Florida Department of Transportation
Office of Policy Planning

A Review of FDOT's Nonmetropolitan Transportation Planning Process

2024

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Introduction

The 2024 Review of the Florida Department of Transportation's (FDOT's) Nonmetropolitan Transportation Planning Process documents the continuing efforts used to coordinate and improve transportation planning and programming activities with nonmetropolitan officials and ensure their communities' needs are included in the development of the Florida Transportation Plan (FTP), the state's long range transportation plan, and the State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP).

Nonmetropolitan areas are geographic areas located outside designated metropolitan planning areas. FDOT first documented its planning process for nonmetropolitan areas in 1999 and has since updated its process every five years. During each update, comments are solicited via survey, directly from nonmetropolitan municipal officials, and through participation in external meetings with organizations such as the Florida Regional Councils Association, Florida League of Cities, and Florida Association of Counties. The draft document is posted on the FDOT website for 60 days to solicit comments regarding the effectiveness of the cooperative process and proposed changes. All comments received are addressed as appropriate, and the final document is posted.

Requirements

According to 23 U.S. Code (USC) Section 135, each state must have a process for consulting with affected nonmetropolitan local officials during development of the FTP and the STIP. The requirement to "consult" with local and regional officials was changed to "cooperate" after the passage of the Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century (MAP-21) Act in 2012 and was affirmed by the Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act, passed by Congress in 2015. Federal regulations define "cooperation" as "the parties involved in the transportation planning process working together to achieve a common goal or objective." The Florida Statutes echo this requirement and call for consultation with nonmetropolitan local officials in development of these plans. Over the years, this consultation, and now cooperation, has strengthened FDOT's partnership with nonmetropolitan entities and organizations. Additional federal and state requirements for cooperating with nonmetropolitan local officials are highlighted below.

Key Federal Requirements	Description
23 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Part 450	Directs the state to have a documented process(es) for cooperating with nonmetropolitan local officials representing units of general purpose local government and/or local officials with responsibility for transportation that is separate and discrete from the public involvement process; and, provides an opportunity for their participation in the development of the long range transportation plan and the STIP. Directs states, at least once every five years, to review and solicit comments from nonmetropolitan local officials and other interested parties, for a period of not less than 60 calendar days, regarding the effectiveness of the cooperative process and any proposed changes. A specific request for comments must be directed to the State association of counties, State municipal league, regional planning agencies, or directly to nonmetropolitan local officials.

Key State Statutory Requirements and Policy	Description
Section 339.135(4)(c), Florida Statutes (F.S.)	Provides that the board of county commissioners located in counties not in a metropolitan planning organization (MPO) will serve as representatives to FDOT and be involved in the Work Program and STIP processes.
Section 339.155(3)(a), F.S.	Requires the FTP be developed in consultation with affected local officials in nonmetropolitan areas.
Section 339.155(3)(d), F.S.	Requires the FTP to be developed in consultation with affected local officials in nonmetropolitan areas and with any affected Indian Tribal governments.
FDOT Policy #000-525-025, Consultative Planning Process for Nonmetropolitan Areas	Requires consultation with local officials in nonmetropolitan areas regarding the statewide transportation planning process and development of the STIP.
Related State Statutory Requirements	Description
Section 163.3204, F.S.	Requires all state and regional agencies involved in the administration and implementation of the Community Planning Act to cooperate with local governments in the preparation and adoption of their comprehensive plans.
Section 339.135(2)(b), F.S.	Requires projects in the department's Work Program to be consistent with an approved local comprehensive plan of any local Government within whose boundaries the project is located in whole or in part, or, if inconsistent, is accompanied by an explanation of why the inconsistency should be undertaken.
Section 339.135(4)(b), F.S.	Requires the tentative Work Program to be developed in accordance with the FTP as required in Section 339.155. F.S.
Section 339.155(4)(b), F.S.	Requires each regional planning council (RPC) to adopt as an element of its strategic regional policy plan, transportation goals and policies, which, to the maximum extent feasible, shall be consistent with the goals and policies of the MPO and the FTP.

Transportation Planning in Florida

Transportation planning decisions in Florida are made continuously at all levels of government and by the private sector. The participation of nonmetropolitan local governments in the transportation decision-making process results in improved transportation planning, performance, and project development. Specific benefits include:

- Encouraging nonmetropolitan local officials around the state to share their voice in the transportation planning and project prioritization processes,
- Ensuring nonmetropolitan local officials can participate in guiding the future of the transportation network in Florida,
- Providing nonmetropolitan local officials with information and resources that allows them to make informed transportation planning and prioritization decisions,
- Assisting nonmetropolitan local officials in receiving federal and state transportation funding,
- Building a cooperative relationship between FDOT and nonmetropolitan local officials, and
- Promoting collaboration between land use, transportation, and economic development officials and projects.

The transportation planning entities in Florida that cooperate in Florida's transportation planning process include local governments, regional-level planning entities, and state-level planning entities.

Local Governments

Chapter 163, F.S., requires each of Florida's 67 counties and over 400 municipalities to adopt, and periodically revise, a comprehensive plan to guide growth, development, and the provision of government services for periods of 5 to 20 years. Current and future transportation projects must be consistent with those plans. Local road systems are planned, built, and maintained by counties and municipalities. Many local governments are also responsible for public transit systems, airports, and seaports, either directly or in conjunction with special authorities created to manage and provide services.

FDOT Districts review local government comprehensive plan amendments and comment on issues within the agency's jurisdiction related to transportation resources and facilities of state importance. These resources and facilities may include state transportation resources such as rights-of-way and any transportation facility on the State Highway System (SHS), Strategic Intermodal System (SIS) or National Highway System (NHS). The FDOT Districts coordinate these reviews with the state land planning agency, FloridaCommerce, and coordinate with various local, regional, and state government officials.

Regional-level Planning Entities

Florida has multiple regional planning organizations. Florida's ten regional planning councils (RPCs) cover all counties in the state. Composed of local elected leaders, appointed officials, and citizens from their regions, RPCs consider planning and development issues from a multi-county perspective. RPCs may also review and comment on local government comprehensive plan amendments, particularly for regional issues, and are responsible for the development of strategic regional policy plans containing regional goals and policies related to transportation, economic development, and natural resources.

MPOs, composed of representatives from local governments and governmental transportation authorities, are responsible for developing long-range transportation plans, transportation improvement programs, and setting transportation funding priorities. MPO boundaries are required to encompass, at a minimum, the urbanized areas plus the areas expected to become urbanized in the next 20 years. Florida's MPO boundaries typically exceed the minimum requirements. Regional rural and nonmetropolitan transportation planning efforts have been expanded in the last few years and are discussed later in the report.

State-level Planning Entities

There are many state agencies involved in the transportation planning process in Florida. FDOT is responsible for planning, operating, and maintaining the SHS. FDOT also assists local governments, metropolitan and regional agencies, and the private sector in providing public transit, aviation, rail, seaport, bicycle and pedestrian, and other transportation facilities and services. The department develops numerous statewide modal plans in addition to the statewide long-range transportation plan.

Other state agencies and organizations participate in transportation decision-making on issues such as plan review, permitting, economic development, and human services. FloridaCommerce, the state's land planning agency, reviews the FDOT Work Program and MPO Transportation Improvement Programs (TIP) each year to ensure consistency with local government comprehensive plans, including those in nonmetropolitan areas.

State agencies involved with permitting transportation projects and plan consistency oversight participate in the FDOT's Efficient Transportation Decision-Making (ETDM) process as representatives on the Environmental Technical Advisory Team (ETAT). ETDM is Florida's procedure to consider potential environmental implications of transportation projects within the planning phase. All local governments are given an additional opportunity to provide project comments using the ETDM process.

Other state agencies and entities coordinate with FDOT to facilitate transportation project development. The Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) works closely with FDOT on natural resources, air quality, and other environmental issues, during planning, development, design, and construction of transportation projects. Additionally, Florida's five Water Management Districts are responsible for assessing potential impacts of transportation projects on water resources.

Statewide Long Range Transportation Planning

FDOT is responsible for developing the statewide long range transportation plan, the Florida Transportation Plan (FTP), as well as long range plans for safety and all modes of transportation. The development of other statewide plans following the development of the FTP allows for a cohesive planning process that aligns with the FTP, is consistent with the department's overall framework for community engagement, and identifies project priorities that are adopted into the STIP. A key aspect of the planning process is community engagement. This engagement allows FDOT to continuously and efficiently cooperate with local government officials, including those in nonmetropolitan areas, so that roles, responsibilities, and issues unique to the different long range plans are tailored for effectiveness and consistent with the department's approach to community engagement described in the 2023 FDOT Public Involvement Handbook.

FDOT encourages cooperation with nonmetropolitan local governments for transportation planning through other avenues as well, such as through participation in the Rural Economic Development Initiative (REDI) and technical and financial assistance to many partners, including local governments. Some grant programs provide opportunities for local governments to address transportation planning project priorities.

Florida Transportation Plan (FTP)

The FTP is the state's long range transportation plan and is developed in cooperation with many stakeholders, including nonmetropolitan local officials. The FTP, updated every five years, identifies long range goals and objectives to address the needs of the entire transportation system. A community engagement plan is published for each update and is available from the FDOT Office of Policy Planning. Cooperative engagement with nonmetropolitan local officials is provided through statewide events, regional public workshops, and direct communication with partners, including presentations at scheduled statewide association meetings (i.e., Florida League of Cities, Florida Regional Councils Association) as well as local government meetings.

FDOT's Central Office drives FTP outreach at the statewide level and relies on its seven Districts and the Florida Turnpike Enterprise to lead engagement at the regional and local level. The Districts focus on developing outreach activities tailored to their relationships and connections within the District's boundaries, which may include:

- Targeted outreach to cities, counties, and RPCs,
- Targeted outreach based on demographic characteristics and population density,
- Targeted outreach to partners and the public (e.g., rural areas of opportunity groups), and
- Customized outreach tools and mechanisms for the appropriate audience.

Other Transportation Plans

Other statewide plans developed by FDOT include the Strategic Intermodal System (SIS) Policy Plan, the Strategic Highway Safety Plan (SHSP), the Florida Aviation System Plan, the Florida Seaport and Waterway System Plan, the Florida Rail System Plan, and the Florida Freight Mobility and Trade Plan. As dictated by the needs of each statewide plan, FDOT works closely with all partners including nonmetropolitan local officials during plan development. In each instance, a community engagement process is tailored to meet the roles, responsibilities, and issues related to each mode.

- **Strategic Intermodal System Policy Plan** – Developed to align with the FTP goals and in cooperation with Florida's local governments and other partners, including MPOs, RPCs, transportation providers, affected public agencies, and citizens.
- **Strategic Highway Safety Plan –** Developed in alignment and coordination with the FTP goals and accompanying community and partner engagement process including nonmetropolitan areas.
- **Florida Freight Mobility and Trade Plan (FMTP)** – Developed with input from the public, the Florida Freight Advisory Committee (FLFAC), and a Project Advisory Committee comprised of FDOT offices. The FLFAC guides the implementation of the plan and includes a cross-section of public and private sector freight stakeholders, including representatives of ports, shippers, carriers, freight-related associations, the freight industry workforce, and state, regional, and local governments including nonmetropolitan representatives. The FMTP also includes information about Florida's Critical Rural Freight Corridors (CRFC). Designated based on the requirements of 23 USC § 167(e), CRFCs are segments of the National Highway Freight Network that provide key connections between rural areas and the broader regional and national freight system.
- **Florida Aviation System Plan** – Developed using comprehensive community engagement with representatives from airports, MPOs, participants in the Continuing Florida Aviation System Planning Process, RPCs, county and city aviation authorities, and airport sponsor representatives.
- **Florida Seaport and Waterway System Plan** – Developed with feedback from Florida's 15 public seaports, one of which is located in a nonmetropolitan area (Port St. Joe). Ports include a variety of local government memberships, providing a cross section of industry and local government perspectives.
- **Florida Rail System Plan** – Developed using stakeholders representing various interests around the state, including the rail industry, shippers, seaports, passenger rail agencies, legislative, state, regional, and local entities, as well as community planning and environmental groups.

Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP)

FDOT annually develops and adopts the Five-Year Work Program, which balances priorities and production schedules for transportation improvements with expected state and federal transportation funds. All projects in the Work Program must be consistent, to the maximum extent feasible, with local government comprehensive plans. Federal regulation mandates that states produce a STIP, which must

include projects with federal participation over the next four years. The STIP is reviewed and approved annually by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). Florida's STIP is the first four years of FDOT's Five-Year Work Program.

In nonmetropolitan areas, FDOT cooperates with local elected officials (i.e., boards of county commissioners) to develop the Work Program. Between July and October of each year, non-MPO jurisdictions provide FDOT Districts with transportation project priorities, and to the maximum extent feasible, the Districts include these project priorities in the District Work Programs. Each District drafts a Tentative Five-Year Work Program, which is followed by a community engagement process in coordination with nonmetropolitan county commissions. As part of the community engagement process, the Districts advertise and hold public hearings to gather input on the Tentative Work Program. The public hearings are required to be held in at least one urbanized area in each District. Based on input from the public and local officials, Districts submit their Tentative Work Program to FDOT Central Office.

Upon receiving the Districts' Tentative Work Programs, FDOT Central Office prepares a statewide Tentative Work Program representing a compilation of all District Work Programs. The Florida Transportation Commission holds a final statewide public hearing prior to submitting the Department's Tentative Work Program to the Executive Office of the Governor and legislative appropriations committees. The Tentative Work Program becomes the Adopted Work Program upon approval by the Governor and Legislature, which takes effect on July 1, the beginning of the state's fiscal year. FDOT's STIP/Work Program public involvement flow chart provides additional details on the role of the Districts, the Florida Transportation Commission, and FDOT Central Office.

Collaboration with Nonmetropolitan Local Governments

In addition to the processes and procedures previously discussed in this report, FDOT engages in a variety of outreach and support activities relating specifically to nonmetropolitan transportation planning. FDOT has long supported nonmetropolitan areas through technical and financial assistance with resources such as the Local Government Resource Guide, grant programs, and application assistance, as well as participation in REDI. Since 2019, FDOT has expanded assistance and outreach to nonmetropolitan areas through nonmetropolitan planning pilot projects and research on emerging community engagement practices.

Technical and Financial Assistance

Local Government Resource Guide

Partnering with FDOT: A Resource Guide for Local Governments provides information for local governments to effectively partner with FDOT to plan, design, construct, and maintain safe and efficient transportation facilities. The Resource Guide provides an overview of FDOT by identifying key offices and roles and summarizing Florida's transportation planning, programming, and project delivery processes. In addition, the Resource Guide describes the project development cycle and phases, including typical

timeframes, and the appropriate District staff to contact for support. The Resource Guide for Local Governments also discusses key federal and state transportation funding sources, including information regarding project eligibility.

Grant Programs

Federal and state grant opportunities are available for projects in nonmetropolitan areas. Five FDOT state-funded grant programs support transportation projects identified in FDOT's Five-Year Work Program, typically funding roadway resurfacing and reconstruction, drainage improvements, bridge rehabilitations, and other multimodal enhancements such as shared use paths and trails. The FDOT Transit Office administers federal and state transit planning, capital improvement, and operation grants. The State Safety Office awards grants to traffic safety partners that undertake priority area programs and activities that address traffic safety deficiencies and reduce crashes. Table 1 provides an overview of these grant opportunities.

Table 1 Grant Opportunities

Grant Program	Authority	FDOT Office	Purpose
County Incentive Grant Program (CIGP)	Section 339.2817, F.S.	Local Programs	Funds are available to counties to improve or relieve congestion on a transportation facility located on the State Highway System.
Small County Outreach Program (SCOP)	Section 339.2818, F.S.	Local Programs	Funds are available to counties that have a population of 200,000 or less to repair or rehabilitate county bridges, pave unpaved roads, address road-related drainage improvements, resurface or reconstruct county roads, or construct capacity or safety improvements to county roads.
SCOP for Rural Areas of Opportunity Municipalities and Communities (SCOP Municipalities)	Section 339.2818, F.S.	Local Programs	Extends additional SCOP funding to municipalities and communities within a rural area of opportunity community designated under Section 288.0656(7)(a), F.S.
Small County Road Assistance Program (SCRAP)	Section 339.2816, F.S.	Local Programs	Funds are available to counties that have a population of 75,000 or less to resurface or reconstruct county roads.
Transportation Regional Incentive Program (TRIP)	Section 339.2819, F.S.	Local Programs	Funds are available to improve regionally significant transportation facilities in regional transportation areas created pursuant to Section 339.155(4), F.S.
Transportation Alternatives Set-Aside	23 USC § 133(h)	Systems Implementation Office	Funds various small-scale transportation projects, such as pedestrian and bicycle facilities, recreational trails, safe routes to school projects, sidewalk improvements, and certain environmental mitigation activities.

Grant Program	Authority	FDOT Office	Purpose
Safe Routes to Schools (SRTS)	23 USC § 208 and Section 335.066, F.S.	State Safety Office	Funds planning, design, and construction of infrastructure projects that substantially improve the safety and ability of students to walk and bicycle to school.
Highway Safety Grants	23 USC § 402 and 405	State Safety Office	Awards "seed" money to state and local agencies and jurisdictions to assist in the development and implementation of programs in traffic safety priority areas and may be awarded for addressing traffic safety deficiencies, expansion of an ongoing activity, or development of a new program.
Public Transportation Formula Grants/Enhanced Mobility of Seniors and Individuals with Disabilities	49 USC § 5310	Public Transit Office	Funds capital improvements and operating expenses for projects that are planned, designed, and carried out to meet special needs of elderly and individuals with disabilities.
Public Transportation Formula Grants/Rural Areas	49 USC § 5311	Public Transit Office	Funds capital and operating assistance in rural areas.

Rural Economic Development Initiative

FDOT is one of over 30 state and regional agencies and organizations participating in the REDI, which is established in Section 288.0656, F.S. REDI recognizes that rural communities and regions face extraordinary challenges in their efforts to enhance their economies and provides opportunities for major development projects of significant scale in these communities. Although the bulk of REDI-eligible areas include nonmetropolitan designated areas, because REDI follows the statutory definition of "rural," there are REDI communities that exist in metropolitan areas as well.

REDI brings together a focused and coordinated effort among agencies and organizations that provide programs and services to rural areas, including advocacy, outreach, and capacity building. As a part of this effort, REDI recommends waivers of financial match for state grants and other programs on a project-by-project basis. FDOT provides waivers to rural counties and municipalities to provide access to resources. Additionally, needs identified through REDI are often funded through agency grant programs, including the FDOT grant programs listed in the section above. Over the past few years, FDOT has provided grant funding to nonmetropolitan REDI communities for airport improvements, bridge repairs, roadway resurfacing, and bicycle-pedestrian trail construction, and many other critical projects.

Nonmetropolitan Transportation Planning Pilot Projects

In the last two years, FDOT has strengthened outreach to many nonmetropolitan local governments through pilot projects to improve the long-range transportation planning process in nonmetropolitan areas.

Specifically, FDOT District 3 partnered with two regional planning councils to develop Regional Rural Transportation Plans (RRTP) through pilot projects, while District 2 is working with two counties on a Rural Engagement Pilot Project.

Regional Rural Transportation Plan Pilot Project in FDOT District 3

The purpose of the RRTP was to provide a process for identifying and documenting transportation needs for the communities in FDOT District 3 not located within the District's four MPOs. This process prioritized short-term and long-term projects over a 20-year long range planning horizon with consideration of, and in alignment with, the STIP and the FTP.

FDOT District 3 first partnered with the Emerald Coast Regional Council (ECRC) to develop an RRTP covering the nonmetropolitan communities in the western part of the District. The ECRC convened a Transportation Advisory Committee, whose activities included public meetings and making recommendations to the ECRC board. The process established by this pilot project resembled the process used by MPOs in developing their long range transportation plans (LRTPs) by consolidating and coordinating the region's needs and prioritizing projects based on criteria validated by FDOT. Once project priorities were established, an online project dashboard was created, preserving historical information and serving as a resource for local governments and FDOT officials alike.

The plan was adopted by the ECRC on February 8, 2023. The plan will be evaluated on an annual basis, while major updates, including a review of all plan components, will occur within the Five-Year Work Program and LRTP update cycles. FDOT District 3 continues to work with the ECRC to extend the District's outreach to nonmetropolitan communities on a regular basis. Following adoption of the ECRC plan, the regional rural transportation planning process was expanded to the nonmetropolitan areas within the Apalachee Regional Planning Council (ARPC) in the eastern portion of FDOT District 3. The ARPC RRTP is currently in development at the time of writing.

Key lessons learned include prioritizing and planning for in-person community engagement; educating local governments with FDOT staff playing key educational roles; establishing funding-based criteria; recognizing that some jurisdictions may need assistance in data gaps; and establishing consistency in the project consideration process to further enhance efficient plan development. One major takeaway from the RRTP was that regional planning agencies can serve as an extension of FDOT because of their established partnerships with local governments.

Enhancing Regional Transportation Planning in Rural Communities Pilot Project in FDOT District 2

FDOT partnered with the Mark and Marianne Barnebey Planning and Development Lab at Florida State University (FSU) to engage communities within Columbia and Taylor counties in FDOT District 2. The partnership aimed to improve the transportation planning process, develop potential project lists, and develop applicable guidance for similar nonmetropolitan communities.

The research and public outreach conducted by FSU and FDOT centered around four pillars identified by FDOT: economic development, mobility, safety, and transportation design. A survey was also developed

and distributed to encourage participation and feedback. In Fall 2023, several public meetings were held in Columbia County. Meetings were free-flowing and featured stations organized around the four pillars designed to encourage attendees to interact with each pillar. All feedback was recorded and analyzed by the project team and used to develop criteria for ranking potential projects identified through the public outreach process.

The engagement and analysis resulted in a Community Specific Transportation Needs list developed for Columbia County. Transportation needs, such as more public transit and active modes, were identified through the regional process. Community members also often identified needs on local facilities in addition to those maintained by FDOT.

Community engagement in Columbia County highlighted several key takeaways, including the need to identify well-known community members to catalyze public trust and engagement in the planning process; the importance of attending existing public meetings at the city and county level to reach active members of the community; and the increased participation of rural residents resulting from engagement methods such as Zoom meetings, online and physical surveys, and interactive poster boards.

The community engagement and analysis process completed in Fall 2023 was extended to Taylor County through spring and summer 2024. Both project lists developed through the pilot project will be considered in development of the Five-Year Work Program. This pilot project won an award for an outstanding grassroots initiative from the Florida Planning and Zoning Association and a Student Award of Merit from the Florida Chapter of the American Planning Association.

Rural Transportation Planning Mini Peer Exchange

In Spring 2024, FDOT staff from Central Office, District 2, and District 3 held a mini peer exchange to discuss rural community engagement. District 3 staff recounted the regional rural planning area pilot project with the Emerald Coast Regional Council discussed above. They discussed the success and lessons learned from mimicking the community engagement approach that is often used by transportation planning organizations during the long range transportation planning process. District 2 staff discussed engagement that occurred in nonmetropolitan Columbia County.

Feedback shared from District 2 and District 3 staff included commentary on the rural planning process being time-intensive, requiring repeated interactions to create trust, establishing project buy-in from local residents, and building an engaged network. Other observations included:

- Community check-ins on the planning process showed residents that their input was valued,
- Community engagement continually evolved, and priorities were constantly shifting,
- Relationship building in nonmetropolitan areas was time and staff-intensive,
- Local champions were important for establishing community trust and spreading the message,
- Projects should be vetted by nonmetropolitan constituencies to produce higher quality proposed projects, and
- Nonmetropolitan engagement should align with the Work Program cycle.

Research on Emerging Practices in Community Engagement for Transportation Planning

FDOT participates in research work that furthers the understanding and effectiveness of the planning and engagement processes. FDOT is funding a research project by FSU for *Emerging Practices in Community Engagement for Transportation Planning.* The study will examine new and emerging techniques in community engagement and develop approaches for integrating these techniques into the current FDOT system of resources and training. Resources like this will help to ensure that the interests of key affected groups are adequately integrated into project planning. The outcomes of this research will include a decision support guidebook, outreach support materials, and recommendations that will identify specific approaches to community engagement in both urban and rural areas.

Nonmetropolitan Local Governments Survey

The nonmetropolitan transportation planning survey polled decision-makers within nonmetropolitan local governments throughout Florida to determine their satisfaction with the existing transportation planning process and whether their transportation planning needs were met through coordination with their FDOT District. Prior to survey distribution, FDOT staff from Central Office and Districts were consulted on the survey's content, and comments were incorporated into the final survey.

The survey was circulated to nearly 400 local government elected and administrative officials in nonmetropolitan areas throughout the state by direct email and through various organizations. Of the surveys distributed, 34 surveys were returned, including 6 from elected officials, 15 from city/county administrators, and 13 from other local government employees. Sixteen respondents were located within FDOT District 2, 15 within FDOT District 3, 2 within FDOT District 4, and 1 within FDOT District 6.

Survey Results

All 34 surveys returned were reviewed and considered; however, 28 were from respondents in nonmetropolitan areas, and 6 respondents were within an MPO boundary. In reviewing the responses, two themes were evident.

- **Majority agreed that technical assistance is available but were not sure who to contact at FDOT**
  Over half (56%) of respondents agreed/strongly agreed that technical assistance with the Local Programs grant application process is available through their FDOT District. However, over a quarter (28%) of respondents disagreed/strongly disagreed that they "know who my FDOT District contact is for transportation planning technical assistance." This indicates more effort is needed to regularly inform and update the nonmetropolitan local officials and staff on who their FDOT District contact is for obtaining technical assistance.

- **Many had no opinion for most questions**
  Many respondents (between 28% and 48% depending on the question) answered "No opinion" on the seven survey questions.

The survey shows the existing limits on FDOT's ability to share with local officials the resources and opportunities available through the agency. Further outreach is needed to increase the precision of the survey. FDOT will enhance the methodology of future surveys and continue to interact with nonmetropolitan communities to increase awareness of the agency's role in nonmetropolitan planning. To improve the survey response rate in the future, FDOT can distribute the survey online and in-person; coordinate with selected government officials within local governments to act as survey liaisons; maintain a limited number of survey questions and the number of free response questions; and increase communication with local elected and administrative officials before distributing the survey.

Recommendations Moving Forward

FDOT remains committed to working with nonmetropolitan local officials to improve the transportation planning and programming process with the goal of providing all local entities that are not served by MPOs with sufficient opportunity for input into the transportation planning and programming process.

Recommendations to enhance the nonmetropolitan planning process moving forward include:

- Actively solicit comments and ideas from nonmetropolitan transportation planning partners on how to identify and increase participation of nonmetropolitan local officials in the transportation planning process and coordinate project prioritization,
- Provide nonmetropolitan local officials with information and staff resources to make informed transportation planning decisions,
- Build on the success of the Rural Regional Transportation Pilot Program in District 3 by expanding the pilot program to other nonmetropolitan areas in the state,
- Increase the frequency of mini peer exchanges between local, regional, and statewide stakeholders to share and synthesize best practices on rural and nonmetropolitan transportation planning,
- Encourage the FDOT Districts to:
    - Make points of contact and information related to transportation planning technical assistance easily accessible via website, email, and regular communication with nonmetropolitan local officials and staff,
    - Regularly check in with nonmetropolitan local government offices to be aware of attrition and turnover to ensure new staff are aware of FDOT District points of contact,
- Consider updating the FDOT policy for Consultative Planning Process for Nonmetropolitan Areas, last reviewed in 2021, to reflect the use of "cooperate" rather than "consult" to coincide with federal transportation regulations, and
- Enhance future survey question methodology and distribution techniques to encourage a higher response rate from regional and local governmental officials.

FDOT has taken several tangible steps within the last five years to enhance the community engagement process with nonmetropolitan communities throughout Florida. By expanding and strengthening relationships between FDOT District offices, MPOs, and nonmetropolitan communities, FDOT is advancing on its commitment to increase rural resident feedback on transportation projects.

FDOT will continually seek opportunities to improve Florida's overall transportation planning process. Education-focused outreach in the FTP process and plan should be combined with outreach on transportation programs in nonmetropolitan communities. By combining outreach purposes, FDOT staff time efficiency and the number of community engagement opportunities in nonmetropolitan areas could increase. FDOT remains steadfast in its commitment to strengthen collaborative efforts during the transportation planning process in nonmetropolitan communities.

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