

NPS Introduction to the Transportation Planning Process

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Who is Involved?

The U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) administers federal transportation laws set forth by Congress, providing the framework and funding for state and regional transportation planning processes.

Metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) are the designated entities for leading transportation planning at the regional level. Any urbanized area with a population of over 50,000 is required to have an MPO.

State departments of transportation (DOTs) are responsible for setting the long-term vision for the state's transportation system, conducting transportation planning activities in non-metropolitan areas of the state, and assisting MPOs with transportation planning for metropolitan areas. State DOTs are also responsible for developing, designing, and constructing projects, as well as managing, operating and maintaining most of the public highway network in their states.

Other stakeholders that provide input into the transportation planning process include local and county governments, transit agencies, and the public. The National Park Service (NPS) is also a stakeholder and has the opportunity to get involved in setting goals and identifying projects of regional importance.

Published: February 2017

Transportation planning is a comprehensive process for evaluating local, regional, and statewide transportation needs in a collaborative and meaningful way. It allows for public involvement in setting long-term transportation visions and goals in order to prioritize projects for federal transportation funding.

In national parks, transportation systems connect parks with surrounding communities and provide visitors access to public lands. To enhance visitor experience and ensure positive impacts to surrounding communities and landscapes, these systems require coordinated planning. By getting involved in the local transportation planning process, national park staff can build relationships with other transportation stakeholders, align park transportation needs and activities with state and regional priorities, and ensure important projects are included in transportation plans to become eligible for additional federal funding.

What is the MPO and state DOT planning process?

The first step of the transportation planning process is to develop a long-term vision of broad goals and performance measures for the state or region's transportation system. Residents, government officials, and other stakeholders are typically involved in this visioning process. MPOs also forecast future conditions that will affect the transportation system, including population, employment, and land use, and identify potential strategies to meet future transportation needs. The results of this vision-setting and analysis are incorporated into the state DOT's 20-year Long-Range Statewide Transportation Plan (LRTP) and the MPO's Metropolitan Transportation Plan.

To move from the long-term vision to a specific program of projects, MPOs develop a Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) based on the priorities in the long range plans. This short-term list of projects is updated at least every four years with projects that are prioritized for funding, design and construction over the next four years.



Zion National Park's transportation planning process included a value analysis workshop, with local stakeholders and state DOT (Source: NPS)

Once the TIP is approved by the MPO, the state DOT compiles it without changes into the Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP). The STIP describes all planned rural and urban area transportation system improvements, and is consistent with the state's LRTP.

How Are Projects Funded?

Transportation plans help states and MPOs budget for anticipated transportation projects. TIPs and STIPs must describe the funds needed to make the transportation improvements possible, along with affordable cost estimates. Transportation projects that are federally funded must be included in the STIP.



TIPs and STIPs, created through a collaborative effort among stakeholders, must budget for anticipated transportation projects and include reasonable cost estimates.

Source: NPS

Key Resources and Contacts

- [USDOT Guide to Transportation Decisionmaking](#)
- [FHWA Transportation Planning Process Briefing Book](#)
- [NPS Transportation Branch and regional transportation program coordinators](#)

NEXT STEPS

Reach out to the NPS regional transportation coordinator

Each of the seven NPS regions has a transportation coordinator with knowledge of the transportation planning process and state DOTs or MPOs within that region. The transportation coordinators can help other NPS staff meet planners at their local MPOs and state DOTs, find out when transportation plans will be updated, and get involved in the planning process.

Proactively build relationships with transportation planning stakeholders

NPS staff should reach out to planning staff at state DOTs and MPOs in order to build relationships, develop a shared understanding of regional goals and significant projects, provide input on the transportation forecast, and inform planners of upcoming initiatives within or around the park. Even in non-urbanized areas, park staff can reach out to local and county governments who have jurisdiction near the park. Developing these relationships ahead of time positions park staff to explore partnership opportunities, get involved when transportation plans are being updated, and learn when projects in and around parks are being developed.

Parks do not need to know the staff at MPOs and DOTs in order to reach out to them. Many MPOs and DOTs have staff directories on their websites, and you can identify planners and contact them directly. If staff contact information is not available online, try calling the general number and asking for the appropriate staff person.



Scenario planning workshop at NPS National Capital Region included participation of the local MPO (Source: NPS)



Planning Process Example



Source: NPS

Lowell National Historical Park

Lowell National Historic Park in Lowell, MA, has a long-standing collaboration with the city, state, and MPO (Northern Middlesex County of Governments). The park regularly participates in the city's master planning process as well as state and regional transportation planning. These connections have helped the park and partners acquire external funding, such as state Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement (CMAQ) funds, for projects benefitting the park and surrounding community, including the expansion of Lowell's Canalway walking path system.



Source: NPS

For more information, see the [Partnerships at Lowell National Historical Park video](#)

NEXT STEPS, CONTINUED

Attend meetings and provide input during the planning process

Check with your MPO or local, county, or state government for opportunities to get involved in the transportation planning process. MPOs and state DOTs typically hold monthly or quarterly meetings of decisionmaking boards and advisory committees that are open to the public. During the LRTP update process, public meetings are an opportunity to provide input on the long-term direction of the state and regional transportation system. The TIP update process is a chance for parks to advocate for projects of importance – such as projects that improve physical connections between parks and surrounding communities – to be included in the TIP. MPOs and state DOTs also hold public meetings about specific projects, which allow parks to comment on design and funding details for projects that affect them.



Gorge West End Transit (WET) bus, serving Skamania County, Washington and public lands throughout the Columbia River Gorge. The WET transit service developed out of planning process among the NPS and other federal land management agencies, the MPO, state DOT, and other local stakeholders. (Source: NPS)