

on a campus that is surrounded by a town. It also has important assets. Unlike many “college towns,” UW’s connection to its community along Grand Avenue is marked by many stately and well-preserved homes rather than the “carbohydrate row” of fast food joints and run down rentals that front other campuses. UW also has a university run transit system that works well, and the university has yet to construct a parking garage. However, future growth must be accommodated, and UW is guided in that regard by a Campus Master Plan, adopted by the university in 2010. There has been an interest on the part of the Legislature in avoiding “concrete canyons” on campus by having buildings farther apart with open spaces around them. However, this further increases pressure for outward expansion.

UW has begun the process of land acquisition and planning for future uses on new lands northwest of the current campus. In recognition of the pro-property rights character of the region, the university has elected not to use eminent domain in its acquisitions. Larry’s description of this planning process and all of its challenges and rewards resonated strongly with the Western planners in attendance on our tour. The UW planning process has been greatly aided by its positive relationship with the city of Laramie, a fact evidenced by the inclusion of one of the city’s planners in our group. Not all universities are blessed with such a relationship, and this should serve the planning process well going forward.

While interesting and informative, this tour was also a reminder to attendees that colleges and universities are living parts of our communities, not just places to be graduated from and forgotten about except on football weekends. What happens on these campuses is very important within their communities and beyond and planning for those spaces is a challenging and critical function. I hope to return to Laramie and UW someday and see the positive results of the work that Larry and his staff are undertaking.

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SIERRA VISTA, VISTA TRANSIT CENTER. *Photo provided by Daniel R. Coxworth.*

URBANIZED!

A NEW METROPOLITAN PLANNING ORGANIZATION IN A RURAL REGION

by Daniel R. Coxworth, Sierra Vista, Arizona

It’s not very often a new local government organization is decreed by a state governor, but after each decennial census a new Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) is required by the federal government, if a certain population threshold is met. Federal and state transportation funds are allocated to MPOs multimodal transportation planning. First required by Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1962, MPOs have been established to take on the responsibility of transportation planning for an urbanized area (UZA).

The 2010 U.S. Census designated 35 new urbanized areas with a population of more than 50,000 people and a population density of greater than 1,000 people per square mile. Thirteen are west of the Mississippi and three are in Arizona, the state where this author administers one of the new MPOs – the Sierra Vista MPO. Sierra Vista

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During the development of the current Federal Transportation Bill, Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century (MAP-21), Congress considered raising the minimum threshold to establish an MPO from 50,000 people to 100,000 or more – but it didn't happen.

and its surrounding area is now an urbanized island in a rural part of the state in a very rural Cochise County, located over an hour's drive from the nearest urbanized area of Tucson, Arizona. The primary employer in the community and the region is the U.S. Army base, Fort Huachuca, pumping up to \$2 billion a year annually into the state's economy.

When the City of Sierra Vista was informed of the requirement to establish a Metropolitan Planning Organization in order to continue to receive federal transportation dollars for roads, city management and the City Council were extremely concerned about the financial and fiscal implications. Passing the minimum threshold by only a couple thousand people, the city's first reaction was – "we don't want it and do we have to do it?" If the city and its urbanized environs under the county's jurisdiction wanted federal transportation funds for roads, the answer was YES. The MPO was necessary and the city, with the largest share of residents in the urbanized area, was responsible for establishing the MPO and getting the organization up and running within a timeline established by the Federal Highway Administration.

To some, the MPO seemed like another layer of government. What they didn't understand was that the MPO wasn't adding to something that already existed. In Arizona, if you are not located in an MPO planning boundary area, you're automatically located in a Council of Governments (COG) region. Smaller MPOs are focused on the transportation planning of the urbanized area and those areas likely to be urbanized in the next 20 years. A COG's region is much broader, often including several jurisdictions to include towns,

cities, and counties. Regardless, federal transportation funds will flow through one of the organizations.

The Sierra Vista MPO acts as an independent decision making body which is responsible for the short and long range planning of the region's transportation system. This cannot be done without the support of local member jurisdictions, the City of Sierra Vista and Cochise County in the case of the Sierra Vista MPO. The Policy Board that governs the Sierra Vista MPO is comprised of elected officials from member jurisdictions and the Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT). The Board is advised by a Technical Advisory Committee comprised of staff members from the local jurisdictions and ADOT. Administrative support for the organization is reliant on the city as the host agency for every aspect of the organization to include finance, accounting, procurement, human resource, public affairs, IT support, vehicle for transportation, and general administrative support to take minutes at meetings and post public meeting notices.

RESOURCES:

The MPO is resourced with federal and state funds for planning, thereby making the requirement to establish the organization a funded requirement. Federal planning funds provided to an MPO come from both the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) and sub granted to each MPO by the DOT. Resources for planning are available for a wide variety of transportation related planning purposes that can help a community plan for the future. The federal government is essentially saying – "you're urbanized now, time to start planning for the future of not



just your community, but for the region across jurisdictional boundaries." Planning funds can be used for studies and planning documents that will improve the transportation system. These include corridor studies, plans to extend a key roadway, plans for bicycle and pedestrian, data collection, long range transportation plans, among many others.

This isn't easy. Government organizations that include MPOs are operating in extremely lean fiscal environments. Government organizations have to find ways to operate more efficiently while still providing the level of service and planning a community requires to stay competitive in an increasing competitive global economy. The MPO process is an opportunity to ensure a multi-modal planning process that makes the best use of available local, state, and federal resources.

Funds for roads and alternative means of transportation, such as multi-use paths, are drying up. Under MAP-21 each state's requirement to sub allocate funds for alternative transportation was lessened. In Arizona the gas tax is one of the lowest in the country at 19 cents a gallon. The federal gas tax has not been raised since 1993 (currently at 18.4 cents a gallon for unleaded fuel). Elected officials on both sides of the aisle understand the need to raise the

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RURAL AREAS: Sierra Vista maintains an extensive multi-use path system built primarily with Transportation Enhancement (TE) grants. MAP-21 substantially reduces the amount of federal funds available for these types of projects. *Photo provided by Daniel R. Coxworth.*

federal gas tax to keep the National Highway Trust Fund solvent. However, raising the gas tax doesn't appear to have any realistic possibility of happening. For the past few years, the federal government's general fund has been used to shore up the Highway Trust Fund. In Arizona, Highway User Revenue Funds (HURF), which are generated from the state gas sales tax and other fees, have been reallocated for other uses, leaving Arizona communities and counties with less to maintain the roads they already have. The implications of this can be seen in communities and counties such as Cochise County. As a result of less funds for road maintenance, the county is considering lowering the minimum standard for rural roads to dirt and replacing existing chip-sealed roads with a gravel road to reduce maintenance cost. Residents of Yavapai County, located in northern Arizona, voted to raise taxes so the county could continue to maintain the existing county dirt roads. Federal and state lawmakers leave local communities, such as Flagstaff, with no other choice but to raise taxes, with the additional revenue allocated toward maintaining the existing transportation system and increase capacity where needed.

To be fair, raising taxes (or user fees as some prefer to call them) is not the only answer. Federal regulations increase the cost of building roads and maintaining the existing system. The federal requirement to pay Davis-Bacon wages increases cost by requiring paying the local prevailing wage on public works projects that use federal funds. The environmental NEPA process, which is important and necessary, can be over-reaching and cumbersome, leading to increased costs. It's expensive to use federal funds for transportation. Local jurisdictions need

The (Davis-Bacon) Act results in unnecessary construction and administrative cost of several hundred million dollars annually and has an inflationary effect on the areas covered by inaccurate wage rates and the economy as a whole.

Source: Government Accountability Office 1979 report "The Davis-Bacon Act Should be Repealed."

federal funds for projects, but in a tight fiscal environment, local jurisdictions need these funds to go further.

THE IMPACT ON LOCAL PUBLIC TRANSIT:

The greatest impact of being urbanized is on Sierra Vista's public transit service Vista Transit. Vista Transit is a necessary service that allows those who can't drive or are without cars access to essential services in the community. Many people in the community rely on public transportation and could hardly function without it. Before becoming urbanized, the city used general funds to support operations. When Vista Transit was established over ten years ago, State Local Transportation Assistance Funds (LTAF) from state lottery proceeds supported local transit operations, thereby encouraging local communities to establish public transportation. Years later, as state revenues began to shrink, the state needed these funds and LTAF funds were swept – leaving local jurisdictions with the burden. Now, as a result of being urbanized, federal funding for Vista Transit, calculated based on an urbanized formula, not a rural formula, results in even less funding for operations and maintenance. Lake Havasu City, another growing community in northwest Arizona that became urbanized in 2010, decided the financial burden was too great and stopped funding public transportation altogether.

BENEFITS OF THE SIERRA VISTA MPO:

What are the benefits of the MPO? A Board member asked for three bullet points that he, as an elected official, could use to explain to his constituents the importance of the MPO to the region:

- Develop a long range transportation plan (LRTP) that considers transportation system projections and needs over at least a 20 year horizon. The LRTP is the foundational element of the MPO and develops the vision, strategies, and project specific investment needs of the MPO Study area. The LRTP must be reviewed and updated once every five years. The LRTP is also fiscally constrained and assists local decision makers develop investment priorities based on anticipated available revenues.
- Based on the approved LRTP, the MPO is required to annually develop a Transportation Improvement

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Program (TIP). The TIP is the schedule of prioritized Federal aid projects within the MPO Area. In order to be eligible for Federal funds, projects must be derived from the LRTP and then included in the MPO TIP. The TIP must be developed in cooperation with both the DOT and local public transit agencies. TIP development gives the MPO the opportunity to develop cooperative project selection processes for certain Federal aid programs.

- Most every action of the MPO must be premised upon an approved Public Participation Plan (PPP). The PPP is the guidebook to the public on how the MPO will make decisions. Decision making is important, and must be a public process. The PPP outlines the steps used by the MPO to develop both the LRTP and the TIP.

One of the first projects the Sierra Vista MPO undertook this past year included a study to extend a road in a regionally significant east-west corridor that extends across jurisdictional boundaries. The road was first recognized in a local transportation study from 2003 as necessary to relieve congestion on other roads in the region. Since 2003, discussions took place between the local jurisdictions, but without significant coordination to allocate resources to pay for a study and planning to determine a preferred route. The Sierra Vista MPO Board identified the opportunity to fund the \$244,000 study, providing the local jurisdictions with a better understanding of the road's necessity, challenges, and cost.

Other key projects of regional significance the MPO will undertake in the coming year includes a corridor study for a main commercial roadway in Sierra Vista identifying alternatives that will increase pedestrian activity and safety and economic development; an origin/destination study to establish a baseline on the number of Mexican Nationals visiting the area and the implications for the transportation system and local economy; and data collection and transportation asset inventory projects. The costs of these projects range from a few thousand dollars to over \$200,000. The MPO programs funds for these projects that would otherwise not be available.

In the western U.S., challenges to maintain an efficient transportation system are not any different than other communities around the Country. However, small, out of the way communities in the west that consider themselves "rural" are growing and are attractive places for people to call home. They provide amenities such as mountain views, wide open spaces, clean air, dark skies, accessibility to public lands, low taxes, and in most cases minimal traffic congestion. These amenities are quality-of-life features that help make a community "livable." Western

communities that have reached the urbanized threshold will struggle to balance the need to protect amenities that make them attractive and plan for a transportation system that meets the expectations and needs of the community. Younger communities, such as Sierra Vista which incorporated in 1956, were primarily developed with auto-centric zoning and development codes and now struggle to not only keep up, but catch up with expectations from residents to provide public amenities such as improved streetscapes or "complete streets" that encourage pedestrian activities and improve community aesthetics. Difficult decisions will need to be made and a delicate balance between improving the existing system, building capacity to meet future population projections, or simply maintaining the existing system – with very limited resources.

CONCLUSION:

The importance of the transportation system of any community and planning for the future should not be underestimated. The transportation system is one of the most important elements of any community contributing to its social and economic vitality. Roads form the basic framework of a community and often dictate, even more so than zoning, future development patterns and land values. The road or public right-of-way is what helps define a community and exemplifies the community's character. It's where we spend a large portion of our time outside of our homes - getting to where we need to go.

Comprehensive transportation planning is an important element to maintain economic competitiveness that draws businesses and investment to a community. Roads are not sexy, but the transportation system is often the largest asset under the control of local government and a powerful way to enable and encourage economic development; and, in general, improves a community through enhanced streetscapes. Transportation infrastructure improvements that encourage bicycling and pedestrian activities also increase the livability of a community.

It is this author's opinion that local governments and organizations, like MPO's, are the most effective form of government. Local government policies and decision-making are where change really happens in each of our communities and differences are made in people's lives. With political will and local planning, communities can become more livable, safer, economically viable and prosperous.

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