

I. INTRODUCTION

Since 1982, the Las Cruces Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) has served the area of New Mexico including Las Cruces, Mesilla and most of Dona Ana County. As the region served by the MPO has developed, the MPO has sought to meet the federal requirements for an MPO in ways that are appropriate within this context.

While the MPO is housed in the City of Las Cruces (both physically and administratively) the MPO's area of responsibility is regional in nature, and includes addressing transportation needs in the Town of Mesilla, parts of Dona Ana County and the increasing need for coordination with the *neighboring* MPO in El Paso, TX.

The MPO is comprised of three committees (Policy Committee, Technical Advisory Committee and Bicycle Pedestrian Advisory Committee (BPAC)). The Policy Committee makes decisions to plan for the future transportation needs of the regions. The TAC makes recommendations to the Policy Committee regarding technical issues, and the BFAC provides recommendations for the planning of bicycle facilities within the MPO area. The MPO is supported by a permanent full-time staff of an MPO Officer, two planners, a development technician and two co-ops.

This *Initial MPO Assessment Report* is the first in a series of reports developed in 2008 and early 2009 as part of the *Las Cruces MPO Location and Structure Study* leading to an action plan to maximize the effectiveness of the MPO for meeting its requirements within the context of the Las Cruces region and its needs. This is the first of the series of four reports to be developed as part of this effort:

- (1) ***Report I: Initial MPO Assessment Report***
- (2) *Report II: Best Practices and Peer Review*
- (3) *Report III: MPO Workshop Proceedings*
- (4) *Report IV: Recommended Action Plan for Las Cruces MPO*

1-1 OBJECTIVE AND SCOPE

The goal of this report is to initiate the *Las Cruces MPO Location and Structure Study* with an appropriate understanding of the Las Cruces regional planning context, given appropriate federal, state and other policies which must be supported by the MPO and its activities.

Specific objectives of the current report are:

- (1) Assess the current local understanding of the **status of the MPO** within the context of larger federal policies, definitions and law pertaining to MPO's.
- (2) Explore **opportunities to improve the MPO** from the perspective of local, regional, State DOT and FHWA partners and stakeholders.

- (3) Explore **key relationships** between different governmental entities affecting the Las Cruces MPO.
- (4) Identify **emerging issues** in transportation planning and policy that may confront the Las Cruces MPO in the immediate or long-term future.
- (5) Explore the need and opportunities for ongoing and increasing **coordination with the El Paso MPO** to address issues before the Las Cruces MPO.
- (6) Conclude with a set of key **decisions** to be explored in the *Best Practices and Peer Review*, the *MPO Workshop Proceedings* and *Recommended Action Plan for the Las Cruces MPO* as part of the current *Las Cruces MPO Location and Structure Study*.

1-2 METHODOLOGY

This *Initial MPO Assessment Report* is developed through a depth interview methodology, consisting of:

(1) Developing a set of interview questions.

The consulting team developed a discussion guide for this assessment, comprising a set of interview questions in consultation with New Mexico DOT and MPO staff. Questions were designed so that participants could respond to MPO issues in a subjective and open ended manner. This would allow the consultant team to gather focused information on topics likely to be of importance in the *Las Cruces MPO Location and Structure Study*.

The discussion guide is included in *Appendix A* of this report.

(2) Developing a set of MPO stakeholders to involve in interviews.

Stakeholders were selected to include both agency staff and citizen planner views of the MPO. The following key individuals or groups were included in interviews:

- a. Most members of the MPO Policy Committee (all were invited to participate)
- b. A majority of the members of the MPO Technical Advisory Committee (TAC)
- c. A majority of the members of the MPO Bicycle and Pedestrian Facilities Advisory Committee (BPAC)
- d. All MPO staff
- e. The Assistant Director of the El Paso MPO
- f. Representatives of NMDOT

(3) Conducting in-person interviews with targeted individuals or groups.

In the period of August 12-14, 2008 a study team of three consultants convened in Las Cruces, New Mexico to explore the current status of the Las Cruces Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) from the perspective of different state and local organizations, including both staff and citizen stakeholders. Interview participants are not identified by name in this report, however specific comments, perceptions and issues are identified based on the interviews.

The depth interview is judged to be a proper methodology for this assessment because it is (1) open-ended enough to allow participants to raise issues that may not have previously been considered, (2) directed enough to ascertain specific issues affecting the MPO and how those issues may be further studied (3) inclusive enough to involve key stakeholder groups in a meaningful way.

The following analysis reports and interprets the findings of the depth interviews within the context of the Las Cruces MPO.

From the results listed below it is apparent there is a wide variety of views on MPO functions, capabilities, major issues, and roles and responsibilities of MPO Policy Board, DOT and FHWA and other participating agencies.

Relevant excerpts from the Code of Federal Regulations and/or SAFETEA LU (2005 - 2009 federal transportation bill) concerning MPOs have been included in italics at the beginning of each pertinent section of this report to serve as a reference or benchmark for interview comments and perceptions documented in this report.

2. ASSESSMENT OF EXISTING MPO STATUS

2-1 MPO “STATUS” DEFINED

The first objective of this report is to assess the status of the Las Cruces MPO within the context of both its formal policy requirements (federal law and relevant legislation) and its need to be responsive to local expectations. To satisfy this objective, this section considers foundational elements of the MPO, including:

- The Purpose of the MPO
- Important Functions of the MPO
- The MPO’s Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP)
- The MPO’s Transportation Improvement Program (TIP)
- The MPO’s Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP) and
- Significant Achievements of the MPO

The analysis of each of the above issues will begin with a review of the Federal Policy establishing the MPO (23 USC 134 and 135) and observations regarding how the Las Cruces MPO seeks to satisfy these requirements. The analysis for each issue will then explore the expectations, needs and perceptions of stakeholders in Las Cruces with regard to the issue. The analysis of each issue will conclude with a general assessment of the balance or imbalance that the MPO faces regarding satisfying its policy requirements while serving the needs of stakeholders in the Las Cruces environment.

2-2 PURPOSE OF THE MPO

Federal Policy Stating Purpose of the MPO

In 1962 the US Congress passed legislation that required the formation of an MPO for any Urbanized Area with a population of greater than 50,000. MPO's are established in the US Code, Title 23 (Highways), Sections 134 and 135 (Metropolitan area Planning). Congress cited the following rationale for the creation of MPO's:

- Transportation investment means allocating scarce federal and other transportation funding resources appropriately
- Planning needs to reflect the region's shared vision for its future
- Adequate transportation planning requires a comprehensive examination of the region's future and investment alternatives
- An MPO is needed to facilitate collaboration of governments, interested parties and residents in the planning process

The policy, as states purposes for metropolitan planning within the context of the overall federal policy for metropolitan area planning given in Title 23 (Section A):

- (1) ***Encourage and promote the safe and efficient management, operation, and development of surface transportation systems that will serve the mobility needs of people and freight and foster economic growth and development within and between States and urbanized areas, while minimizing transportation-related fuel consumption and air pollution through metropolitan and statewide transportation planning processes identified in this chapter; and***
- (2) ***Encourage the continued improvement and evolution of the metropolitan and statewide transportation planning processes by metropolitan planning organizations, State departments of transportation, and public transit operators as guided by the planning factors identified in subsection (h) and section 135(d).***

The over-arching purpose of any MPO established under federal law is to ensure transportation investments are developed through a continuous, cooperative and comprehensive “3-C” process.

The MPO is expected to provide a forum where regional transportation stakeholders collaboratively assess regional transportation issues and identify optimal solutions meeting area travel needs.

Further background on federal policies pertaining to the **core functions of the MPO** is cited in section 2-3 of this report.

Stakeholder Expectations Regarding the Purpose of the Las Cruces MPO

Stakeholders in the Las Cruces MPO had many expectations regarding the purpose of the MPO. Some of the specific purposes of the MPO cited by Las Cruces stakeholders included:

- Joint transportation planning
- Multi-modal transportation
- Put policies into place
- Design a flexible plan for future roads and infrastructure
- Coordinate transportation planning among the jurisdictions and ensure effective use of federal funds

While all of the above mentioned purposes of the MPO are consistent with the federal requirements, there were other responses in which stakeholders identified activities the MPO undertakes in pursuit of the above purposes as “purposes” in and of themselves. In particular one perception was that the purpose of the MPO was:

- “To identify and monitor roadway sizing and alignments”

Yet another local perception of the MPO’s purpose was that the MPO exists:

- “To help direct growth in the face of development”

This was the only observation that was clearly outside of the federal language regarding the purpose of the MPO. (However it is important to note that the federal policies do not preclude MPO’s from taking a role in growth management. The federal policies simply do not identify this as a core purpose of the MPO).

2-3 IMPORTANT FUNCTIONS OF THE MPO

Federal Policy Stating Functions of the MPO

The US Code, Title 23 (Highways), Section 134-H (Metropolitan area Planning) clearly states the scope of planning activity an MPO:

(1) *In general.--The metropolitan planning process for a metropolitan planning area under this section shall provide for consideration of projects and strategies that will-*

(A) *Support the economic vitality of the metropolitan area, especially by enabling global competitiveness, productivity, and efficiency;*

(B) *Increase the safety of the transportation system for motorized and non-motorized users;*

(C) *Increase the security of the transportation system for motorized and non-motorized users;*

(D) *Increase the accessibility and mobility of people and for freight;*

(E) *Protect and enhance the environment, promote energy conservation, improve the quality of life, and promote consistency between transportation improvements and State and local planned growth and economic development patterns;*

(F) *Enhance the integration and connectivity of the transportation system, across and between modes, for people and freight;*

(G) *Promote efficient system management and operation; and emphasize the preservation of the existing transportation system.*

Within this general scope of planning activity, all MPOs in the nation are expected to perform the following five core functions:

- (1) **Establish a setting:** Establish and manage a fair and impartial setting for effective regional decision-making in the metropolitan area.
- (2) **Evaluate alternatives:** Evaluate transportation alternatives, scaled to the size and complexity of the region, to the nature of its transportation issues, and to the realistically available options.
- (3) **Maintain a long-range transportation plan:** Develop and update a long-range transportation plan for the metropolitan area covering a planning horizon of at least twenty years that fosters (1) mobility and access for people and goods, (2) efficient system performance and preservation, and (3) quality of life.

- (4) **Develop a transportation improvement program:** Develop a program based on the long-range transportation plan and designed to serve the area's goals, using spending, regulating, operating, management, and financial tools.
- (5) **Involve the public:** Involve the general public and all the significantly affected sub-groups in the four essential functions listed above.

While some of these core functions are further explored in subsequent sections of this report, the current section focuses on the degree of balance or imbalance between current public expectations of the Las Cruces MPO, and these core functions.

Stakeholder Expectations Regarding the Core Functions of the Las Cruces MPO

Stakeholders in the Las Cruces MPO had many expectations regarding the functions of the MPO. Some of the specific expected functions of the MPO cited by Las Cruces stakeholders included:

- Provide a regional forum for transportation decisions
- Involve the public in plans and projects
- Create a regional multi-modal transportation plan that avoids duplication (including maps of the area and its needed transportation improvements, as well as explaining why projects need to be done)
- Serve as a liaison among different governmental entities and enable the area to acquire federal funds for local projects
- Improve the quality of life for citizens
- Create a transportation System that matches the growth and dynamics of the city
- Prioritize projects to fund

While all of the above activities can be interpreted to fall within the scope of planning activity for an MPO as indicated in the federal law, there are clearly some expectations which fall outside of the five core functions indicated in federal policy.

One observation regarding the public expectations of the core functions of the Las Cruces MPO is the absence of any responses to this question pertaining to:

- Evaluation of transportation alternatives or
- Development of the transportation improvement program

This may suggest that steps can be taken to accentuate these functions of the MPO and the understanding among stakeholders that these are critical and core functions of the organization.

It is also notable that there are some expectations of the MPO by stakeholders which may fall outside of the defined core functions. In particular, the expectation for the MPO to

“improve the quality of life for citizens” may clearly be interpreted as a desired outcome of the MPO’s general scope under Title 23, Section 134-F, yet the broad based function of improving quality of life, and all that entails may not be fully within the scope of an MPO’s core functions.

In a similar way, the creation of a transportation system that matches the growth and dynamics of the city, while clearly a desired outcome, may be considered more of a best practice for the MPO’s core functions of maintaining long range plans, within the setting of regional decision making.

2-4 THE LONG RANGE TRANSPORTATION PLAN

Federal Policy on the Long Range Transportation Plan

The US Code, Title 23 (Highways), Section 134-I (Metropolitan area Planning) clearly describes the requirements for a Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) in an MPO:

- (1) ***In general.***--Each metropolitan planning organization shall prepare and update a transportation plan for its metropolitan planning area in accordance with the requirements of this subsection. The metropolitan planning organization shall prepare and update such plan every 4 years (or more frequently, if the metropolitan planning organization elects to update more frequently) in the case of each of the following:
 - (A) Any area designated as nonattainment, as defined in section 107(d) of the Clean Air Act (42 U.S.C. 7407(d)).
 - (B) Any area that was nonattainment and subsequently designated to attainment in accordance with section 107(d)(3) of that Act (42 U.S.C. 7407(d)(3)) and that is subject to a maintenance plan under section 175A of that Act (42 U.S.C. 7505a).

In the case of any other area required to have a transportation plan in accordance with the requirements of this subsection, the metropolitan planning organization shall prepare and update such plan every 5 years unless the metropolitan planning organization elects to update more frequently.

- (2) ***Transportation plan.***--A transportation plan under this section shall be in a form that the Secretary determines to be appropriate and shall contain, at a minimum, the following:
 - (A) *Identification of transportation facilities.*--An identification of transportation facilities (including major roadways, transit, multimodal and intermodal facilities, and intermodal connectors) that should function as an integrated metropolitan transportation system, giving emphasis to

those facilities that serve important national and regional transportation functions. In formulating the transportation plan, the metropolitan planning organization shall consider factors described in subsection (h) as such factors relate to a 20-year forecast period.

(B) Mitigation activities

- i In general.--A long-range transportation plan shall include a discussion of types of potential environmental mitigation activities and potential areas to carry out these activities, including activities that may have the greatest potential to restore and maintain the environmental functions affected by the plan.*
- ii Consultation.--The discussion shall be developed in consultation with Federal, State, and tribal wildlife, land management, and regulatory agencies.*

(C) Financial plan.--A financial plan that demonstrates how the adopted transportation plan can be implemented, indicates resources from public and private sources that are reasonably expected to be made available to carry out the plan, and recommends any additional financing strategies for needed projects and programs. The financial plan may include, for illustrative purposes, additional projects that would be included in the adopted transportation plan if reasonable additional resources beyond those identified in the financial plan were available. For the purpose of developing the transportation plan, the metropolitan planning organization, transit operator, and State shall cooperatively develop estimates of funds that will be available to support plan implementation.

(D) Operational and management strategies.--Operational and management strategies to improve the performance of existing transportation facilities to relieve vehicular congestion and maximize the safety and mobility of people and goods.

(E) Capital investment and other strategies.--Capital investment and other strategies to preserve the existing and projected future metropolitan transportation infrastructure and provide for multimodal capacity increases based on regional priorities and needs.

(F) Transportation and transit enhancement activities.-- Proposed and transit enhancement activities.

(3) Coordination with clean air act agencies.—

In metropolitan areas which are in nonattainment for ozone or carbon monoxide under the Clean Air Act, the metropolitan planning organization shall coordinate the development of a transportation plan with the process for development of the transportation control measures of the State implementation plan required by the Clean Air Act.

(4) Consultation.-

(A) In general.--In each metropolitan area, the metropolitan planning organization shall consult, as appropriate, with State and local agencies responsible for land use management, natural resources, environmental protection, conservation, and historic preservation concerning the development of a long-range transportation plan.

(B) Issues.--The consultation shall involve, as appropriate—

- i. Comparison of transportation plans with State conservation plans or maps, if available; or*
- ii. Comparison of transportation plans to inventories of natural or historic resources, if available.*

(5) Participation by interested parties.—

(A) In general.--Each metropolitan planning organization shall provide citizens, affected public agencies, representatives of public transportation employees, freight shippers, providers of freight transportation services, private providers of transportation, representatives of users of public transportation, representatives of users of pedestrian walkways and bicycle transportation facilities, representatives of the disabled, and other interested parties with a reasonable opportunity to comment on the transportation plan.

(B) Contents of participation plan.—

A participation plan--

- i. Shall be developed in consultation with all interested parties; and*
- ii. Shall provide that all interested parties have reasonable opportunities to comment on the contents of the transportation plan.*

(C) *Methods.*--In carrying out subparagraph (A), the metropolitan planning organization shall, to the maximum extent practicable—

- i. *Hold any public meetings at convenient and accessible locations and times;*
- ii. *Employ visualization techniques to describe plans; and*
- iii. *Make public information available in electronically accessible format and means, such as the World Wide Web, as appropriate to afford reasonable opportunity for consideration of public information under subparagraph (A).*

(6) *Publication.*—

A transportation plan involving Federal participation shall be published or otherwise made readily available by the metropolitan planning organization for public review, including (to the maximum extent practicable) in electronically accessible formats and means, such as the World Wide Web, approved by the metropolitan planning organization and submitted for information purposes to the Governor at such times and in such manner as the Secretary shall establish.

(7) *Selection of projects from illustrative list.*—

Notwithstanding paragraph (2)(C), a State or metropolitan planning organization shall not be required to select any project from the illustrative list of additional projects included in the financial plan under paragraph (2)(C).

Given the breadth of requirements placed on the LRTP by federal law, it is not surprising that stakeholders in the Las Cruces area indicated a breadth of different expectations regarding what was important about the LRTP, its role in the MPO process, and how it might be improved.

Stakeholder Expectations Regarding the Las Cruces Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP)

The first LRTP was adopted by the Las Cruces MPO in 1994 and updated in 2000, then again in 2005. Stakeholders consistently commented that with each update, the quality of the plan improves as an overall planning resource for the region.

Overall, stakeholders in the Las Cruces MPO area see the MPO’s LRTP as a good “macro-level tool” for long range planning. (“Macro-level” means the LRTP is seen as good for high-level planning at the community level, as opposed to “micro-level” planning which may be at the project level). The MPO is in the process of “overhauling”

the LRTP format, which is expected to improve the overall quality of the LRTP as a planning document. The plan has been SAFETEA-LU compliant since 2007 per NMDOT and FHWA requirements. In February of 2007 the pedestrian element of the LRTP was also updated. The current LRTP includes a “MTP” or Major Thoroughfare Plan.

As the MPO is makes regular updates to the plan, there is an awareness that many significant investments in the planning process will be most efficiently implemented in (or after) 2010, when the reauthorization of the federal transportation law will make clear how improvements in the LRTP can best meet new requirements.

Meanwhile, in addition to a current overhaul of the LRTP format, MPO staff track the population of the area closely, and do not expect the MPO to be a TMA by 2010 (FHWA however, believes it is possible the Las Cruces MPO could be a TMA and should be preparing for that). Processes like the “Las Cruces Vision 2040” (which invites stakeholders to consider future development, and its associated infrastructure and transportation requirements) are exemplary of how integration with regional planning can enhance the quality of the LRTP as a planning process.

A need was identified to keep community development and land use planning integral to the LRTP process, but to do so in a way that maintains the integrity of each process, such that the LRTP doesn’t degenerate into a composite of development reviews and sub-area studies in response to land use changes. There is also sense on the part of many stakeholders that the LRTP could be improved by greater utilization and enhancement of system level modeling, analysis, multi-modal performance measurement and scenario planning in the LRTP process.

The assessment found many comments from Las Cruces MPO stakeholders indicating a consistent understanding of the LRTP process with the federal requirements cited above. Some examples of comments about the LRTP made by stakeholders showing this understanding are:

- The LRTP reflects input from all parties
- The plan is comprehensive
- The plan should include more quantitative analysis showing trends, level of service, and other quantifiable measures.
- The public transportation and pedestrian elements have been “beefed up”
- Keep it current
- Educate the public that it exists (2)
- A summary of the plan would be helpful

The above bulleted observations or expectations about the Las Cruces LRTP are consistent with the federal policy expectations of what an LRTP should be, and would likely support the LRTP in a manner consistent with federal law.

There were other comments that did not address the LRTP as an instrument of federal policy, but that highlighted some practical and operational issues associated with the plan in the Las Cruces context. These are issues and stakeholder expectations, that are more specific to Las Cruces, and not general interpretations of federal law regarding LRTP's. Yet these issues and expectations, if addressed by the *Las Cruces MPO Location and Structure Study* may enhance the practical effectiveness of the LRTP as a policy instrument.

- The LRTP is not used as effectively as it could be for regional decision making.
- The Policy Committee is “passive” with respect to the LRTP
- MPO staff is responsive to the board in development of the LRTP
- The plan is not fully adopted by jurisdictions and is not fully implemented (such as bicycle and transit portions)
- A plan organized by issues (such as safety, mobility, etc.) might be better than a plan organized by modes.
- Developers don't take a multi-modal approach to planning their projects, so the plan does not get fully implemented.
- Expand geographic coverage to address southern part of County in El Paso MPO
- Needs more strategies and tools for implementation
- Connect land use and transportation planning to make livable communities and complete streets
- Enhance trail connectivity
- The LRTP should be organized into phased 10-year “bands” in which different projects/priorities may need to be completed
- Involve MPO in City Arroyo Task Force to protect future trails
- Better communications with NMSU and Las Cruces Public Schools (who have not been attending TAC meetings) on schools planning

While none of the above stakeholder expectations are expressly required of the LRTP by federal law, each item above is an area where decisions could be made that might enable the MPO to better carry out the LRTP in a way that meets specific Las Cruces region stakeholder expectations, while also carrying out the federal requirements for the LRTP.

There were only a few comments from Las Cruces stakeholders that seemed to denote a lack of understanding of what the LRTP is as a required instrument of federal policy. The following three comments suggest some stakeholder expectations of the LRTP which are clearly outside the scope of what an MPO's LRTP is generally expected to satisfy:

- It has been helpful in understanding urban growth limits in making decisions on land use
- Assess societal changes in doing the plan, especially with regard to energy issues
- Address land use more directly

The above comments view the LRTP in a manner that may confuse it with a local comprehensive plan, a local, regional or statewide energy plan or a local zoning ordinance. While the above mentioned comments do reflect some stakeholder expectations of the LRTP, the only assessment that can be made from these comments is that there is a need to both coordinate the LRTP with other supporting policies in areas such as energy and land use, while also clearly educating stakeholders on the purpose and function of the LRTP as it relates to other plans and policies.

2-5 THE TRANSPORTATION IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM (TIP)

Federal Policy on the Transportation Improvement Program

The US Code, Title 23 (Highways), Section 134-J (Metropolitan area Planning) clearly describes the requirements for a Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) in an MPO:

(1) TIP Development

(A) In General

In cooperation with the State and any affected public transportation operator, the metropolitan planning organization designated for a metropolitan area shall develop a TIP for the area for which the organization is designated.

(B) Opportunity for Comment

In developing the TIP, the metropolitan planning organization, in cooperation with the State and any affected public transportation operator, shall provide an opportunity for participation by interested parties in the development of the program, in accordance with subsection (i)(5).

(C) Funding Estimates

For the purpose of developing the TIP, the metropolitan planning organization, public transportation agency, and State shall cooperatively develop estimates of funds that are reasonably expected to be available to support program implementation.

(D) Updating and Approval

The TIP shall be updated at least once every 4 years and shall be approved by the metropolitan planning organization and the Governor/

(2) Contents

(A) *Priority List*

The TIP shall include a priority list of proposed federally supported projects and strategies to be carried out within each 4-year period after the initial adoption of the TIP.

(B) *Financial Plan*

The TIP shall include a financial plan that:

- i. Demonstrates how the TIP can be implemented;*
- ii. Indicates resources from public and private sources that are reasonably expected to be available to carry out the program;*
- iii. Identifies innovative financing techniques to finance projects, programs, and strategies; and*
- iv. May include, for illustrative purposes, additional projects that would be included in the approved TIP if reasonable additional resources beyond those identified in the financial plan were available*

(C) *Descriptions*

Each project in the TIP shall include sufficient descriptive material (such as type of work, termini, length, and other similar factors) to identify the project or phase of the project.

(3) *Included Projects*

(A) *Projects under this title and chapter 53 of title 49.--A*

TIP developed under this subsection for a metropolitan area shall include the projects within the area that are proposed for funding under chapter 1 of this title and chapter 53 of title 49.

(B) *Projects Under Chapter 2 –*

- i. Regionally significant projects.--Regionally significant projects proposed for funding under chapter 2 shall be identified individually in the transportation improvement program.*
- ii. Other projects.--Projects proposed for funding under chapter 2 that are not determined to be regionally significant shall be grouped in one line item or identified individually in the transportation improvement program*

(C) *Consistency with Long Range Transportation Plan – Each project shall be consistent with the Long Range Transportation Plan developed under subsection (i) for the area.*

(D) Requirement of anticipated full funding.--The program shall include a project, or an identified phase of a project, only if full funding can reasonably be anticipated to be available for the project within the time period contemplated for completion of the project.

(4) Notice and Comment –

Before approving a TIP, a metropolitan planning organization, in cooperation with the State and any affected public transportation operator, shall provide an opportunity for participation by interested parties in the development of the program, in accordance with subsection (i)(5).

(5) Selection of Projects

(A) In General.--Except as otherwise provided in subsection (k)(4) and in addition to the TIP development required under paragraph (1), the selection of federally funded projects in metropolitan areas shall be carried out, from the approved TIP by

i. By

(I) In the case of projects under this title, the State; and

(II) In the case of projects under chapter 53 of title 49, the designated recipients of public transportation funding; and

ii. In cooperation with the metropolitan planning organization.

(B) Modifications to project priority.--Notwithstanding any other provision of law, action by the Secretary shall not be required to advance a project included in the approved TIP in place of another project in the program.

(6) Selection of Projects from Illustrative List

(A) No required selection.--Notwithstanding paragraph (2)(B)(iv), a State or metropolitan planning organization shall not be required to select any project from the illustrative list of additional projects included in the financial plan under paragraph (2)(B)(iv).

(B) Required action by the secretary.--Action by the Secretary shall be required for a State or metropolitan planning organization to select any project from the illustrative list of additional projects included in the financial plan under paragraph (2)(B)(iv) for inclusion in an approved TIP.

(7) Publication

(A) Required action by the secretary.--Action by the Secretary shall be required for a State or metropolitan planning organization to select any project from the illustrative list of additional projects included in the financial plan under paragraph (2)(B)(iv) for inclusion in an approved TIP.

(B) Publication of annual listings of projects.--An annual listing of projects, including investments in pedestrian walkways and bicycle transportation facilities, for which Federal funds have been obligated in the preceding year shall be published or otherwise made available by the cooperative effort of the State, transit operator, and metropolitan planning organization for public review. The listing shall be consistent with the categories identified in the TIP.

Stakeholder Expectations Regarding the Las Cruces Transportation Improvement Program (TIP)

The TIP is an area of frustration for many stakeholders in the Las Cruces MPO. There is a sense that SAFETEA-LU does not provide adequate funding for projects in small urban areas. This exacerbates a deeper issue of a disconnect between the Las Cruces MPO TIP process, and the NMDOT District project programming process.

The disconnect is a major issue of concern to the NMDOT district, and creates difficulties in the NMDOT's programming process with respect to the Las Cruces MPO. NMDOT stakeholders expressed a desire for NMDOT to be more involved in TIP project selection and ranking with the Las Cruces MPO. There is also concern among NMDOT stakeholders that MPO members do not have a firm understanding of NMDOT District (District 1) responsibilities, organization and procedures for project development funding.

The DOT District includes a large area, encompassing two MPOs and two Regional Planning Organizations (RPOs). The NMDOT allocates funds to each district according to formulas that take into account population, lane miles and vehicle miles of travel. Districts have to consider the needs of local governments in relation to the needs of the transportation network in the district and its relation to the NMDOT state-wide transportation network. Federal or State Legislative earmarks occur through the actions of elected officials.

The disconnect between the Las Cruces TIP process and NMDOT's programming creates a perception among other stakeholders that the state brings projects directly into the STIP for funding, and effectively changes the TIP at will whenever NMDOT funds a project – making the TIP less of an MPO planning process, and more of a simple formality or “rubber stamp” for projects chosen by the NMDOT independently of the MPO process.

The disconnect (perceived and actual) between the MPO TIP process and the state DOT programming of the STIP is at odds with the Federal law on the TIP process as described above, however there was clearly not awareness of the above referenced federal policies and procedures for how the TIP is to be developed, amended and implemented.

The result is that a cross section of local stakeholders are under the impression that projects brought into the TIP through the prescribed MPO planning process take a “back seat” to NMDOT priorities and tend to stay on the TIP indefinitely without ever being completed. This concern was most often noted with regard to Dona Ana County and the Town of Mesilla sponsored projects.

Some stakeholder comments and suggestions regarding the TIP process in the Las Cruces MPO which speak to existing perceptions of the TIP are:

- NMDOT General Office and District staff should attend more MPO Meetings
- The MPO Policy Committee should have a greater hand in project selection
- NMDOT should be more open about its project selection criteria and collaborate with the MPO in the development and application of the criteria
- Local elected officials should be more involved in the development and selection of NMDOT projects (which are, in essence projects in the TIP)
- There should be a mechanism to fund local projects that are nominated by entities other than NMDOT

All of the above suggestions and comments are consistent with the above cited federal law regarding the TIP process, and point to key decisions that must be made in the Las Cruces MPO Location and Structure study to establish a collaborative TIP process between the MPO and NMODT to ensure consistent metropolitan planning and transportation programming for the region.

Other stakeholder comments about the TIP report surround the need for a more transparent, collaborative and structured process for the MPO to manage priorities in the fiscally constrained TIP in conjunction with its member organizations (including NMDOT). Some of the comments were as follow:

- The TIP process should be continuous, cooperative, and coordinated
- The TIP is adequate, however the lack of funding is frustrating
- Projects are well prioritized
- The TIP doesn't work because funds are not really in the hands of the MPO
- The DOT (and legislative earmarks) dominate the TIP; hence it is not really a true 'planning' document so much as simply a list of NMDOT priorities
- Short Term: Las Cruces MPO should involve the NMDOT more closely to establish buy-in to the planning process.

- More FHWA oversight is needed in the relationship between NMDOT and the MPO
- The DOT plays too dominant a role in the TIP, crowding out the needs of the County
- Fiscal constraints eliminate options—not enough resources are available

There is also a perception among some stakeholders that the MPO is making progress in improving the TIP process. Some comments regarding recent improvements and strengths of the TIP include:

- Staff has made good changes, tying it to appropriations
- The new evaluation process is more objective and a nice improvement
- It is a good document

There were also some comments indicating some stakeholders have a lack of knowledge or understanding of the TIP process. For example:

- Long term: Las Cruces MPO should anticipate becoming a TMA to have more control of the TIP
- It is a useful tool for getting funds from the legislature
- Only fully funded projects are put on the TIP

Las Cruces does not expect to be a TMA under the next census (though some stakeholders disagree with this judgment), and the TIP is not intended as a tool for getting funds from the legislature. Furthermore, by definition, the TIP is fiscally constrained and does not include unfunded projects. The only conclusion that can be made from these comments is that it is possible that further education of stakeholders may help enhance the overall understanding of the TIP purpose and functions for the Las Cruces MPO.

2-6 THE UNIFIED PLANNING WORK PROGRAM (UPWP)

National Best Practices for the UPWP

The Unified planning work program (UPWP) is the program which determines what the major activities of the MPO will be in a given period. Generally, the purposes of the UPWP for an MPO are:

- (1) Reflect planning priorities in the area served by the MPO
- (2) List studies and tasks to be performed by the MPO and or its member agencies (with MPO funds)
- (3) Cover at least one year
- (4) Identify funding sources for each study or task
- (5) Serve as a basis for PL funding and FTA 5303 transferability
- (6) Provide schedules for major planning activities to be undertaken in the MPO

- (7) Identify the responsible agencies for each study or task undertaken with MPO funding
- (8) Often include a 'preamble' element articulating the intentions of the MPO's planning activity for the period.

Stakeholder Expectations Regarding the Las Cruces Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP)

There is some concern that the MPO may leave elements of its (UPWP) not completed. There is a desire for more clear accountability regarding staff hours and expected outcome for UPWP activities.

Some stakeholders raised concerns that the Las Cruces MPO does not currently use the full potential of UPWP as a tool to (1) guide MPO work, (2) focus MPO staff work tasks, and (3) allocate staff and budget resources for required and desired tasks. There is a perception among some MPO stakeholders that the MPO Policy Board doesn't fully understand the connection between the UPWP, funding, and how staff time is used by the MPO.

There is a sense among many stakeholders that the UPWP has been improving. They cite more transparency in accounting for the activities of the MPO. Nevertheless, the general comments tended to agree that the UPWP but may still not be as transparent as possible, with respect to expected outcomes and MPO specific activities associated with hours charged to the MPO.

2-7 SIGNIFICANT ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE MPO

Stakeholders identified many achievements of the MPO they believed to be significant. The following is a list of achievements cited by the stakeholders as being important to the Las Cruces region:

- The Major Thoroughfare Plan
- Highly effective, charette style public involvement (critical for buy-in to the LRTP)
- Identifying future roads on east mesa
- Support to identifying issues at SCRTD
- Public transportation (Road Runner) and bicycle paths
- Three new traffic signals in Mesilla
- High quality multi-modal planning
- Thoroughfare and bicycle facility plans are taken seriously by City of Las Cruces
- MPO keeps the public informed
- Coordinated human resources transportation plan for urban areas
- SCRTD planning process is completed

- Bike paths are getting built on many of the new roads
- Better lighting and signalization at intersections
- Neighborhoods have been constructively involved in planning and have even come up with new alternatives that have been adopted (2)
- They have kept the plan up to date, which has served the community well

While this list shows stakeholders associate the MPO with important transportation planning developments and projects in the region, it also shows that stakeholders are often unclear on those achievements which are really attributable to MPO functions (as defined by the policies cited throughout this section of the current report), and which are simply transportation projects which have helped the system.

For example, the citation of three new traffic signals in Mesilla as an achievement of the MPO indicates there is some confusion among stakeholders as to what an MPO accomplishment is, and what is simply a good project which is delivered through the MPO's programs. Other examples include the citation of a coordinated Human Services Transportation Plan (HSTP) for urban areas and the building of bicycle paths. While these achievements may be supported through the MPO's program, they are not typically within the scope of achievements one would associate with the MPO process itself.

3. OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE THE MPO

Given the above analysis of stakeholder expectations of the Las Cruces MPO within the context of larger federal policies establishing and governing the MPO, the current section explores ways in which stakeholders would most like to improve the Las Cruces MPO. Stakeholder comment on potential improvements to the Las Cruces MPO is organized into the areas of:

- Most Desired Capabilities of the MPO
- Possible Changes to the MPO Committee Structure
- Adequacy of MPO Funding
- Adequacy of MPO Staff Levels
- Training and Educational Opportunities for MPO Staff
- Key Areas for Improved Outcomes
- Perceptions of the Linkage to the City of Las Cruces

The following is a general summary of stakeholder perceptions of opportunities for improvements to the Las Cruces MPO in each of these areas. In some cases, brief analysis is added to the reporting of stakeholder views to clarify the degree to which such improvements can be made given the policies governing the MPO as outlined in section 2 of this report.

3-1 MOST DESIRED CAPABILITIES OF THE MPO

Technical Analysis in Corridor Studies

Stakeholders cited a desire to incorporate more technical analysis into the “corridor studies” implemented by the MPO. Engineering analysis, a greater utilization of modeling, measures of effectiveness and GIS were all seen as features that may add value to the corridor studies currently undertaken by the MPO.

There was also some concern about how the MPO characterizes neighborhood charettes and street studies as “corridor studies.” It was noted by some stakeholders that a “corridor study” as typically defined in transportation planning involves a rigorous assessment of performance problems on a specified transportation corridor, proposes specific and detailed alternatives, considers impacts (through modeling and analysis), develops cost estimates, and then ranks alternatives to be considered for funding through the MPO TIP process.

When the Las Cruces MPO describes “corridor studies” the term generally refers to neighborhood charettes which effectively involve the public in discussing transportation issues, but may better be described by a name other than “corridor study” given the level of effort generally associated with a true “corridor study.”

For charettes, corridor studies and other planning activities in the MPO, some examples of specific technical analyses stakeholders desired to see further utilized in the MPO include:

- Conducting a cost-benefit analysis for projects
- Travel demand modeling and simulation
- Greater technical assistance to committee members

Policy Expertise

Some stakeholders cited a desire for greater policy expertise at the MPO regarding federal and state law, engineering standards and policies relevant to MPO policy decisions. The desire to bring greater policy knowledge to the MPO was identified by stakeholders as important for both for the MPO staff as well as MPO committee members.

An observation was made that DOT district staff have been known to answer questions in public meetings and other settings about the federal policies governing the MPO, its associated policies and requirements that might typically be answered by MPO staff. There is a need for a solid sense of internal awareness and knowledge among MPO staff of key MPO policies and requirements, and a definitive process of communicating this information to Policy Board members.

The recent development of the “MPO 101” binder and compact disk are seen as positive developments in this regard. However, accompanying these resources with an active

program of education and advisory support for MPO Policy Board members is seen by some stakeholders as critical for the success of the MPO.

Some examples of specific technical analyses stakeholders desired to see further utilized in the MPO include:

- The MPO 101 “course” would be very beneficial. For example, the staff could develop a course based on the “MPO 101” binder, and refer to the binder in the course (even walk the board through the binder).
- More board training, esp. for new members—staff is trying to do more of this, but the board has to be willing to take the time

Involvement in More Areas of Policy, with More Partner Agencies

When asked about desired capabilities of the MPO, many stakeholders offered responses that were less about desired capabilities than about desired activities they believed would add value to the MPO. Many of these activities fall within the scope of the MPO as defined in section 2 of this report, and while not associated with specific MPO capabilities, they were important enough to stakeholders to mention in response to this question. They are therefore reported as common responses to this question.

Some examples of areas where stakeholders mentioned a desire for greater MPO involvement with other policy areas or agencies included:

- Greater involvement of the MPO in the Las Cruces development process
- Work more closely with the El Paso MPO
- Involve the MPO in the City Arroyo Task Force to protect future trails
- Better communications with NMSU and Las Cruces Public Schools (who have not been attending TAC meetings) on schools planning
- Connect land use and transportation planning to make livable communities and complete streets
- Increased trail connectivity
- Encourage more policy development and the implementation of design standards

3-2 POSSIBLE CHANGES TO COMMITTEE STRUCTURE

Positive Feedback Regarding Committee Structure

Stakeholders held a generally positive view of the MPO committee structure. Positive feedback from stakeholders regarding the committee structure includes the following comments:

- It is seen as a positive that each entity has equal representation, regardless of population
- Citizen input via the Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee (BPAC) is good
- It is working well; the other committees save the Policy Committee a lot of time

Opportunities to Improve Coordination among Committees and other Entities

The assessment finds a consistent desire among stakeholders for improved communication among the MPO committees, as well as committee representation for key technical actors in the Las Cruces planning environment. Stakeholders also cited a desire for combining some meetings of MPO committees, so that staff does not have to repeat the same presentation. Another consistent desire among many stakeholders was a desire for NMDOT to be represented on the MPO Policy Committee. Some specific comments regarding the need for improved coordination among committees were:

- Need for more communication among committees, including a liaison to the Policy Committee, or a Policy Committee Member sitting on each committee
- NMDOT should be represented on the policy committee to ensure buy-in
- Need cross fertilization (input) from smaller communities
- Have all 3 committees meet jointly sometimes, especially for educational presentations from staff so they need not be repeated at each meeting
- Add technical staff to Policy Committee as ex officio members
- Have TAC and BPAC chairs attend PC board meeting and present their recommendations (rather than MPO staff presenting for them)
- Policy Committee members should attend some of the other committee meetings to improve information flow; perhaps a Policy Committee member could sit on each of the other committees

Some Interest in a New Committee

In addition to the above observations, stakeholders also expressed some level of interest in a citizen’s advisory committee for the MPO. This was generally seen as desirable only if the staff would have sufficient time to support its efforts. Some specific stakeholder comments supporting the development of a citizens’ advisory committee include:

- Possible value for a new ‘citizens advisory committee’
- There is a need for representation of a broader cross section of the community, particularly Hispanics. Add a neighborhood or outreach committee to accomplish this

Desire for Increased Efficiency

Some stakeholders cited a desire for increased efficiency on the part of the MPO committees to enable the MPO to work in a faster and more transparent manner. Some stakeholder comments to this effect include:

- The MPO is often too slow in offering direction, which slows City of Las Cruces process as well
- Develop a one-year program for the TAC meetings

3-3 ADEQUACY OF MPO FUNDING

The primary sources of funding for the Las Cruces MPO are the FHWA (through NMDOT), the FTA and the City of Las Cruces. The Town of Mesilla also contributes to the MPO. However, Dona Ana County does not contribute funding.

There is frustration about how operational funds are allocated to the MPO. In particular, the manner in which New Mexico distributes funds to MPO's based on population actually makes the 80% provided plus the 20% match insufficient for the MPO to exist, requiring the city of Las Cruces to "overmatch" in order for the MPO to cover its basic functions.

There was a general sense that there is a need for considerably more funding for projects.

3-4 ADEQUACY OF MPO STAFF LEVELS

Stakeholder interviews consistently indicated a perception that the MPO staff is spread very thin – often attending to municipal issues which may tangentially relate to the MPO function. Examples cited by stakeholders include looking at land use, planning and zoning issues within the context of development reviews.

It was also pointed out that, with the MPO Director heading both the new regional transit authority and the MPO, there may be even more requirements placed on the limited MPO staff. It is not well understood among stakeholders that this is a temporary arrangement for the MPO director, nor was it well understood by stakeholders the degree to which other organizations also currently staff and support the regional transit authority.

A pervasive observation is that MPO staff members "wear many hats," making it more difficult for them to focus on any specific MPO policy or requirement. It was stated that local entities may demand too much of MPO staff.

While some felt that the MPO was adequately staffed, others felt that the MPO is understaffed, which is a barrier to the quality of the LRTP and to working on other major plans. This concern is highlighted by the fact that there is an unfunded position for an MPO staff member to work on ITS. This position was created with the understanding that funds were available, but NMDOT later informed the MPO that the funds were actually not available. If there could be one additional staff member for the MPO, the most common view is that there should be a staff engineer to coordinate with NMDOT,

and other engineering entities, on the technical aspects of projects. Skills in forecasting and outreach would also be valuable.

3-5 SKILL LEVEL OF MPO STAFF/TRAINING NEEDS

The majority of stakeholders consistently characterized the current MPO staff as highly proficient and capable of meeting and in many cases exceeding expectations.

Two areas where stakeholders indicated a desire for expanded technical the MPO can benefit from improved technical capabilities through staff training are:

- **System Planning**
Characterized as system-wide goal setting, performance measurement, scenario analysis and prioritization using models, technical methods and computerized tools and;
- **Support for the Project Development Process**
Characterized as analysis (modeling, GIS, economics), alternatives analysis and presentation of choices which inform the development of projects by the MPO's member organizations.

(It was never suggested that the MPO develop its own projects, rather stakeholders expressed a desire that the MPO provide planning level technical support for its member organizations as projects are being developed. MPO's typically do not develop projects, but routinely do support project development in the above mentioned ways consistent with USC Title 23 as cited in section 2-3 of this report).

- **Stakeholder Communication and Presentation Techniques**
While public involvement was consistently cited as the greatest strength of the Las Cruces MPO, there were some specific trainings and techniques requested by stakeholders as potential opportunities to add value to public involvement in the MPO.

Stakeholder Desires for System Planning

The planning undertaken by the MPO is seen by some as a "patchwork" of small localized planning decisions. A clear comparison of regional investment options, with comparative performance outcomes (based on modeling and other analysis) is seen as a highly desirable approach to system planning. Clearly defined, quantifiable and measurable goals and performance areas are seen as key success factors.

While the Las Cruces MPO has a new VISUM travel demand model, the model has yet to be fully employed in corridor studies, sub-area plans and other system planning opportunities that the model may present.

VISUM is a new, state of the art traffic forecasting software with considerable potential for enhancing the MPO's forecasting and volume, capacity and mobility analysis at the community level. VISUM also has a companion software (VISIM) which can enable the MPO to undertake detailed traffic simulation and engineering analysis for specific corridors and projects. There is a strong desire among some stakeholders to see the MPO further utilize these exciting new tools in its planning process.

There is also a sense that GIS is underutilized, with very little analysis of spatial patterns of connectivity, system performance and other technical work done in GIS, but instead that GIS is used primarily as a mapping tool to facilitate public involvement. There is also a desire to see safety data incorporated into the planning process at the MPO. There are also some concerns about emerging air quality issues, most notably ozone, and the possibility that Las Cruces could become a non-attainment area (it is currently a maintenance area).

Some specific system planning activities where greater MPO staff training was identified by stakeholders as important include:

- Better utilization of the new VISUM/VISIM model
- Better access to traffic and data trend information
- More training in modeling and simulation
- Economic Impact Modeling (REMI/TREDIS/IMPLAN or other types)
- Forecasting
- Freight planning
- Air quality conformity issues

Training Opportunities Stakeholder Communication and Presentation Techniques

Some of the specific areas where stakeholders suggested training as an opportunity to improve stakeholder communication and presentation techniques include:

- Grant writing
- Communicating with the Policy Committee board and educating the board
- Public outreach techniques
- Training on how to do board training

Role of the MPO in Project Development

Stakeholders clearly identified a desire for the MPO to play an active role in project development at the planning level. While it was never suggested the MPO should design, construct or deliver projects (activities clearly outside of the MPO's mission) –

stakeholders articulated a desire for the MPO to support project development at the level of providing services such as modeling, GIS and alternatives analysis to support NEPA and other processes related to project development.

Increased staff knowledge of NEPA requirements, technical aspects of project development, as well as NMDOT project development and programming processes are seen by stakeholders as areas where MPO staff training could add considerable value to the MPO in managing the overall planning and programming process as set forth in Section 2 of this report. The recent I-10 project was cited by some stakeholders as an example of a project where greater knowledge of these aspects of project development may have facilitated greater MPO collaboration with NMDOT in both the planning and programming aspects of the project.

Some specific system planning activities where greater MPO staff training was identified by stakeholders as important include:

- Bicycle design standards
- NEPA requirements

3-6 KEY AREAS FOR IMPROVED OUTCOMES

When asked about areas where the MPO could contribute to improved planning outcomes, stakeholders identified a wide range of opportunities. Some identified specific outcomes, whereas other specified planning activities that the MPO may be able to undertake to support better outcomes overall.

The response to this question indicates that stakeholders see the MPO not only as a federally required entity as explored in Section 2 of this report, but also as a key participant and contributor to other planning areas such as energy policy, livable communities and land use. The areas where specific stakeholder comments suggest opportunities for improved outcomes are organized in Table 3.1 as those where:

- (1) The outcome might come from a core function of the MPO
- (2) The MPO may play a supporting role in achieving the outcome

Core MPO Function	MPO Supporting Role
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved city/county relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addressing energy issues
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full adoption and implementation of the plans by local entities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning for Livable Communities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating a real bicycle/pedestrian transportation network 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visioning of a long range plan in sync with developing model new communities—involving more entities (public and private) in the planning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better relationship with Public Health Department would provide more useful stats 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forecasting skills and trends analysis 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bicycle traffic counts 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is hard to get a quorum of the Policy Committee and to keep them in the room 	

3-7 PHYSICAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE TIES WITH THE CITY OF LAS CRUCES OFFICES

The MPO is administratively attached to the City of Las Cruces and is also housed in City office space. Stakeholders raised some concern about the MPO director reporting to City staff, being on City payroll, and having performance evaluations conducted by City staff. This raises a concern about the objectivity of the MPO – both in terms of perception and decisions.

While the City of Las Cruces is understood by most stakeholders as an appropriate fiscal agent for the MPO, there is concern among some stakeholders regarding the location of the MPO in the city offices.

Advantages of Location at the City

Stakeholders cited the following advantages to the location of the MPO in city offices:

- Cost effective in using City space, vehicles, and other resources
- Near City Community Development
- Convenient to the public
- The visibility of the MPO to the City and City staff
- Opportunities to integrate the transportation/MPO function with local land use planning

Disadvantages of Location at the City

Stakeholders cited the following disadvantages to the location of the MPO in city offices:

- Would be nice for MPO to have a “neutral” site so the public would not see it as an arm of the city
- Stakeholders would like to find ways to ensure that MPO staff is accountable to the Board, rather than to City directives
 - This was brought up in the context of discussing how the MPO director’s performance (including interpretation of his job description), compensation and overall professional development is contingent on relationships with city staff as opposed to the satisfaction of the MPO policy board.
- There is a potential for undue city influence
- Potential for interruptions by city officials coming to the office with various requirements not related to core MPO activities
- The MPO is less able to focus on supporting its Policy Committee members
- Location at the city can be perceived as aligning the MPO more closely with the City than with the County and rural areas
- One idea for increasing the sense of independence of the MPO is to rename it the “Mesilla Valley MPO.”
- It was generally felt that, if the MPO were ever to move out of City space, that it should have its own independent space in downtown Las Cruces.

4. KEY RELATIONSHIPS

Stakeholders were invited to rate the relationships among the major parties involved with the Las Cruces MPO. Relationships were generally rated as positive. In addition to the above mentioned desire for a better way of interfacing with NMDOT in both program and project development, the most notable desires for improved relationships centered around:

- (1) The Las Cruces MPO relationship with FHWA and
- (2) The Las Cruces MPO relationship with the El Paso MPO

Some of the observations made by stakeholders regarding these relationships are summarized below.

4-1 MPO RELATIONSHIP WITH FHWA

It was stated that the MPO would benefit from more direct involvement from FHWA. For example, there is a strong desire among MPO stakeholders for FHWA staff to respond directly to inquiries from the Las Cruces MPO for assistance, policy guidance or direction instead of responding primarily through NMDOT.

None of the stakeholders with the MPO could recall an instance where a member of FHWA staff has ever returned a direct phone call or e-mail inquiry from any member of the MPO staff.. The observation was made that MPO staff have effectively stopped attempting to contact FHWA directly for over a year, citing a lack of response for many years prior.

None of the stakeholders could ever recall an instance where an FHWA representative was present at an MPO Policy Committee meeting. Stakeholders consistently judged that it was rare that FHWA training courses are held in the Las Cruces area.

Stakeholders consistently stated a desire for an FHWA representative to directly (in person) address the MPO policy board at least once a year on FHWA developments, policies and opportunities. There was also a consistent interest in making more of FHWA's training opportunities locally available to both staff members and policy board members.

4-2 MPO RELATIONSHIP WITH EL PASO MPO

Within the last five years, El Paso and Las Cruces have formed the "Multi-Regional Transit and Commuter" committee, which meets a few times a year to consider regional planning issues. While this committee has a core group, the meetings are open and generally include state DOT staff (Texas and New Mexico), MPO Staff, Deming, NM Staff, Truth or Consequences, NM Staff, as well as transit agency staff (including private transit providers).

The two MPO's cooperatively applied for \$273,000 in federal funds to undertake a transit study on commuter rail between El Paso and Las Cruces. There is currently a transit center in El Paso which is located at the final terminus of transit services to and from New Mexico (and Las Cruces), providing planning such that the two transit systems connected at the El Paso transit center.

These are seen by both the El Paso MPO and Las Cruces stakeholders as examples of the types of collaboration that can further advance the goals of both organizations in the future. Some key areas for future collaboration specifically noted by Las Cruces stakeholders include:

- Border Crossing Issues (including freight)
- Ongoing Regional Transit Planning (further elaborated below)
- Military Base Planning
- Inter-Modal Planning

Section 5 of this report gives further reporting and analysis regarding the Las Cruces MPO relationship with the El Paso MPO.

4-3 REGIONAL TRANSIT PLANNING

Regional transit planning was of particular interest to Las Cruces stakeholders as pertains to the Las Cruces MPO's key inter-governmental relationships. It was stated that the MPO's regional transit planning should be done in collaboration with other entities, both to balance the work burden of transit planning as well as to offer a more integrated regional approach to transit planning.

As stated in section 3-4, it was not well understood among stakeholders that the MPO director serving as director of the Regional Transit District (RTD) is a temporary arrangement, and there is a strong desire to separate these roles. It should be noted that PL funds legally are not to be used to fund a Regional Transit District director, but only for MPO activities.

Some stakeholders envisioned a regional transit planning community comprised of three distinctive entities including:

- The Las Cruces MPO
- Transportation planning for the City
- Regional transit planning (SCRTD)

4-4 OTHER COMMENTS ON INTER-GOVERNMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS

In addition to the above mentioned issues, there were a number of comments from different governmental entities related to the MPO. Below is a brief reporting of some other comments received from stakeholders regarding various inter-governmental relationships:

Other comments included:

- Mesilla would like more support from Dona Ana County.
- City of Las Cruces seems to have little communication with the El Paso MPO
- Relationship between City of Las Cruces and the MPO was described by some stakeholders as “incestuous”
- City and County have conflicts about design standards, especially regarding bicycle facilities.
- The County has difficulty getting County sponsored projects into the El Paso TIP
- The MPO is seen by some other agencies as adversarial to NMDOT, i.e. in a “turf battle”
- Relationship between City of Las Cruces and the Town of Mesilla can be improved (there is a sense that the city of Las Cruces ignores Mesilla’s needs)

5. EMERGING ISSUES

While the focus of the current study is on how the Las Cruces MPO functions as an MPO, stakeholders were given the opportunity to mention important regional emerging issues that may change the needs, demands and expectations of the MPO.

The following is a brief reporting of the emerging issues raised by Las Cruces MPO stakeholders in this assessment:

- Air quality concerns: if the current trend of rising ozone levels continues (due to vehicle exhaust) they will exceed the national standards and that will significantly change transportation planning activities for the MPO.
- Revisit realignment of Weisner
- Better involvement of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and State Land Office in land use and transportation planning
- More attention to the needs of Mesilla, especially regarding tourism that benefits the regional economy
- Focus more on bicycle routes, especially in the Valley
- Improve Highway 359 (Calle del Norte), especially with the Overlook subdivision being built
- Road network and public transportation
- Increasing needs for inter-governmental collaboration
- Need to assist the County to get projects in the TIP and funded
- Increasing need for coordination with the City’s 2040 Vision process
- Address impacts of military expansion at White Sands and in El Paso at Ft. Bliss
- Define MPO study corridor on west mesa (to Santa Teresa)—set alignment and tie to El Paso MPO
- Clarify when developer must pay for MPO designated routes
- Address rail more (with El Paso MPO)
- Allow bikes on future rail

- There will be a solid city from Las Cruces to Santa Teresa; need corridor planning
- Work together well with El Paso already (and with Juarez); could do this more often
- RTD joint transit plan
- Staffs should meet regularly and brief the committees
- Rail transit planning and freight corridors
- Could use feedback from El Paso MPO staff re County development project submitted for review
- Participate in Rio Grande river corridor project
- Find more funding for bicycle commuting and multi-modal education
- Study additional corridors (e.g. from I-10 to West Mesa)
- More mixed-use developments with internal schools
- More safe route to school programs
- Plan for commuting: widen I-10, improve frontage roads, multi-modal planning
- Connecting up rural roads around areas of growth in the commute corridor
- Metro bike trail coordination
- Coordination of bus systems
- Need another major arterial to connect across I-25 to Telshor/Sonoma Ranch area
- While Las Cruces is not expected to become a Transportation Management Area (TMA) in the next census, eventually the population is likely to reach 200,000, which will place new planning requirements on the MPO.
- MPO needs to preserve function of interstates as through routes for interstate travel and not for accommodating local traffic within urban area due to urban area growth, I-25 from US 70 to University is an example. To implement this parallel or alternative set of local arterial routes needs to be part of the LC MPO road network.

6. COORDINATION WITH EL PASO MPO

The Assistant Director of the El Paso MPO, has worked with the director of the Las Cruces MPO for many years. The El Paso and Las Cruces MPOs are collaborative in reviewing studies and planning documents, cooperating in various planning efforts and supporting each other as MPO's. Stakeholders observe that the El Paso MPO does not usually comment on Dona Ana County development proposals that are submitted to it for review.

Within the last five years, El Paso and Las Cruces have formed the "Multi-Regional Transit and Commuter" committee (mentioned in section 4-4), which meets a few times a year to consider regional planning issues.

The border crossing has always been an issue in the El Paso MPO, and a new commercial freight crossing in the area of Santa Teresa (as well as new residential development proposed in the area) will require New Mexico, and the Las Cruces MPO, to become increasingly involved in planning for both the border crossing as well as the surrounding

development. The area of the Santa Teresa Crossing is also envisioned to be a new major Commercial Freight Crossing (probably a new Port of Entry , west of the current Santa Teresa crossing), which will carry with it associated transportation and economic implications requiring ongoing regional planning collaboration between El Paso and Las Cruces.

The region is expected to grow, not only from the border crossing, but also due to the increasing level of military activity in the area. White Sands is experiencing a growth of 5,000 to 8,000 additional troops, while Fort Bliss (in El Paso) is increasing its staffing by 21,000 additional troops (announced 2 years ago). The growth in military presence is another major source of demand for future transportation planning in both New Mexico and Texas. There is also a need for more coordination in the south end of the County (Anthony and south) as that area urbanizes. Also, it would be desirable to coordinate more with Juarez as one region.

While there is a sense that the two MPO's have cooperated in the past, most stakeholders would like to see this relationship enhanced and more joint regional planning and projects undertaken.

7. KEY DECISIONS BEFORE THE LAS CRUCES MPO

Based on the results of the interviews, the consultants have identified eleven major areas in which decisions should be made as part of this study. Some of these issues were included in the focus of the workshop on September 18th.

1. How to enhance the independent operation of the MPO with respect to its fiscal agent in the city of Las Cruces, including whether the MPO should continue to be housed within Las Cruces City offices

There are both advantages and disadvantages of having the MPO located at the City. A decision should be made on whether to continue this situation. Also, ways to increase the staff's accountability to the MPO board should be explored.

2. Whether to add MPO staff (especially for engineering and environmental issues)

There should be further analysis and discussion of whether to increase the size of the MPO staff to better meet current and future needs.

3. How to make better use of existing transportation and GIS models

There is a strong desire to utilize the new Las Cruces VISUM/VISIM model to enhance the MPO's system planning capabilities. Further training and peer examples of practical VISUM and travel model applications – or suggestions for regular model output products

to incorporate into the MPO process may support this objective. A decision must be made regarding how much of the MPO's time and resources to invest into fully utilizing travel modeling and GIS, and what the regular and expected outcomes of this type of analysis should be.

4. How to improve communications among the MPO committees and whether to add a citizens advisory committee

Several suggestions were made for improving communications among the MPO committees. Also, consideration should be given to forming a citizens committee (consisting of neighborhood groups, other governmental jurisdictions and special stakeholder constituencies) subject to the ability of MPO staff to support such an effort.

5. How to improve communications with FHWA

Communications between the MPO and FHWA need to be improved and methods for doing so should be explored.

6. How to best integrate NMDOT into the MPO process, and the MPO into the NMDOT planning and programming process.

There is a desire for the MPO to have greater integration with NMDOT in the selection of projects for the TIP. At the same time, it has been suggested that the DOT provide a representative to the Policy Committee to enhance the relationship between the two groups.

7. How to increase funding for the MPO, including contributions from Dona Ana County

There should be discussion of how to increase both operational and project funding for the MPO.

8. How to improve the LRTP, including more technical analysis, more integration with land use planning, use of goal setting and performance measures, and more multi-modal emphasis (including energy conservation)

A number of recommendations have been offered for improvements to the LRTP.

9. How to improve the TIP, including more integration with NMDOT processes for project selection.

Similarly, recommended improvements to the TIP should be explored.

10. How to enhance the relationship with the El Paso MPO in order to improve regional transportation planning

Ways to increase regional communication, planning, and project development should be explored.

11. How to enhance training for MPO staff and committee members

A number of areas have been identified in which MPO staff would benefit from additional training. Also, there is a need for ongoing board training. The recent development of the “MPO 101” binder and compact disk is seen as a positive development in this regard. However, accompanying this resource with an active program of education and advisory support for MPO policy development should be further explored.

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW DISCUSSION GUIDE

Introduce yourself: I am _____ and I am here to interview you as part of the Las Cruces Location & Structure Study Team.

Explain who you are: I work for _____; one of the Consultants brought on board to conduct the preliminary assessment and help develop the recommendations for the membership and structure of the MPO in the future.

Explain why you are here? We asked you to participate in the stakeholder interviews because of your specialized knowledge of the MPO and the community and your position _____

Appreciation for their time: We appreciate your time and willingness to participate in the process and share your knowledge, concerns and feelings about the MPO Membership, Structure, Processes and physical location.

Interview Process: We expect the interview to take approximately one hour.

Contact Information

Interviewee Name: _____ Title: _____

Position: _____ Agency: _____

Email: _____ Telephone: _____

Mailing Address: _____ Physical Address: _____

Section 1. What is working?

1. Who are the LCMPO members?

2. What is the purpose of the Las Cruces MPO?

3. What is the most important function of the MPO?

4. How is the MPO funded?

5. Is the MPO Transportation Plan sufficient as a long range planning tool for making policy decisions?

6. What changes would you like to see in the MPO Transportation Plan?

7. Is the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) sufficient as a short range planning tool for making policy decisions?

8. What changes would you like to see in the TIP?

9. What is the most significant accomplishment of the MPO since its founding?

10. If there were one thing you would most like the MPO to accomplish in the next year, what would it be?

Section 2: Relationships

1. How would you describe the relationships between the members of Las Cruces MPO?

2. For those relationships that are rated as 3 or less, what is the cause?

	1 Poor	2	3 Mixed	4	5 Excellent	Not Applicable Or Not Relevant
Relationship Matrix						
City of Las Cruces and Dona Ana County						
City of Las Cruces and Town of Mesilla						
City of Las Cruces and City of El Paso						
City of Las Cruces and NMDOT						
City of Las Cruces and FHWA						
Dona Ana County and town of Mesilla						
Dona Ana County and City of El Paso						
Dona Ana County and NMDOT						
Dona Ana County and FHWA						
Town of Mesilla and FHWA						
Town of Mesilla and NMDOT						
Town of Mesilla and City of El Paso						

Section 3: Potential for Change

1. What do you believe are the three most important transportation issues where the Las Cruces area may benefit from coordinating with the El Paso MPO?
2. If there were one competency or capability you would most like the MPO to develop, what would it be?
3. Are there any areas where you believe the outcomes achieved by the MPO could be improved? If so what are these areas, and what would the improvement look like?
4. What do you think of the MPO Staffing Level?
5. What additional resources would better enable the MPO staff to address the area's transportation needs?
6. What do you think of the MPO technical skill level?
7. Does the staff need additional training in one or more areas?
8. What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages of the current physical location of the MPO in Las Cruces?
9. If there were to be a change in the physical location of the MPO, can you describe the ideal location for the MPO?
10. What is the most important outcome of this Location & Structure Study?
11. Do you have questions or concerns or words of wisdom for us?