

Regional Transportation for Hampton Roads

In the early 1970s, the federal government started a new process for the planning and programming of transportation. The new process was to address the subject of transportation, not on a national or state-level basis, but on a regional or metropolitan level basis. For some twenty years this new approach was beset with challenges and progress toward this regional oriented goal was slow in coming.

Finally, with the advent of the federal Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) of 1991, this thrust toward regional transportation planning and programming began to mature nation wide. Among the tenets of federal legislation was the required creation of a Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) at the regional level that would shoulder and share responsibilities for transportation planning with state and public transit agencies.

Different states and different regions responded differently, some maturing their metropolitan transportation planning and programming procedures and their MPO organizations faster and/or deeper than others. With an especially large VDOT not wanting to delegate chores below the state-level, Virginia, initially, was one of the slower states to respond. Real progress in Virginia began to appear, however, in 2001. For a variety of reasons, Hampton Roads was slower yet to respond.

Fortunately, this is now beginning to change and the day almost seems visible when Hampton Roads will have both a mature set of regional transportation planning and programming best practices in place and an MPO organization that is visible, accountable and admired rather than continuing to remain in its past obscure status.

This long-awaited and now ongoing MPO modernization and reform process was triggered by:

1. The realization that transportation advances in the region have been delayed for a decade or more with hugely growing levels of congestion and uncertainty, and
2. Three reports over three years that squarely addressed the problems at hand: (these Reports are posted below)
 - An FHR MPO Study Group Report of September 2007 with over 100 recommendations and a treatise on the history of MPOs,
 - A Federal Quadrennial Certification Final Report of February 2008 that found the MPO to be “conditionally certified” with numerous required corrective actions, and
 - A consultant’s MPO Best Practices Final Report of January 2009 that underscored the need for major reform of the Hampton Roads MPO organization and its procedures.

This relatively recent history of discovery of the need to make changes in how Hampton Roads approaches transportation at the regional level has produced an exceptionally productive series of actions:

1. An MPO Reform Committee, over a twelve month period, has studied, analyzed and obtained MPO Board approval for scores of best practice structural and administrative reforms, including an expanded MPO Board, the addition of professionals to the MPO Board, a new regional voting formula for MPO Board decisions, the creation of new “public body” MPO Advisory Committees, etc. (please see MPO Point Paper 2009-12 listed below).
2. A first-ever, full day MPO Board Retreat was conducted in early 2009 to examine MPO Mission and Vision statements and to discuss many of the major changes that still need to be addressed.
3. A national level consulting firm spent three months with the MPO Staff and MPO Board discussing matters at hand and producing the consultant’s MPO Best Practices Report cited above and tailored for Hampton Roads.

As of this July 2009 date, the MPO Reform Committee and the MPO reform process continues. Having taken major steps since February 2008 to address structural, legal and administrative needs (see MPO Point Paper 2009-12 below), the next era of reform must now begin to address its actual transportation planning and programming procedures. This will require the development of objective-based decision-making methods, newly developed prioritized project selection criteria, a newly created entrepreneurial and business-like approach, a diminishment of the jurisdictional driven something-for-everyone approach, and a much stronger will and capacity to compete against other regions rather than to compete against (or to steal from) each other.

The consultant opined that it would take four to six years for the Hampton Roads MPO to effect the changes that are necessary. For this writer, it seems possible that we could do this in just under three years. In any case, the tasks at hand and the reforms that are still needed will require new leadership and a new rigor and a new vigor. This is all possible to do.

Given that Hampton Roads is the 31st largest region in the nation, or better, that because of our nationally important regional assets, our huge and valuable ports complex and military bases, Hampton Roads must rank in the top twenty vital metro areas in the nation. If the subject at hand were something else, it may be that we should not seek to be one of the best in the nation. But, for transportation, it is entirely appropriate for Hampton Roads to seek such a level of professionalism—it may even be our duty to do so.

Additional short readings on selected regional transportation or MPO topics are available in the series of [MPO Point Papers](#).

For Hampton Roads, the goals are high; the rewards will be higher. We must have the will to sustain and continue an absolutely in depth MPO reform process.

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