

# **APPLIED POLICY RESEARCH: FACILITATED CONSULTATION PROCESS FOR MPO DESIGNATION**

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

The Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) faced numerous challenges in coordinating designation of new metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) after the most recent decennial census. Prior to issuing a request for membership apportionment plans, a boundary map identifying the metropolitan planning area boundary, and a list of all entities eligible for MPO membership pursuant to statute, the Governor requested that FDOT consult with representatives of newly designated urbanized areas and existing MPOs. A push for more regionally focused MPOs made the recent round of designations even more challenging. Therefore, FDOT requested assistance through applied research to help define and develop approaches to integrate best practices for collaborative planning, consensus building, and conflict resolution for this critical piece of the decision-making process.

## **OBJECTIVES**

The Florida Conflict Resolution Consortium (FCRC) worked with FDOT through consultation with its District offices and the respective MPOs and local governments to develop model approaches to facilitated consultations for possible MPO redesignations. Using the developed model, researchers did the following:

- contacted each District and engaged in initial interviews with key contacts
- designed a consultation MPO designation process to fit the needs of each District requesting assistance
- developed meeting agendas and related materials for consultation designation meetings
- facilitated consultation meetings
- drafted and conducted surveys of participants on concerns and on examples of successful regional transportation cooperation
- drafted a summary process report for each designation consultation meeting

## **FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS**

The following are among the findings and conclusions:

1. The model meeting process was an effective means for FDOT to respond to the Governor's request for consultation with affected parties on MPO redesignation issues, a means by which researchers were able to (1) solicit the views of MPO board members and staff on the relative merits of potentially consolidating MPOs as a means of achieving effective transportation planning for their urbanized area, (2) identify and review alternative means of achieving effective transportation planning, and (3) explore possible next steps.

2. The model process was most effective when neutral facilitators were enlisted early in the consultation process to engage key participants in the development of the agenda, related meeting materials, and issues to be discussed as part of the process. This early engagement established trust and commitment to the process.
3. The model process was less effective when MPOs had already formally adopted positions in opposition to the consultation process prior to the neutral facilitators participation in the process. But even in these cases, the model was flexible enough to allow for productive discussions between key participants, which expanded the opportunity for future development of regional joint planning.
4. Written participant surveys conducted during or at the conclusion of the meetings on concerns and on examples of successful regional transportation cooperation was of limited value in establishing opportunities for future joint planning. Facilitated discussions during the meetings offered better input for identifying effective future opportunities.

## **BENEFITS**

This project helped to define and develop a conflict resolution process that provided a variety of benefits, including (1) more effective and efficient use of FDOT resources, especially personnel; (2) opportunities to build essential new relationships and mend existing relationships between key participants; (3) identified opportunities for effective regional transportation cooperation; and (4) a process model flexible enough to meet the varying needs of participants and situations. A facilitated consensus building process, if applied early, can be an effective tool for FDOT in coordinating future MPO designation consultations.

This project was conducted by Robert Jones and Harald Beardall, J.D., of The Florida Conflict Resolution Consortium, a neutral center with offices at Florida State University and the University of Central Florida. For more information, contact Kathleen Neill at (850) 414-4814, [kathleen.neill@dot.state.fl.us](mailto:kathleen.neill@dot.state.fl.us) .