Metrolina Transportation Framework Study

Executive Summary

11.15.2010

Study Context and Purpose

Metropolitan and Rural Planning Organizations were initially created to serve as the forum for regional transportation decision-making, working cooperatively with their state departments of transportation, United States Department of Transportation, and other public and private transportation providers. As these planning agencies grow and evolve, their missions become progressively more inter-related on major transportation projects. A number of MPOs around the country are currently examining their organizational structures to see how they can serve their member agencies better in a regional and even global transportation market. *The purpose of the study was to look at how we go about the business of creating a sound, multi-modal transportation system to effectively move people and goods in the Greater Charlotte "Metrolina" Region, supporting the economy, and sustaining livability.*

Study Methodology

Surveys, focus groups, and interviews were the primary means of gathering information throughout the study, as was a detailed review of the by-laws, charters, and planning products produced by the Metrolina MPOs and RPOs. Three MPOs and two RPOs were direct participants of the study, with the Rock Hill-Fort Mill MPO in South Carolina participating as observers only. Seven other metro MPOs participated in the study as peers for benchmarking.

Five Regional Metrolina Agencies

- Cabarrus-Rowan MPO
- Gaston MPO
- Lake Norman RPO
- Mecklenburg-Union MPO
- Rocky River RPO

Seven Peer MPOs

- Atlanta (ARC)
- Austin, Texas (CAMPO)
- Kansas City (MARC)
- Minneapolis-St. Paul (Metropolitan Council)
- Nashville, Tennessee
- Pinellas County, Florida (Tampa-St. Petersburg)
- San Diego (SANDAG)

Organizational Findings: Metrolina MPOs and RPOs

Findings from a review of the internal workings and external perceptions of MPOs and RPOs in the Metrolina Region include the following:

- Like virtually all MPOs and RPOs, Metrolina organizations are "attached" to a host agency to allow them to hire staff and otherwise function. Four of the five are attached to local governments; Lake Norman RPO is attached to CCOG.
- MPOs and RPOs have much the same mission and governing policies. A review of the policies and charter documents that form the basis of the MPO and RPO structures indicated relatively few differences among Metrolina's regional planning organizations.
- The MPOs and RPOs have backgrounds that are similar, although the former group has more diversified practices due to the longer period of their existence. RPOs are similar to each other, but lack the federal requirements that undergird the MPO missions.
- Additionally, the RPOs in Metrolina are not fulfilling all of the intended state-level requirements currently, notably the creation of a long-range transportation plan.
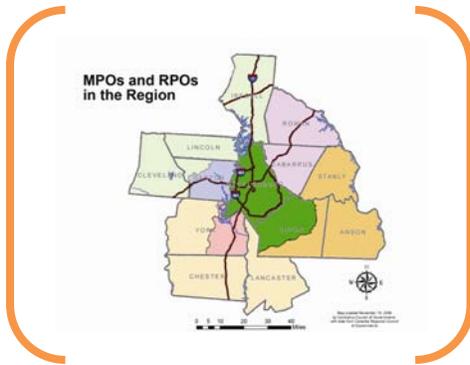
■ While some differences in voting and member representation do exist, such differences are relatively rare or minor in the day-to-day operations of the MPO or RPO missions.

■ The regional transportation planning staff support is highly valued. Without exception, the MPO and RPO staff was seen as extremely valuable to the member agencies that were the subject of technical and policy focus groups. Staff support is highly valued in every MPO/RPO and performs meaningful service including transit service planning; functioning as a liaison to NCDOT; coordinating with outside agencies on federal and state requirements; and serving as a forum for addressing transportation issues that pierce traditional government jurisdictional boundaries.

■ In some cases, concerns were raised about consolidating functions if that consolidation might lessen the effectiveness of the current staffing contingent.

Regional cooperation occurs now at a technical level proactively, with staff at MPOs and RPOs typically getting along with each other and engaging in productive actions such as air quality conformity and regional travel demand modeling. The CRAFT partnership has produced a system of regular meetings of technical staff of the MPOs. Policy-level coordination, however, largely occurs only on a reactive basis, with the elected officials on CRAFT not having met in over 18 months at the time of this writing. Several interviewees noted that the political relationships "come together when they need to" in cases such as the Yadkin River Bridge.

Performance Findings and Identified Gaps

The largest group of survey respondents identified themselves as technical committee members for a RPO or MPO, municipal or county staff, or elected officials. The participants in the internal framework survey identified some gaps in performance. These included:
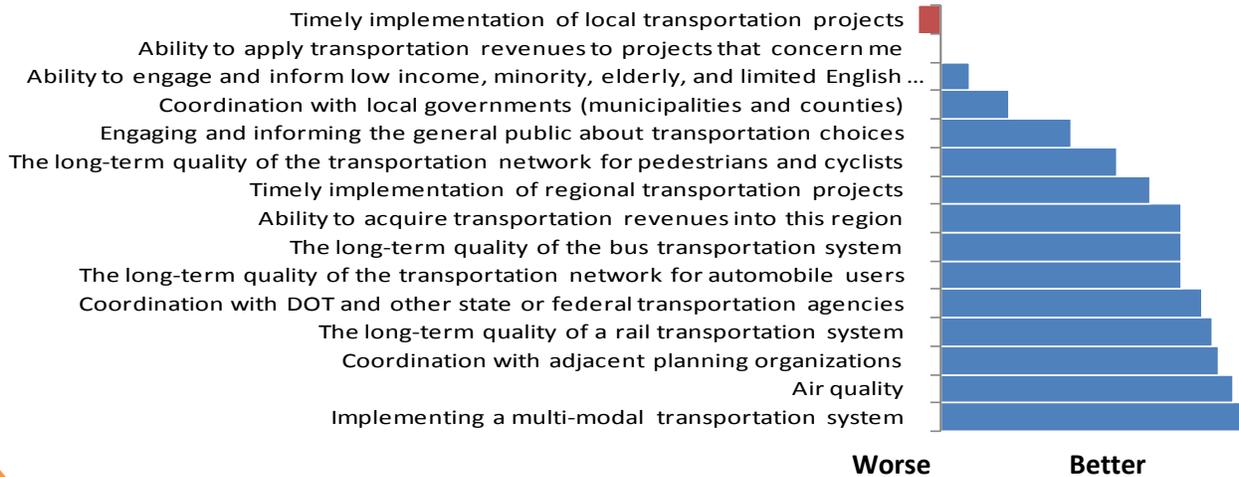
■ The timely delivery of projects;
■ Lack of financing options;
■ Creating meaningful public engagement opportunities;
■ Need to increase collaboration and provide direction on regional issues; and,
■ Proactively planning for regional land use/transportation issues

Respondents also identified the following as areas that could be addressed more effectively with more regional coordination:

■ Developing a multimodal transportation system;
■ Developing a regional rail system;
■ Coordination with other agencies as well as with the region's planning organizations; and,
■ Mitigating air quality issues.

The chart below displays survey responses on this question.

How would the following areas be affected if our regional planning organizations consolidated some or all of their functions?

Chart categories (top to bottom):
- Timely implementation of local transportation projects
- Ability to apply transportation revenues to projects that concern me
- Ability to engage and inform low income, minority, elderly, and limited English …
- Coordination with local governments (municipalities and counties)
- Engaging and informing the general public about transportation choices
- The long-term quality of the transportation network for pedestrians and cyclists
- Timely implementation of regional transportation projects
- Ability to acquire transportation revenues into this region
- The long-term quality of the bus transportation system
- The long-term quality of the transportation network for automobile users
- Coordination with DOT and other state or federal transportation agencies
- The long-term quality of a rail transportation system
- Coordination with adjacent planning organizations
- Air quality
- Implementing a multi-modal transportation system

Worse　　　**Better**

- Similar feedback was generated from one or more of the eight focus groups conducted during the study. "Regional planning initiatives", "leveraging revenue options", and "engaging the public" were areas where some improvement through more regional consolidation of function was noted.
- Limited funding for project implementation, and its allocation, is a primary concern.
- There is also high frustration with the timely delivery of transportation projects, leading to a sense of "endless planning" that may be able to be addressed by having more local and regional financing options available to everyone.
- There is a sense of limited meaningful public engagement and a lack of a regional-scale land use-transportation planning linkage.

Peer Region Findings

Peer regions were selected by the Study Advisory Committee based on feedback from the Metrolina surveys, focus groups, and the Committee itself. Peer regions were asked the same and additional questions concerning organization, roles, challenges, and funding streams, as well as about external factors such as state legislation that would influence their functioning.

- When asked the same questions as the Metrolina Region MPOs and RPOs, the external peer MPOs tended to perform slightly better in the areas noted above.
- Peer regions also reported having better relationships with their respective state departments of transportation.

- Many MPOs, like our own regional planning organizations, cited that engaging the public effectively was challenging, although one thought that their MPO was doing well with engaging the public.

- The peers often had more opportunities for local government members to participate in the planning process through standing committees. This was viewed not only a way to actively engage some of their smaller government members, but also a way to build consensus with stakeholder groups such as environmental advocates and the business community.

- All of the MPOs surveyed had undertaken a large-scale land use/transportation integration exercise and/or had state laws that required the development of comprehensive plans or sustainability elements in their MPOs long-range transportation plan. In two cases, these processes were undertaken by "umbrella" agencies that conducted regional-scale planning in cooperation with or supported by one or more MPOs.

- State contexts are very important in terms of shaping not only the state-MPO (and RPO) relationship, but also the ability of the MPO to create and manage their own funding sources.

The external survey should be understood from the standpoint of who responded to the survey. The survey contains a large response (over half) from one MPO (Mid-America Regional Council), a very small (2) response from another (Metropolitan Council), and none at all from a third MPO (SANDAG). Significantly higher rates of return on the external framework survey were noted for elected policy officials and bicycle/pedestrian advocates than was the case for the internal framework survey, which had higher numbers of self-reported municipal staff. However, like the qualitative information gleaned

External Survey Response Rates

10%, 7%, 1%, 49%, 24%, 9%

- Atlanta Regional Commission
- Capital Area (Austin) MPO
- Metropolitan Council
- Mid-America Regional Council
- Nashville Area MPO
- Pinellas County MPO

from the interviews, the external framework survey component of the study contains information necessary to establish performance benchmarks. Among the key findings:
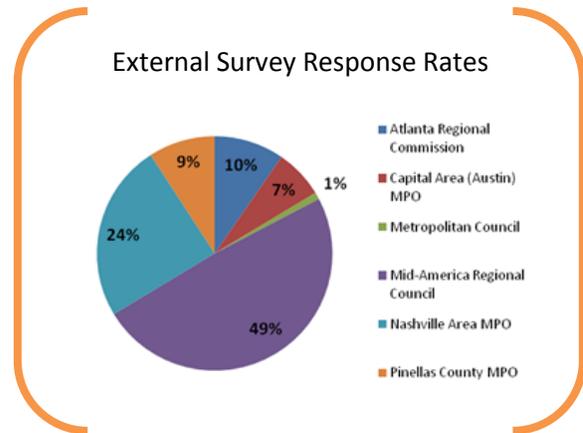
- The state matters. State-level policy contexts are important considerations when comparing national and Metrolina MPOs/RPOs since some states in the peer group, notably California and Minnesota, have more expansive planning requirements or the states have granted more enabling authority to local governments to finance transportation projects through bond referenda. States have facilitated the maturation of their MPOs and regional planning efforts through legislation that makes planning a legally-binding priority, resulting in regional planning bodies that are notably more comprehensive in scope and more responsible for the implementation of projects and services.

- The national peers are doing comprehensive regional planning more successfully. The MPOs in these external peer cases still have important issues and problems in creating their plans, but the baseline of planning practice that they start from is noticeably higher in some of the larger bodies such as Mid-America Regional Council, Metropolitan Council, and SANDAG. Although the Atlanta Regional Commission has had its share of problems managing land use, air quality, and transportation issues, their programs and practices are considerably more comprehensive and speak more directly to regional issues than appears to be the case in Metrolina. With the possible exception of the CAMPO (Austin, TX) MPO, the level of regional cooperation appears to be greater and more successful among peers.

- Public engagement and engaging nearby partners are not be perceived as important – or successful – activities in many MPOs. Both the level of expectations and the level of performance in two areas, engaging the public and engaging nearby MPO/RPO partners, ranked highly for the peer group (and Metrolina MPOs/RPOs) as other performance factors.

- Several of the national peer agencies presented a greater confidence in their ability to direct revenues towards their priority projects than did their Metrolina peers, or at least to have a better working relationship with their state departments of transportation to identify common priorities. This may be due to differences in the ownership of the transportation system elements or because some MPOs have direct control over dedicated funding. A second point on overall funding is that a consolidated planning function would be able to leverage resources and priorities on a regional system basis more effectively.

The national peers present some good examples of formal consolidation structures that don't compromise local responsiveness and local decision-making. Both Nashville, TN and Pinellas County, FL, have created "umbrella" organizations through interlocal agreements that are effective at improving regional planning and integrating land use/transportation decision-making.

A Range of Choices for the Region

The purpose of this study was to identify the barriers that keep us from more effective regional planning. Once those issues were identified, a menu of actions can be discussed by the regional transportation planning agencies and their partners to determine a course of action that improves the current standard of operations while minimizing the negative consequences to successful practices being employed today. The range of potential consolidation actions can be thought of as a continuum, as shown in the chart which follows. These categories of regional cooperation and organizational structure do not speak directly to operational performance.

However, as MPOs and RPOs grow in number and size in the same spatial proximity, daily commuting patterns, business opportunities, and governmental inter-relationships grow to the point where a higher level of association becomes important to accomplish goals as a region that cannot be achieved easily at one of the lower levels.

Chart: Level of Regional Cooperation vs MPO Coordination Levels, with y-axis 0–5 and categories: (1) Disassociation, (2) Independent, (3) Function Consolidation, (4) Informal Association, (5) Formal Association, (6) Consolidation. Legend: ○ Normal Operating…
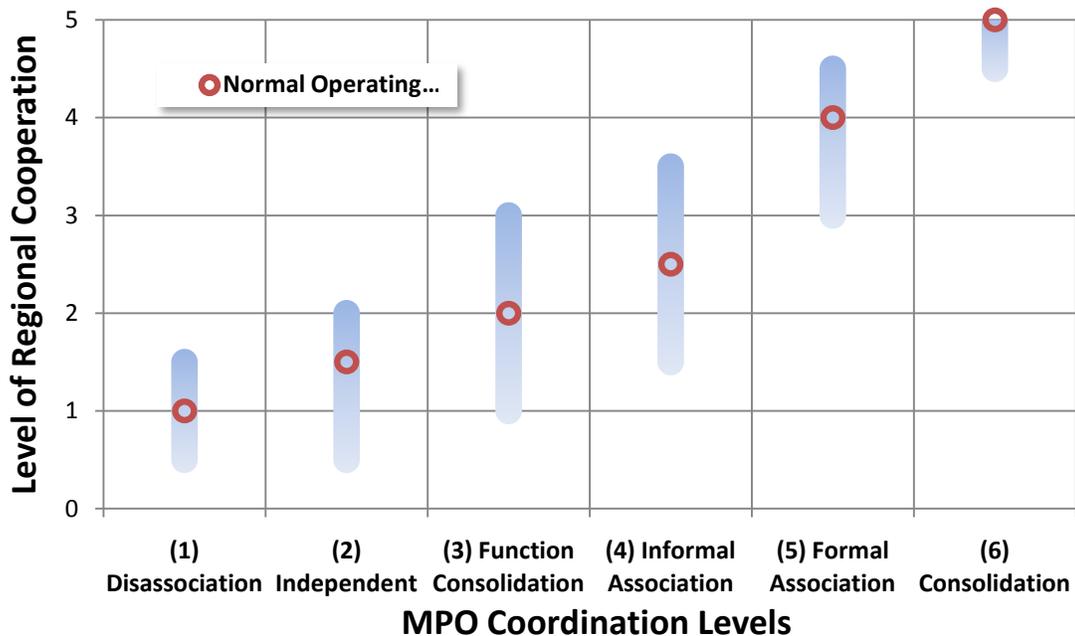
(1) Disassociation: MPOs/RPOs may actively avoid communication with each other and seek to minimize cooperative opportunities because of distance from a neighboring MPO or RPO, or due to a history of non-collaborative behavior. Collaboration occurs only when forced by external requirements to resolve a single, immediate issue. Joint meetings of policy boards do not happen and forward-looking planning or implementation exercises happen generally within individual MPO/RPO boundaries. Examples: Most geographically isolated MPOs

(2) Independent: MPOs/RPOs are fully independent, and have no long-term arrangements to work share but collaborate when it makes sense to do so by internal or external forces. Joint meetings of policy boards happen infrequently and without a specified schedule. Example: CAMPO (Austin, TX) MPO

(3) Function Consolidation: Similar to Independent (2) but some functions, such as air quality conformity analysis/reporting or travel demand modeling, are conducted through long-term formal or informal agreements. The short- and long-term operations of these functional groupings are primarily carried out at a staff level with little intervention from the policy member. Joint meetings of policy boards (or board chairs) happen at least once every two years, but without a scheduled periodicity. Example: Triangle Region of NC MPOs (Durham-Chapel Hill-Carrboro and Capital Area)

(4) Informal Association: The MPOs/RPOs in a single region have created a working group that regularly meets to discuss various issues; the policy boards (or board chairs) may still only meet infrequently but might be on a regular schedule. Only a minimal and perhaps informal working agreement is written, without many specific requirements of the member agencies. This level typically has little or no authority independent of MPOs/RPOs.

(5) Formal Association: Same as the Informal Association, except that the policy and technical boards (or board chairs) meet multiple times per year on a regular schedule with detailed meeting protocols set out in a mutually adopted and binding interlocal agreement. It is likely that the decisions of this formal association, which will have its own named title, will carry weight for projects of regional impact while local decisions are still conducted autonomously by each MPO/RPO. Examples: Pinellas County MPO; Middle Tennessee Mayor's Caucus; Piedmont Area (NC) MPOs

(6) Consolidation: MPOs and perhaps RPOs have dissolved their organizations and have created a single planning entity. This new, larger MPO may still retain district-level committee structures that are reminiscent of previous MPO boundaries to afford some degree of distinct geographic representation. Examples: Wasatch Front MPO; Hampton Roads MPO

Options for Consideration

Making no change is always an option. However, should the transportation stakeholders in the Metrolina region wish to move closer toward the processes and products of the peers, two other options are possible:

Consolidation or Merger (Full or Partial)

- Full consolidation of existing MPOs / RPOs is rare, Hampton Roads (Virginia) in the mid-1980s was the last of these situations in which a merger of MPOs in close proximity merged. None of the peer agencies has undertaken a full consolidation two or more MPOs.

- While some MPOs have vestigial remnants of an earlier consolidation (Hampton Roads, VA still has a bi-cameral policy structure, and Wasatch Front, UT (i.e., Salt Lake City) has two technical committees, both remnants of previous consolidations), there are no recent examples of two or more MPOs dissolving to form a single MPO serving in its place.

- Not all regional bodies are successful. The Georgia Regional Transportation Authority (GRTA) in the Atlanta region was developed to address regional land use/transportation integration issues in that area, but has suffered some setbacks in terms of transit funding shortfalls. Originally begun in 1999, GRTA has carried out its policies of helping to manage regional development and starting a regional transit service, but budgetary concerns and the continuing forces of sprawling development have made the mission difficult.

- In terms of the impacts to funding, there is no reason to believe that a consolidation of functions or organizations would present a loss of planning monies, provided that a minor formula adjustment is made to resolve a small decrease in the hold harmless allocation component of PL 104(F) funds. It is likely that the area would realize a small increase in Section 5311 (transit) funding if transit services were consolidated under one management authority.

- Discussions are happening about significant structural changes for some MPOs in Florida and Indiana, and the number of MPOs reconsidering their organizational structure is likely to increase in the next decade, with or without federal interventions because of operating budget concerns or simply because they are under pressure to do so from their constituents or federal and state partners.

- Full consolidation of the four Metrolina MPOs (including Rock Hill-York, South Carolina) and RPOs would take a considerable amount of time, involve a significant risk of failure, and may result in a loss of local autonomy and staff attentiveness that the regional planning organizations enjoy today.

A New Regional Transportation Entity

The Study uncovered examples in which an "umbrella' entity provided the regional focus for transportation planning for MPOs and RPOs which continue to function for more local planning. This approach has the advantages of ensuring local voice and attention to local projects, while providing a regional focus and means of setting joint regional policies for projects of regional significance. Two examples exist in Tampa-St. Petersburg and Nashville:

- The Pinellas (Tampa-St. Petersburg) example requires each of six MPOs in the partnership to "host" the regional body (Chairs Coordinating Committee) for three months, preparing a meeting agenda and hosting a meeting of this regional board. This board has been successful in promoting a regional agenda, adopting a regional transportation plan, public participation plan, and adopting a clear charter of purpose and operations. It has clear responsibility for, and is the State's "go to" for projects of regional significance or for statewide projects which affect the region.
- The second example is the Mayor's Caucus, which was started much more recently in 2009, and represents 10 counties in and around the Nashville MPO planning area, including some rural areas outside of the MPO. The objectives of the Mayor's Caucus extend to promoting a positive image of the region as a place to live, work, and play; promoting economic success; advocating sound public policy; and creating an opportunity to meaningfully engage the public on important regional issues.

Based on these findings, performance areas in the Metrolina Region that could be addressed by a more coordinated regional organizational structure include public and stakeholder engagement (including traditionally underserved populations); regional coordination on land use-transportation decision-making; leveraging revenue sources; and engaging local and state partnering agencies. Any actions taken to address these issues should strive to respect local authority on local project decisions, as well as the quality level of service that each MPO/RPO is receiving now from their staff.

The table on the following pages describes the specific set of actions and a logical sequence for their implementation, starting with the creation of a new regional transportation authority that fills the current gap in regional-scale planning activities that exists today while still maintaining local authority and responsiveness to member agencies. Each of the structural actions and work items described in this table are intended to address performance gaps noted in the preceding assessment, notably public engagement, closer regional cooperation, and the provision of financing options.

- In the first phase of development a Regional Transportation Authority (RTA) would replace the existing CRAFT organization in order to represent a new starting point in a regional dialogue. The purpose of the RTA would intentionally avoid contact with local decision-

making and staffing arrangements, since these were priority concerns expressed by RPOs and MPOs during the course of this study.

- For major regional corridors and projects the RTA would assume a preeminent authority. Additional process details ensuring adequate review and involvement by local and MPO/RPO staff on technical positions would need to be incorporated into the RTA charter to be created and adopted by the MPOs, RPOs, and NCDOT.

- Important work plan elements during these initial phases of work would focus on creating a regional transportation system that the RTA would address through existing and new revenue sources.

- Such an authority would require state enabling legislation to authorize contracts and legally represent its regional constituency.

- The formation of the RTA, although it shares the same name as Senate Bill 910, would still allow MPOs to have the dominant voice dealing with sub-regional projects and programming, as well as the major voice in the composition of the chairing committee.

- Not all Phase I/II activities require a different regional structure to implement, although a regional organization would greatly facilitate all aspects of regional planning. Starting regular dialogues as a group with the relevant NCDOT Division and project development branches, as well as twice-yearly legislative updates, are possible now through the CRAFT vehicle or by cycling the hosting responsibilities through the MPOs and RPOs.

- Although the RTA can be staffed through a rotating "host" MPO for the first 1.5 to 2 years, the group should create a permanent Stakeholder Engagement Officer (SEO) position towards the end of this period to help staff the RTA, prepare public engagement materials for use regionally, and take the lead on maintaining regional databases of outreach listings for the general public, traditionally underserved populations, and transportation partnering agencies such as public transportation operators, private providers, freight distribution facilities/companies, and limited English proficiency (LEP) populations, minority community representatives, and low income representatives.

- Unlike a traditional public involvement officer, the SEO position should devote a portion of time staffing and advising the Regional Transportation Authority and therefore be well-versed in the operations of metropolitan and rural planning organizations and municipal governance.

Still-later phases of work (Phases III and IV) would see the RTA shift from a new planning authority to one that has the power to raise and steer revenues. The input and resources of an involved legislator's office would be beneficial to consult throughout the development of the revenue options. However, it is critical that all subject counties and the municipalities represented by the RTA have access to the discussions to ensure that these governments have adequate voice in what will be a controversial discussion. The project-level priorities for this funding would be developed jointly by the MPOs/RPOs in coordination with NCDOT.

As mentioned earlier, a full consolidation of the MPOs and/or RPOs in the Metrolina Region is not suggested at this time due to the desire to support a mutually acceptable framework that respects the level of staff responsiveness and control over local or sub-regional decisions. However, the menu of potential action items discussed herein would not preclude that option, should the parties in the Region decide to do so at a later time.

Possible Actions for Improving Regional Performance

Structural Actions	Work Program	Timeframe
Dissolve CRAFT Organization	**Establish a Regional Transportation System (RTS)**	PHASE I (12 months)
Create Interlocal Agreement for Regional Transportation Authority (RTA) ■ Three times/year meeting schedules ■ Addresses regional transportation system issues only, with binding authority on regional transportation system components ■ Establish Regional Policy Board with 4 urban, 4 small urban and 4 rural representatives, plus 1 advocacy representative each for freight, environmental stewardship, NCDOT, public transportation, and citizen ■ Quorum requires two of each representative group (urban, small urban, rural and advocacy) ■ One person, one vote ■ RTA charter created and adopted by MPOs, RPOs, and NCDOT	■ The RTS includes all cross-jurisdictional transportation corridors, including Interstate, Numbered State Routes; fixed route public transportation services; and cross-jurisdictional greenway facilities ■ Develop a base map of the RTS facilities ■ RTA adopts RTS v.1.0	PHASE I (12 months)
	Initiate Regional Dialogues ■ Start and maintain an annual legislative work session devoted to transportation project status and priority needs ■ Maintain a biannual (every six months) half-day work session with NCDOT to discuss regional priorities, projects, and planning status updates and initiatives.	PHASE II (12 months)
Creation of a RTA Stakeholder Engagement Officer (SEO) Position ■ Each MPO plus NCDOT pays for proportional share of SEO position ■ Develops materials specific to the regional transportation system, and common materials that can be easily modified for use by each MPO/RPO according to a two-year work program ■ Additional functions will be to serve as staff to RTA; liaison to local / state governments; management of outreach databases, partners, and contacts.	**Develop a Regional Transportation Plan** ■ Develop a technical summary of each RTS corridor, its purpose, and significant engineering, land use, and environmental challenges and resources ■ Develop purpose-and-need statements describing anticipated demands and issues to be resolved for horizon year time frame ■ Each MPO/RPO adopts RTS map as a part of the LRTP and CTP documents	PHASE III (18 months)
	Conduct Corridor Resolution Studies ■ Based on the project summaries in the RTS Plan, develop typical cross-sections, wayfinding (greenways), intersection analyses/conceptual plans ■ RTA proposes corridor-level ultimate build out scenarios, including anticipated land use and transportation options ■ RTA adopts Corridor Resolution Studies ■ Each MPO/RPO adopts RTS map as a part of the LRTP and CTP documents. ■ Coordinate with MPOs/RPOs/NCDOT to identify project priorities	PHASE III (18 months)
Seek Referendum and Authority to Expand Revenue Options ■ Working through state legislative or Governor's office to develop authority of RTA to steer funds for projects on RTS ■ Referendum prepared by counties for new revenue source	**Develop Five-Year Work Program** ■ Assess SEO position for continued funding ■ Determine project categories ■ Determine funding requirements and sources ■ Establish Key Performance Indicators and monitoring system ■ Establish formal dialogue and project capacity to develop long-term land use and transportation build-out vision	PHASE IV (6

Additionally, a five-year work program would be created by and for the RTA that includes a system of measuring both external system performance and internal organizational performance. This KPI (key performance indicator) monitoring system would be updated annually and managed by the SEO position, ultimately being used to track performance and steer administrative and even planning decision-making. An important achievement of the RTA would be to lead the region to a consensus on an integrated land use and transportation plan that describe the principal directions for future growth based in part on the capacity of the transportation systems in the Region.

The original purpose of the Metrolina Transportation Framework Study was to create an environment where more effective regional planning decisions occur in a proactive fashion. While this set of recommendations is only based on a single study and will need to be detailed and refined to accommodate the needs of Metrolina's regional organizations, it does provide a starting point towards improving the performance areas discussed in this report to foster a more influential and effective regional decision-making structure in the Metrolina Region.

For a copy of the full Report, please contact Centralina Council of Governments, www.centralina.org, or 704-372-2416.