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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 The Charge

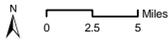
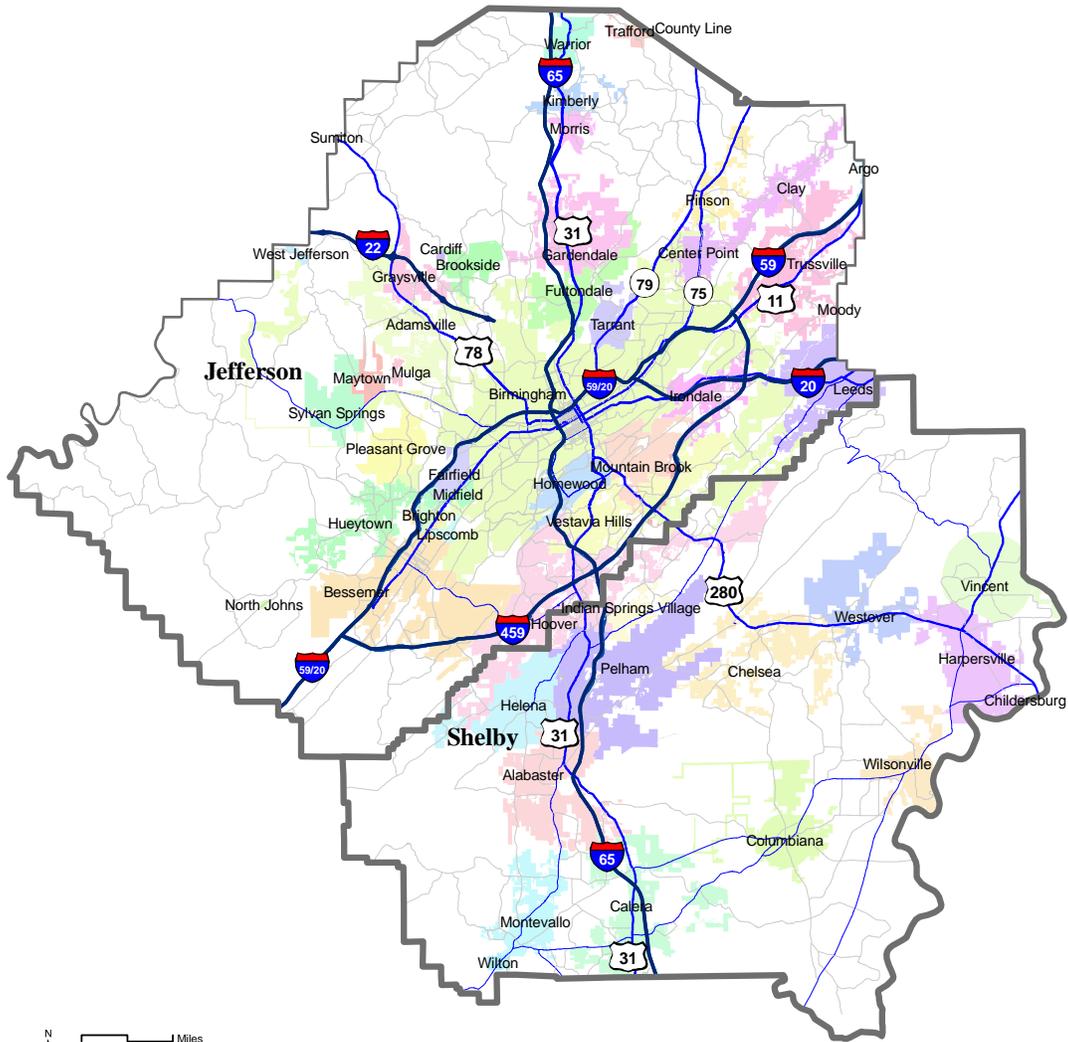
Transportation systems are designed to help people participate in activities distributed over space and time. Sustained economic growth and the associated impacts of that growth on critical transportation, water, and social infrastructure are among the greatest challenges that the Birmingham metropolitan planning area faces. The ability to sustain this growth is at question. The increasing realization that financial resources needed to provide critical transportation infrastructure will not be adequate to meet future demand is a primary driver of the development of this, the Birmingham Regional Transportation Plan (RTP), the Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) for the Birmingham metropolitan area.

Prepared by the Birmingham Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) with support from its host agency, the Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham (RPCGB), the RTP covers a 25-year planning horizon – through the year 2035 – in which a balanced, multimodal, and sustainable transportation system is sought. The Birmingham MPO is also responsible for developing and maintaining a Transportation Improvement Program (TIP), a short-range plan that applies funding to projects drawn from the RTP. In addition, the MPO is charged with developing and maintaining an annual work program meant to provide for the continuing, cooperative, and comprehensive planning of the metropolitan planning area’s transportation system.

The primary purpose of the RTP is to provide a vision for satisfying the existing and anticipated demands on the transportation system serving the two-county Birmingham metropolitan planning area, Jefferson and Shelby Counties. The RTP also informs the transportation planning efforts for the metropolitan planning area’s four adjacent rural counties which comprise the Heart of Alabama Rural Planning Organization (HARPO): Blount, Chilton, St. Clair, and Walker Counties. The Birmingham MPO region also includes a portion of Walker County which has been included because of its air quality designation as a non-attainment area.

Given the area’s consistent growth in both population and employment, the RTP is a necessary tool for addressing transportation needs. The plan provides a balanced, financially feasible set of transportation improvements supported by a number of policies. Together, these will facilitate the movement of people and goods by all modes of transportation within the Birmingham metropolitan area.

The proposed improvements identified in the RTP as well as in its associated functional plans are intended to help alleviate traffic congestion, provide more transportation choices, improve transportation system operations, and meet the region's air quality goals through the future 25-year planning period.



**Birmingham Metropolitan Planning Area
Birmingham MPO**

October 2009



Figure 1.1 Birmingham MPO Planning Area

1.2 Roles and Responsibilities of the Birmingham MPO

The U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT), in accordance with Section 134 of Title 23 of the United States Code and Section 1604(1), 1607(a), and 1607(c) of the Title 49 of the United States Code require that each urbanized area with a base population of 50,000 or more, must have an organized planning process as a condition of the receipt of federal capital or operating assistance. The metropolitan transportation-planning process, as executed by the Birmingham MPO, is a means to bring people, information, and ideas together to inform regional transportation decisions. The process encompasses not only considerations such as mobility, accessibility, and connectivity, but also economic vitality, the environment, social equity, safety, security, and financial constraints.

The keystone of the process is the collaborative participation of transportation agencies/organizations, elected officials, transportation-issue advocates, and the general public.

The Birmingham MPO is the forum for the planning process. Within that forum, the metropolitan planning area's short- and long-term needs are assessed, a vision for the future is developed, and funding for projects and programs to support that vision is allocated. The federal government refers to this work as the 3C process, because it requires that the process be continuing, cooperative, and comprehensive:

- **Continuing:** Planning must be maintained as an ongoing activity and should address both short-term needs and the long-term vision for the region
- **Cooperative:** The process must involve a wide variety of interested parties through a public-participation process
- **Comprehensive:** The process must cover all transportation modes and be consistent with regional and local land-use and economic-development plans

The Birmingham MPO must follow the 3C process in order to be certified and eligible to receive federal funds. Three required documents are produced by the MPO at regular intervals:

- The Metropolitan Transportation Plan (i.e. the RTP aka the LRTP)
- The Transportation Improvement Program (TIP)
- The Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP)

Both the RTP and the TIP include air quality conformity analyses to ensure consistency with the region's air quality goals.

In addition to producing those three documents, the Birmingham MPO is required to conduct an ongoing Congestion Management Process (CMP). The Birmingham metropolitan planning area is also required to produce and adopt a Coordinated Human Service Transportation Plan in order to receive and spend federal transportation funding specific to human service transportation programs. This applies to transportation specific funding administered by the USDOT as well as human service transportation funds administered by other federal departments. Within the Birmingham metropolitan planning area, this responsibility has been assigned to the MPO.

The RTP has been prepared under the federally mandated regulations of the Clean Air Act Amendments (CAAA) of 1990, and the Safe Accountable Flexible Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU). SAFETEA-LU requires that metropolitan transportation plans consider eight planning factors:

1. Support the economic vitality of the metropolitan area, especially by enabling global competitiveness, productivity, and efficiency
2. Increase the safety of the transportation system for motorized and non-motorized users
3. Increase the security of the transportation system for motorized and non-motorized users
4. Increase the accessibility and mobility of people and for freight
5. Protect and enhance the environment, promote energy conservation, improve the quality of life, and promote consistency between transportation improvements and State and local planned growth and economic development patterns
6. Enhance the integration and connectivity of the transportation system, across and between modes, for people and freight
7. Promote efficient system management and operation
8. Emphasize the preservation of the existing transportation system

It is up to each Birmingham MPO community to determine how to apply these factors locally.

SAFETEA-LU also recognizes the importance of social service agencies in providing transportation services for the transportation disadvantaged, and requires closer coordination between both public and social service transportation service providers.

The RTP is designed to meet the requirements of federal legislation as well as transportation system goals of both the state and the Birmingham region. As such, the RTP includes only those projects that the Birmingham MPO believes can be delivered during the planning periods timeframe with funding that is reasonably expected to be available.

Additionally, the RTP addresses the metropolitan planning area's transportation system needs by considering the broader context within which the transportation system exists. That is, in addition to the federal planning factors, the Birmingham RTP speaks to the community's concerns about the transportation system's role in accessing opportunities, providing for the mobility of the transportation disadvantaged, congestion, and the environment. This would include issues surrounding air quality, energy usage, and climate change. The RTP also speaks to concerns about the role that the transportation system plays in the metropolitan planning area's overall economic competitiveness.

Programs and projects identified by the MPO as well as planning activities undertaken through the annual UPWP are intended to address many of the significant issues facing the Birmingham area. As such, a number of one-time activities, ongoing programs, and major projects are carried out by the Birmingham MPO. These include:

- Provision of MPO funding for human service transportation
- Administration of the Alabama Partners for Clean Air (APCA)
- Direct operation of the CommuteSmart Birmingham Commuter Assistance Program
- Project management and oversight for both the regional transit system planning and corridor specific high-capacity transit planning

Finally, the Birmingham MPO has chosen to develop Functional Area Plans (i.e. Functional Plans) in order to focus on mode specific issues, establish policies, and provide guidance. These Functional Plans include:

1. Regional Thoroughfare Plan
2. Regional Transportation System Operations Plan
3. Regional Transit System Development Plan
4. Regional Goods Movement and Freight Mobility Plan
5. Regional Travel Demand Management Strategy
6. Non-motorized Transportation Facilities Plan
7. Public Involvement Plan
8. Environmental Justice Documentation and Outreach Plan

It is envisioned that future regional transportation plans will be built upon these Functional Plans, where the RTP will address broad-brush issues of policy and funding, and the functional plan will identify specific transportation system improvement projects.

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1.3 Consistency with SAFETEA-LU

The SAFETEA-LU planning factors were considered during the identification and development of the RTP. They were specifically applied as the RTP's Key Principles, goals, and objectives were developed. These are discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, RTP Goals and Objectives.

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1.4 Birmingham MPO Structure

The Birmingham MPO functions under a committee structure comprised of:

- Transportation Citizen’s Committee (TCC) - the TCC is the primary focal point for local citizens to be involved in the transportation planning process.
- Transportation Technical Committee (TTC) - the TTC advises the MPO on the feasibility of proposed projects. The committee is comprised of department administrators, planners, engineers, and other local parties involved in transportation, and who support the comprehensive Birmingham Area Transportation Planning Process. The basic responsibilities of the TTC include the on-going administration of transportation planning activities and the development of plans and documents such as the LRTP.
- Policy Committee (aka MPO Subcommittee) - the MPO Subcommittee, is comprised of a subset of appointed members, and serves as the policy committee for the MPO. The MPO Subcommittee provides policy direction and a forum for transportation and air quality decisions. It also receives recommendations from both the TCC and TTC, offering these committees and MPO staff feedback regarding the policy implications of both plans and MPO actions. The MPO Subcommittee is charged with setting the meeting agenda for the full MPO membership. The MPO Subcommittee cannot take actions reserved for the full MPO membership.

The full membership of the Birmingham MPO is currently comprised of forty-four voting members as appointed by the governing bodies of the City of Birmingham, Jefferson County Mayors Association, Unincorporated Jefferson County (Jefferson County Commission), Shelby County Commission and the cities of Alabaster, Hoover, Pelham and Helena. Additional voting members of the MPO include a representative of the Birmingham-Jefferson County Transit Authority, the ALDOT 3rd Division Engineer and any member of the Joint Legislative Transportation Committee in a majority Jefferson or Shelby County legislative district. The two non-voting members include a representative of the Alabama Department of Transportation Montgomery Office and the Federal Highway Administration Montgomery Office.

Figure 1.2 illustrates the structure of the MPO.

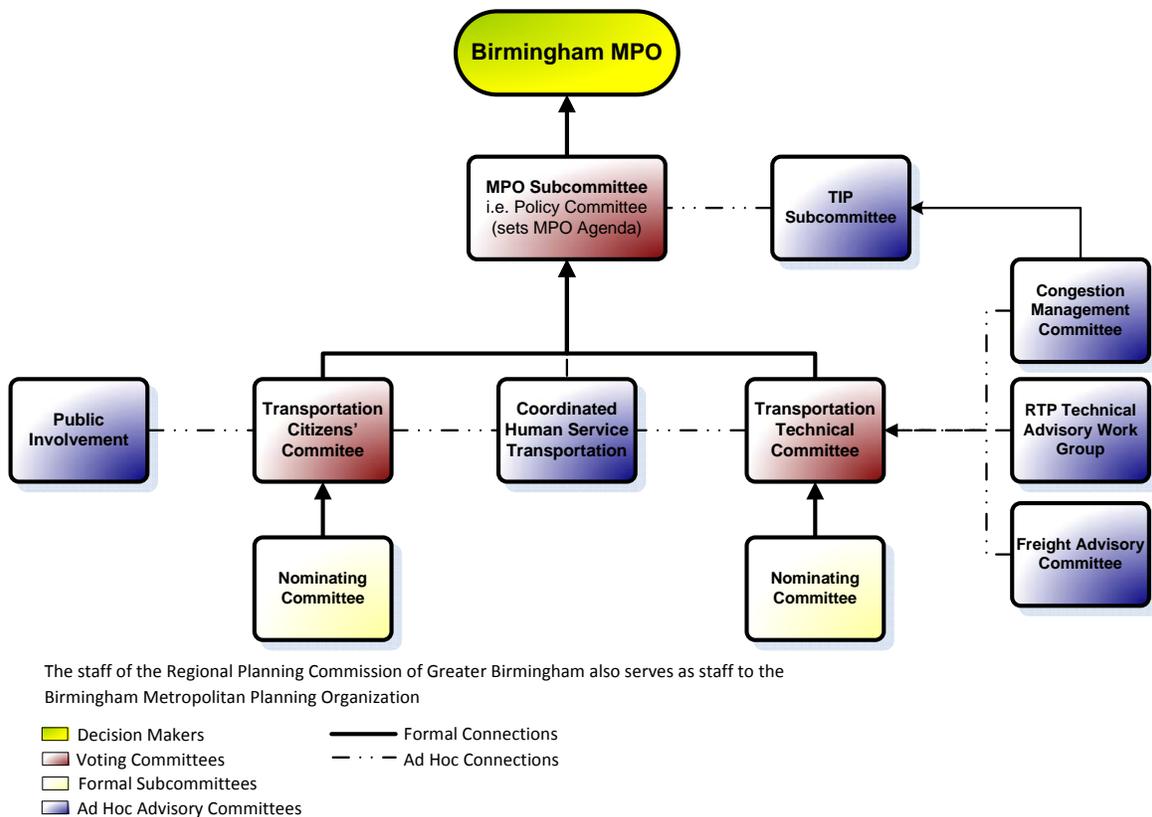


Figure 1.2 Birmingham MPO Structure

The full Birmingham MPO meets regularly to discuss issues, review, and approve major planning reports and documents.

As described briefly in Section 1.2 of this document, the Birmingham MPO is housed within the RPCGB. Formed in 1963 as a service agency to assist local governments in planning activities, the RPCGB is responsible for providing planning assistance to local and county governments within a six county region consisting of Blount, Chilton, Jefferson, Shelby, St. Clair, and Walker Counties. Services are provided to member governments and the communities through cross-functional teams and include:

- **Intergovernmental Cooperation** - Encourages multi-jurisdictional planning for comprehensive land use, corridor and strategic development, cooperative efforts, and project efficiencies
- **Transportation and Transit Planning** - Provides long range planning and programs including urbanized area plans, corridor plans, greenway plans along with traffic counts, and safety studies on the impact of transportation in the region
- **Community Planning** - Provides land use planning and analysis for member governments including zoning ordinances, subdivision regulations, mapping and general community plans for a highest and best-use basis for development in the region

- **Community and Economic Development** - Assists member governments with applications for federal and state grants, provides information and assistance to new and expanding businesses to increase the tax base in the region
- **Information Management** - Provides GIS data development, analysis and deployment assistance, redistricting and site analysis for member governments

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1.5 Developing the Regional Transportation Plan

1.5.1 Relationship Building

The Birmingham MPO prepares a long-range and coordinated metropolitan transportation plan having specific projects and programs, goals, and performance criteria for all transportation modes. The plan is revised every 4 years, and periodically modified to reflect changes in federal regulations, expected funding availability, and changes to projects and/or programs that have air quality impacts. This metropolitan transportation plan should be the basis for recommending projects for funding in the TIP, and informs the annual budgeting processes of both the state and local governments.

The Birmingham MPO also works closely with local county road departments, public transportation agencies, other public agencies, and private organizations to coordinate transportation facilities and services in the Birmingham metropolitan planning area. This working relationship is extended to non-transportation agencies, non-profit organizations, and grassroots, citizen based groups.

Part of the RTP effort has been to identify ways to strengthen and enhance the Birmingham MPO's partnership with these public and private entities so that the Greater Birmingham region's overall transportation enterprise advances as rapidly as possible. Without such strong partnerships, the MPO cannot meet the spirit or the letter of federal regulations and the codes of conducts of the various professional and trade organizations with which the MPO and its host agency, the RPCGB, are affiliated.

1.5.2 Public Involvement

Early and continuous public participation is a vitally important part of the Birmingham MPO planning process. The MPO is continually working to improve public involvement in the overall planning process. The MPO has taken steps to ensure that the region's citizenry are actively involved in the transportation planning process, particularly as they relate to specific projects.

The development of the 2035 RTP utilized several strategies to solicit input from the public. These included the development of an RTP website, the use of online discussion and survey tools, interactive public involvement activities, and hosted mode specific plan development meetings. The Birmingham MPO also took the opportunity to speak and/or make presentation at the regularly scheduled meetings of other government agencies, civic groups, and local neighborhood and community events. Finally, a number of outreach activities were hosted by the TCC. Attendees of the TCC meetings had the opportunity to provide input to the RTP. The TCC is also responsible for calling for and hosting the formal public involvement meeting for the plan.

Efforts to involve the public, including "traditionally underserved" (i.e. low-income, minority, elderly, low literacy, and Limited English Proficiency persons), freight users, and others, were begun before the first draft of the RTP was produced. Through a variety of efforts, the Birmingham MPO has conducted outreach to various transportation constituencies within the community. Part of this outreach effort involved employing a market research company to conduct an extensive transportation survey to inform the transportation planning process.

Additionally, specific contacts were made with the growing Hispanic community through a group called !Hola Latino! Other minority community outreach included participation in the regular neighborhood and community meetings of the City of Birmingham's ninety-nine (99) neighborhoods, to include the Citizen's Advisory Board; participating in minority focused radio talk shows, and attending meetings of the BJCTA's Transit Advisory Committee. Each of these organizations has memberships that are predominantly comprised of minority populations, and/or are targeted towards providing information to minority population concentrations.

The Birmingham MPO continues to make improvements to its public involvement process by making new contacts with minority media, radio, TV and print as well as by adding more names to the minority/low income portion of the master contacts mailing list. The agency also has developed closer partnerships with agencies that represent traditionally underserved groups and uses focus groups to better determine their needs.

1.5.3 Transportation Surveys

A random calling process to collect the public's thoughts about the Birmingham metropolitan planning area's transportation system was undertaken in winter 2006 as part of the preparation for this RTP update. The six RPCGB counties were included in the research sample. ZIP Codes in each of these counties were weighted according to household population in order to achieve an accurate demographic and geographic representation of the region. This random sample methodology delivers an accuracy of +/- 5 percentage points. All six counties were surveyed because the information gathered will be used to assist in planning for both the Birmingham MPO and HARPO.

Telephone Researchers made a total of 9,798 calls, completing a sample of eight hundred and six (806) surveys. Five hundred and eleven (511) of the 806 surveys (63.4%) were collected in Jefferson County. One hundred and twenty-eight (128) of the 806 (15.9%) surveys were collected in Shelby County. Combined, these surveys make up 79.3% of the total survey sample. The survey had a refusal rate of 57.45%, and a 73.41% incidence rate. Qualifying conditions for individuals being surveyed included:

1. Individuals had to be at least 18 years of age;
2. Individuals had to have resided at their present residence at least one year; and
3. Individuals or any person who was presently living in their household could not work for or as:
 - An advertising agency
 - Public relations firm
 - Market research company
 - Police Department
 - The State of Alabama
 - A contractor working for ALDOT

The transportation survey process addressed various modes and users of the transportation system. Employers and employees were surveyed with the assistance of the CommuteSmart Birmingham Commuter Assistance Program, who worked with their participating companies to collect data from employees and managers. However, the survey process is deficient in its collection of data from freight users. It is the intent of the Birmingham MPO to better include air,

rail, and highway freight modes into the regional transportation planning process. The MPO is preparing a separate freight survey to collect data from freight carriers about their perspective of the metropolitan planning area's freight system.

The survey results revealed that the two most perceived transportation problems of Jefferson County residents are traffic congestion and a limited public transportation system. In Shelby County, the most perceived problem is traffic congestion.

Bicycle and pedestrian modes were also included in the survey, although cyclist and runners (the groups most likely to use on and off-street bicycle and trails facilities), were not specifically targeted. 37.57% of Jefferson County's survey respondents indicated that they walk or cycle on occasion to travel to work or shopping areas. These respondents indicated that the reason that they do not use these travel modes more frequently is because they face barriers such as major roadways or railroad tracks, abrupt ends to dedicated travelways (i.e. sidewalks and trails), and lack of bike racks at bus stops and on buses. Shelby County survey respondents indicated that there were not enough non-motorized transportation facilities (i.e. sidewalks and trails) available for their use, and that locations with paths were poorly connected to work locations and nearby shopping areas.

Survey respondents in both Jefferson and Shelby Counties indicated that strongest perceived improvement to the metropolitan planning area's transportation system would be improving the information provided to travelers. Particularly, they cited that improving the use of the variable message boards to alert drivers to roadway conditions would be one of the most effective transportation system improvements.

In responding to inquiries about public transportation improvements, survey respondents overwhelmingly indicated that they had a preference for rideshare type activities such as carpooling and vanpooling. This includes suburban park and ride lots that support regional express bus services. Overall, survey respondents in both Jefferson and Shelby Counties indicated that the conditions most likely to influence public transportation usage are:

- **Accessible public transit services** – the physical inability to reach public transportation is a major barrier to its use. Potential transit riders need to be able to walk comfortably and safely to and from transit stops
- **Convenience** – transit routes should be convenient and easy to use, running frequently enough to make it attractive for individuals that have a choice in how they travel (choice riders) as well as reduce travel times and travel distances. In addition, scheduling and fares for transit services should be simple, easy to understand, and easy to explain
- **Performance based routing** – transit routing, the frequency of service, and the types of vehicles providing service are based on route performance as indicated by ridership demand and cost
- **Speed of service** – transit routes should provide travel times as close as possible to automobile travel times

- **Branding/image enhancement** – the branding and image of transit services, along with quality customer service, are important aspects of attracting and retaining choice riders

Overall, survey respondents identified the following transportation system improvement strategies as being most effective. Strategies are listed in priority order:

1. Widening and improving roads
2. Improving existing public transportation (transit) services so that it is more user friendly and reliable
3. Developing a regional and local network of bike paths, trails and sidewalks that connect residential neighborhoods, employment centers, shopping areas and local services
4. Using the Internet, roadside message boards, or other communication technology to inform drivers
5. Installing computerized signal systems to speed-up traffic flow
6. Building other types of transportation such as commuter rail, and light rail, to accommodate the region's future growth
7. Develop and promote programs to ensure ride sharing is more accessible and understood

A supplemental transportation survey was administered by the Birmingham MPO staff at public meetings, regularly scheduled MPO committee meetings, and posted to the MPO's RTP website. Survey respondents were directed to the website via articles in *The Birmingham News*, direction from MPO staff at public meetings, and instructions posted on the MPO's main webpage. Information collected from this survey is an indication of the attitudes and/or opinions of those individuals who attended outreach meetings or took time to visit the RTP project website. These individuals might be considered to have an above-average interest in regional transportation issues. This survey was not scientifically administered.

In short, the data collected indicates that those individuals who responded to the survey agreed that the long-term transportation system priorities should focus on system preservation, improving and expanding public transportation, and improving the capacity of existing roadways. Survey respondents also pointed out that they believed adding new transit service and making improvements to existing transit services were the most effective strategies to address traffic concerns in the Birmingham metropolitan planning area.

Finally, survey respondents indicated that there was strong support (88.4% of respondents to the question) for regional funding initiatives to fund transportation system improvements, even if they weren't going to use the services. Additionally, there is strong support (79.7% of respondents to the question) for a combination of local and regional funding sources to pay for transportation system improvements.

1.5.4 Technical Advisory Work Groups

In addition to the public involvement activities specifically for the development of the RTP, the Birmingham MPO also utilized technical advisory work group (TAWGs) to assist MPO staff in developing critical plan components. In particular, TAWGs were used to help craft the Congestion Management Process, the revised RTP goals and objectives, the project prioritization methodology, and the financial plan. Along the way, the TAWGs helped to spell out new policies and procedures regarding complete streets and the TIP's development. They also helped to define and identify regional activity centers and regionally significant transportation facilities.

1.6 Other Considerations

1.6.1 Fiscal Constraint

The 2035 Birmingham RTP's affordability is a major issue, as the investment element must fall within the fiscal constraints identified in the analysis of the region's long-range financial capacity. A conservative approach to developing revenue forecasts was used based on analysis provided by ALDOT.

1.6.2 Air Quality Conformity Process

The LRTP and TIP for Jefferson and Shelby Counties follows the metropolitan planning process established in federal regulations for metropolitan transportation planning. This metropolitan planning process establishes a cooperative, continuous, and comprehensive framework for making transportation investment decisions in metropolitan areas. Program oversight is a joint Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) / Federal Transit Administration (FTA) responsibility.

1.6.3 Birmingham Metropolitan Planning Organization Approval and Documentation

Following a public involvement meeting, the Birmingham MPO staff will record responses to the comments received and prepare a public involvement report. The MPO would then approve the RTP. Upon approval of the document by the MPO, copies of the final document and the accompanying appendices will be finalized, printed, and distributed.

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1.7 RTP Document Organization

The RTP is organized into eight chapters including this introductory chapter, Chapter 1.

Chapter 2 presents the “State of the Region” in terms of growth and development trends, and how these changes have and continue to influence transportation demands in the Birmingham metropolitan planning area. Additionally, Chapter 2 describes existing transportation systems, including all surface transportation travel modes for people and freight.

Chapter 3 presents the RTP goals and objectives.

Chapter 4 presents an assessment of transportation needs and demands within in the metropolitan planning area over the twenty-five (25) years from various directions including the travel demand model, freight needs and intermodal considerations, community input, and other factors (including Environmental Justice and NEPA).

Chapter 5 presents the actual transportation plan, identifying transportation strategies, proposed programs and projects. This would include strategies to improve system operations and expand capacity. It also cuts across multiple travel modes and addresses issues related to non-motorized travel, incident and emergency response, public transit services, and human service transportation.

Chapter 6 presents transportation analysis of the existing financial environment for transportation system development, the expected future conditions to include a gap analysis, and a financial plan showing expected and potential sources of funding, their appropriateness for use in the Birmingham metropolitan planning area, and their likely availability. Chapter 6 concludes with a financially constrained project plan and an illustrative list of important transportation projects that cannot be accommodated within the anticipated cost constraints of the Birmingham MPO.

Chapter 7 addresses environmental issues, and specifically identifies the Birmingham metropolitan planning area’s approach to federal requirements for consultation and mitigation. It also begins a regional conversation on climate change and the role that the transportation planning process might play in addressing it.

Finally, Chapter 8 looks at implementation strategies for the RTP. Too often policy documents such as the RTP pitch new and innovative ideas for regional activities, programs and projects, but fail to recognize how these will be accomplished. The assumption is that local project sponsors, ALDOT, the BJCTA, or some other entity will pick up these projects and run with them. However, this is not always true. Projects that are priorities to the region may not be priorities for a local government or an agency. Additionally, not everyone is in agreement when it comes to determining responsibilities for funding regional activities versus those that are thought to be local.