



Federal Highway Administration

Rural Transportation Planning Workshops

Vermont Workshop

Including

Connecticut

Maine

New Hampshire

FINAL DRAFT

Summer 1999

Dye Management Group, Inc.

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Road mileage data included in this report is from the Federal Highway Administration, 1996, and can be accessed at www.fhwa.dot.gov/ohim/1996/section5.html.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.0 Introduction 1

 1.1 Objectives..... 1

 1.2 Discussion Topics 2

 1.3 Participants 3

 1.4 Report Structure 4

2.0 Connecticut 5

3.0 Maine 10

4.0 New Hampshire 17

5.0 Vermont..... 22

6.0 Workshop Findings and Conclusions..... 26

 6.1 Similarities 26

 6.2 Differences 26

Attachment A: Participants

Attachment B: Maps

Federal Highway Administration

Rural Transportation Planning Workshops

Vermont Workshop



1.0 Introduction

The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), assisted by Dye Management Group, Inc., conducted a series of regional rural transportation planning workshops from October 1998 through July 1999. The Vermont Agency of Transportation hosted the first regional workshop on October 28-29, 1998, in Montpelier.

These workshops were structured to allow the exchange of success stories and dialogue between neighboring states and their representatives on how to make rural transportation planning effective. In addition, the workshops were used to assemble information on how local elected officials are involved in the statewide transportation planning process. Officials from Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont, including planning representatives, district/county engineers, local elected officials, rural planning organizations, economic development agencies, tribal governments, departments of transportation, and rural transit operators were invited to attend. The information gathered at the Vermont workshop is presented for each state individually. Overall workshop findings and conclusions follow the state summaries.

1.1 Objectives

The purpose of the workshops was to foster dialogue and the exchange of ideas, not formal presentations. The objectives of the workshops were to:

- Explore and promote effective ways to involve rural officials in the statewide transportation planning process.
- Enable participants to share experiences in rural transportation planning and programming.
- Build relationships among participants that can form the basis for future cooperation and coordination.
- Identify the most effective roles and responsibilities for rural transportation providers and users.

- Determine rural transportation needs and issues that are being addressed by planning and programming.
- Identify best practice planning techniques used in developing successful rural projects.
- Obtain information for a report to Congress on how responsive state transportation plans and the statewide transportation planning process are to rural concerns and how rural officials are involved in the planning process.

These objectives were achieved by working through an agenda of discussion topics. Workshop participants were asked to come prepared to provide input around specific questions that they were given in advance.

1.2 Discussion Topics

Five principal discussion topics were addressed in the workshop. Knowledgeable individuals from each state, from both the state department of transportation perspective and the local rural perspective, were asked to address these discussion topics. The topics were:

- **The Process and the Outcome: How Planning for Rural Areas Is Conducted**

This topic covered the following questions:

- How is planning for rural areas conducted?
- How are rural transportation needs addressed in the development of the statewide transportation improvement program?
- How are rural officials involved in decision making?
- What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses in your state?

- **Jurisdictional Roles, Responsibilities, and Funding**

This topic covered the following questions:

- What are the jurisdictional roles and responsibilities in your state for planning, programming, and funding improvements in rural areas?
- How are plan decisions funded?

- **Integration/Coordination with Other Plans**

This topic covered the following questions:

- How are local/regional plans coordinated with other plans?

- How are local rural goals balanced against regional/statewide goals and objectives?

- **Success Stories**

This topic covered the following question:

- What success stories do you have of innovative programs and projects that address rural needs?

- **Other Issues**

This topic covered the following question:

- What are the major rural transportation issues facing rural areas in your state, for all modes?

1.3 Participants

State departments of transportation were solicited to host the rural transportation planning workshops. Based upon the response, host states were identified and nearby states were then invited to attend.

Knowledgeable individuals, from both the state department of transportation perspective and the local rural perspective, were invited to attend the workshops. The objective was to have approximately five people from each state, representing a variety of rural transportation stakeholders, actively participate in the workshop forum. Participants included local, state, and federal planning representatives; county engineers and commissioners; local elected officials; councils of governments; regional planning organizations; economic development agencies; tribal governments; and rural transit operators. National organizations represented at the workshops included the:

- Community Transportation Association of America.
- Federal Highway Administration.
- Federal Transit Administration.
- National Association of Counties.
- National Association of County Engineers.
- National Association of Development Organizations.

The local elected officials who participated in the workshops included rural mayors, county commissioners, judges/county executives, public works directors, trustees, and former state legislators.

1.4 Report Structure

The format of this report is based on the workshop objectives and topic areas, as follows:

- The Rural Planning Process.
- Programming and Funding for Rural Area Decisions.
- Major Planning Issues.
- Identified Strengths and Weaknesses.
- Success Stories.

Each of the participating states are addressed in turn. A list of workshop participants and maps of each of the states are included in the attachments.

2.0 Connecticut

Connecticut contains 43,770 lane miles of roads, 18,283 lane miles of which are rural, and 1,131 of these rural miles are on the National Highway System. Seventy-six percent of rural roads are locally owned. Connecticut's rural transportation planning process is considered to be top-down.

2.1 The Rural Planning Process

Connecticut has ten urban regional planning organizations, five rural regional planning organizations, and one rural region of unaffiliated towns. Members of these organizations may include local elected officials, town representatives, government employees, or citizens. The Connecticut Department of Transportation (ConnDOT) coordinates transportation planning and research with these organizations through their Office of Field Coordination. The sole duty of the six full-time staff at the Office of Field Coordination is to serve as liaisons between ConnDOT and the regional planning organizations, and to provide coordination on all transportation planning activities.

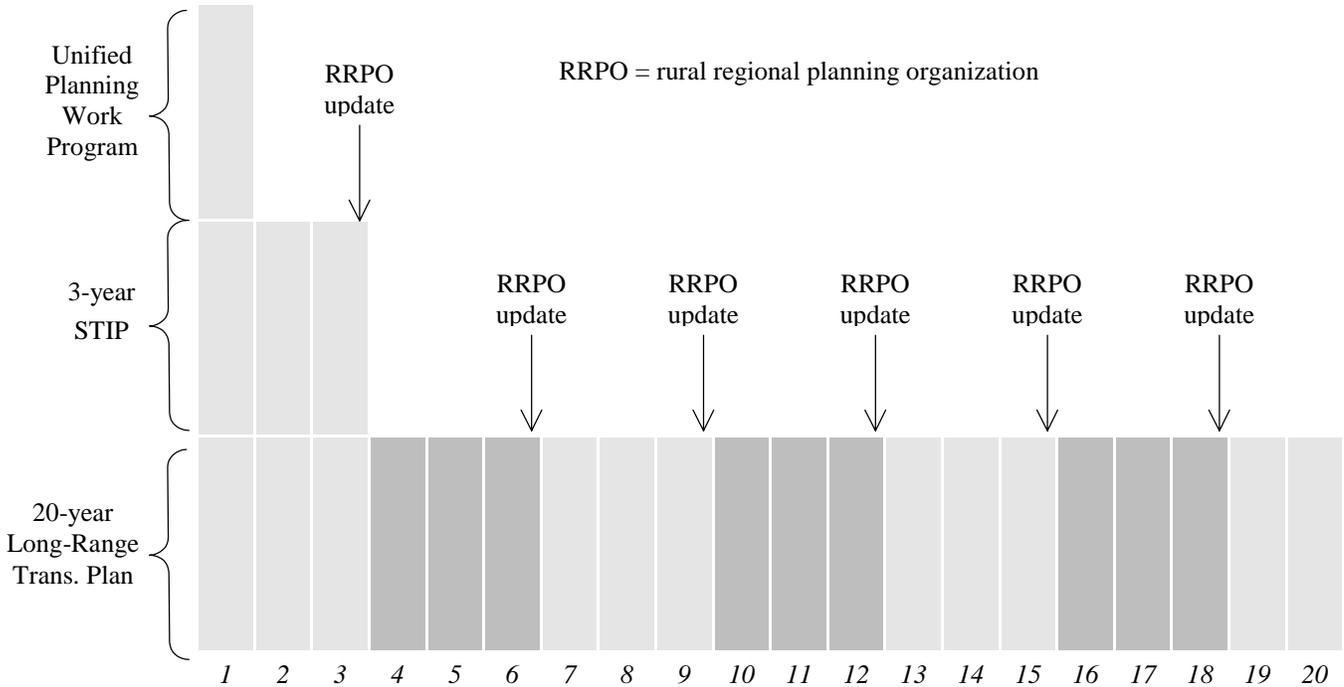
ConnDOT provides rural regional planning organizations with funds from federal planning money, State Planning and Research (SPR), the Federal Transit Administration (FTA), Section 5311, and state matches for transportation planning purposes. Each rural organization receives \$49,500 every fiscal year for highway planning, and \$15,750 for transit planning. The rural regional planning organizations must provide a 10% match. ConnDOT has provided these monies for over 20 years.

Principal Rural Planning Activities

- Each fiscal year, the rural regional planning organizations develop a Unified Planning Work Program under the direction of ConnDOT to address the major transportation issues in their regions and identify the planning tasks that address them in accordance with the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21).
- Connecticut's rural regional planning organizations voluntarily update their own long-range plans every third year, as well as provide input every three years on the Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP).
- ConnDOT conducts coordination meetings with regional planning organizations three times a year to discuss issues and search for resolutions. ConnDOT's incorporation of input provided by rural regional planning organizations is voluntary and not required by state law.

Exhibit 2a illustrates the levels of input the rural regional planning agencies have in transportation planning.

Exhibit 2a: Rural Planning Integration in Connecticut



Local Elected Official Involvement

Local elected officials may participate in the rural transportation planning process by joining their regional planning organization. Involvement by local elected officials is voluntary – no regulation requires that they be members of the planning organizations – and the incorporation of their input by ConnDOT is voluntary as well. Local elected officials may influence rural transportation planning through the Unified Planning Work Program and STIP updates. ConnDOT depends upon local elected officials to make the STIP available for comment and review at publicly held meetings.

2.2 Programming and Funding for Rural Area Decisions

Although TEA-21 does not set aside specific funding for the rural regional planning organizations, ConnDOT plans for and programs projects in rural parts of the state through the following mechanisms:

- Statewide Transportation Planning – Small Urban Places

Three of the five rural regional planning organizations are eligible to apply for this funding: Litchfield, Windham, and Northeastern. ConnDOT informs the groups of the

funds available, the rural regions submit projects for review, and ConnDOT scopes and schedules projects based on their complexity and available funding. Project selection is rotated so that each of the three eligible organizations receives a priority project in a timely manner. The projects then go through the STIP process. (See the STIP process description below.)

- Statewide Transportation Planning – Rural Funding.

All of the rural regional planning organizations are eligible for this funding. It is preferred that the project selected in this category involve the state highway system. ConnDOT scopes out the projects and, if acceptable, they are programmed into the STIP based on project need and funding. The projects then go through the STIP process. (See the STIP process description below.)

- Statewide Transportation Planning – Enhancement Program Funding.

All of the rural regional planning organizations are eligible for this funding. ConnDOT states the funding levels for this category, and the regions submit their project applications. All of the rural organizations review and prioritize the applications. Usually each region's top project is selected, depending upon eligibility and funding.

- Statewide Transportation Planning – Rural Major/Minor Collectors.

All of the rural regional planning organizations are eligible for this funding. Up to \$1 million of federal STP-rural funds are available annually with certain program limitations. Local matches are provided by municipalities.

- Scenic Byways Program.

After the FHWA informs ConnDOT of the available funding, ConnDOT solicits the rural regional planning organizations that have scenic roads for eligible projects. The projects submitted are reviewed by ConnDOT for eligibility and forwarded to the FHWA for review and selection. Funding is based on nationwide competition.

- The STIP Process.

Rural regional planning organizations receive a draft of ConnDOT's proposed STIP for their area every three years, and are asked to review and comment on the projects listed in the program. The rural organizations then make this document available to their towns and elected officials for review and discussion at publicly-notified meetings. This is also the time for review and comment of any TIP amendments and administrative actions. After a review period of 30 days, the rural organizations forward their comments to ConnDOT, which incorporates them into the final STIP. Although there is no formal endorsement process, the input often leads to the inclusion of locally-desired projects.

Transportation issues such as maintenance are coordinated and conducted by ConnDOT throughout the state. If a rural region has a specific maintenance need, they must notify ConnDOT to address it.

2.3 Major Planning Issues

The following major rural planning issues were identified during the workshop.

- Rural communities have difficulty providing the 20% match in order to receive funding for capital projects.

ConnDOT helps the regions evaluate their funding options.

- Information on freight rail is difficult, if not impossible, to obtain for planning purposes.

ConnDOT and other states continue to struggle with this issue.

- There is “paralyzing” opposition to new or larger arterials, especially in the regions where there are casinos.

ConnDOT bends to local pressure, and some necessary projects and road expansions are not completed, creating overloaded arterials.

- Most money is spent on the state highway system.

Certain highway projects receive high priority. Then ConnDOT prioritizes projects based on type and distributes the remaining funds.

- Rural regional planning organizations believed an unfair share of funding went to metropolitan regions after the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) legislation.

With the passage of TEA-21 and the new eligibility rule for rural minor collectors, ConnDOT developed a \$1 million funding program for rural regions. Projects on rural minor/major collectors that are town-owned and maintained can now be funded. The rural regions have financed safety projects from this funding source for fiscal year 1999, and are now working on the next two to three years of proposed projects.

- Projects frequently move within the STIP timeline, which occurred 16 times last year.

An agreement was created between ConnDOT and the regional planning organizations on how to handle project movement and funding category changes within the approved three-year STIP; these types of actions no longer require amendments. New projects or projects deleted from the STIP still require amendments.

2.4 Identified Strengths and Weaknesses

The following strengths and weaknesses were identified during the workshop.

Strengths

- Rural regions have a strong influence on project selection for inclusion in the STIP.
- State funds are now distributed every two years.
- Enhancement projects are initiated at the regional/local level.
- Transit projects are considered on equal grounds with other projects.

Weaknesses

- The rural planning process is somewhat top-down because ConnDOT makes all decisions regarding funding distribution.
- One rural region systematically declines to participate in the transportation planning process, and shows nominal interest in the state highway that crosses its region. ConnDOT sends drafts of the STIP and other information to this region on a regular basis, but receives no input.

2.5 Success Stories

Previously, ConnDOT would identify a transportation project and complete it without any consultation with the rural regions before, during, or after. Now, consensus is reached beforehand. Projects may not be originally what ConnDOT or the rural region wanted, but compromise is achieved and there is opportunity for rural input.

3.0 Maine

Maine contains 46,341 lane miles of roads, 40,751 lane miles of which are rural, and 2,880 of these rural miles are on the National Highway System. Sixty percent of rural roads are locally owned. Maine's rural transportation planning process is considered to be a blend of top-down and bottom-up methods.

3.1 The Rural Planning Process

In November 1991, a citizen initiated referendum created the Sensible Transportation Policy Act, which mandated public participation in transportation decisions and required alternatives analyses before major highway investments were made. The law generated a rule-making process which was shepherded by a Transportation Policy Advisory Committee, consisting of environmental advocates, business representatives, elected officials, state employees and representatives of non-highway transportation modes. The two-year rule-making process outlined changes to the statewide planning process. It maintained the existing MPO process for four areas in the state. The balance of the state was divided into eight regions (two southern Maine regions were later combined, resulting in seven rural regions) closely resembling Maine's seven maintenance divisions. Each of the seven regions formed Regional Transportation Advisory Committees, which shared four Maine Department of Transportation (MDOT) staff. In addition, MDOT has contracted with up to ten regional planning agencies to assist with Regional Transportation Advisory Committee staffing and planning needs. Planning regions and MPOs, though related, exist independently even though an MPO might be located completely within a planning region. Representatives of the MPOs attend Regional Transportation Advisory Committee meetings; most recently, the reverse is also true.

Members of the Regional Transportation Advisory Committee are nominated by various sources with appointments made by the transportation commissioner. Members are appointed for a three-year term and vacancies are filled to assure representation according to the following interest area distribution:

- 5-6 municipal officials/planners.
- 3-4 environmentalists/land use representatives.
- 3-4 business representatives.
- 3-4 alternate mode representatives.
- 2-3 general public representatives.

MDOT contracts with the ten regional planning agencies serving the state at a cost of \$280,000 annually. MDOT's direct staff support to the Regional Transportation Advisory Committee process represents a budget of roughly \$200,000, with another \$150,000 for operating costs. Funding for the regional planning agencies has traditionally been an

equal distribution regardless of geography, population, or miles of road. An allocation policy is expected to be investigated in the future. MDOT and the Regional Transportation Advisory Committee, in conjunction with the regional planning agencies, have traditionally outlined annual work plans. Beginning in July 1999, biennial work plans are being developed in order to assure appropriate and adequate public input in MDOT's planning processes.

Two statewide advisory committees, one for freight transportation and one for passenger transportation, were created to guide MDOT in terms of these transportation needs. These committees are staffed by MDOT personnel from the Office of Freight and the Office of Passenger Transportation. Information exchange between the two statewide committees and the seven regional committees occurs via MDOT staff and sometimes by virtue of dual membership (a member of the freight transportation advisory committee also being a member of a Regional Transportation Advisory Committee) as well as via newsletters and annual advisory committee meetings. Major studies requiring economic impact analyses or social and environmental impact assessments for major improvements are generally contracted for by MDOT.

Principal Rural Planning Activities

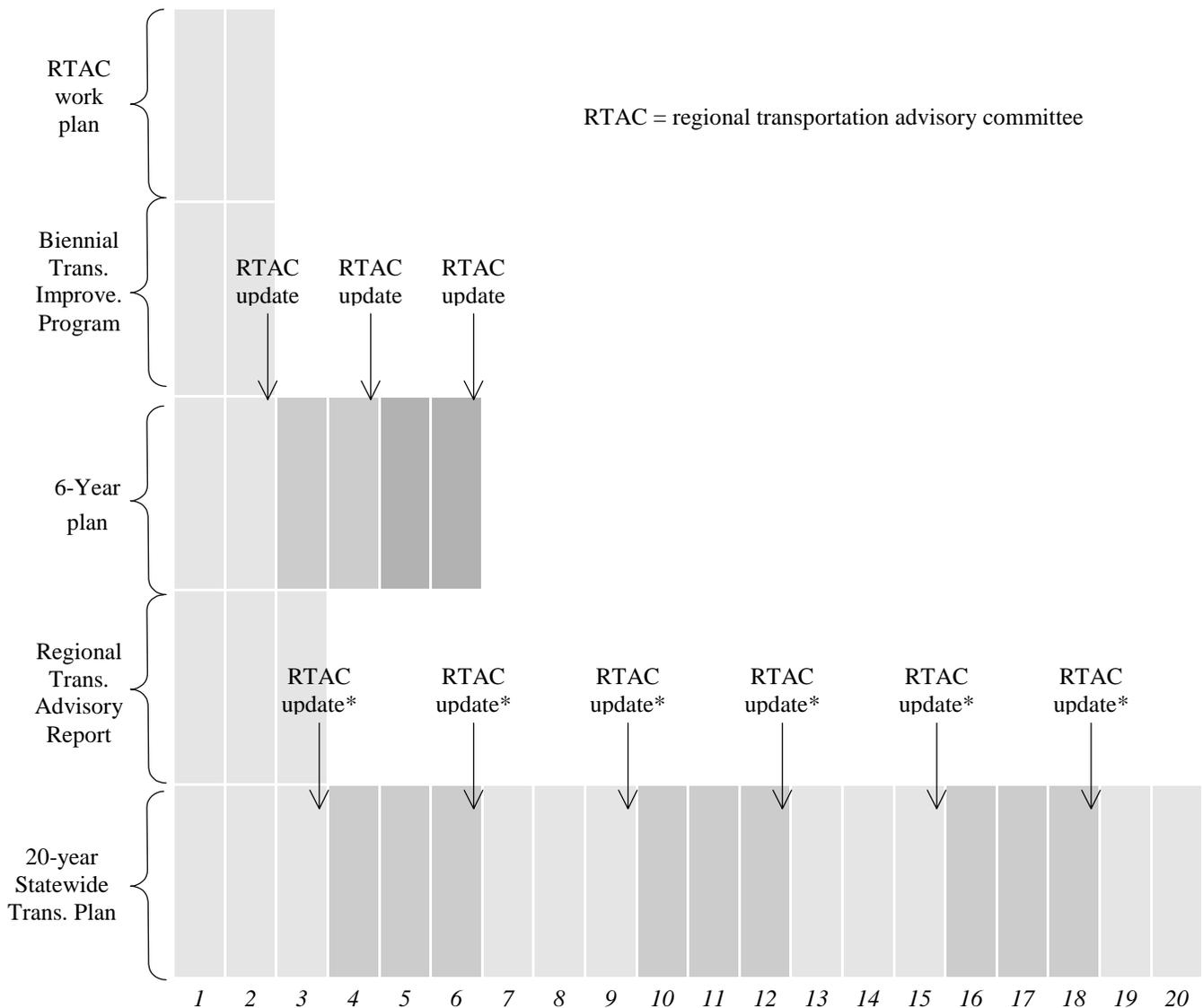
- The primary function of the Regional Transportation Advisory Committees is to advise MDOT in transportation planning efforts and provide input.
- Regional Transportation Advisory Committees have the ability to classify highway projects as “significant,” thereby requiring MDOT to first conduct an alternatives analysis prior to proceeding with the activity, or as “substantial,” requiring MDOT to work in close consultation with the appropriate regional transportation advisory committee. In doing so, the Regional Transportation Advisory Committees and MDOT co-sponsor the project's public input process. In the past year, MDOT has worked to integrate the requirements for public involvement and alternatives analyses with similar requirements of national legislation. This has resulted in a new transportation planning process for major investments called the Integrated Transportation Decision-Making process.
- Every year, the Regional Transportation Advisory Committees produce a list of tasks and deliverables they must realize, ranging from exploring improvement needs for preferred freight routes to identifying public interest projects.
- Every two years, the Regional Transportation Advisory Committees are involved in updating Maine's Six-Year Plan and Biennial TIP. The 20-Year Plan, which is largely policy-based, guides the Six-Year Plan, a document that prioritizes candidate highway and non-highway projects. The Biennial TIP, which is a project-specific expression of the Six- and 20-Year Plans and considered part of the MDOT budget, is submitted biennially to the legislature for adoption. Advice on MDOT's Six-Year Plan and Biennial Transportation Improvement Program is collected by involving the

Regional Transportation Advisory Committees, municipalities, and general citizens in a process that prioritizes transportation improvements of regional importance.

- The Regional Transportation Advisory Committees advise MDOT on the 20-Year Plan by developing regional advisory reports which have, until recently, been updated every three years to coincide with updates of the 20-Year Plan. Future updates may be adjusted to coincide with a five-year planning cycle. Regional advisory reports identify regional needs and deficiencies, as well as goals and objectives regarding regional transportation improvements.

Exhibit 3a illustrates the levels of input the Regional Transportation Advisory Committees have in transportation planning.

Exhibit 3a: Rural Planning Integration in Maine



* The 20-year plan was previously updated every three years, but in the future will be updated on a five-year cycle.

Local Elected Official Involvement

Local elected officials may participate in the Maine Municipal Association, a league of cities and towns, which has a Legislative Policy Council that responds to state policy initiatives. A transportation subcommittee of this council meets to discuss proposed MDOT funding and program policy. Their recommendations are made to the full Legislative Policy Council, which votes in an official position ultimately presented to MDOT and the legislature.

Regional Transportation Advisory Committees generally do not have local elected officials as members. Instead, members representing municipal interests are usually appointed, such as managers, planners, engineers, or public works superintendents. About one-third of committee positions is reserved for people with municipal interests, usually appointed representatives.

3.2 Programming and Funding for Rural Area Decisions

Maine allocates project funds to the seven regions based on their ratio of local deficiencies to statewide deficiencies, not on a per capita basis. Deficiencies are referred to as the “backlog”; a principal duty of the Regional Transportation Advisory Committees is to prioritize their region’s backlog. Maine’s programming and funding process is as follows:

- MDOT's 20-Year Plan sets goals to modernize Maine's geometrically and structurally substandard highways. The Six-Year Plan is the tool used to identify corridor priorities. Regional importance is determined by the Regional Transportation Advisory Committees through a scoring process which awards points to highways of regional economic importance (considered a commuter corridor, a freight route, provides a connection to an intermodal facility etc.), as well as other aspects of its multimodal transportation system.
- MDOT’s 20-Year Plan goal is to address 100% of the needs on the NHS and principal arterials, 80% of the minor arterial needs, and 30% of the major collector needs. Funds are allocated for project improvements to each region on the basis of the ratio of regional deficiencies to statewide deficiencies (for example, if 30% of Maine’s deficient highway mileage exists in a region, that region is allocated 30% of the funding available for improving those highway deficiencies). Available funds are projected for a six-year period; top priority projects in each region are included in the Six-Year Plan to the extent that funds may be available.
- MDOT solicits project preferences from municipalities, which are considered by the Regional Transportation Advisory Committees as part of the criteria for regional importance. Regional Transportation Advisory Committee scores, worth 30% of the total project score, are factored with MDOT cost-effectiveness ratings (60%) and statewide importance (10%) to arrive at a project priority.

- The final project scores are then used to create a Six-Year Plan priority listing by region. A draft Six-Year Plan is presented at regional public meetings around the state. The transportation commissioner presents the plan to state, local elected, and/or appointed officials as well as general citizens.

Bridge, pavement, and safety management systems are managed at the state level. Pavement management is also conducted by the state. MDOT has centralized planning, and generally handles statistics, data collecting, and GIS efforts. Maintenance operations are conducted at the state and local levels. MDOT division offices are responsible for winter and summer maintenance on state and state-aid highways while municipalities are responsible for local roads. Local Road Assistance funds granted to municipalities are typically used for this purpose. MDOT is working on an initiative that will require municipalities to use their local road assistance funding on capital improvement of local roads and minor collectors. Local communities with a population exceeding 6,000 provide a match for federal capital, non-bridge projects.

3.3 Major Planning Issues

The following major rural planning issues were identified during the workshop.

- Federal funding is insufficient, unreliable, and restrictive.

MDOT and the Regional Transportation Advisory Committees are learning not to count on funds from federal programs, and to expect numerous requirements and project qualifications. MDOT relies heavily on funds from federal programs and the state's needs are greater than the allocations. Maine has achieved some recent success in stabilizing its own highway fund so that it can match federal allocations with less reliance on bonding.

- Some of Maine's gas tax funds were being used for non-transportation activities.

Previously, the legislature diverted money from the highway fund to assist with the delivery of other state programs. Recently, MDOT's planning and investment strategies, as well as improvements in Maine's economy, have permitted the legislature to restore the integrity of the highway fund.

- Metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) and Regional Transportation Advisory Committees sometimes believe they don't receive fair shares of money.

MPOs used to receive flat funding, but they are now funded based on need, population, and vehicles miles traveled. MDOT must continually adapt to the changing needs of the MPOs, and the Regional Transportation Advisory Committee process is being reevaluated. Other regions are not funded on a per capita basis, but on a needs- and roads-based system.

- Communication between the towns, Regional Transportation Advisory Committees, and MDOT is improving.

There sometimes isn't a clear relationship between the Regional Transportation Advisory Committees and towns. MDOT and the committees are working with towns to develop their own transportation capital and investment plans, which would be used by the Regional Transportation Advisory Committee to develop their regional report. A simple guide is also being created for communities to use in the development of their comprehensive transportation plan.

3.4 Identified Strengths and Weaknesses

The following strengths and weaknesses were identified during the workshop.

Strengths

- The Regional Transportation Advisory Committee process is routinely reevaluated, surveyed, and improved.
- The Regional Transportation Advisory Committees meet with a legislative subcommittee on transportation at least annually, and the legislature approves transportation plans and budgets with little debate.
- MDOT has a well-developed airport master plan developed in coordination with the federal government, and even the small airports in the north are active lifelines. There are also passenger transportation, integrated freight, rail, and port plans, and a statewide transit plan is in progress.
- Pavement, bridge, and safety management systems are in place and functioning.
- There is coordination with other state agencies, especially regarding land use planning.
- Maine has a strategic passenger transportation plan and integrated freight plan that guide transportation investment decisions.

Weaknesses

- There is no dedicated revenue for modes other than highways, therefore these improvements must be bonded.
- Land use regulation is a sensitive issue, and it is difficult to address land use/transportation coordination.

- There is no comprehensive access management program, although it is a goal for the next biennium. Municipalities are responsible for issuing access permits for their jurisdictions, and MDOT division offices issue permits for rural highways.
- Many citizens believe there is unlimited federal funding and, “they just need to find their shovels and go get it.” They consequently become disenchanted when the money is not readily available. MDOT has identified this as a need for improved educational efforts.
- State policy has contributed to growth sprawl. Towns compete for large business, and large retail institutions can dictate plans and programming. By permitting and subsidizing this fringe growth, urban centers become underutilized and do not support adequate densities for transportation improvements. Additionally, there is no agreement on the weight of public versus technical input.

3.5 Success Stories

- The Regional Transportation Advisory Committees have greatly enhanced public involvement, especially in rural areas, and their input is heavily relied upon. Citizens and officials have more access to the MDOT planning process due to the committees, and MDOT continually acts to improve upon the participation process.
- With the creation of the Regional Transportation Advisory Committees and project development by consensus, the inherent fear of MDOT being primarily interested in road building at the expense of community priorities has dissipated, and citizens have begun to recognize that others have a legitimate point of view.
- Municipalities are beginning to integrate local plans in light of state and regional goals and objectives. Municipal-MDOT partnerships are now the norm.
- An example of the benefits of the participatory process is in the town of Bath, where there was a popular drawbridge that allowed tall ships to enter the harbor. However, when it came to refurbish the bridge, the relatively low count of tall ships caused the cost of the bridge to be high. The public fought to keep the drawbridge, and a series of public meetings were held. After it was shown that replacing the drawbridge was not cost effective, community members agreed to MDOT’s plan for closing it and replacing it with a regular bridge. In another community where MDOT planned to improve an arterial passing through downtown, citizens requested that traffic calming amenities be incorporated. After discussions, MDOT agreed to incorporate these measures upon the community’s adoption of access management standards on other portions of the arterial throughout town.
- The National Environmental Policy Act and other related state acts were combined to avoid redundancies in planning and to provide a comprehensive planning approach.

4.0 New Hampshire

New Hampshire contains 31,093 lane miles of roads, 24,917 lane miles of which are rural, and 1,768 of these rural miles are on the National Highway System. Sixty-nine percent of rural roads are locally owned. New Hampshire’s rural transportation planning process is considered to be bottom-up.

4.1 The Rural Planning Process

New Hampshire has nine regional planning commissions (four MPOs and five rural planning commissions), all of which have technical advisory committees. The New Hampshire Department of Transportation (NHDOT) coordinates transportation planning and research with these organizations through their Bureau of Transportation Planning. Approximately 40 full-time staff at the Bureau of Transportation Planning serve as liaison between NHDOT and the regional planning commissions, and to provide staff support and coordination on a variety of transportation planning activities.

In 1985, the NHDOT Commissioner decided to fund rural planning commissions in a similar manner to the MPOs. NHDOT currently provides each rural planning organization with \$65,000 annually for transportation planning purposes, based on two-year contracts, although they are not required by law to do so. This planning money comes from NHDOT’s statewide planning and research budget. The rural planning commissions must match 10% of this money locally, which is garnered through town membership dues. Several towns that don’t pay dues cannot be represented on the technical advisory committees. However, the rural planning commissions try to solicit their input during project selection.

Each rural planning commission consists of a geographically-bound grouping of 25 to 50 towns and localities, although municipalities are not required to participate in the rural planning organization. Any citizen, local elected official, or other representative may join a rural planning organization or their technical advisory committee. Members may join their regional transportation commission, which oversees the rural planning organizations, when there is a vacancy. Appointments must be approved by the local appointive authority, and so far every person who has solicited a position has been accepted. Most commissions hold monthly meetings.

Principal Rural Planning Activities

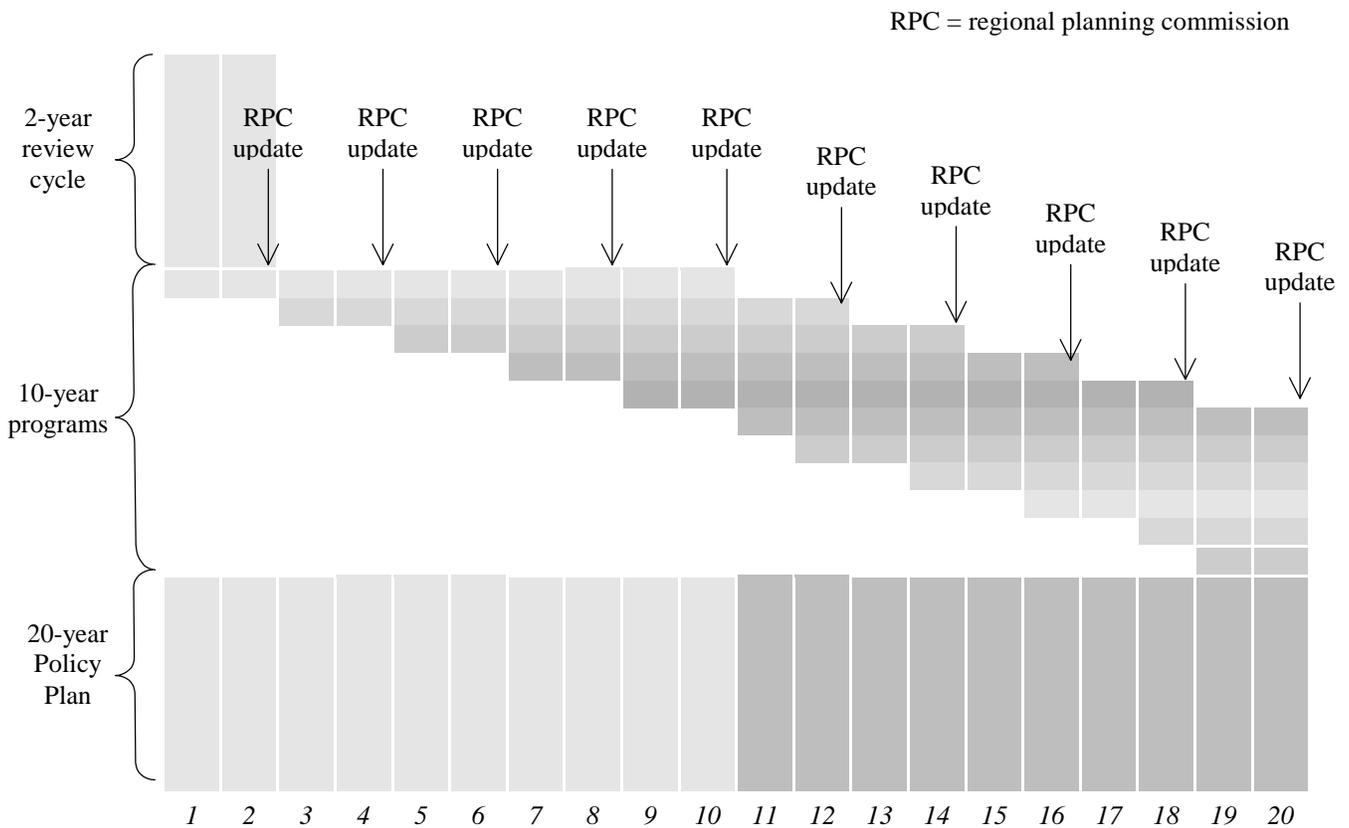
- In even-numbered years, the rural planning commissions review and evaluate a two-year long part of the 10-Year Program, going town to town for public review and comment.
- They then submit their prioritized project lists and transportation plans (in the case of MPOs) in odd-numbered years. NHDOT takes this input, combines it with the

information from other regions, and presents it at 12 to 14 public hearings throughout the state for additional public comment. Afterwards, NHDOT submits the 10-Year Program to the legislature for approval.

- As two years of projects are delivered from the current 10-Year Program, the newly-approved two years' of projects are added.

Exhibit 4a illustrates the rural planning organization participation process, and how the 10-Year Program progresses by shifting ahead two years at every update period.

Exhibit 4a: Rural Planning Integration in New Hampshire



Local Elected Official Involvement

Local elected officials may participate in the rural transportation planning process by joining their rural planning commissions. Involvement by local elected officials is voluntary – no regulation requires that they be members of the planning commissions – and the employment of their input by NHDOT is voluntary as well. Local elected

officials may influence rural transportation planning through their regional plans and project priorities. NHDOT depends upon regional planning commissions to make the STIP available for comment and review at publicly held meetings. Officials may also become commissioners to the transportation board, where they can influence policy.

4.2 Programming and Funding for Rural Area Decisions

New Hampshire relies primarily on federal funding. During the two-year review cycle, the rural planning commissions prioritize the projects they would like programmed during that period on a point system. These projects are merged with those of other regions, keeping in consideration the different regional priorities and financial constraint. If a project is included in multiple regions, it is weighted heavily.

When NHDOT presents the updated 10-Year Program to the legislature every two years, the material is usually passed with little debate. The governor may change some aspects of turnpike projects, but otherwise leaves the remaining transportation programming untouched since it has already passed extensive public scrutiny.

For transportation enhancement projects, communities apply through the regional planning commissions. Rural planning commissions and MPOs have eight of the 13 seats on the advisory committee that selects the projects to be funded through the congestion mitigation and air quality (CMAQ) program.

4.3 Major Planning Issues

The following major rural planning issues were identified during the workshop.

- Snowmobile management is a new issue that does not fit into any category or mode. “Pure” transportation money cannot be spent on snowmobile projects.

Road shoulders are being built to accommodate snowmobiles, and the regions are trying to better integrate snowmobile efforts. Also, snowmobilers have formed their own organization.

- The public perceives big businesses as a solution to economic and other problems. Towns compete for large retail establishments and their revenue, yet strive to maintain the local character.

NHDOT and the rural planning commissions are educating citizens on growth and development issues. While a heavily used road is attractive to strip development, transportation planners have been showing municipalities how to plan wisely and incorporate access management.

- Citizens complain that their downtown areas are either empty and unused or too busy and congested.

The rural planning commissions are conducting efforts to educate the public in thinking about multimodal transportation: sidewalks, access management, parking, pedestrian ramps, signage, and other items affect the quality of the small downtowns.

- State legislators at first were upset that they couldn't create and push a project through legislation without consulting the transportation commission and public.

After a few years, both elected officials and organization members have learned to adapt to the new procedures. There is more consistency in the planning and programming process. Also, the rural planning organizations are attempting to facilitate the relationship between the higher state elected officials and the lower officials and general public.

4.4 Identified Strengths and Weaknesses

The following strengths and weaknesses were identified during the workshop.

Strengths

- NHDOT adheres strictly to a public input system, and follows up on all contacts.
- The relationship between NHDOT and the rural planning commissions continually improves.
- NHDOT will not override public opposition to transportation projects.
- Narratives are included in reports on project development and prioritization, which has helped them in reaching the programming stage.
- Communication and relations between towns, rural planning organizations, and NHDOT's maintenance operations are excellent. Although the maintenance division does good work, citizens realize potholes can't be fixed immediately.
- ISTEA provoked a much needed shake-up in and separation of transportation planning/programming and politics.

Weaknesses

- Planning conflicts are resolved politically.
- There is "crushing" opposition to road expansion. Some rural organizations would like NHDOT to override public opinion and announce that in the long run certain projects will be beneficial, but this doesn't occur anymore.

- There is insufficient communication about betterment project selection, and the process for it is considered mysterious.
- There is demand for transit, but insufficient population to justify it. As the population ages, the demand for transit only increases.

4.5 Success Stories

- The Route 16 Corridor Protection Study, which included an examination of the techniques for access management commissions, was a success due to its extensive collaboration. Rural planning commissions were assigned different research tasks, and their products were used to educate towns along the corridor about its various impacts, including travel and tourism, community design, etc.
- The scenic byways program has united towns across regional and state lines due to a common theme. It not only transcends political boundaries and recognizes common characteristics, but establishes a connection between states and regions. Towns have built themselves around this theme, and see the end result and benefit. The Champlain Valley and Connecticut River scenic byways have proven to be very community-based, grassroots efforts, and some areas later received national scenic byway titles.
- The Maidstone and Bemis Bridges were successful “self-help” projects involving public/private partnerships.
- Road Scholars is a successful and popular transportation education program, and is administered through the University of New Hampshire Technology Transfer Program.
- The transportation commissioner once hosted an open forum, and directly answered questions from citizens on a wide range of transportation issues. It was successful not only because of the accessibility, but because of the commissioner’s familiarity with specific issues and no-nonsense responses.

5.0 Vermont

Vermont contains 29,199 lane miles of roads, 26,389 lane miles of which are rural, and 1,847 of these rural miles are on the National Highway System. Seventy-nine percent of rural roads are locally owned. Vermont's rural transportation planning process is considered to be bottom-up.

5.1 The Rural Planning Process

Vermont has 11 rural regional planning commissions, each of which has created a transportation advisory committee. Transportation Advisory Committee members are appointed, and represent a wide variety of citizens and officials. The Vermont Agency of Transportation (VAOT) initially offered a model to the regions of the ideal committee, but it does not dictate who the members should be. VAOT did require resolutions from each region stating their participation in and agreement with this process, so as to avoid debate later. The original purpose of the regional planning commissions was economic development and planning, which has expanded to include transportation education efforts currently.

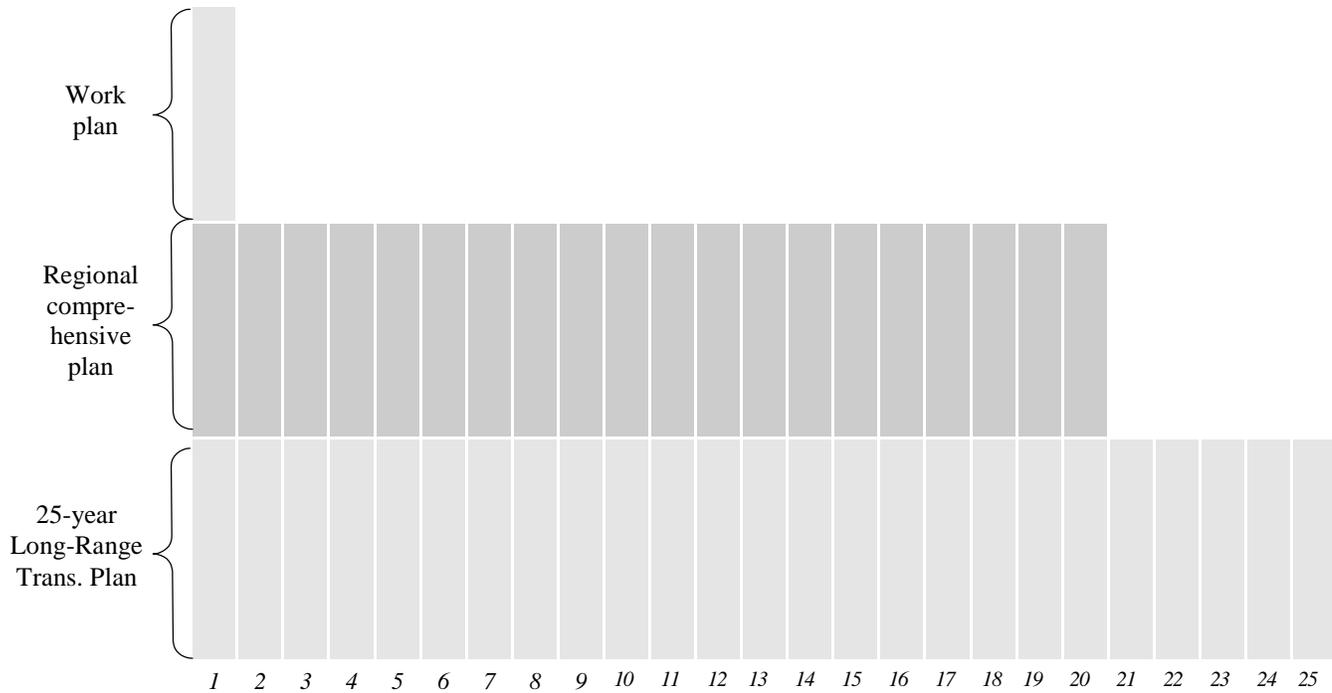
VAOT provides each regional planning commission with \$100-250,000 annually for transportation planning purposes, based on a formula distribution method.

Principal Rural Planning Activities

- Vermont asks that each regional planning commission administer a yearly work plan, which can include transportation inventories, forecasts, prioritizing, and solutions. The regions operate on a monthly budget basis.
- Every year, each regional planning commission must solicit input and approval from their towns on the regional work plan. This plan then becomes part of the region's 20-year comprehensive plan and Vermont's 25-year long-range transportation plan.
- The regional planning commissions provide technical assistance, like traffic counters and staff support, to towns.

Exhibit 5a on the following page illustrates Vermont's rural transportation planning process.

Exhibit 5a: Rural Planning Integration in Vermont



Local Elected Official Involvement

Local elected officials may participate in the rural transportation planning process by joining their transportation advisory committees. Involvement by local elected officials is voluntary – no regulation requires that they be members of the planning organizations – and the employment of their input by VAOT is voluntary as well. Local elected officials may influence rural transportation planning through their regional plans and project priorities. VAOT depends upon local elected officials to make the STIP available for comment and review at publicly held meetings. The active participation and concurrence of local elected officials is essential to rural planning success.

5.2 Programming and Funding for Rural Area Decisions

Paving and safety programs are centralized and handled by VAOT. VAOT supplies the regions with bridge management system information, but then allows them to prioritize and program bridge-related activities.

Vermont has a capital expenditure block grant program. Towns are required to match 33% of the funds, and once a year they meet with the district engineer to distribute the

money. It's a complex program that requires lots of administrative work, but has shown many benefits.

5.3 Major Planning Issues

The following major rural planning issues were identified during the workshop.

- VAOT has been purchasing rail rights to abandoned or partial lines, which has been met with “not in my backyard” opposition.

Efforts are underway to show citizens that turning old rail lines into bike paths is less obtrusive and not the same as building a new road.

- Snowmobile management is a new issue that does not fit into any category or mode. “Pure” transportation money cannot be spent on snowmobile projects.

A section in the plan on transportation-related facilities and activities deals with snowmobile issues. Some towns are active in finding alternate snowmobile routes, and some trails already exist. Also, snowmobilers have formed their own organization.

- Vermont has been “wrestling” with growth issues for over 20 years, and land use laws often turn into a battle of the “haves” and “have-nots.”
- Simple projects such as sidewalks were being overlooked.

Sidewalks are being recognized as an essential transportation issue, and consequently improved and extended. Towns are starting to implement sidewalk programs due to increased awareness of the appropriate resources through regional planning.

- There is debate about the efficiency of maintaining ten state airports, and whether to close some.

5.4 Identified Strengths and Weaknesses

The following strengths and weaknesses were identified during the workshop.

Strengths

- Before being programmed, a project's funding source must be shown and cannot be based on potential or estimated dollars.
- “Bigger and wider is better” is no longer the driving force in transportation planning; there has been an evolutionary thinking process.

- Rural planning enables Vermont to work with local jurisdictions and to resolve issues for roads that serve multiple functions, such as a National Highway System facility that is also a town’s main street.

Weaknesses

- Transportation Advisory Committees become demoralized when their projects never reach fruition.
- It is difficult to determine precisely when a project is completed.
- There is significant disagreement over the functional classifications of roads.
- Success stories are often due to political pull and connection.
- There is debate over what is considered to be a transportation project, and what constitutes “raiding” the transportation fund; currently, the legislature may use up to 25% of designated transportation funds for non-transportation projects.
- A large portion of funding has been appropriated to passenger rail, despite concerns that it may not be a good investment, because of strong support by the current governor.

5.5 Success Stories

- VAOT conducted an alternatives study in a small town due to its congested key intersection. Roundabouts, bypasses, slip-lanes, traffic lights, and other means were suggested, which the town declined. They decided that they preferred the congestion, and VAOT left them alone. This was considered successful because VAOT allowed the town to choose its future, instead of forcing one on it.
- Public/private partnerships have facilitated project development when there were insufficient funds.

6.0 Workshop Findings and Conclusions

6.1 Similarities

Consensus was reached by Vermont’s workshop participants in many areas, most notably regarding public involvement, project development, and funding. These agreements are listed below.

- Citizens have taken full advantage of the opportunity to offer input on transportation planning issues.
- Citizens have the power to prevent undesirable projects or realize desired ones.
- Rural planning organizations are an effective tool in educating the public on transportation and development issues.
- A region-wide and nationwide perspective on freight rail is needed, along with more information and data.
- Rural planning organizations must compete with metropolitan areas for money, with the department of transportation acting as arbitrator and distributor of funds.
- Communities crave the benefits of economic development which affects their planning policies, yet strive (often blindly) to maintain local character.
- The different approaches used are all participatory.
- Both organizations and the departments look forward to the increased use of intelligent transportation systems.

6.2 Differences

Differences between the states were also noted, which tended to center on governmental organization, regulations, and the programming process. These differences are listed below:

- States vary from taking a top-down approach to rural planning – like Connecticut, which “holds the purse strings” and makes final project decisions – to states that have a bottom-up approach, such as New Hampshire.
- Some rural planning organizations struggle to find planning funds, while others are provided with more extensive resources.

- Some rural planning organizations have a purely advisory role, while others actively develop, plan, and program their transportation projects.
- There is wide variation in the extent to which the rural plans affect the prioritization and selection of projects.

Attachment A. Participants

Vermont Workshop

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Federal Highway Administration

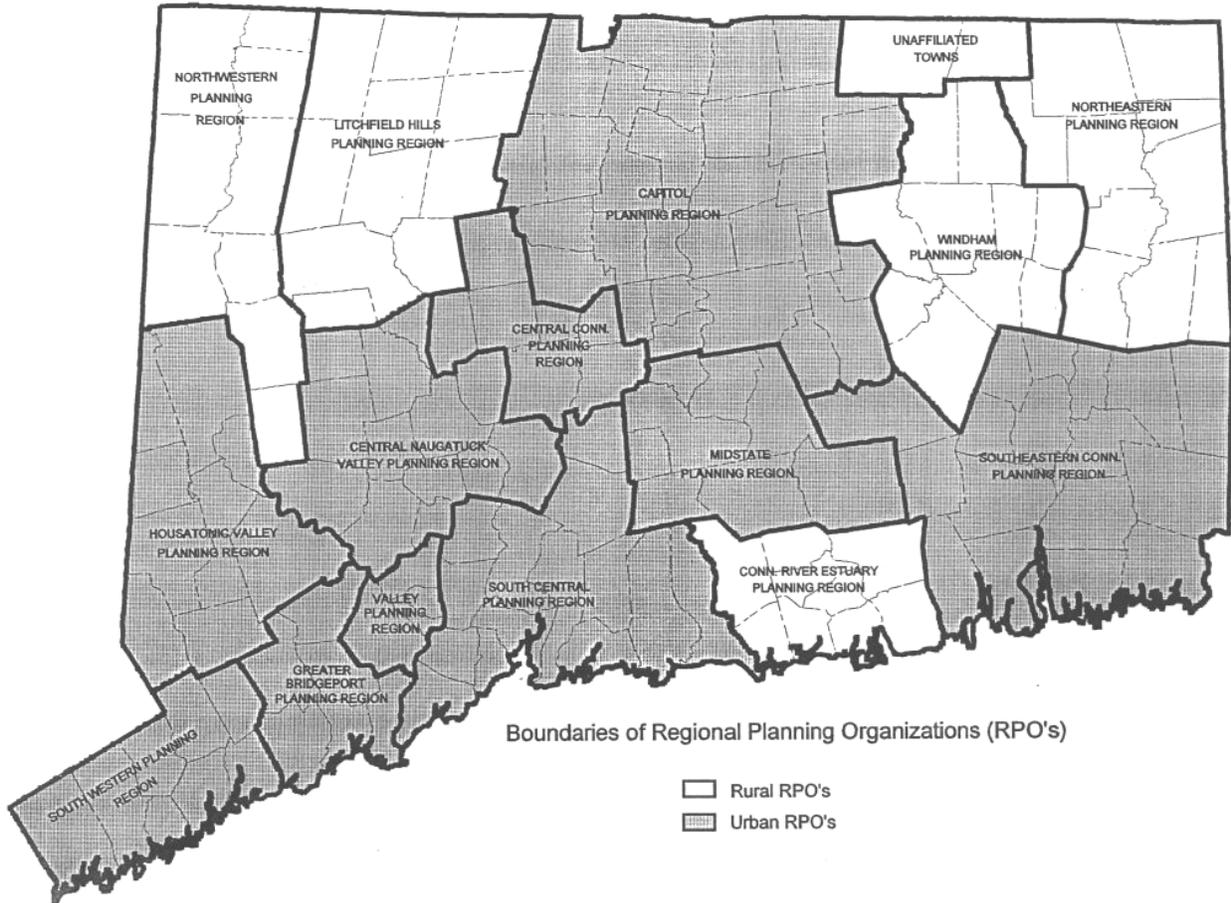
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Federal Transit Administration

Attachment B. Maps

Connecticut



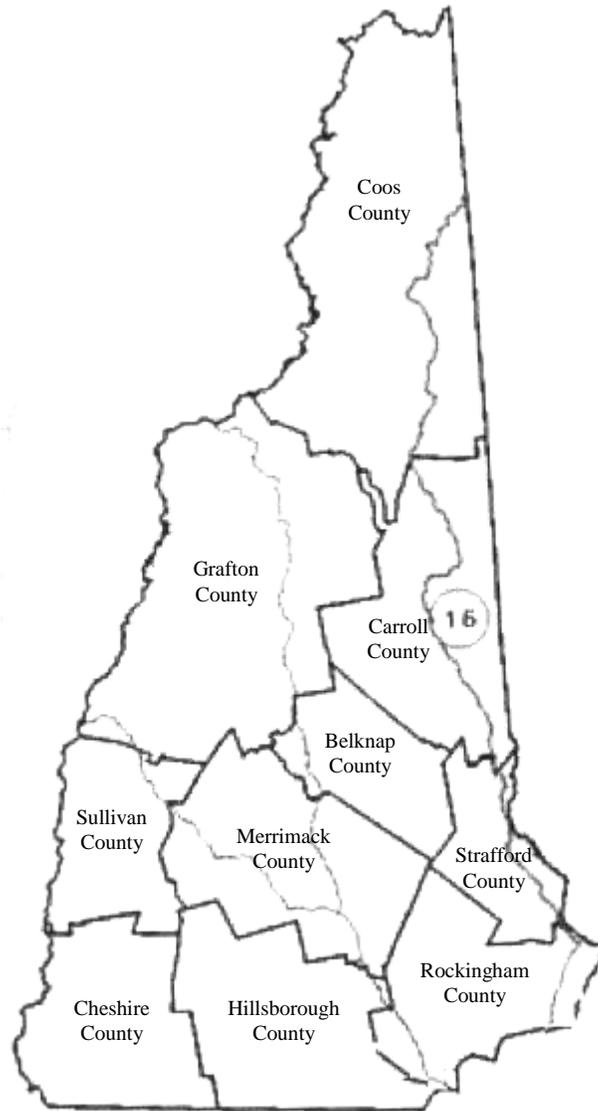
Maine

3 R.T.A.C. AREA
 — BOUNDARY
 4 R.T.A.C. AREA



REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION
 ADVISORY COMMITTEE AREAS
 STATE OF MAINE
 DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

New Hampshire



Vermont

