Indiana MPO Council: Informal Collaboration Yields Successes

Quick Information

Organization(s): 14 Indiana MPOs
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Website: http://www.indianampo.com/
Cooperation Topic(s): Statewide Planning
Cooperation Practice(s): Forums for Communication and Idea Sharing; Project Partnerships
Cost Information: Costs of meetings, annual conference, and responsibilities shared across participating agencies.

For the past 30 years, Indiana’s 14 metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) have met regularly to solve problems through a statewide collaborative forum called the Indiana MPO Council. The Council has successfully tackled regional issues such as shifts in funding allocations, planning regulation updates, and air quality concerns. This decades-long collaboration has ensured that available funds are distributed fairly among all of Indiana’s MPOs, leading to uniform, yet tailored projects and processes that have benefitted residents across the State.

Motivation for Establishing the Collaboration

Grant funding can be a difficult topic to broach among MPOs, especially since they must often compete with each other for the same funds. Nonetheless, the topic was often discussed among Indiana’s MPOs at Indiana Department of Transportation’s (INDOT) annual, statewide meetings. To attract greater Federal investment in Indiana and to better distribute such investment throughout the State, the MPOs’ executive directors decided to create the MPO Council as a forum for MPOs to discuss issues and form a representative voice for MPOs in State legislative, executive, and judicial matters. Thus, in the early 1980s, Indiana’s 14 MPOs formed the Indiana MPO Council to work together on mutually beneficial funding opportunities and work with the State DOT and Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) on improving community solutions to transportation and planning issues.

Collaboration Structure and Process

Once per month, the MPO executive directors hold an in-person Council meeting in Indianapolis where they discuss a formal, MPO-sourced agenda that may cover a wide variety of topics, such as new modeling and data

Figure 17. Indiana MPO Council tackles a variety of topics, such as congestion. Source: Volpe Center
technologies, planning regulations, improved internal processes, and partnerships with State and Federal agencies. The MPO directors also update one another on projects that their Council committees have undertaken or completed. Committees are formed as need for them arises; there are approximately 10-15 committees active at any given time, though some are more active than others. The committees address a number of issues, including MPO policies and processes, project development, pavement management, safety performance measures, and local and sustainable communities.

Two co-chairs head the Indiana MPO Council, and as one co-chair retires, another is selected by the other members of the Council to take his or her place. The Council typically tries to select a younger MPO director to replace the retiree so that person may learn from the existing co-chair. These elections are usually made unanimously. Prior to each meeting, a staff member from one co-chair’s MPO solicits agenda items, compiles the agenda, and distributes it among the MPO directors. This volunteer position is the only “formal” position within the Council and it has helped the MPOs to coordinate their Council communications. All members—those that serve both large and small urban areas—are responsible for contributing equally to Council tasks and initiatives.

In addition to monthly meetings, each MPO rotates the responsibility of hosting an annual 2½-day Council conference, which also includes staff from INDOT, FHWA, and consulting firms. The conference location rotates each year so that participants from the MPOs have the opportunity to explore a part of the State that they may not otherwise have the opportunity to visit. The conference agenda typically consists of large group sessions on various transportation topics, small breakout sessions, tours, and an awards dinner. The host is responsible for designing and implementing the annual awards program that recognizes various MPO contributions to planning, construction, and partnership programs throughout Indiana.

The Council periodically revisits the idea of making the organization more structured by establishing bylaws and designing requirements for the member MPOs to follow. Decades of successful collaborative work have convinced the MPOs that the Council’s current structure has been advantageous to all of them and does not warrant significant changes. Regardless, there is benefit in including everyone at the table for these discussions.

**Takeaways**

- The Indiana MPO Council was formed in the early 1980s to help the MPOs better distribute Federal investment throughout the State.
- The MPO executive directors hold a monthly meeting in Indianapolis to discuss matters of mutual interest, and various committees meet as needed to tackle specific subjects.
- Each MPO rotates the responsibility of hosting an annual 2½-day conference, which also includes staff from INDOT, FHWA, and private firms.
- The Council members have found an informal structure without bylaws, which has allowed them to collaborate most efficiently.
- The MPOs developed a mutually-agreed upon Planning Fund (PL) funding formula that distributes Federal funds; they also have a system for sharing funds.
- Allowing the MPOs to make allocations as a group builds better transparency throughout the State and ensures that the money goes towards projects where it is needed the most.
Collaboration Accomplishments

Around the same time the Council was founded, the MPOs worked together to develop a Planning Fund (PL) funding formula that provides a method and calculations process for MPO PL distribution and is agreed to annually by INDOT and FHWA. This formula was developed because of a discrepancy in utilization of Federal funds—some MPOs could not spend down their funds while others were too resource-constrained to move ahead with projects. The formula is mostly population-based, but includes certain caps on the amount any individual MPO can receive. When the Council developed the formula, it was also able to continue a process it had begun with INDOT in which MPOs are able to “bank,” or not obligate, up to 25 percent of their of PL funds (or up to $100,000). PL funds can be carried over to the next fiscal year. The MPOs have an ongoing three year rolling fund agreement with INDOT in which, for example, funds allocated in FY14 do not need to be spent down until FY17, with the exception of funds for active construction projects. Additionally, the Council has developed a process in which MPOs can choose to put PL funds they cannot obligate in a discretionary pool, and then other MPOs can apply for a certain portion of the funds in that pool.

The Council also utilizes a Local Sharing Agreement, published annually by INDOT, the Council, and numerous State agencies, that outlines the category of funds and traditional split of Federal funds between the State and local public agencies. Based on these collaborative efforts to allocate funds, the Council and its partners have been able to advocate for additional funding. Allowing the MPOs to make allocations as a group builds better transparency throughout the State and ensures that the money goes towards projects where it is needed the most.

The Council has also worked with INDOT to use its State Project Management System to track how much funding is allocated to individual projects so that short- and long-term funding issues can be managed. In addition, the Council developed and supported the statewide implementation of quarterly project tracking from preliminary engineering to design and right-of-way (ROW) acquisition, which has been an effective way to support local public agencies and improve project development and delivery.

Almost every MPO now has a sidewalk inventory as a result of the Council’s efforts to standardize pavement and asset management throughout Indiana with help from State and Federal partners. The Council has also supported a statewide effort to help local agencies develop transition plans to ensure they meet Americans with Disabilities Act compliance requirements.

These are just a few of the many projects, processes, and programs the Council has developed and implemented as a result of its sustained efforts to achieve multi-jurisdictional cooperation. Guidance and planning efforts that occur together at the director level translate into coordinated, streamlined work at the technical level because of the relationships cultivated by the Council.
Challenges and Lessons Learned

The Council is successful, in part, due to the consistency of its participants. While its monthly meetings are informal, they are very well attended. Many of the MPOs’ executive directors have served in their positions for many years, and these tenures provide valuable institutional knowledge to and cohesion among the directors. They have been able to build strong statewide relationships as a result of the collaboration. When a new MPO executive director is appointed, the current Council members proactively demonstrate the value of active participation. For example, the Directors and senior staff of other MPOs will make themselves available to answer questions or provide insight to new MPO directors. In this way, involvement is never depicted as a requirement and is instead seen as a mutually beneficial opportunity for the new MPO director and the other Council members.

Looking forward, one of the Council’s main priorities is improving the robustness of its performance management in light of new Federal legislation. A modelers group comprised of members of the Council routinely meets with INDOT and private sector representatives to discuss best practices in data collection, modeling and forecasting, GIS, and other information sharing techniques. The Council is also closely working with its local planning authorities to ensure they are actively modifying their Title VI assurances and policies.

After so many years of collaboration and considering the many political and regulatory changes that occur in Federal, State, and local government, the Council can boast an impressive number of planning, funding, and policy achievements for itself, its partner agencies, and the State of Indiana. An open, informal structure that is grounded in the motivation to achieve more for everyone by working together has brought the Council lasting success that seems poised for many more years of prosperous cooperation.

Additional Resources

- Indiana MPO Council website
- 2015 Indiana MPO Conference
- Indiana MPO Council Cooperative Operations Manual