

## **Metropolitan Mobility**

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### **Executive Summary**

Metropolitan areas are leaders of the nation's and state economy, and a new federal Metropolitan Mobility Program has been proposed to address growing congestion that is threatening the ability of metropolitan regions to compete globally. While detailed program proposals have not yet surfaced, issues include whether the new program should combine highway and transit programs into one multimodal program; whether the new program should be directly allocated to and controlled by metropolitan regions; whether the new program should be targeted at all metropolitan regions, or just to larger metropolitan regions which have congestion problems; and who should establish performance targets for the new program and be held accountable for achieving performance.

### **Background**

Metropolitan areas are leaders of the nation's and state's economy. Nationally, metropolitan areas (those areas above 50,000 population) account for 85% of US population, and more than 85% of employment, income and production of goods and services (source: US Conference of Mayors: Metro Economies: U.S. Cities and Metropolitan Areas Dominate Economic Growth (Jan 2007)). In Washington, the 11 metropolitan areas (Central Puget Sound, Spokane, Vancouver, TriCities, Yakima, Olympia, Bellingham, Longview/Kelso, Wenatchee, Mount Vernon, and Lewiston/Clarkston) represent 74% of the state's population, with the three large metro areas of Central Puget Sound, Spokane, and Vancouver alone representing 62% of the state's population. (Source: OFM urban area population estimates, 2007)

Federal transportation programs have increasingly recognized the special transportation needs of metropolitan areas. Under the current federal transportation act, key federal transit formula distributions are made directly to metropolitan regions for competitive project selection, and a small portion of highway funds (the Congestion Mitigation/Air Quality Program and part of the Surface Transportation Program) are required to be sub-

allocated to the larger metropolitan regions for competitive project selection. In Washington, past policy has directed a portion of the Surface Transportation Program to all metropolitan areas for regional competitions.

Leading up to the post-SAFETEA-LU reauthorization of the federal transportation programs, the growing congestion, other transportation needs, and inadequate funding resources for metropolitan regions has emerged as a major topic. The National Commission on Surface Transportation Revenue and Policy has recommended a major federal program aimed at Metropolitan Mobility. This program would fund both highway and transit investment, with investment decisions being made regionally. The new federal program would also provide an incentive for both states and metropolitan regions themselves to raise revenue to leverage the new federal dollars.

**Options with Pros and Cons of each option - include benefits and/or costs to the state in your analysis**

Key issues related to the potential Metropolitan Mobility Program include:

**1. Issue: Creating one multimodal (both highway and transit) Metropolitan Mobility Program**

Currently, highway and transit programs are authorized and appropriated as separate programs. Federal highway programs available to metropolitan regions are flexible, meaning that they can be used for highway or transit purposes. Federal Transit programs are restricted to transit-only uses.

**Option 1: Keep separate highway and transit programs**

**Pros:** Both highway and transit advocates may argue that they might be put at a disadvantage if they had to compete for funding. Federal transit formula funds are a predictable resource for transit agencies, who often use the funding for basic preservation needs. A competitive program might make this funding less certain.

**Cons:** A combined program would allow metropolitan areas the flexibility to better match resources with needs, since needs vary by metropolitan area.

**Option 2: Combine the highway and transit programs into one multimodal mobility program**

**Pros:** A combined program would allow metropolitan areas the flexibility to better match resources with needs, since needs vary by metropolitan area.

**Cons:** A combined program could make funding less certain for some grant recipients.

**2. Issue: Direct Allocation and Project Selection Authority to Metropolitan Regions**

Federal Highway formula funding is currently allocated to the State of Washington, and a portion is sub-allocated by the state to metropolitan regions for regional project selection. Federal Transit formula funding is currently allocated to metropolitan regions for a cooperative regional project selection process.

Option 1: Directly allocate Metropolitan Mobility funding to Metropolitan regions, and give Metropolitan Regions project selection authority over that funding.

Pros: This option puts decision making authority and accountability at the metropolitan level, at a place where transit and roadway decisions can best be integrated for the benefit of the metropolitan system.

Cons: The ability of metropolitan regions to manage federal funding would have to be addressed. How state priorities mesh with metropolitan priorities would have to be decided.

Option 2: Allocate Metropolitan Mobility funding to states, and require states to use the funding for metropolitan mobility projects, with a cooperative project selection process with MPOs and transit agencies.

Pros: States have federal funds management abilities which would be utilized. The cooperative project selection process would ensure that state and metropolitan needs were addressed.

Cons: Removing transit funding from a direct allocation to metro areas would cause concern by transit agencies. State control of project selection might not mesh with metropolitan priorities.

3. Issue: **Raising the threshold for Metropolitan designation**

Current federal law defines metropolitan regions as any urbanized area over 50,000 population. Each of these areas is required to have a Metropolitan Planning Organization to develop a transportation plan and an investment program. Washington has 11 MPOs, covering the Central Puget Sound region, Spokane, Vancouver, Tri-Cities, Yakima, Olympia, Bellingham, Longview/Kelso, Wenatchee, Mt. Vernon, and Clarkston/Lewiston. Some have proposed raising the threshold for Metropolitan planning, and for Metropolitan Mobility funding to the larger and/or faster growing areas which have growing congestion.

Option 1: Keep the threshold for Metropolitan Planning Organizations at 50,000, and make Metropolitan Mobility funding available to all metro areas.

Pros: All metro areas benefit from cooperative planning, and have system investment needs that would benefit from increased funding.

Cons: Allocating this new funding program to all metro areas might dilute the resource, and lose the intended focus on congestion relief.

Option 2: Keep the Threshold for Metropolitan Planning Organizations at 50,000 for planning purposes, but target Metropolitan Mobility project funding at larger areas (over 200,000 or over 1 million)

Pros: This allows smaller MPOs to continue with the cooperative planning program, but would focus the new funding on larger areas with more congestion, and with greater capabilities to manage federal funding.

Cons: This option cuts out a number of metropolitan areas from a federal funding resource.

Option 3: Raise the threshold for Metropolitan Planning Organizations to a higher level (200,000 or 1 million), and target Metropolitan Mobility funding at these larger areas.

Pros: Larger MPOs would benefit from increased resources and focus from the federal program. Some smaller MPOs may want to get out from federal planning requirements.

Cons: Smaller MPOs would no longer have a federally required MPO planning program.

#### **4. Issue: National, State, or Regional Performance Targets**

A major part of proposals for federal reauthorization is a requirement for performance-based investment and accountability. A question remains as to whether the federal government should establish performance targets, or should the new programs require states and or regions to establish their own performance targets for their own areas.

Option 1: Establish, either through Congress or USDOT, national performance targets that states and metropolitan regions would be held accountable for

Pros: This would promote consistency across the country, and a clear objective for the new federal program.

Cons: This option does not recognize the differences between states and regions across the country – one size does not fit all.

Option 2: Require each state to establish performance targets, based on broad Congressional direction, and hold states accountable. Require border states to coordinate.

Pros: Since all metro areas within individual states are operating under the same statutory environment, this would provide performance consistency within states.

Cons: Again, regions within states differ in priorities, so one approach statewide may not work for all.

Option 3: Require each metropolitan region to establish performance targets, and hold them accountable for reaching the targets.

Pros: Each metro areas' priorities could be met with the new program funding.

Cons: With all metro areas pursuing their own priorities, it would be difficult to consistently measure progress toward any national goal for the new program.

### **Subcommittee Recommendations**

If Congress were to proceed to change the current program structure to create a new Metropolitan Mobility Program, the following principles should be followed:

1. The new Metropolitan Mobility Program would need to provide more funding to metropolitan regions than the current allocation of STP, CMAQ and transit funding to make the change worthwhile.
2. A new Metropolitan Mobility Program would need to be governed at the regional level to ensure that fair and equitable representation of the various interests (including transit agencies) who have a stake in the funding
3. If the program were to include performance expectations, the federal government should establish broad performance expectations, but the individual metropolitan regions should be charged with setting specific performance measures. Federal performance expectations should provide more direction on national issues such as the economy, environmental stewardship, security, interstate commerce, and other national-scale issues.
4. The federal program should set a floor or minimum guarantee for transit projects to ensure that transit agencies are held harmless in the transition to a multimodal funding program.
5. Recognize that a formula-based Metropolitan Mobility Program would not replace the need for discretionary federal grants for large scale new-starts or mega-projects, especially those projects which serve national purposes but are contained within a metropolitan region
6. For the purposes of planning, the current definition of MPOs should stay in effect. All areas above 50,000 would be required to have a cooperative planning process, and would be entitled to a share of federal metropolitan planning funds to carry out that work.
7. MPOs and regions above 1 million people would have the option of accepting a special designation for greater authority in selecting projects and accountability for meeting performance goals. These larger MPOs which accept greater authority would have access to enough planning funds to meet the added planning requirements, and access to more federal resources for leveraging state and regional investment to improve metropolitan mobility.