



Utah's Unified Transportation Plan: Joint Planning Improves Support for Investment in Transportation

Quick Information

Agency: Wasatch Front Regional Council (WFRC); Mountainland Association of Governments (MAG); Utah Department of Transportation (UDOT); Utah Transit Authority (UTA); Cache Metropolitan Planning Organization (CMPO); Dixie Metropolitan Planning Organization (DMPO)
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Website: <http://www.utahunifiedplan.org/>
Cooperation Topic(s): Statewide Planning
Coordination Practice(s): Joint Planning Products
Cost Information: Agencies designate funding in budgets to support collaborative efforts; one agency hires the contractor; UTA contributes annual funding for joint corridor studies.

Competition between metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs), State departments of transportation (DOTs) and transit agencies can create inefficiencies in transportation planning, project prioritization, and funding. Conversely, collaboration between these agencies increases efficiency, encourages effective planning, and streamlines project delivery. Utah's four MPOs understand the value of collaboration. These MPOs know that planning and implementing transportation improvements cannot happen in a vacuum. In partnership with Utah DOT (UDOT) and Utah Transit Authority (UTA), Utah's MPOs integrated their Regional Transportation Plans (RTPs) into a [Unified Transportation Plan](#) for the entire State of Utah. They completed the [first Unified Plan in 2007](#), [the second in 2011](#), and the [most recent plan in 2015](#). The agencies adopted this collaborative approach to serve the public more effectively and efficiently. All of the partners recognize that the success of one transportation mode benefits all modes and the success of each individual MPO region benefits the entire State.

Motivation for Establishing the Collaboration

The four Utah MPOs have built strong relationships with UDOT and UTA over the years. Prior to the first Unified Plan in 2007, however, each had operated on different planning cycles, used different assumptions in their travel modeling, and did not have shared priorities for how to fund projects. The State Legislature requested that the MPOs work together to identify the highest priority projects, when they should be built, and how much it would cost. Wasatch Front Regional Council (WFRC); Mountainland Association of Governments (MAG), UDOT, and UTA entered into a [Memorandum of Understanding \(MOU\)](#) to create a Joint Policy Advisory Committee (JPAC) in response to the Legislature's request. JPAC provided a statewide forum for policymakers to discuss issues, resolve inconsistencies, and build consensus between the agencies. In 2007, the agencies updated the MOU to include the

other MPOs in Utah, Cache Metropolitan Planning Organization (CMPO); Dixie Metropolitan Planning Organization (DMPO). The MPOs began aligning their planning cycles, financial assumptions and modeling approaches through these cooperative efforts. They integrated their RTPs into the first Unified Transportation Plan in 2007. This enabled the partners to communicate the multi-modal transportation needs of the State in a consistent and unified way, helping to ensure taxpayer dollars are being used efficiently in meeting Utah's priority transportation needs.

Collaboration Structure and Process

To create the Unified Plan, JPAC formed a policy committee, a technical coordinating committee, and subcommittees on topics such as finance, safety, and data. These committees meet regularly to ensure that the agencies agree on the content of the Unified Plan. In addition to these formal committees, members of the participating agencies regularly and informally discuss issues that arise day-to-day.

The agencies share responsibility for coordinating the Unified Plan. UDOT organized meetings and led development of the 2011 Unified Plan, while WFRC coordinated the 2015 Unified Plan. To help with the 2011 Unified Plan, the partners hired a consultant to edit and design the document. For the 2015 update, the partners hired a financial consultant to further refine their joint financial model and a consultant to facilitate the establishment of shared performance measures.

WFRC maintains a joint travel demand model for the Ogden-Layton, Salt Lake-West Valley, and Provo-Orem Metropolitan areas. This model enables WFRC, MAG, UDOT, and UTA to use common assumptions and analytical platforms in their planning processes for the Wasatch Front region. UDOT coordinates the statewide transportation demand model and transportation forecasting model that integrates seamlessly with the MPOs' model.

The participating agencies designate funding in their respective budgets to support collaborative efforts like the Unified Plan. The partners jointly fund many planning projects, regardless of which agency hires the contractor. For example, UDOT, WFRC, and MAG helped to fund [UTA's First/Last Mile Strategy Study](#) because they understand that more efficient transit also relieves road traffic. Likewise, UTA contributes annual funding for [joint corridor studies](#) because of the benefits these studies provide to transit.

Takeaways

- Utah's four MPOs partnered with UDOT and UTA to integrate their RTPs into a Unified Transportation Plan for the entire State of Utah.
- UDOT, UTA, and four Utah MPOs formed JPAC, a statewide forum for the policy makers to discuss issues, resolve inconsistencies, and build the level of cooperation between the agencies.
- The agencies entered into a memorandum of agreement in 2014 to develop a Unified Transportation Plan Funding Model Update.
- Developing the Unified Plan has not only enabled each of the Utah MPOs to create better, more coordinated plans, but has also generated support for significant investment in transportation projects.
- The agencies put increased focus on (1) developing shared performance measures to evaluate the impacts and benefits of the plan and (2) enhancing financial analysis processes to evaluate the application of financial constraints and availability of revenues for their 2015 Unified Plan.
- A mix of formal and informal collaboration helps the partnership to be successful.

Collaboration Accomplishments

One of the most significant accomplishments of the Unified Plan has been that it clearly communicates to policymakers the transportation funding needs statewide. All of the transportation agencies agree on which projects are needed and are able to clearly articulate the benefits of implementing such projects to stakeholders. This has resulted in significant investment in transportation projects. Elected officials, businesses and community leaders feel more confident that transportation plans and projects have been analyzed and prudently prioritized. This effectively changed the conversation from one in which stakeholders ask, “Should this project be funded?” to one in which they ask, “*How* should this project be funded?” Over the past fifteen years, Utah has had the highest per-capita investment in public transportation of any State in the Nation. Utah has also recently completed a multi-billion dollar interstate reconstruction project that was funded entirely with State and local funding.

In addition to billions of dollars of investment, the collaborative partnership cultivated by Utah’s transportation agencies has allowed them to implement more active transportation projects. The Unified Plan provided the agencies in Utah with a network that transcends jurisdictional boundaries and allowed for the collaborative development of active transportation priorities. Now that they have reached agreement on priorities, there is an improved understanding regarding how to best incorporate active transportation facilities into current and future projects. UDOT and UTA have implemented policies that require staff to consider active transportation features in every stage of project delivery, from planning to implementation. Because providing active modes of transportation is seen as a public health benefit that can improve quality of life, elected officials and other community leaders have been very supportive of active transportation projects.

The transportation agencies in Utah were among the first in the country to develop RTPs compliant with the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient, Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users, leading to the development of the 2007 Unified Plan. By collaborating—even in instances in which it was not required—significant efficiencies and system performance improvements have been achieved. For example, the MPOs provided funding for UTA park and ride lots not only to reduce their own traffic volumes, but also to create efficiencies for UDOT and improve the flow of the overall transportation system. The MPOs also work simultaneously with UDOT and UTA on local corridor projects, rather than receiving input from each agency separately.

For its 2015 Unified Plan, the agencies increased their focus on two areas: (1) developing [shared performance measures](#) to evaluate the impacts and [benefits of the plan](#) and (2) enhancing financial analysis processes to evaluate the application of financial constraints and availability of revenues. The Utah MPOs wanted to set appropriate goals and measure progress toward achieving those goals. They identified key factors that cut across modes so that they could measure progress collectively for the entire system and not just for each mode separately. With the help of a consultant, they developed goals and objectives in light of Federal requirements and eventually

identified a set of performance measures that would be applicable to all agencies.

To enhance financial analysis and modeling processes, the Utah MPOs hired a municipal finance firm to evaluate revenue and expenditure projections over 25 years using sophisticated modeling techniques. Hiring financial experts to develop the funding model gave the product additional reliability and allowed policymakers to make more informed comparisons between potential projects in order to identify, prioritize, and fund needs. In 2014, they developed an MOA for a Unified Transportation Plan Funding Model Update (See Appendix).

In conjunction with the development of the 2015 Unified Plan, Utah's transportation agencies launched a Unified Plan website, utahunifiedplan.org. The website is compatible with mobile devices so anyone with a smartphone or tablet can find all of the projects planned in the State through the year 2040. The website has features such as an interactive map and searchable project database to increase transparency and accountability to the public. In addition, the website has allowed the MPOs to reflect amendments to their RTPs in real-time and allows features such as a public comment layer on the interactive map during public comment periods so stakeholders can add their voice to the process and selected projects.

The process behind the Unified Plan has strengthened relationships between the participating agencies at every level from design to engineering to construction and in both urban and rural jurisdictions. The agencies communicate frequently, through formal Unified Plan meetings that coincide with semi-monthly JPAC meetings as well as informally through a steady stream of phone calls and emails. The agencies have established a level of trust and developed a framework for collaborating on day-to-day work, which allows them to quickly address any multi-jurisdictional problems that arise, saving time and money for the State.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

The partners emphasize that they do not seek consensus on every point, but rather collaborate on shared goals and objectives. For instance, the MPOs decided to choose key performance measures, which include safety, economic vitality, state of good repair, air quality, and mobility and accessibility. All agencies agreed that these were measurable and useful, but they also maintained separate performance measures in their individual RTPs. This strategy allows each agency to retain individual autonomy while accommodating the unique needs posed by urban and rural jurisdictions.

The partner agencies acknowledge that creating the Unified Plan is made easier because the MPOs represent over 85 percent of the State's population, which reduces the complexity involved with interagency communication and cooperation. However, they have also learned that even in areas with a small number of agencies, successful collaboration requires each agency to relinquish the desire to lead and instead trust one another as equal partners

with shared credit for their accomplishments. Additionally, because of Utah's rapidly growing population (Utah is projected to nearly double in population by 2050) but geographically constrained landscape, developing a transportation system in which different modes complement and facilitate each other will be crucial to meeting the transportation needs of Utah's residents. The Utah MPOs will focus heavily on developing an integrated transportation system in their next Unified Plan, which will span from 2019 to 2050.

Viewing the transportation system as a whole that benefits from the improvement of each mode and region has enabled Utah's transportation agencies to create a single vision for the State's transportation infrastructure. Utah's Unified Transportation Plan has strengthened community trust (the public, business community, and elected officials) in the partner agencies' recommendations and led to unprecedented consensus on and investment in transportation projects across the State.

Additional Resources

- <http://www.utahunifiedplan.org/>
- 2014 MOA for Unified Transportation Plan Funding Model Update (see RMOCHandbook Appendix p. 59)
- [2004 MOU for Joint Policy Advisory Committee](#)