

TECHNICAL MEMORANDUM

DATE: March 13, 2024
TO: Regional Transportation Advisory Council
FROM: Stella Jordan, Public Engagement Program Manager
RE: Review of Peer Agency Public Advisory Entities

Many, but not all, Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPO) have advisory councils or committees that provide a forum for public input into the MPO's work. While there are no specific federal requirements mandating or guiding this type of body, many MPOs use such advisory councils as one way to meet federal public engagement requirements. Of the MPOs that do have advisory councils with a public participation focus or framework (this research excludes MPOs with advisory councils that are similar in structure, composition, and function to policy boards or technical committees), these groups vary widely in structure, focus, mandate, and influence on the MPO's planning and decision-making processes. It is relatively rare for a public advisory council to hold a voting seat on the MPO's policy board, although many MPOs' advisory councils participate in the MPO's technical committees and have other official conduits for providing input and advice to decision makers. Most advisory councils have structured opportunities to engage with and provide input on MPO staff work programs and projects, and are outlined in the MPO's Public Engagement/Participation Plan.

This research of other MPOs' approaches to public participation and particularly the structure and role of their advisory councils was conducted throughout 2023 and 2024, and included scans of web content and planning documents as well as one-on-one interviews and a peer exchange with staff from other MPOs. From this research, several MPOs stood out for their well-documented processes and practices for administering their advisory councils, and for the functions of those advisory councils. This memo gives a brief overview of different examples of MPOs/advisory councils and some promising practices related to the administration and function of these groups.

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1 EXAMPLES

1.1 Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments/Transportation Planning Board (TPB)

The Washington, DC, region MPO supports two advisory groups: the [Community Advisory Committee](#) (CAC), which is a more general forum, and the Access for All Advisory Committee, which is focused on access and equity, has a membership of primarily transportation professionals, and is chaired by a policy board member. The CAC is the focus of this research.

The CAC has 24 members, and membership is focused on regional representation. A formal membership application is used in a biennial application process, during which TPB staff select new members based on their prior civic involvement (an application requirement is involvement with the applicant's representative on the policy board), geographic and demographic characteristics (staff seeks to mirror regional population distribution), and representation of equity communities (for which staff award extra points). Staff advertise and solicit applications via technical committee members' (primarily planning staff to board members) networks, and via promoted, geographically targeted Facebook ads. CAC members have two-year terms without term limits. The CAC chair is selected by the policy board chair. CAC meetings are open to the public to watch and listen, but not to directly participate.

Although the CAC lacks formal conduits for participation in policy board decision-making, the board chair and members frequently attend CAC meetings and maintain close working relationships with the CAC chair. CAC members participate in working groups to increase understanding of particular aspects of the transportation planning process, and hold roundtable discussions on specific topics of interest to members. TPB staff and policy board and committee members generally view the CAC as a focus group that can help shape staff work and provide helpful perspectives and an understanding of public sentiment to the board. Examples of CAC activities and input include participation in the development of the Long-Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) through scenario planning, providing input on program work such as bicycle and pedestrian planning, and CAC members' participation in other ad-hoc TPB task forces and advisory groups. TPB staff provide a monthly CAC report to the policy board, and also present a longer annual CAC report that includes a summary of activities that individual CAC members engaged in as a result of their CAC involvement (i.e., civic engagement efforts in their communities).

The CAC meets monthly in the evenings, mostly virtually with an occasional hybrid option. The CAC is formally outlined in the [TPB's Public Participation Plan](#)

(PPP), with a CAC redefinition/restructuring effort having been codified in a recent PPP update.

1.2 Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission (DVRPC)

The Philadelphia region MPO supports the [Public Participation Task Force](#) (PPTF). PPTF membership fluctuates around 40–45 people, with open public meetings. A formal application is used to select members who hold up to four two-year terms. DVRPC staff select members with a focus on diverse perspectives and backgrounds as well as demographic and geographic diversity and representation (their application includes demographic questions and questions about relevant experience and areas of interest). DVRPC staff advertise and solicit applications via targeted outreach to municipalities and organizational stakeholders. Individuals, rather than organizations/entities of affiliation, are selected as members.

The PPTF has several mechanisms for formal involvement and input in DVRPC's planning and decision-making. PPTF members are assigned to internal closed technical groups that focus on work programs, such as the Transportation Improvement Program, as well as a regional technical committee that makes recommendations to the policy board. However, the main purpose of the PPTF is to be a forum for education on core MPO work products, and a focus group for testing public outreach and engagement strategies and materials before they roll out to the general public.

PPTF members are paid stipends of \$50 per meeting (or a total of \$500 annually if they attend all meetings). Officially, this stipend is for transportation, although most meetings are virtual. Meetings occur quarterly or every two to three months as needed, and are held in the evening.

The PPTF is formally outlined in [DVRPC's PPP](#). A recent restructuring effort (prompted by a lack of clear purpose and previously toxic environment that resulted in legal issues) led to the PPTF's more formal membership processes, and was supported by the [Citizens Planning Institute](#).

1.3 Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP)

The Chicago region MPO hosts several advisory committees with various mandates, including a general [Citizens' Advisory Committee](#), a 16-member group representing residents from throughout the CMAP area who bring individual perspectives, rather than those of particular organizations or entities. The primary function of the Citizens' Advisory Committee is to provide avenues for public participation and provide the CMAP board and staff with guidance that reflects residents' perspectives. Citizens' Advisory Committee members must attend and

represent the Citizens' Advisory Committee/CMAP at one public event per year at a minimum. Members also participate in CMAP-related publicity, communications, and engagement initiatives. The Citizens' Advisory Committee meets quarterly and meetings are open to the public.

In 2023, CMAP launched a revamped version of the [Community Alliance for Regional Equity](#) (CARE) to deepen relationships with historically marginalized communities by developing partnerships with community-based organizations. CARE's goal and mandate is to address disproportionate burdens of the transportation system faced by Environmental Justice communities. Twelve to 14 organizations form each year's cohort and are selected by CMAP staff through a brief application and interview process. CARE members receive a \$10,000/year honorarium as compensation for their time and expertise. The pilot program is federally funded via the Illinois Department of Transportation.

CMAP staff use CARE as a focus group on projects and planning efforts, including the LRTP. CARE members identify and address local transportation and safety concerns and priorities, and work with staff to identify best practices and develop and improve engagement strategies and tools. CMAP also works with the CARE team to provide professional and networking opportunities for members, and shares regional and localized data and analysis with member organizations. CARE meets monthly in person and is outlined in [CMAP's PPP](#).

1.4 Greater Portland Council of Governments (GPCOG)

The Portland, Maine, region MPO supports a Regional Transportation Advisory Committee, as well as several other public advisory groups that are run through its "Mobility for All" engagement program focused on engaging older adults, people with disabilities, people of color, and other underserved communities in transportation planning. While their Advisory Committee is more formal in structure and more similar in composition to a policy board, two seats are reserved for graduates of the [Community Transportation Leaders](#) (CTL) program, a Mobility for All initiative aimed at building relationships and community capacity for civic involvement. The CTL program is the focus of this research.

GPCOG staff recruit CTL members through advertising and via agency and organization partners' networks. Recruitment does not involve a formal application; instead, staff choose participants after conducting one-on-one interviews with potential members to assess their interest and participation needs. Some participants require special accommodations such as translation and interpretation services, and have specific communication preferences, which staff accommodate. Organizational affiliation is not a membership requirement,

although advocates are accepted. The only requirement for members is that they use public transit and have experienced challenges or barriers to doing so.

The CTL program holds six sessions over six weeks, during which members identify specific transportation concerns and develop partnerships with other GPCOG staff to work on solutions that tie into work programs and projects across the agency. CTL members are officially considered volunteers, but receive a \$50 stipend per month, or \$250 upon completing the program.

In addition to holding two seats on the Regional Transportation Advisory Committee, CTL graduates can also be appointed to other GPCOG technical committees, and collaborate with GPCOG staff on other MPO initiatives.

The CTL program, under the Mobility for All Program umbrella, is formally outlined in [GPCOG's Public Involvement Plan](#) and also included in its LRTP. The program was developed to meet a formal goal of inclusive engagement. GPCOG staff also created a [CTL handbook](#) documenting the process of creating and managing this program.

1.5 Broward MPO

The Broward County, Florida, (Fort Lauderdale region) MPO supports the [Citizens' Advisory Committee](#), a group of 45 members representing municipalities, regional and state agencies, advocacy and community-based organizations, and unaffiliated residents of the region. The membership structure is split into three categories: 19 members are appointed by the policy board, 23 members are appointed by civic or other organizations selected and authorized by the policy board to appoint Citizens' Advisory Committee members, and three members are nominated and approved by the Citizens' Advisory Committee itself. Broward MPO staff, having less direct oversight over Citizens' Advisory Committee composition, regularly review Citizens' Advisory Committee membership and provide insight and input on member diversity and equitable representation.

The Citizens' Advisory Committee engages with and provides input on MPO work programs and projects, such as the LRTP, and also takes formal votes on recommendations about core MPO activities, such as Transportation Improvement Program amendments, which go to the policy board. The goal of the Citizens' Advisory Committee's feedback is to represent public interests and perspectives to MPO planners and decision makers.

The Citizens' Advisory Committee meets monthly in the evening, in-person. The Citizens' Advisory Committee is formally outlined in the [Broward MPO's PPP](#).

1.6 Thomas Jefferson Planning District Commission/ Charlottesville/Albemarle MPO (CA-MPO)

The Charlottesville, Virginia, region MPO supports the [Citizens Transportation Advisory Committee](#) (CTAC), a 13-member group representing residents of the MPO region. Five representatives of CTAC are appointed by the City Council, five representatives are appointed by the County Board of Supervisors, and three representatives are appointed by the MPO policy board. A formal application for membership is used, and each appointing authority solicits new members via their networks, with a focus on prioritizing diverse membership and the representation of a variety of transportation users. Members hold three-year terms.

CTAC's primary function is to advise the MPO policy board by offering community-focused insights and perspectives. The CTAC chair holds an ex-officio nonvoting seat on the policy board, and the CTAC vice-chair holds an ex-officio nonvoting seat on the MPO's technical committee. CTAC members also collaborate with CA-MPO staff to support the development of MPO work programs and projects, such as the LRTP, by hosting community forums, participating in community events, and identifying issues and recommending solutions for inclusion in the LRTP.

CTAC meets every two months in the evening, in person, with virtual/hybrid attendance available. CTAC is formally outlined in the [CA-MPO's PPP](#).

2 KEY TAKEAWAYS

2.1 Successes

Several themes emerge in the structure of other advisory councils that produced or supported successful outcomes in the councils' engagement and impact:

- Formal application process for membership that considers factors such as background, interest, expertise, geography, and demography, and prioritizes stakeholders that are currently underrepresented in the planning process; or other equity-driven process for ensuring a diverse and regionally representative membership body
- Strong staff involvement in agenda setting and meeting facilitation to maximize opportunities for advisory council participation in MPO work
- Clear outline of the purpose and function of the advisory council, and alignment with the engagement goals of the MPO's Public Engagement Plan

- Established framework for the advisory council to impact MPO decision-making via formal participation on boards/committees/task forces or more informal avenues such as project-related focus groups or partnerships

2.2 Challenges

Many MPOs face common challenges in facilitating a robust and effective advisory council:

- Pitching the value of participating in/committing substantial time to the advisory council, particularly for small community-based organizations and individuals
 - MPOs addressed this challenge by clearly and intentionally articulating the mission, role, and impact of the advisory council vis-a-vis the MPO and its decision-making processes, as well as by providing incentives such as stipends/honoraria, professional development and networking opportunities, or tailored data and analysis to members
- Maintaining a strong level of attendance and participation in advisory council meetings
 - MPOs addressed this challenge by having staff lead the planning and programming of meetings to maximize opportunities for direct and timely input on planning work, and housing staff support/facilitation of the advisory council in public engagement departments or practice areas to increase meeting interactivity and engagement
- Evaluating the impact of the advisory council on the MPO's planning and decision-making
 - MPOs addressed this challenge by developing formal evaluation metrics and precise language about advisory council goals and objectives; working with staff across the agency to demonstrate the value of working with the advisory council on programs and projects and incorporating their input; and working with the advisory council to generate and support specific projects (often engagement related) in which members could take stronger leadership/partnership roles

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