



Mid-Atlantic Regional Planning Roundtables: MPO Coordination on Efforts Across States

Quick Information

Organization(s): Wilmington Area Planning Council (WILMAPCO), Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission (DVRCP), Baltimore Metropolitan Commission (BMC)

Contact(s): Tigest Zegeye, Wilmington Area Planning Council

Website: <http://www.wilmapco.org/mid-atlantic/>

Cooperation Topic(s): Multi-State Planning

Cooperation Practice(s): Forums for Communication and Idea Sharing

Cost Information: The American Planning Association (APA) and regional science and consulting organizations have funded roundtables. The recent roundtables have been funded through the host's MPO UPWP funds and sponsorships, who have typically provided the meals.

The Mid-Atlantic region shares many planning challenges as part of a dense network of cities that stretch from Virginia to Pennsylvania. From commuting patterns to weather vulnerabilities, local agencies realized they could share best practices across metropolitan planning organization (MPO) and State boundaries to improve the effectiveness of their plans. Between 2005 and 2012, the MPOs and regional commissions as well as local American Planning Association (APA) chapters held eight Mid-Atlantic regional planning roundtables and have built lasting interagency relationships that continue to enable collaborative planning efforts at the regional level. More recently, the area MPOs took the lead to rekindle the effort, with the Wilmington Area Planning Council (WILMAPCO) hosting a roundtable in October 2015 and the group planning to host one every other year.



Figure 21. Areas represented by the Mid-Atlantic Regional Planning Roundtables.
Source: WILMAPCO

Motivation for Establishing the Collaboration

In 2005, the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments' (MWCOG's) 2030 growth projections showed that the Northern Shenandoah Valley and surrounding regions would continue providing housing for jobs in the Metro Washington region for the next 25 years. To address the challenges of providing labor and housing in a region with local labor shortages caused by rising housing costs, MWCOG and the Northern Shenandoah Valley Regional Commission (NSVRC) held the first Mid-Atlantic regional planning roundtable in October 2005. Other organizations joined the annual roundtables, recognizing the benefits of establishing connections with nearby agencies and sharing best practices related to regional issues such as air and water quality, freight, and long-distance commuting.

Collaboration Structure

The following partners have hosted roundtables: MWCOG, NSVRC, Baltimore Metropolitan Council (BMC), the George Washington Regional Commission (GWRC), Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission (DVRPC), WILMAPCO, the Maryland Department of Planning (MDP), and the Northern Virginia Regional Commission (NVRC). The National Association of Regional Councils (NARC), National Association of Development Organizations (NADO), and Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations (AMPO) have provided sponsorship to eliminate participant registration fees and increase attendance. The APA's Regional and Intergovernmental Planning Division assumed responsibility for organizing and sponsoring the event in 2007. This APA Division funded the roundtables with help from Delaware, Maryland, the National Capital Area, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia APA Chapters. Later, the roundtables also received funding from regional science and consulting organizations, including the North American Regional Science Council (NARSC), the Regional Science Association International (RSAI), and the Regional Studies Association (RSA). NARC, NADO, and AMPO continued to publicize the roundtables, while regional commissions and MPOs hosted the events.

In the past, the APA Division and the host regional commission or MPO collaborated to plan the roundtable agendas via conference call. They chose national, regional, and local topics relevant to agencies from Virginia to Pennsylvania, aiming to host approximately 100 attendees at a one-day event. The topics included linking land-use and transportation, the ways in which rural and small metro regions could achieve smart and sustainable growth, and intermodal regional planning. In 2007, the attendees proposed strategies to establish an official mechanism for public officials and transportation practitioners to use University research; in 2008, they discussed authorization issues, needs, and goals for the new surface transportation authorization; and in 2012, they shared best practices related to energy efficiency and coastal mitigation. Mainly senior staff from local and State agencies attended the roundtables, which acted as a forum for more technical information exchange than the policy-oriented NARC and AMPO meetings attended by MPO directors. After the roundtables started offering APA credits, many APA members also began participating. Finally, many universities, as well as national organizations like the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Smart Growth Program, provided speakers for and led panels at the events.

In recent years, the region's three largest MPOs led the planning process for the roundtables. The MPOs determined that the previous roundtables had

Takeaways

- Roundtables began through organization with the local APA Chapter and included participation from area MPOs, environmental organizations, and other planning agencies.
- The daylong event gathers more than 100 participants to discuss key issues affecting transportation and other planning in the region.
- More recently, three area MPOs (DVRPC, WILMAPCO, and BMC) refocused the roundtables to narrow the scope and emphasize directly solving regional issues.
- The agencies rotate the location of the roundtables and shifted the occurrence to once every two years.
- Flexibility in changing the structure and schedule of the event is key to ensuring that it provides for relevant discussions and includes key participants.

lost focus, as they brought together a multitude of partners with broad perspectives and therefore did not easily allow for directed discussions on important planning topics. The MPOs refocused the event to include more specific discussions on issues and potential collaborative initiatives. With this shift, involvement in the roundtable has shifted to include more technical staff, particularly in more technical sessions. The sessions focus on the recent initiatives of the host agency, as well as on upcoming national requirements.

The recent roundtables have been funded through the hosts MPO's Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP) funds and sponsorships, who have typically provided the meals. As they are hosted at the MPO offices, the host agency does not have to rent space for the event. However, capacity constraints of the different agencies can limit participation. For example, the roundtable hosted by DVRPC was limited to 80 participants due to space constraints.

The MPOs also determined to host the event every other year, as they have numerous other methods of communication and collaboration, and organizing the event requires a large amount of staff time and funding. The MPOs are regularly in touch informally and have conducted other initiatives together.

Collaboration Accomplishments

In 2008, the roundtables received the APA Division Education Excellence Award for their success in promoting and sharing planning-related research and best practices between many levels of government in the Mid-Atlantic.

The roundtables also inspired, supported, and facilitated several large collaboration efforts within the Mid-Atlantic region. For instance, NJDOT began hosting coordination meetings with its three MPOs, DVRPC, a bi-state MPO on the southern New Jersey and Pennsylvania border, continued quarterly coordination meetings that rotated among the Pennsylvania MPOs, and addressed more local topics than the Mid-Atlantic roundtables. DVRPC and WILMAPCO, a bi-state MPO for the northern Delaware and Maryland region which borders DVRPC, continued to cooperate through planning for the multi-region, 18-county air quality non-attainment area, while also collaborating on freight and air transportation via DVRPC's Goods Movement and Airports Task Forces. The MPOs also coordinate on commenting on Notices of Proposed Rulemakings. MPOs of the Mid-Atlantic Roundtables plan to coordinate on system performance measures as a part of FAST Act.

Many of the MPOs have carried interregional coordination beyond the roundtables and into their UPWPs by producing technical documents that surpass Federal requirements in considering jurisdictions outside the MPOs' own planning borders. For example, the 2015 Roundtable provided a space for DVRPC to learn about PennDOT's freight plan and incorporate the relevant information into their own freight work.

Most importantly, the agencies regularly communicate through informal challenges, having developed strong relationships among their staff and embraced a culture of collaboration—working together and communicating has become part of their planning mindset.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

The agencies learned that, for a large regional conference to succeed, it requires dedicated staff and leadership to organize the events. Although the MPOs reshaped the roundtables to narrow the focus and scope of participants, the event still requires staff time and funding.

The MPOs found that retaining flexibility in the goals and structure of the collaboration has allowed for better participation in the roundtable. The MPOs do not adhere to a strict schedule for hosting the event, which recently shifted from annual to every two years, nor do they strictly preordain the agenda. Allowing the schedule and agenda to develop organically helps them to better address important issues and ensure participation.

From the roundtables, the participating agencies realized the benefits of working with established non-governmental organizations to facilitate communication, encourage participation, and share information on multi-jurisdictional planning processes.

By providing a forum for cross-agency planning discussions, the Mid-Atlantic roundtables facilitate regional relationships and enable the information exchange necessary to strengthen multi-jurisdictional collaboration.