

**Coming of Age:  
The Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) and Regionalism**

NOTE: This Regionalist Paper matured and became the widely recognized Regional Structure Project Study Group Report SG3A: *Recommendations for the Hampton Roads MPO.*

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**I. Preface**

*“Responsible for planning and programming transportation investments, metropolitan planning organizations [MPOs] are the most widespread form of regional governance in the United States today”,.... Myron Orfield<sup>1</sup>.*

This is a very surprising message for many people, even among public administration and government leaders. Myron Orfield has become one of the nation’s most productive and most quoted practitioners on matters of local and regional governance in the nation today. He is an advocate of regionalism, but even he did not share this view some five years ago or earlier. In Hampton Roads, most citizens ask, even members of city councils and county boards of supervisors ask—what is it; what is this MPO?

One can talk about the MPO in two ways: (1) in the context of regionalism, for which the MPO has served as an invaluable precursor for substantial regional collaboration in certain metropolitan areas, and (2) in the context of transportation, for which the MPO is, indeed, definitely essential. In this paper, we will do both, and we will examine the roots, legal basis, structure, intergovernmental relationships, missions, evolution, and potential of the Hampton Roads Metropolitan Planning Organization. Coincidentally, this paper is being written (and read) as the Virginia General Assembly in its current 2006 session and our local leaders are faced with a massive transportation impasse, preventing a reasoned solution on how best to manage long term transportation investments. Recall this as you review the important details about the MPO that follow.

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<sup>1</sup> Myron Orfield, *American Metropolitcs: The New Suburban Reality*, (The Brookings Institution Press, Washington, D.C., 2002), p. 137

As with other MPOs in the United States, the Hampton Roads MPO is a federally mandated organization<sup>2</sup>. Designed to provide sorely-needed, metropolitan-level judgment to major transportation issues, it was created by local and state authorities in 1973. Drawing on lessons learned from other MPOs, this paper will argue that untapped opportunities exist that could be achieved with reform and modernization of the Hampton Roads MPO organization and that such reform would be of benefit to the communities of Hampton Roads and their elected leaders. We argue that such reform is essential to help fill the void in effective transportation planning that exists somewhere between the intent of federal dollars and the roads themselves, and that this reform would also contribute to the effectiveness of regional cooperation, and regionalism, itself. However, timing is everything, and as they say, “wine in its own time”. Nationwide, some MPOs have come of age, when for them, the time was right. Others will follow in their own time, either through planning, or in response to crisis.

Robert Puentes, also a nationally-recognized regionalist from Virginia Tech declares that “*Metropolitan areas, the engines of the American economy, require greater control over the transportation spending so crucial to their dynamism*”<sup>3</sup>. From his data collection and studies, he maintains that transportation has become a metropolitan matter. With the long term in mind, he strongly believes that decision-making at this level produces the most balanced and best results. This requires, of course, an effective metropolitan management structure, one authorized, able, and confident enough to work in a new metropolitan-way, and one that is able to cope with the time-honored old ways of doing things, or in short, able to stand up to and move beyond bureaucratic inertia.

Is it time for our Hampton Roads MPO to come of age, or, if not, when might that be? What is needed to energize an MPO organization? We will conclude this lengthy paper with important recommendations, but first, let’s fully review and understand the roots, objectives, and evolution of MPO organizations

## **II. Origins of the MPO**

Nationwide, Metropolitan Planning Organizations find their roots in the national Interstate Highway System started by President Eisenhower in 1956. Some fifteen years

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<sup>2</sup> Federal legislation, U.S Code Title 23, Highways, and U.S Code Title 49, Public Transportation, both identify the process of establishing MPO organizations: “... a Metropolitan Planning Organization shall be designated ... by agreement between the Governor and units of local government [cities and counties] ... in accordance with procedures established by applicable state or local law”.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Puentes and Linda Bailey, “*Improving Metropolitan Decision Making in Transportation: Greater Funding and Devolution for Greater Accountability*,” Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy, The Brookings Institution, Transportation Reform Series, (Washington, DC, 2003), p. 1

into this massive effort<sup>4</sup> and with well over fifty percent of the national highway network completed, it was time to re-address the planning and management procedures in place. Theretofore, and with at least some degree of urgency over the years, the building of highways was managed by civil engineers and transportation professionals. Brilliant to be sure, they were expert in all matters of road construction, and they had a get-the-job-done sense of determination. However, conflicts and infighting arose that needed attention. The “build-and-be-damned” approach had begun to put federal objectives in conflict with the ongoing community and economic development plans of both state and local governments, or it was sometimes seen as favoring certain localities over others. It was evident that local plans and voices needed to be acknowledged. The federal government could not serve as an arbiter among neighboring localities being impacted, whether favorably or unfavorably, by projected new federal highways.

In an effort to generate better local, regional, and state coordination, the Federal Highway Act of 1973 required that metropolitan areas of sufficiently large size establish a Metropolitan Planning Organization that would review and comment on all transportation plans, normally state-developed, in their metropolitan area. This was not an option; this was obligatory. In passing such legislation, Congress was encouraging regional cooperation. They were fully aware that the construction of interstate highways across the nation’s open spaces (building the arteries) was largely completed and that construction issues were now more focused on interfacing these highways with urban or metropolitan centers (building the connectors). With the Interstate System soon to be finished (except for lifetime maintenance), this was the very beginning of “devolving” the essence of road and transportation responsibilities from the federal level down to government levels that would best manage the attendant issues. For scores of reasons, the need for this devolution process and the process itself have grown, and this will not be stopped or reversed. As we shall see, implementation of this MPO legislation around the country has varied widely with an instructive range of successes and failures. The most recent federal transportation legislation<sup>5</sup> was passed just last August 2005 with a required implementation date of not later than July 2007. This means the process will continue with yet new mandated requirements and—yes, with new opportunities for MPO organizations.

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<sup>4</sup> The federal interstate highways program was the largest public works project in U.S. history

<sup>5</sup> Congress approved the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) on August 10, 2005, to be implemented by individual states no later than July 1, 2007. For the years 2004-2009, this legislation increased funding for highways by 5% and transit by 16%. Hereafter, in this Paper, we will use the abbreviated SAFETEA acronym when describing this legislation.

The initial 1973 legislation requiring the creation of MPO organizations may have been visionary, but it was woefully short on specifics. It seemed to be an idea pointing the way toward future management methods rather than legislation describing required actions. As their first-assigned tasks, MPOs were required to develop (1) an annual Unified Planning Work Plan (UPWP), essentially an agenda of its planning activities; (2) a Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP); and (3) a short term regional Transportation Improvement Plan (TIP), a prioritized plan of the transportation projects that would be listed in near term grant proposals and budget plans. The legislation provided a transition period for metropolitan areas to create their respective MPOs and for them to attain the ability to accomplish these functions. Importantly, the legislation also provided a small amount of annual funding to be drawn from the national Highway Trust Fund (based primarily on a population-driven formula) for MPO administrative costs and to support the work required to stir genuine regional cooperation in assessing needs and creating the required plans. Still, the legislation in those early days was weak in terms of defining the MPO organization, its membership, its voting policies, and other structural arrangements. Only a few MPO organizations thrived across the 1970s and early 1980s; some proved modestly useful; and many remained invisible to the public eye and, thus, had not developed useful public support. Starting in 1991, however, at least for many MPO organizations, this abruptly changed.

### **III. The Maturing of MPO organizations**

For matters of transportation, the federal highway legislation of 1991 ushered in a significant new era when Congress passed the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA). This was followed with the Transportation Equity Act for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (TEA-21) in 1998 and as noted earlier, by the subsequent Safe, Accountable, Flexible, and Efficient Transportation Equity Act (SAFETEA), approved by Congress last year in August 2005.

The fourteen year legacy of the ISTEA and TEA-21 and their periodic Re-Authorization Acts was substantial. The interstate highway legislation was transformed profoundly from a “highways” program (roads) to a “transportation” program (multi-modal) and from a program “to move vehicles” to a program “to move people and goods”. ISTEA, especially, started the process of sub-allocating funds and decision-making down to the metro level. ISTEA also started the process of granting new levels of flexibility to metro leaders as concerns their spending decisions—they could transfer funds either way between the federal highway and federal transit accounts as needed in order to develop transportation plans with the optimum mix of roads and public transportation projects for their metropolitan area. In addition, and as further described

later in this paper, ISTEA and TEA-21 transformed transportation planning and management from a “single discipline” (engineering) to a “multidiscipline” set of issues, now involving matters of public governance. This is hugely important. In essence, transportation as an issue was “devolving” down from the federal level and “transforming” itself, both at the same time. Necessarily, the role and expectation of MPO-driven decision making had to and was expanded in these legislative acts.

ISTEA provided incentives for and required that “public transit” be as comprehensively addressed as roads and highways themselves, bringing mass (or public) transit and all forms of alternative transportation to the forefront to be an integral part of MPO-approved regional transportation plans and their cost-benefit analyses. In addition, ISTEA in 1991 required MPOs to manage a comprehensive public affairs program to assure transparency of their decision-making processes and to broadly inform their regional citizens. TEA-21 expanded this requirement in 1998 to include the requirement for a formal public participation process<sup>6</sup> and to elevate procedures enabling accessibility of planning information to the public.

To bring actions and hope closer to the everyday issues of municipal leaders, ISTEA inaugurated, provided set-aside funding for, and required MPOs to develop a congestion management program as an adjunct to MPO plans. Recognizing that vehicular traffic is the largest single source of regional pollution; that traffic congestion is a major source of such pollution; and that congestion was the primary irritant of today’s commuters and their leaders, this congestion management program was a win-win-win concept. On at least this matter, it definitely devolved authority down to the metropolitan level, where it belonged. It empowered MPO structures thus assisting in their development and in their relevance to the public, and it addressed EPA environmental mandates. Further on the environmental front, both legislative acts required that regional LRTP and TIP transportation plans “conform” to other regional Air Quality maintenance plans, required by the federal Clean Air Act, especially stringent if one’s metropolitan area is designated as a “non-attainment” area as is the case for Hampton Roads<sup>7</sup>. It was the MPOs who were charged with the responsibility of ensuring “conformity compliance”<sup>8</sup> of regional transportation plans with the region’s current and projected air

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<sup>6</sup> Public participation quote

<sup>7</sup> The EPA designated Hampton Roads as an 8-hour ozone non-attainment area on June 15, 2004, as reported in the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) Report to the Governor and General Assembly, dated October 15, 2005. Some so-designated areas in Virginia were at levels low enough for them to engage in Early Action Compacts, delaying their effective date of non-attainment and giving them time to effect local corrections; this did not apply to Hampton Roads.

<sup>8</sup> Conformity requirements have grown. Initially, the business of MPOs was transportation (road projects). Both the Clean Air Act (CAA) and National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) of the 70s and 80s

quality management programs. In short the federal government intended to terminate its funding for roads that begot pollution, on the one hand, while simultaneously funding environmental projects designed to curb pollution, on the other hand. Air quality management had long been a regional project, and only at the metropolitan or MPO level could both transportation and transportation-induced pollution be effectively managed.

More broadly and perhaps more importantly, the transformation of transportation issues to the need for ‘multidisciplinary’ management was also at the core of ISTEA and TEA-21 legislation. Metropolitan transportation plans now had to show there was “no disproportionate impact on low income or minority populations”<sup>9</sup> in their metropolitan area. MPO leaders had to consider both community development and regional economic development plans to ensure their transportation investment plans would be consistent with these endeavors. Given that the growing array of new roads had led to extended suburban distances and to dispersed office and industrial parks, the region’s workforce, and thus the region’s economy, was being impacted by transportation decisions. Stated as an expression of the sense of the Congress, transportation projects were linked to the needs of the general workforce, low income and disabled persons, and economic development. Accordingly, ISTEA and TEA-21 included requirements that concepts such as reverse-commuting<sup>10</sup>, traffic monitoring, access-to-jobs projects, and public transit be examined and included in the decision-making and project selection process for transportation planning. As a remarkable measure of devolving authority downward, ISTEA and TEA-21 permitted a significant fraction of highway funds to be spent for either transportation or transit projects, a first-ever, new degree of flexibility with transportation funds that gave credence to federal intent to address all modes of transportation, no longer just highways. TEA-21 legislation added the authority for intermodal connector projects to be included among the transportation projects to be funded by national highway system funds. Again, the federal government intended to terminate its funding for roads that complicated the travel of workers from low income areas on the one hand, while simultaneously funding welfare-to-work programs designed to assist the workforce on the other hand.

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linked pollution to roads. These acts required regional environmental plans, including limitations and fines on non-supporting construction and manufacturing operations. For the first time, ISTEA clearly demanded documentation showing that road construction and road end results conform to these regional environmental plans before regional transportation projects were evaluated for funding. Non-conformance meant no funding. The notion of “conformity”, perhaps with less stringent requirements, has extended itself to requiring that MPO decisions consider and conform to existing regional economic development and all sorts of other regional community development plans as well (workforce development, health, etc.)

<sup>9</sup> Impact on low economy

<sup>10</sup> Reverse commute is the concept of paying particular attention to commuting needs from urbanized areas (not just center cities) to suburban employment locations.

In sum, and when viewing transportation as a means of communications, transportation-related decisions were to be based on a mixture of economic, social, workforce, and environmental requirements as well as on matters of civil engineering. Once requiring only a unitary road-construction mindset, transportation planning and the tasks of the MPO had become an effort truly requiring a ‘multidisciplinary’ mindset.

Since 1991 also, and in order to support the foregoing, the definitions and authorities of MPO organizations were gradually clarified. There are two levels of MPOs, the first for urbanized areas of greater than 50,000 people, and the second, also called Transportation Management Areas (TMA), for urbanized areas of greater than 200,000 people. ISTEA and TEA-21 legislation provided broader authorities, substantially increased funding opportunities, and levied more demanding requirements upon the larger TMA-level MPOs. Hampton Roads is a TMA-level MPO, one of four in Virginia<sup>11</sup>. For the first time, guidance was provided describing MPO membership and voting rights. For the larger MPOs, the voting membership is defined as the MPO Policy Board, and it had to be composed of (a) publicly-elected representatives from each of the participant city and county governments<sup>12</sup>, (b) a representative from the state transportation department (VDOT in our case), and (c) a representative from any formally established local public transit authority boards<sup>13</sup>. A representative from the regional Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) office and from the regional Federal Transit Administration (FTA) office were designated as required non-voting, advisory members of the MPO, and MPOs were encouraged to enlist additional local non-voting, advisory members of the MPO organization to assist with broadening its expertise and with public participation programs.

ISTEA and TEA-21 provided more stringent requirements for metropolitan transportation planning. The goals went beyond the 1973 level of fostering collegial regional cooperation which was useful but which far too often produced only a wish-list compilation of transportation projects on a full consensus basis (something for everybody). From now on, transportation plans had to be “fiscally constrained”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The four TMA-level MPOs in Virginia are Hampton Roads, Northern Virginia, the Fredericksburg Area, and the Roanoke Valley. Virginia has ten other smaller MPOs.

<sup>12</sup> Smaller MPOs required only a representative from city and county governments, not necessarily a publicly-elected person.

<sup>13</sup> The Transportation District Commission of Hampton Roads and James City County Transit are the two public transit authorities that are represented on the Hampton Roads MPO Policy Board.

<sup>14</sup> Strongly worded and starting with ISTEA, this fiscally-constrained requirement was an important new requirement. Always hard to change ongoing procedures, state and MPO responses varied. Some MPOs re-titled their LRTPs and TIPs to be CLRTPs and CTIPs (C for constrained) to get across the idea for staffers and for the public that fiscal realism was required, and for grant reviewers, that it was done.

meaning that the short term TIP plan had to include complete data displays showing the sources and timing of funds available for these projects. This funding information was not to serve as a mechanism to place pressure on state or federal authorities (which was a phase that some MPOs went through, and some still do); it had to depict “reasonably expected” funding streams for these projects. The legislation called for practical and fiscal realism in the planning process, nothing less.

That transportation plans now had to be consistent with, and conform to, economic, social, environmental and other plans is an end result fitting for the now defined concept of requiring publicly-elected representatives to be the voting members of the MPO Policy Boards. Requiring publicly-elected persons to be the voting board members provided the legitimacy necessary for such broad responsibilities. Often, around the country, these representatives are the Mayors and Chairs themselves of the participant municipalities who are the members of the MPO Policy Board. In any case, persons publicly-elected to government positions are, by definition, the generalist and ‘multidisciplinary’ leaders that are required on MPO Policy Boards.

Collectively, these management expectations from nascent MPO organizations were formidable, and this was recognized soon after the inception of ISTEA requirements. In the mid-1990s, the FHWA and FTA combined efforts and developed a Transportation Planning Capacity Building (TPCB) program<sup>15</sup>. This still ongoing and useful program has its own website, produces training curricula for local use, and conducts executive and technical training programs, including seminars on the legal basis and authorities of MPO organizations, how to conduct MPO business effectively, and how to productively manage working relationships with state DOT and federal FHWA and FTA authorities<sup>16</sup>. Building the “capacity”, both administrative and technical, of MPO organizations, including basic staffing, has been a long term challenge nationwide. The TPCB program and a new requirement that the larger TMA-level MPOs be certified by FHWA each five years were two efforts designed to promote the entrepreneurial effectiveness of MPO organizations.

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<sup>15</sup> This program was inspired by U.S Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Affairs (ACIR), Report A-130, *MPO Capacity: Improving the Capacity of Metropolitan Planning Organizations to Help Implement National Transportation Policies*, Washington, DC, May 1995. The TPCB website is [www.planning.gov](http://www.planning.gov)

<sup>16</sup> The national Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations (AMPO) also offers MPO training seminars.

#### IV. Funding MPO organizations

Funding is always a key parameter. Before 1973, all federal transportation funding was passed directly to the states and was managed by their individual state Departments of Transportation (DOTs). After 1973, only small funding sums were passed (via states) to MPO organizations to support their planning processes and for administrative purposes. This has slowly and steadily expanded with some funds, since ISTEA, to be expended only at the metro level. The most recent legislation, SAFETEA, appropriates \$268B for transportation and transit, of which an estimated 7% to 12%<sup>17</sup> impacts metropolitan, not state or federal, projects. Based on today's legislation, there are five core programs for which the larger TMA-level MPOs can directly obtain federal funds or for which MPO approval is required in order to expense federal funds for projects in their metropolitan areas. Let's briefly examine these five program elements (PL, CMAQ, STP, 5303, and TE):

PL – MPO Planning funds: This was the original single source of federal funds for MPOs dating back to 1973. Nationwide, it amounted to an approximate 1% take-down from the total core federal funding of all transportation programs provided to any state to be re-distributed by the state to all MPOs primarily on the basis of population<sup>18</sup>. The most recent 2005 SAFETEA legislation has increased that sum to a new 1.25%<sup>19</sup> take-down of these federal dollars. This legislation also imposed a new requirement upon states to reimburse subject MPO invoices within thirty days. These are MPO dollars.

CMAQ – Congestion Management and Air Quality funds: This is, since 1991, one of the newer sources of dollars potentially available to the larger TMA-level MPOs. Nationwide, it amounts to about 5.8% (2003 figure) of the total federal dollars spent on transportation in any state. Its implementing legislation permits states to sub-allocate these funds directly to MPO organizations. Twenty six states do sub-allocate these dollars, and fortunately Virginia is listed as one of those states. CMAQ dollars, however, are actually expensed at the state level, based on MPO-approved projects and their related contracts, meaning that MPO-VDOT negotiation is required. In an effort to measure state performance and their support for congestion management programs, one national

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<sup>17</sup> Puentes, p. 5

<sup>18</sup> In addition to population, the funding allocations for certain transportation projects may be based on highway death rates, bridge repair arrears, security threats, low income population densities, or other factors, a trend that also needs multidisciplinary and metropolitan levels of thinking.

<sup>19</sup> Amidst recent Congressional debate and with the idea of further strengthening MPO capacity and to speed the devolution of transportation decisions, proponents sought to increase this take-down to 2.0%, an idea likely to recur in the future.

report has listed Virginia as ranking 45<sup>th</sup> in the nation<sup>20</sup> in obligating the CMAQ-eligible funds that are available. Whether for valid reasons or not, several state DOTs still manage to overspend on highways, an area historically comfortable for them; and they use their under-spent metropolitan congestion management funds to cover the deficit, a loop hole that MPOs and regionalist organizations<sup>21</sup> are trying to close. Statistics from the Planning District Commission indicate that Hampton Roads has done well with its CMAQ projects and is a model for other MPO efforts across the state. Nonetheless, additional well developed, politically well-endorsed, and MPO-led CMAQ project recommendations that guide VDOT toward policies and discipline that use increased amounts of these CMAQ-eligible dollars at the metropolitan level would invariably improve our region's congestion challenges.

STP – Surface Transportation Program: This represents the largest dollar value impact opportunity that is potentially available to MPO organizations. STP is the largest (24%) of the total federal transportation programs. This funding is divided 7.3% to states, 5.8% to large MPOs, 6.0% to rural and small MPOs, 2.4% to traffic safety, and 2.4% to transportation enhancement projects<sup>22</sup>. All funds go to the states. States are permitted to directly sub-allocate these dollars to the TMA-level MPOs. Virginia does not, but it should. Other federal program funds cover national and interstate highway projects. STP dollars are especially important to metropolitan areas since they provide funds for other primary and secondary road systems, road connectors, intermodal connectors, and road maintenance projects. STP funds are further unique in that this is where the authority for MPOs to flex dollars to transit projects is possible. On this latter topic, Virginia ranks fifth in the nation in its flexing of STP-eligible funds to transit<sup>23</sup>, thanks especially to rail projects in Northern Virginia and bus projects in Hampton Roads. The most recent SAFETEA legislation has increased the sums available to the STP program which suggests that future MPO opportunities in the important STP domain are abundant.

5303 – Public transportation funds: This is an FTA source of funds designed to support the planning and programming of any and all forms of mass or public transportation. In the U.S. Code, Title 49 (Transportation), Chapter 53 (Mass Transportation), Section 5303 (Metropolitan Planning) refers.

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<sup>20</sup> Surface transportation Policy Project: Decoding Transportation Policy & Practice #7, *The CMAQ Program: Funding Clean Air*, Washington, D.C, www.transact.org, January 2003

<sup>21</sup> The Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations (AMPO) is a transportation advocate for metropolitan regions and is one such lobbyist group. Their website, www.ampo.org, and their quarterly newsletter, *Metros*, are informative on these matters.

<sup>22</sup> Puentes, p. 4; these are 2003 STP distribution figures

<sup>23</sup> Puentes, p. 13.

TE – Transportation Enhancement: This is a relatively small transportation program, but one of particular relevance at the metropolitan, and even the community level. Legislation permits these funds, 2.4% of the total federal transportation budget, to be directly sub-allocated to MPOs. Ten states do so; Virginia does not. Transportation enhancement projects include those that improve upon the adverse impacts of major road projects on people and communities, such as historic preservation, scenic beautification, some transit programs, and pedestrian improvements. Most observers judge that metropolitan level decision-making and management of TE projects would yield the best results. This program element should be managed at the metro level by MPOs.

## **V. Challenges and Resistance Faced by MPO organizations**

Even with this broad trend of change, it is important to recognize that federal legislation emphasized that states remain the dominant force in transportation planning and management. State funding for transportation and transit is roughly equal to federal levels of funding; indeed, many projects are based on matching funds. States fund and manage nearly everything in rural areas. The years of federal legislation have always underscored this reality of state preeminence while at the same time trying to force<sup>24</sup> movement toward the imperatives of regional input and regional decision-making.

In any large management structure such as the realm of transportation, change is hard; there are multiple difficulties; and it takes time for such large structures to adjust course. While pointing no fingers, we need to review and understand these difficulties, or, if not, our region and its Hampton Roads MPO will be slow to come of age. Most of the difficulties were rather predictable, and they exist at both the state and local levels.

### At the state level:

State DOTs fear losing control of operations and of dollars. They fear being bypassed. They have structures and processes in place, so why change? They fear disruption. They already have a system of regional districts that happens to differ from that described by MPOs and their defined Transportation Management Area (TMA) boundaries. They have a time-honored state transportation board. In Virginia, this is the Commonwealth Transportation Board (CTB) appointed by the Governor to make transportation plan decisions. There are no metropolitan governance structures in place,

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<sup>24</sup> Curtis Johnson and Neal Peirce describe Federal Intervention Forcing Change in *Regionalism Today: Risks, Rewards and Unresolved Questions*, a policy paper for the John D. and Catherine T. Mac Arthur Foundation, January 2004, p. 10.

so how can all of this be resolved? For decades, state DOTs have “operated” the road systems, and it is not intended that the MPOs become “operators”.

At the crux of the matter, many state DOTs are simply behind philosophically. They have not adjusted to the evolved ‘multidisciplinary’ planning mindset that has become essential to effective transportation planning. Virginia is one of those states, for example, that has not embraced the MPO process, even for its own purposes, to help with its own self-reform efforts and to modernize, or just to gain assistance. Several states openly acknowledge their MPOs on their state DOT websites; Virginia does not. Several state DOTs provide comprehensive summaries of the opportunities and tasks for their states that stem from the latest federal transportation bills on their websites as a way of assisting metropolitan planners and of informing the public; VDOT does not.

At a more subjective level, in Virginia (and in some other states as well) there has been an historic distrust of local governments at the state level. This may stem from the days of Thomas Jefferson and his policy bias favoring rural communities. Or, it may be the legacy of Governor Harry Flood Byrd, Sr. who took (the then needed) sweeping measures in the late 1920s to centralize government functions at the state level. Some suggest the Dillon Rule<sup>25</sup> is the root cause of, and perpetuates this attitude. Others claim that Hampton Roads simply has no effective legislative caucus or voice in Richmond. Whatever the reason, this is a huge obstacle for any regional transportation or other regional endeavors. These subjective root causes must be addressed in any pursuit of regional development.

Virginia has not publicly, nor formally (in the Virginia Code) designated the Hampton Roads MPO as an instrument of governance as suggested in federal legislation. By a VDOT letter to FHWA and the FTA, Virginia did designate the Hampton Roads MPO as the entity required by federal legislation. This less than public or formal support has lessened the legitimacy that the MPO might otherwise have. No doubt, after some thirty years, this important organization should be better supported. The MPO Charter needs to be updated; it should be signed by each participating city and county government as suggested in federal legislation, and then the state should publicly re-designate the Hampton Roads MPO organization.

In a related, new trend in some states, transportation decisions are appearing more often on the public ballot<sup>26</sup> around the country; they are too hard for the state DOTs. In

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<sup>25</sup> See Regionalist Paper No.14, *Regionalism: Does the Dillon Rule help or Hinder Metropolitan Progress?*

<sup>26</sup> The American Association of State Highway and transportation Officials (ASSHTO) issued a government affairs alert in November 2002 noting that transportation-related referenda had dramatically

some states, legislators or transportation boards are earmarking transportation projects in budgets as a (wrong) way of making transportation decisions.

At the local level:

In the nation's various metropolitan areas, there has been a different, but still predictable, list of difficulties that complicated the initial 1973 formation and the subsequent development of MPO organizations. In many localities, there were metropolitan or regional organizations already in place, created for different or broader reasons than transportation alone, and these localities were reluctant to add new structures for this purpose. This was the case in Hampton Roads, where the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission (PDC) had been created just four years earlier in 1969 and was seen by all as a promising new regional entity.

Lacking state direction or any evidence of state interest in the MPO, or perhaps for other reasons, the easiest thing to do was to merge the PDC and MPO missions, even though their sources of authority and their charters were quite different.

Around the country, some pre-existing metropolitan Councils of Government (COGs)<sup>27</sup> or PDCs had evolved further than others in their processes of regional decision-making. They had tamed the otherwise dominant forces of inter-local competition; there was public awareness and support for advancing certain regional matters; and final decisions were supported by all. The level of such progress is very germane to the functioning of the MPO, in that MPOs are obligatory organizations that must make transportation, transit, and environmental decisions, often tough (fiscally constrained) decisions, even if these are not full-consensus decisions. Given their mission to serve as a forum for ideas, most COGs or PDCs are not required or allowed to make binding majoritarian decisions. Thus an MPO attribute is potentially lost—the requirement and the authority to make binding decisions short of unanimity, when required. For metropolitan transportation investment plans, inter-local competitiveness could not be allowed to water down the decision making process. Instead local leaders needed the coherent and visible leverage the MPO process provided in order to be successful in advancing their transportation plans at the state level. Some MPOs could handle this;

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increased from 11 in 2002 to at least 41 in 2003. In one way or another (taxes, bonds, tolls) nearly all were seeking approval for funding for either or both roads and transit projects.

<sup>27</sup> Starting in the mid-60s, federal housing and other legislation prompted the formation of Councils of Government (COGs) comprised of two or more local governments who would cooperate on project proposals as a necessary precursor for major grant awards. Nearly 500 COGs were so formed, many of which became PDCs. Nearly all MPOs got started thanks to staff, office, phone, or other assistance from local COGs, PDCs, or state DOT regional offices, before becoming MPO entities themselves.

some learned later to do so; and some still strive for that capability. On a lesser matter, the fact that Virginia MPOs were not authorized to issue contracts stopped their early day ability to function. This authority, of course, was essential, and this was later corrected<sup>28</sup>.

## **VI. The MPO in Hampton Roads**

Based upon the research conducted in preparing this paper, one concludes that the Hampton Roads MPO is ineffective, perhaps broken, but still revivable. At least, the record of performance is checkered. One measure of any organization relates to the effectiveness of its relationships<sup>29</sup> to other organizations and how it shares responsibilities with other sources of authority. The current 2006 General Assembly transportation impasse unfortunately shows no VDOT-MPO teamwork, no MPO-legislative caucus common point of view, and no MPO-General Assembly path of communications. These relationships, of course, require a great deal of work, and they must to be cultivated well before they are needed. None of this has happened, but why, and does it matter?

Obviously, in the beginning, the challenges were many in 1973. Nonetheless, Hampton Roads formed two MPOs—the Southeastern Virginia MPO and the Virginia Peninsula MPO. In 1990, at the request of local officials and with federal government approval, these were merged into the current-day single Hampton Roads MPO. Seemingly with vision, this merger occurred one year before the ISTEA federal legislation of 1991 which significantly elevated the role of MPO organizations. Faced with the difficulties cited earlier, however, this merger in 1990 did not lead to a visible or robust maturation of the Hampton Roads MPO organization. In 1992, the local MPO boundaries were expanded to include Isle of Wight County and the town of Smithfield, a minor adjustment. In 1996, a new planning agreement was executed by VDOT and forwarded to federal authorities, “...identifying the roles and responsibilities of cooperatively conducting the metropolitan planning and programming process...”, but this document was not signed by each of the participating cities and counties, and its text was (and remains) sparse and insufficient in describing responsibilities.

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<sup>28</sup> Code of Virginia, Section §33.1-23.03.01, “Distribution of certain funds: Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) ... shall be authorized to issue contracts for studies and to develop and approve transportation plans and improvement programs to the full extent permitted by law”.

<sup>29</sup> In advancing its plans to build a regional support structure for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the report from one of its major planning councils urged a system that acknowledged the importance of and measured working relationships at the regional level, *Advancing the Management of Homeland Security: Managing Intergovernmental Relations for Homeland Security*, National Academy of Public Administration, February, 2004.

Today, the Hampton Roads MPO remains entirely supported by and dependent upon the PDC.<sup>30</sup> The MPO agreement identifies the PDC as the staff of the MPO<sup>31</sup>. The PDC provides administrative and financial management services to the MPO. The PDC's Transportation Department with its professional planners serves as the MPO's Technical Advisory Committee, conducting data collection and research, and developing recommendations for transportation plans and options for MPO review, prioritization, and approval. The PDC executive director serves also as the MPO executive director. The Hampton Roads MPO does not have its own public affairs program, its own staff, or its own financial management process. In effect, here in Hampton Roads, the functions and the funds of the PDC and the MPO are entirely co-mingled. In such a situation and with indifference at the state level, the potential of the MPO is constrained, if not smothered.

There is no doubt that the Hampton Roads PDC provides excellent administrative support and drafts some of the more comprehensive transportation plan proposals in the state. The PDC reliably posts MPO meeting agendas and minutes as well as the MPO-approved TIPs and LRTPs on its own website for public perusal. This is useful, and these and other PDC-provided values must be entirely sustained. Today, it is the strength of PDC administrative and technical support that keeps the MPO process afloat in Hampton Roads. On the other hand, the Hampton Roads MPO is not "all that it could be".

Pursuant to its charter and mission, the PDC is a forum, tasked with planning and research functions and specifically not permitted to act collectively upon or execute its decisions, a constraint it fully honors. Rather those decisions are passed back to the respective communities for review and action. The PDC is not charged to make the decisions vested in the MPO. The current process wherein the PDC ratifies the monthly decisions of the MPO should be reversed to reflect the flows of authority from relevant state and federal legislation.

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<sup>30</sup> One must note that the HRPDC, a state-created political sub-division has its own charter and mission and is quite busy in its own right. See Regionalist Paper No. 3, *Understanding the Regional Organizations in Hampton Roads Today: Contemporary Regionalism and Where We Stand in the Process*, for a description of the HRPDC and its functions.

<sup>31</sup> The Agreement for cooperatively conducting the metropolitan planning and programming process in the Norfolk-Virginia Beach-Newport News urbanized area, dated October 25, 1996.

The Fredericksburg Area MPO (FAMPO) has its own website<sup>32</sup>; we do not. On their websites, the Thomas Jefferson PDC (Charlottesville and four neighboring counties) and the Roanoke Valley-Alleghany PDC<sup>33</sup> post their respective MPO information in a fashion that elevates the importance and the authority of the MPO and that segregates PDC and MPO materials rather than blurring the two. Across the country, many MPOs have their own websites. A new MPO was formed in Dover, DE in 1990 which like so many others was launched with the help of its regional PDC. Within a year, the Dover-Kent County MPO hired its own executive director. Five years later, its staff grew to three persons, and it began to manage its own finances. At the ten year point, the Dover MPO hired its fourth employee, all the while depending upon its regional PDC, under contract, to provide the Technical Advisory Committee services needed<sup>34</sup>. Debates preceded this fourth hiring—hire a planner, which was obviously needed, or hire a public affairs person? This concluded with the hiring of the PR person. When asked recently if this was a good call, the response was overwhelmingly affirmative. With an Executive Director to keep track of federal policies and available funding streams, and with one administrator, one planner, and contracts for technical support, they realized they were not doing the federally required public outreach and public participation programs needed to help the various mayors gain public awareness and support. They also sought to conduct similar regional-level outreach with state legislators and the business community.

With roughly 120 TMA-level MPOs (and about 360 total MPOs) around the country, there are countless lessons learned to draw upon about the staffing, structure, and day-to-day operations of MPOs. For some, clarifying the different purposes and authority, or, otherwise separating the PDC and the MPO may amount to layering and more cost or complexity; for others the whole topic may seem to be simply bureaucratic and not worth the worry. But, it has to be that something tangible is lost when such disparate functions, tasked by different authorizing sources are merged. To some degree, that something includes the loss of an effective regional voice and the loss of leverage in Richmond. In contrast, having the clout that comes with delivering locally-developed decisions on a bloc (metropolitan) basis would more likely gain VDOT and legislative attention, thereby gaining fair share funding and gaining better transportation, transit, and environmental management in the long run.

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<sup>32</sup> Visit [www.planning.dot.gov/Documents/CaseStudy/Fredericksburg2rmm/Fredericksburg2rmm.htm](http://www.planning.dot.gov/Documents/CaseStudy/Fredericksburg2rmm/Fredericksburg2rmm.htm) to view the FHWA Case Study of the Fredericksburg Area MPO, and visit <http://www.fampo.state.va.us/> to find their website

<sup>33</sup> The Roanoke Valley-Alleghany Regional Commission website is <http://www.rvarc.org/>

<sup>34</sup> Visit [www.planning.dot.gov/Documents/CaseStudy/DoverKent2/doverkent2.htm](http://www.planning.dot.gov/Documents/CaseStudy/DoverKent2/doverkent2.htm) to view the FHWA Dover-Kent County MPO Case Study

## VII. Opportunities At Hand for the Future of MPO organizations

MPOs have served as an invaluable precursor to regional progress and as a beneficial test bed for regional management, or as Myron Orfield has noted, they “are the most widespread form of regional governance in the United States today”<sup>35</sup>. He is not alone in this regard, Weiss<sup>36</sup> asserts that MPOs are at the root of the “resurgence” of regionalism in the United States, and Johnson<sup>37</sup> refers to MPOs as “the narrow slice of regional government [already] operating in many metropolitan areas largely unnoticed by the public”. However, this level of MPO maturity does not exist everywhere.

Nationwide, many metropolitan areas found strength in and exploited their MPO authority and requirement to make binding decisions that prioritized and approved transportation projects, based upon multidisciplinary reviews as described earlier. They did this in order to have a coherent regional voice on transportation matters and to achieve support and success at the state level. This process, in time, inspired regional cooperation on any number of different matters other than transportation. They had broken the barriers to collective action where needed on important large scale issues while maintaining their independent city and county government structures. By not having an independent and effective MPO, one misses the opportunity to use it as an instrument fostering regional cooperation. As for transportation matters, without the visible and collective voice of the MPO and the weight that it could carry cities and counties are urged instead, in a more fragmented process, to independently lobby state legislators. Before the current transportation impasse, in October 2005, the Charlottesville-Albemarle MPO sent an MPO letter<sup>38</sup> outlining their plans to the Virginia Commonwealth Transportation Board as an aid for them and for legislators before the coming congressional session. The Hampton Roads MPO opted to send individual letters, perhaps for valid reasons, but this seems to be a fragmented approach, rather than a coherent effort.

In this same Charlottesville-Albemarle MPO letter and referring to two VDOT-announced road projects, they complained about the lack of state coordination in that “this unilateral selection of projects announced by the VDOT staff to the CTB for

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<sup>35</sup> Myron Orfield, *American Metropolitanities: The New Suburban Reality*, (The Brookings Institution Press, Washington, D.C., 2002), p. 137

<sup>36</sup> Marc A. Weiss, *Metropolitan Governance and Strategic Planning in the U.S.*, a report to the Metropolitan Strategic Plan Association of Barcelona

<sup>37</sup> Curtis Johnson and Neal Peirce, *Regionalism Today: Risks, Rewards and Unresolved Questions*, a policy paper for the John D. and Catherine T. Mac Arthur Foundation, January 2004, p. 9.

<sup>38</sup> Charlottesville-Albemarle Metropolitan Planning Organization *MPO Statement to the Commonwealth Transportation Board*, October 18, 2005.

inclusion in next year's funding program—without consulting the MPO or localities—is completely counter to ... federal regulations on transportation funding allocation”<sup>39</sup>.

Nationwide, some MPOs have become forceful and visionary regional policy-making bodies in their respective metropolitan areas. They coordinate well with and work side-by-side with previously established regional entities. With Governor designations, as suggested in federal legislation, and in some cases with referenda-approved charters, a few have been assigned authority and responsibilities for government functions beyond that of transportation planning alone, for example, for regional land-use policies, disaster preparedness and response, or others. Twin Cities Metro in Minnesota and the Portland Metro in Oregon, though quite different, are often cited as two of the most advanced regional cooperation structures in the country. These organizations both credit their nascent MPO organizations of years ago as being instrumental in starting their broader regional governance and growth management organizations. One married long term land-use issues with transportation, the other married broader environmental projects with transportation, and then they grew to become the regional entities they are today, each with broad, yet bounded, charters for community and economic development matters. In these cases, the MPO continues to live as a formal small piece within the Metro bodies.

Running an effective MPO becomes a source of momentum for both planned and unforeseen opportunities. In a separate field of federal funding, Homeland Security grants during the years after 9-11 primarily went to high population urbanized areas. Minneapolis and Saint Paul were viewed as individual cities and did not receive grants. Likewise, the cities of Hampton Roads were viewed individually and did not receive grants. Minnesota and the Twin Cities, both experienced and supportive of regional projects, lobbied successfully, and the Twin Cities Metro organization now receives annual homeland security grants. Such momentum does not exist in Virginia or Hampton Roads. For this and for other reasons, we are leaving money on the table. One advisor has calculated that Hampton Roads has lost over \$80 million in homeland security grants<sup>40</sup>, which it would have earned, if viewed as a region. Similarly, we are leaving transportation dollars on the table, first, as suggested in the discussion of transportation program elements described earlier in this paper, and second, about \$64 million in federal

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Joseph F. Bouchard, *Assessment of Changes to the Urban Area Security Initiative Grant Program and Implications for Hampton Roads*, January 4, 2006

funds could be lost as forecast in repeated newspaper articles stemming from the current transportation impasse<sup>41</sup>.

While less dramatic, the influence of maturing MPOs elsewhere has always been positive. Uniformly, participation in the maturing MPOs has provided a wealth of experience in wrestling with regional matters. Empowered as they are to make decisions on a truly regional topic—transportation—and recognizing that transportation impacts the workforce, the economy, the public, the environment, and thus shapes (or should shape) many public policies, the Policy Boards of MPOs are critical to the state, the region, and to every locality.

Nationwide, transit usage increased by 21 percent (1993-2002), the largest increase of any mode of travel<sup>42</sup>, and federal transit funding was increased last year by 16 percent last year. Population growth rates show no sign of slowing. Comprehensive MPO metropolitan transportation plans today and certainly for tomorrow need to be visionary and include transit components.

Coming of Age is a process. In a sea of competing local governments and state ambivalence for regional projects, there are important indicators that the MPO Coming of Age process has started in Hampton Roads. The monthly Hampton Roads MPO Minutes have matured over the last five years. They show that fewer issues are tabled which has permitted quality and depth of discussions. They also show that fewer pop-up or pet projects are accepted as discussion items and have been met with admonitions to ensure that previously approved project selection procedures be followed for all projects. More significantly, considerable in depth debate over several meetings preceded the time for a final decision on the region's current transportation plan. This concluded in June 2005, first by overruling a motion to take the issue back to the cities and counties for assessment (the non-regional perspective), and second, by approving by majoritarian vote the proposed regional Plan for its furtherance to higher authorities. These are bright spots, and they do depict a trend of the emerging regional decision-making and discipline that is sought in federal legislation. For the MPO, however, this paper continues to argue that more needs to be done with regard to its structure, its external working relationships, its willingness to prioritize projects on a regional basis (moving away from something-for-everyone votes), its attention to transit, its rapport with the public, and its liaison with its legislative caucus.

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<sup>41</sup> The Virginian-Pilot, *Irked Senator Pulls Proposal to Establish Tolls for Road Needs*, March 10, 2006 is one of several articles on the subject and one that notes that VDOT, given the transportation impasse, would be forced to drop planning for certain Hampton Roads projects in its six-year construction project.

<sup>42</sup> Bruce Katz and Robert Puentes, *Remaking Transportation Policy for the New Century*, a presentation of The Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., January 2006. p. 11.

The Interstate arteries have been built. The urban, suburban, and intermodal connectors; and public transit are what is needed in the years to come. The regions own more, know more, and are impacted more by these challenges than are the state and federal governments. State officials are often too distant for these issues. Regional MPOs go through a federal certification process; state planners do not. The time to come of age is here; the new SAFETEA legislation with its elevated opportunities must be implemented by July 2007. Devolution is happening—we need to become MPO-ready.

Nationwide, the process steadily crawls forward as the “tipping point”<sup>43</sup> is found in one metro area after another. Today, most MPOs have a degree of recognized independence, a small dedicated staff, state recognition, and formal agreements with regional research groups such as COGs, PDCs, or local universities for technical support. One characteristic drawing much recent attention is that of public identity, and accordingly, several MPOs have established their own public affairs information and public participation programs that provide transparency of MPO meetings and decisions, and that engender the public awareness and public support that large transportation investments and city leaders require.

The potential benefits are numerous:

- Gaining leverage in Richmond by being a stronger regional voice,
- Gaining public support that will assist local legislators in Richmond,
- Opening a more fruitful liaison at the federal level with FHWA and FTA offices,
- Gaining increased funding and better end results:
  - Increasing the CMAQ-eligible dollars available to Hampton Roads,
  - Coaching Virginia to sub-allocate its available TE dollars to Hampton Roads,
  - Gaining from the noticeably increased STP funding available in SAFTEA legislation, especially in the transit area (federal allocations up by 16%),
- Gaining “regional experience”:
  - Experience with the macro regional issues that are beyond the scope of any one locality to do alone,
  - Experience making regional decisions short of unanimity, perhaps determining vote weighting factors, when needed,
  - Experience with disciplined regional decision-making that adheres to fiscal realities, that prioritizes goals, and that involves ‘multidisciplinary’ planning,

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<sup>43</sup> Observers have noted that progress on intergovernmental affairs, such as regionalism, stem from either effective leadership or from a crisis. The current transportation impasse may not be severe enough to force change, but coupled with leadership it could easily become the sufficient “tipping point”.

- Allowing transportation successes to build momentum and breed other regional governance structures.

Now past the thirty year point, MPOs and their related transportation planning and programming functions will continue to evolve. There is no turning back—transportation matters have become metropolitan in nature. Devolving transportation decisions down toward the metro level where the impacts of action or inaction are the greatest and transforming them to be based on metro development factors are strong trends that will inexorably continue. It would be wise to align with this trend, participate in its predictable future, and optimize returns for the region.

### **VIII. Recommendations:**

We started this paper noting that MPO organizations were important in two different contexts—regionalism and transportation. To achieve the most in these two realms, some recommendations follow.

**As concerns regionalism**, the primary task at both the state and local levels is to cultivate belief in the fact that regional perspectives are essential for competitive advantage and for day-to-day management in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

1. Educate and lobby at the state level. In no state can regionalism advance without state support. This fact stems from the U.S. Constitution itself which leaves local matters in the hands of state governments. That said, there is abundant language in the Virginia Constitution and the Virginia statutory code that permit regional cooperation of almost any kind. It is time for renewed education and lobbying. The same locally-inspired arguments that fostered the creation of the Virginia Port Authority, the Virginia Regional Competitiveness Act, and the several state-established Regional Authorities in Hampton Roads, to name a few, need to be vigorously renewed. The opportunities and risks are far greater now in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century than they were twenty or thirty years ago. Strong regional initiatives that convincingly generate state involvement, including significant state incentives to force the issues, constitute perhaps the number one requirement.
2. Coordinate metro efforts. Concurrent with the above and at the metro level, we must fix our own house. We, too, must cultivate a genuine regional perspective and a genuine long term perspective. Investing in roads and public transit today will produce roads and rails 15-20 years from now and result in land-use impacts enduring for more than fifty years. Any one community (urban or suburban) that observes

blight or poverty in a neighboring community cannot think that 50 years from now it will avoid similar issues; to the contrary that is what happens<sup>44</sup>. We are all in the same metropolitan boat. It is best that we work collectively both for the present and the future welfare of the region.

3. Be prepared to lead. Seeking a progressive (regionalist) relationship with state government should result in the state devolution of authorities to the metro level. It should also assist in re-building the utility of the Hampton Roads legislative caucus that currently seems to be widely divided. We need to become regionally-ready, as well as MPO-ready to govern.
4. Conduct our own “beta test”. Federal MPO legislation is like a gift-horse which in some metropolitan areas has proved the value of a regional approach to macro level governance issues. MPO successes can and have served as a sort of “beta test” for regionalism. After some 20 years of seeking to regionalize certain government functions, leaders in Louisville and surrounding communities actually “practiced” with regional projects (not their MPO in this case) as a sort of test bed that in the end drew support from an uncertain public and from many uncertain leaders. As noted earlier in this paper, the Portland, OR and Twin Cities Metro organizations drew early inspiration from their successful MPO organizations. In effect, the MPO was a ‘confidence building measure’.

**As concerns transportation**, the primary task at both the state and local levels is to bring the MPO organization out of the closet and to subscribe to its required (and reasonable) procedures. We have truly superb city councils and county governments in Hampton Roads, and we have an outstanding PDC team. First, however, and not pointing fingers, and not tumbling into pangs of remorse or blame (many MPOs around the country need to be re-built), what we need is to acknowledge that the Hampton Roads MPO is not effective, or not as effective as it should be. We need to:

1. Re-examine our State-MPO (and VDOT-MPO) relationships and how we communicate, lobby, and exchange letters and reports,

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<sup>44</sup> The 1960s saw a nationwide center city epidemic of decay and neglect and years of declining populations. Programs were crafted and books were written to try to save America’s cities. The mid-1990s saw the rebirth of these same center cities, a new resurgence, and now almost nationwide, population increases. Today, similar worries, programs and books are trying to address the “First Suburbs” deemed to be the next destabilizing force in regional harmony and hopes. Google first suburbs for an array of literature about which we must be aware.

2. Re-write the MPO Charter to reflect the latest SAFETEA legislation, and obtain renewed, formal and public state designation,
3. Re-examine our local MPO planning and programming methods, especially how votes are made (weighted or not, and if so, when weighted?),
4. Re-examine how the MPO is staffed and funded, and secure a sufficient level of independence for the MPO body. The scope of transportation—roads, highways, transit, safety, evacuation, security, technology, inter-city and inter-state issues, freight movement, worker access, land-use and zoning issues—is enormous, and the miasma of associations and agencies involved is bewildering. It is not just another topic; it is a full-time issue.
5. Go to school on the MPO. Conduct an in depth Mayors and Chairs offsite on the subject and participate in the federal Transportation Planning Capacity Building (TCPB) seminars that describe MPO legitimate responsibilities, and/or bring in a consultant (as other metro areas have done) for this purpose,
6. Re-examine how we engender public support and how we conduct public participation; develop improved public relations methods that meet the intent of federal requirements and that foster public trust and support for regional transportation and transit plans,
7. Seize the moment and capitalize on the latest SAFETEA transportation and transit legislation and its opportunities that must be implemented by July 1, 2007,
8. Seize another moment and capitalize on the current transportation impasse. There are lessons learned—turn them into a “silk purse” whatever the outcome may be.
9. Recognize that as the above measures help to mature the Hampton Roads MPO, unexpected regional opportunities will arise (such as funding for homeland security a few years ago, which we missed; or for unexpected BRAC-like pressures, for which we were regionally unprepared), and that MPO skills can be easily transferred for use in these other areas,
10. Expect better regional results—transportation is a long term subject.

Taking determined steps to optimize and enable an MPO organization to “Come of Age” are tasks that have become essential for the best, long-term management of transportation and transit investments. For transportation and transit, we need to think in terms of a substantial systemic overhaul or a paradigm shift, something that substantially expands the capacity of the MPO and something that elevates the legitimacy of its majoritarian decision-making authority. Micro initiatives here and there will not be sufficient. At the same time, these steps will contribute greatly to the more complex and even more essential structures and skills needed for effective metropolitan governance.

Ray Taylor, Board member, Future of Hampton Roads, Inc., April 2006

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