate plans are developed.

## Larger MPOs Serve as Anchor Members

Elements that differentiate the capacity of MPOs in the MAP Forum also seem to serve as factors that enable sustainability of the collaboration. Specifically, NYMTC and NJTPA seem to serve as “anchor members” that are able and motivated to provide the administrative support that is needed to sustain collaborative activities. A common deterrent for smaller MPOs to participate in collaborative activities with other MPOs is the additional staff and administrative burden associated with participating and maintaining these relationships. In the MAP Forum, both NYMTC and NJTPA can absorb much of the administrative responsibilities, thereby enabling and incentivizing the participation of smaller MPOs. The size and nature of transportation planning activities conducted by NYMTC and NJTPA are also associated with the availability of specialist staff and knowledge that helps broaden the capacity of transportation planning activities and discussion within the MAP Forum and helps member MPOs in this contiguous interregional collaborative to better prepare for emerging issues. For NYMTC and NJTPA, economic activity and commute patterns necessitate their sustained participation and collaboration with smaller adjoining MPOs. On the other hand, belonging to a collaborative facilitates the leveraging of collective resources and shared data collection efforts as well as learning and support around transportation modeling efforts for smaller MPOs—a “win-win” situation for all member MPOs. It also important to note that NYMTC’s sustained participation and support for the MAP Forum is mandated by the MOU that established the creation and designation of NYMTC in 1982; specifically, the MOU for NYMTC includes a stipulation that NYMTC shall develop procedures for coordinating its plans and programs, and their processes, with adjacent MPOs in the states of New York, New

Jersey, and Connecticut, and shall appoint a representative to work with these MPOs (NYMTC MOU 1982).

### Barriers: Jurisdictional and Resource Constraints

The MAP Forum has large variations in the size of member MPOs, reflecting markedly different resource availabilities. This inhibits equal levels of participation from smaller MPOs, since staff time and efforts are voluntary. Jurisdictional constraints and political constraints are particularly significant since the MAP forum is a multi-state coordination area. These aspects are generalizable to other coordination areas and have already been explained in previous sections.

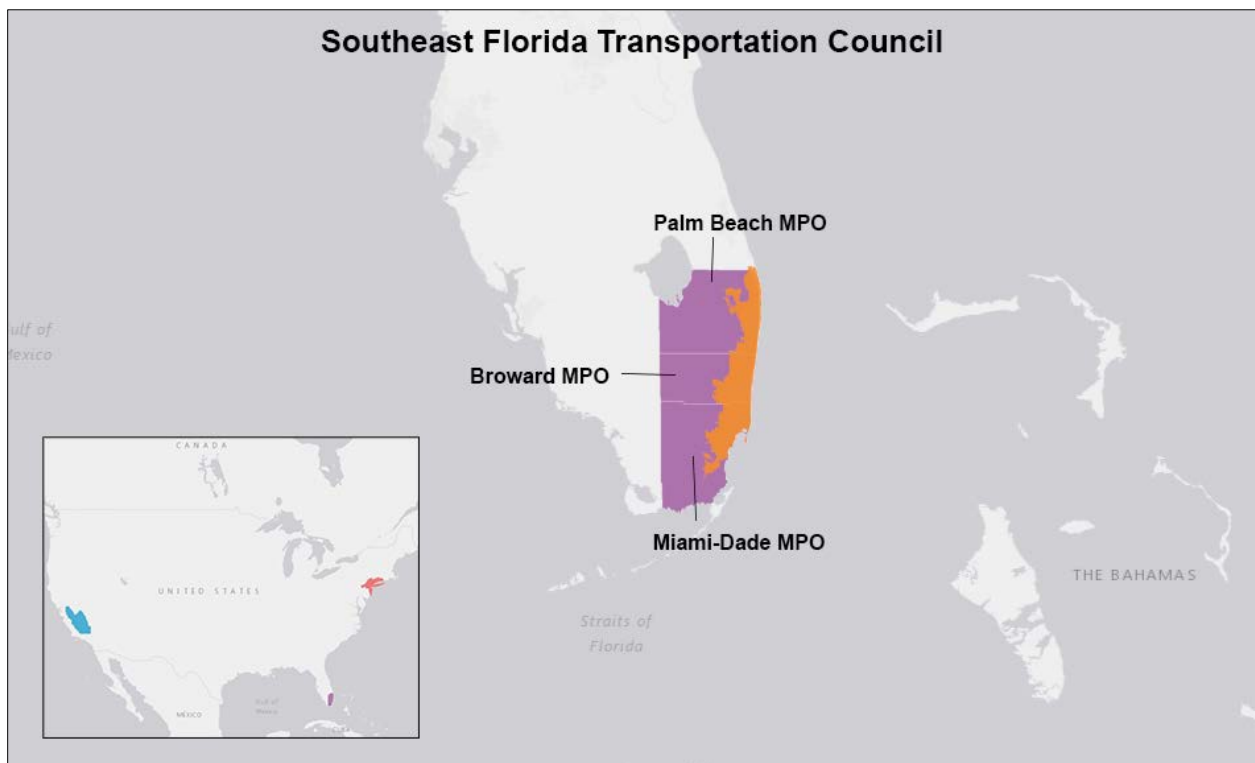
*Table 3. Key components of the New York Metropolitan Area Planning Forum coordination area*

State	MPO	Counties	Planning Area Extent (sq. mi.)	2017 Pop. Est.	UZAs
New York	Orange County Transportation Council	Orange	837	382,226	Middletown, NY; Poughkeepsie-Newburgh, NY-NJ (partial)
New York	New York Metropolitan Transportation Council	Nassau; Suffolk; Bronx; Kings (Brooklyn); New York (Manhattan); Queens; Richmond (Staten Island); Putnam; Rockland; Westchester	2,726	12,893,600	New York-Newark, NY-NJ-CT (partial); Bridgeport-Stamford, CT-NY (partial); Danbury, CT-NY (partial)
New Jersey	North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority	Bergen; Hudson; Passaic; Middlesex; Monmouth; Ocean; Somerset; Union County; Essex; Hunterdon; Morris; Sussex; Warren	4,410	6,800,589	New York-Newark, NY-NJ-CT (partial); Allentown, PA-NJ (partial); Philadelphia, PA-NJ-DE-MD (partial); Twin Rivers-Hightstown, NJ (partial); Trenton, NJ (partial)
Pennsylvania	Lehigh Valley Transportation Study (hosted by Lehigh Valley Planning Commission)	Lehigh; Northampton	725	669,899	Allentown, PA-NJ (partial)

State	MPO	Counties	Planning Area Extent (sq. mi.)	2017 Pop. Est.	UZAs
Connecticut	Housatonic Valley MPO (hosted by Western Connecticut COG)	Fairfield (partial); Litchfield (partial)	337	230,969	Danbury, CT-NY (partial); Bridgeport-Stanford (partial)
Connecticut	South Western Region MPO (hosted by Western Connecticut COG)	Fairfield (partial)	216	381,901	Bridgeport-Stamford, CT-NY (partial)
Connecticut	Greater Bridgeport and Valley MPO (co-hosted by Connecticut Metropolitan COG and Naugatuck Valley COG)	Fairfield (partial); New Haven (partial)	203	413,771	Bridgeport-Stamford, CT-NY (partial)
Connecticut	Central Naugatuck Valley Region MPO (hosted by Naugatuck Valley COG)	Litchfield (partial); New Haven (partial); Hartford (partial)	363	284,726	Waterbury, CT (partial); Bridgeport-Stamford, CT-NY (partial); Hartford, CT (partial); New Haven, CT (partial)
Connecticut	South Central Regional COG	New Haven (partial)	377	596,467	New Haven, CT (partial); Hartford, CT (partial); Bridgeport-Stanford, CT-NY (partial)
Connecticut	Lower Connecticut River Valley MPO (hosted by Lower Connecticut River Valley COG)	Middlesex; New London (partial)	444	173,196	Hartford, CT (partial); New Haven, CT (partial); Norwich-New London, CT-RI

The Southeast Florida Transportation Council (SEFTC) coordination area is comprised of the three southernmost mainland counties in Southeast Florida, with a contiguous combined planning area of more than 5,000 square miles and an estimated population of more than six million residents. The coordination area name refers to a joint policy board established through an interlocal agreement among the three MPOs responsible for planning in the Miami urbanized area (SEFTC ILA 2006). Since 2006, various transportation, environmental, and economic issues have motivated these MPOs and their partners to collaborate on long-range multimodal transportation planning.

*Figure 6. Constituent MPO planning areas and the urbanized area of the Southeast Florida Transportation Council coordination area (Sources: HEPGIS, Esri, HERE, NPS, Garmin, NGA, USGS, NPS)*



### Intergovernmental Agreements

Florida's statutes governing MPOs encourage MPO collaborations and provide mechanisms for the coordination of multi-MPO collaborations because it recognizes that population growth causes many MPO jurisdictions to become contiguous with each other, potentially necessitating coordination ([§339.175](#)). Thus, the establishment of the SEFTC may be the most streamlined among the three case studies presented in this paper.

When the Miami UZA was designated, it became a legislative requirement for the three MPOs in the area to combine into one MPO or to enter into an interlocal agreement for the collaboration to be in accordance with the Florida Statutes [§339.175\(2\)](#) and [§339.175\(6\)\(j\)](#). Consequently, the Board and staff of affected MPOs were required to work through, and not be hindered by any barriers and complications that may exist to otherwise deter formalization of the collaboration. Development of an interlocal agreement was also streamlined by the level of detail of the provisions in [§339.175\(6\)\(j\)](#) that clearly stipulate that when an MPO coordinates with another MPO or political subdivision, an interlocal agreement shall be entered that establishes a separate legal or administrative entity to coordinate activities. The legislation also explicitly provides formal structure and

mechanisms for administration of the multi-MPO collaborative. These provisions that provide guidance for multi-MPO collaboratives was then ready for adoption into the interlocal agreement that established the SEFTC as the administrative entity for the coordination of collaborative activities between Miami-Dade TPO, Broward MPO, and Palm Beach TPA. These provisions in the Florida legislation reduces the need for negotiations and lead time required for formalization of multi-MPO collaborations.

### Joint Governing Board, Technical Advisory Committee, and Subcommittees

The SEFTC has a well-defined governing structure to coordinate regional planning efforts and Regional coordination efforts. The governing board for SEFTC is made up of three board members that represent their MPOs, all of whom are elected officials from their respective counties (SEFTC 2015). Governing board rules require unanimous agreement between all three members to approve motions. The governing board is informed by one committee, the Regional Transportation Technical Advisory Committee, and four subcommittees: the Modeling Subcommittee, the Public Participation Subcommittee, the Freight Advisory Subcommittee, and the Transportation System Management and Operations Subcommittee.

Additional regional collaboration committees, outside of the SEFTC, include the Planning Technical Advisory Committee, which advises the South Florida Regional Transportation Authority, the Tri-Rail Coastal Link Executive Steering Committee, the Fare Interoperability Working Group, and the Southeast Florida TOD Working Group, and informal group that works to support transit-oriented development in the region. SEFTC partners with these organizations to address transportation challenges in the region (SEFTC 2015).

### Transportation Regional Incentive Program (TRIP) & Strategic Intermodal System (SIS)

Consistent with the state's recognition of multi-MPO collaborations and their role in improved transportation planning outcomes ([§339.175\(6\)\(j\)1](#)), the Florida Legislative Assembly created the Transportation Regional Incentive Program (TRIP) in 2005 to encourage regional planning by providing state matching funds for improvements to regionally significant transportation facilities that serve national, statewide or regional functions, and function as part of an integrated transportation system. Applicants of the TRIP funding must be collaborative partnerships that have signed an interlocal agreement, and jointly developed a regional transportation plan that includes a prioritized list of regional projects. Eligible partnerships are two or more contiguous MPOs; one or more MPOs with one or more contiguous counties that are not members of a MPO; a multi-county regional transportation authority; two or more contiguous counties that are not members of a MPO; or MPOs comprised of three or more counties (FDOT 2017). The provision of this fund incentivizes collaborations between MPOs in Florida to develop a regional transportation plan and jointly endorse a prioritized list of regional projects and helps overcome funding complications when MPOs derive funding from local sources that are restricted in use for multi-MPO projects. Additionally, the state designates high-priority transportation facilities as part of the Strategic Intermodal System (SIS)—a categorization that enables access to state funds (MDTPO 2018a). These funding sources encourage constituent MPOs to collaborate on projects of regional significance.

### Other Regional Collaborative Efforts

The SEFTC has other noteworthy formalized interregional collaboration efforts such as the MOU signed between SEFTC, the three constituent MPOs, the Southeast Florida Transportation Council (SEFTC), the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT), South Florida Regional Planning Council (SFRPC), South Florida Regional Planning Authority (SFRTA), and the Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council (TCRPC) for the Tri-Rail Coastal Link Service with project responsibilities for development, implementation, funding and outreach delegated among participating entities. The universal fare collection system



adopted by the SEFTC identifies a streamlined transit fare collection system and associated technologies and reduces barriers for residents to travel across the region. Other joint long-range planning efforts include the Seven 50 Prosperity Plan, the Regional Greenways Plan and Southeast Florida Regional Freight Plan. The Southeast Florida Regional Freight Plan was jointly developed by the three SEFTC member MPOs and FDOT with specific intention of complementing the LRTPS and RTPs. The plan proposes solutions to overcome barriers to regional coordination of industrial land use and freight movement including identifying bottlenecks, implementing a performance monitoring program, engaging local governments in conversations about freight, and promoting regional freight mobility. Finally, it highlights the importance of regional involvement to implement freight priorities.

### Barriers: Navigating jurisdictional and political complexities

Like other MPOs, SEFTC members are also subject to the common deterrents of collaboration such as the need for additional effort to coordinate work schedules, additional time and resources needed for consensus-building and collaborative activities and negotiating different DOT districts and regional planning councils. However, provisions in the state legislation streamline the processes required, and provision of the TRIP funding incentivizes multi-MPO collaborations.

Table 4. Key components of the Southeast Florida Transportation Council coordination area

MPO	Counties	Planning Area Extent (sq. mi.)	2017 Pop. Est.	UZA
Broward MPO	Broward	1,225	1,935,878	Miami
Miami-Dade TPO	Miami-Dade	2,020	2,751,796	Miami
Palm Beach TPA	Palm Beach	1,980	1,471,150	Miami

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## Glossary

**Agreement:** A document signed by official representatives of two more MPOs specifying roles and responsibilities for their respective organizations. This agreement may be a legally binding compact or contract or it may be a non-legally binding memorandum of understanding (MOU), memorandum of agreement (MOA), or letter of intent.

**Collaboration:** A joint process of creation.

**Consultation:** A process in which one or more parties confer with other identified parties in accordance with an established process and, prior to taking action(s), considers the views of the other parties and periodically informs them about action(s) taken (23 CFR §450.104).

**Cooperation:** A process in which two or more parties involved in carrying out the transportation planning and programming processes work together to achieve a common goal or objective (23 CFR §450.104).

**Coordination:** The cooperative development of plans, programs, and schedules among agencies and entities with legal standing and adjustment of such plans, programs, and schedules to achieve general consistency, as appropriate (23 CFR §450.104).

**Formal collaboration:** Two or more parties participating in actions and activities that are required by a signed agreement.

**Informal collaboration:** Two or more parties participating in actions and activities that are voluntary and not under the obligation of a formal agreement.

**Interregional:** Pertaining to two or more overlapping, adjacent, or proximate metropolitan areas, or MPO planning areas.

**Joint Policy Board or Coordinating Committee:** A body created to discuss, coordinate, or decide policy of mutual interest to two or more MPOs. A joint policy board or coordinating committee does not replace the statutorily required policy board of any constituent MPO.

**Multi-MPO Coordination Area:** Two or more adjacent or proximate MPO planning areas with a history of sustained coordination or collaboration between or among MPOs.

**Collaborative Planning Events:** Joint or cosponsored workshops, seminars, summits, visioning exercises, open houses, or other activities that bring together stakeholders beyond policy board or coordinating committee members to discuss interregional issues or to formulate or refine interregional strategies.

**Statutorily Defined MPO Work Products or Processes:** Federal statutes define the long-range transportation plan (LRTP, also known as the metropolitan transportation plan (MTP) or regional transportation plan (RTP)), the public participation plan (PPP), the transportation improvement program (TIP), and the unified planning work program (UPWP) as essential components of metropolitan multimodal transportation planning. MPOs must develop each of these products through statutorily defined processes. Additionally, MPOs in Transportation Management Areas must develop a congestion management process (CMP). See [23 USC §134](#) and [23 CFR §450.308](#).