MPO Roles in Supporting Local Smart Growth

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Searching for a Spatial Fix: Patterns of Inter-metropolitan Collaboration in Transportation Planning and Policy-making

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Abstract

We analyze rationales for inter-metropolitan collaboration and barriers to systematic planning at larger spatial scales. To understand whether multiple planning challenges are generating meaningful forms of collaboration across metro areas, we detail findings from a survey of U.S. Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs). Our results suggest that inter-MPO joint planning activities are widespread and substantive in light of potential barriers to such collaborations. A majority of MPO leaders see inter-metro planning activities as an important priority and effective in the context of their overall mission. However, the survey results suggest that transportation planning at the megaregional scale is at a nascent stage.

Keywords

inter-metropolitan planning, collaboration between Metropolitan Planning Organization, planning at the megaregional scale, planning challenges at larger spatial scales

Resumen

Analizamos los fundamentos de la colaboración inter-metropolitana y las barreras para la planificación sistemática a escalas espaciales más extensas. Para comprender si los múltiples desafíos de planificación están generando formas significativas de colaboración entre áreas metropolitanas, detallamos los hallazgos de una encuesta de las Organizaciones de Planificación Metropolitana (MPO) de EE. UU. Nuestros resultados sugieren que las actividades de planificación conjunta entre MPO son generalizadas y sustantivas a la luz de las barreras potenciales para tales colaboraciones. La mayoría de los líderes de MPO ven las actividades de planificación inter-metro como una prioridad importante y eficaz en el contexto de su misión general. Sin embargo, los resultados de la encuesta sugieren que la planificación del transporte a escala megaregional se encuentra en una etapa incipiente.

Palabras clave

Planificación inter-metropolitana, colaboración entre organizaciones de planificación metropolitana, planificación a escala megarregional, desafíos de planificación a escalas espaciales más extensas

摘要

我们分析了大都市间合作的基本原理和在更大空间尺度上系统规划的障碍。 为了解多重规划挑战是否正在产生跨都市区的有意义的协作形式，我们详细介绍了美国大都市规划组织 (MPO) 的一项调查结果。 我们的调查结果表明，考虑到此类合作的潜在障碍，MPO 间的联合规划活动广泛且具有实质性意义。 大多数 MPO 领导者将城际规划活动视为重要的优先事项，并且在他们的总体任务背景下是有效的。 与此同时，调查结果表明大区域尺度的交通规划目前还处于初级阶段。

关键词

大都市城际规划, 大都市规划组织之间的协作, 大区域尺度的规划, 更大空间尺度的规划挑战

Introduction

Planners have long recognized the region as an important scale for addressing cross-jurisdictional challenges that result from urbanization processes. Recall early twentieth-century leaders like Patrick Geddes and Lewis Mumford who advocated for regional approaches to traffic congestion, overcrowding, sanitation, and water management (Gottmann 1957; Mumford 1938). Yet, formal spatial fixes for regional ills have been limited or ad hoc, with government powers largely reserved for state and local jurisdictions in the U.S. federalist system. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, so-called "new regionalists" promoted voluntary collaborative governance frameworks to address these mismatch problems. Today, twenty-first century planners grapple with urbanization footprints that reach far beyond the bounds of single regions or urbanized areas, that intensify jurisdictional interconnectedness and interdependencies, and that raise crucial questions about what governance frameworks planners can use at these larger territorial scales.

We situate this research on planning governance at these larger, interregional scales in longer standing discussions around struggles to align the planning enterprise—attached to the specific jurisdictional authorities of geographically bounded local governments and regional bodies—with the spatial scale at which planning problems manifest. Historically, this discourse, reviewed below, first emphasized more formal, top-down approaches and later multi-jurisdictional governance based on voluntary cooperation and active collaboration. By the late 1990s, many advocates for stronger metro-regional planning and governance acknowledged that formidable barriers limited both local government consolidation and the establishment of new regional government institutions to address region-wide problems. Many "new regionalists" pragmatically promoted deeper inter-jurisdictional cooperation and collaboration to tackle problems of growth within metropolitan regions (Benjamin and Nathan 2001; Norris 2001; Savitch and Vogel 2000). An extensive literature chronicled "new regionalist" governance approaches to metro-region-scale challenges. Numerous case studies highlighted institutional actors and arrangements, frameworks of cooperation and collaboration, and specific planning and policy initiatives to address metro-scale functional problems (Barbour and Teitz 2006; Bennett and Grannis 2017; Innes, Booher, and Di Vittorio 2010; Mitchell-Weaver, Miller, and Deal 2000; Nunn and Rosentraub 1997; Salkin 1999; Savitch and Vogel 2000).

More recently, the study of challenges that spill outside individual metro regions has taken off. In a series of studies in the mid-2000s, planners and scholars sought to delineate the increasing interdependencies across U.S. urban systems and to identify and name specific megaregional geographies where U.S. population and employment growth were concentrated. Advocates highlighted the need for new thinking and new strategies to accommodate and manage megaregional growth (Carbonell and Yaro 2005; Dewar and Epstein 2007; Lang and Dhavale 2005; Nelson and Lang 2011; Ross 2009), and this literature specifically emphasized the need for voluntary collaboration *between* metropolitan regions (metropolitan statistical area [MSAs]) *within* megaregional geographies.

In this paper, we explore whether, in the face of contemporary urbanization patterns, there is evidence of substantive cooperation and collaborative initiatives *between* metropolitan regions in the domain of transportation planning. We ask in particular whether regionally scaled Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) are serving as catalysts for such voluntary *inter-metropolitan* cooperation and collaboration, and we seek to learn about what activities are involved. Various transportation phenomena bear witness to the expanding contemporary geographies of urbanization, including inter-regional flows of people and goods, critical linkages between coastal ports and distant inland warehouses, and plans for high-speed rail corridors and for multi-region and multi-state toll collection. Each of these challenges spills beyond the formal planning areas of single MPO.

As one of the few formalized U.S. regional bodies, MPOs may be well positioned to collaborate with one another and with other metro actors, even absent legal mandates to do so. U.S. federal law has required MPOs to perform transportation planning and investment decision-making in urbanized areas for over a half-century. However, multi-jurisdictional planning within *even a single U.S. region* faces notable barriers that are well established in the planning literature and that may dampen the prospects for region-to-region collaboration by MPOs.

We use a nationwide survey of MPOs to gauge whether region-to-region collaboration to address transportation systems and related challenges is a significant phenomenon. The survey investigates whether growing demands for planning and action between metropolitan regions are generating meaningful forms of collaboration across MPOs and whether MPOs see inter-metro collaboration as important to their mission. We then ask MPOs about specific barriers to more expansive interregional work. Finally, we briefly compare MPOs' reported patterns of collaboration with other MPOs in general to the patterns of inter-MPO collaborations addressed specifically to megaregional-scale

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issues, presented in a complementary article (Oden and Sciara 2020).

The Long Search for a Formal Fix to Regional Urbanization in the United States

Since the inception of planning as a field, scholars and policy makers have searched for spatial fixes to challenges associated with urbanization processes. The central argument for spatial fixes has been consistent over time: as human settlements grow and evolve, the spatial scale at which externalities, network effects, and economic or residential integration all operate becomes mismatched to the territorial scale of government or governance institutions (see, for example, Benjamin and Nathan 2001; Friedman and Weaver 1979; MacKaye and Mumford 1929). Planners and policy makers have thus sought to identify the most logical and effective spatial scales at which to address environmental, social, and physical processes, and they have advocated for both formal government institutions and governance arrangements to match the appropriate scales.

The U.S. federalist system presents durable hurdles for planning and policy-making efforts or fixes that stretch across metropolitan regions and other sub-state territories (Sciara and Handy 2017). Legal and fiscal government powers are concentrated at federal and state levels in the United States. These government levels, in turn, shape the powers and capacities of sub-state governments, often consisting of complex, decentralized networks of local government jurisdictions. Historically, attempts to address regional problems in the context of the U.S. federalist framework have been significant and long-standing. Such efforts are distinguished on one hand by systematic federally driven initiatives establishing nationwide frameworks of regional governance through legislation and financial incentives and, on the other hand, by more ad hoc federal or state actions to address specific functional challenges at various territorial scales.

Two federally driven initiatives emerged at the beginning of the 1960s that sought to fashion new governance institutions across all U.S. regions. First, the federal government promoted the establishment of Councils of Governments (COGs) as more multi-issue regional institutions. Initiated under the recommendation of the federally established Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations in 1959 and supported in the 1960s by the League of Cities and National Association of Counties, there were 350 regional COGs by 1967 (Mitchell-Weaver, Miller, and Deal 2000; Rothenberg 1984). Through the 1970s, COGs received modest federal funding for regional planning type activities and had certain powers to review and approve federal grant applications from member jurisdictions. Second, the Highway Act of 1962 provided the first federal impetus for MPOs (Sciara 2017). The Act made the transfer of federal funds for highway projects in areas with populations of 50,000 or greater contingent upon "3-C" planning—planning that is continuing, cooperative, and comprehensive—between state and local government officials.

Since the 1920s, a number of more ad hoc U.S. planning initiatives have been implemented at various spatial scales and in specific functional domains, including water and waterway management, regional ports, electric power grids, economic development, and the management of transborder movements of people and goods. The Colorado River Compact was initiated in 1922 to govern water rights allocation among seven states, and similar long-lived river basin and waterway authorities include the Tennessee Valley Authority and the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey established in 1921 (Loftus-Otway, Miller, Harrison, Marriott, Dharmadhikari, and Mingo 2017). Large-scale inter-jurisdictional collaboration in the economic development domain is visible in the Appalachian Regional Commission, focused since its establishment in 1965 on alleviating poverty and underdevelopment in the thirteen-state region. These historic, formal interventions focused on discrete territorial functions/problems/activities and were sanctioned and sponsored by higher level government institutions (federal and state).

A number of authors have emphasized the waning of federally driven initiatives in the 1980s to support regional planning alongside major reductions in funding for cities and regions in general (Jonas and Ward 2002; Jonas, Goetz, and Bhattacharjee 2014; Mitchell-Weaver, Miller, and Deal 2000). Federal funding and review powers were stripped away from COGs in 1983, for instance, and all reviews of federal non-formula grants were vested with state governments (Mitchell-Weaver, Miller, and Deal 2000). However, top-down initiatives did not vanish entirely. At the metro level, federal transit and environmental legislation have assigned MPOs more powers and responsibilities over the past four decades (Sciara 2017; U.S. Department of Transportation [USDOT] 2004). State governments also continued to enter interstate compacts to address specific issues (e.g. the Columbia River Gorge Commission established in 1987 by the states of Oregon and Washington).

While regional planning activities continued in several domains, by the 1990s many argued that ongoing problems associated with urbanization and jurisdictional fragmentation were becoming more acute and warranted reinvigorated efforts to establish new government or administrative mechanisms to address regional problems. In particular, the expansion and evolution of urban regions in the late twentieth century drew attention to the MSA scale and its burgeoning problems (Orfield 2002; Benjamin and Nathan 2001; Norris 2001; Rosentraub 2000). Subsequently, many commentators drew attention to additional planning challenges *between* metro regions, especially agglomerations of metro regions known as megaregions (Carbonell and Yaro 2005). These discourses evolved to center less on formal *government* entities and more on collaborative *governance* arrangements at

the metro and inter-metro scale that came to be labeled the new regionalism.

New Regionalism: Using Governance to Address Problems *within* Metro Regions

In this paper, we examine whether U.S. regional transportation planning bodies themselves have pursued such collaborative governance arrangements *between* metro regions, and we consider the opportunities and constraints associated with such region-to-region arrangements. Yet, as this section reveals, the interregional planning arena has received limited attention in contemporary theoretical and policy debates. Instead, literature surrounding the new regionalism has focused largely on addressing problems concentrated *within* single metro geographies, in particular on the barriers to formal regional government approaches and the rationales for less formal cooperation between neighboring jurisdictions.

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, scholars increasingly advocated for reinvigorated metro-scale planning organized via new inter-jurisdictional government or governance frameworks to attack the worsening problems of congestion, transportation infrastructure, labor market mismatches, regional equity, air pollution, and aspects of urban sprawl that increased fiscal costs (Benjamin and Nathan 2001; Kincaid 1997; Norris 2001; Rosentraub 2000). One stream of literature echoed the longer history of U.S. metropolitan regionalism with calls to establish new formal government or administrative mechanisms (Benjamin and Nathan 2001; Rusk 2001). Yet, many countered that establishing new formal regional government frameworks would depend on federal or state government legislation and would face the familiar and durable barriers (Gainsborough 2001; Kincaid 1997; Savitch and Vogel 2000).

The literature pointed to three major barriers—political, institutional, and economic—to consolidating metro jurisdictions or expanding government institutions to deal with metro-scale processes and problems (see Burns 1994; Gurr and King 1987; Oakerson 1999). First, such efforts would meet political resistance from citizens and local officials prizing local control and unwilling to surrender powers or resources to regional institutions or other entities (Einstein, Glick, and Palmer 2020; Rast 2006; Richmond 2000; Swanstom 2006). Observers have long recognized that political realities in many U.S. regions, which include city-suburban cleavages around class and race, cause proposals for formal metropolitan or regional integration to falter (Banfield and Grodzins 1958).

Second, scholars have emphasized the institutional constraints facing larger scale, multipurpose regional governments. Larger government organizations that assume more diverse and expansive functions experience higher coordination costs (internal to the unit of government) and/or transaction costs of managing tasks with contractors or other units of government. Transaction costs hence loom over multi-jurisdictional collaboration, and these costs typically increase as the number of parties to and spatial scale (distance) of such agreements expand (Oakerson 1999, 74–75).

Finally, economic constraints stem from general private-sector resistance to additional layers of government that would regulate their behavior, constrain their locational preferences, or increase tax burdens (Basolo 2003; Lewis 1996).

A stark record of failure among the late twentieth century attempts to fashion new metro-wide government institutions or to consolidate jurisdictions suggests these barriers are formidable. Indeed, as a National Academy of Sciences report concluded, "the politics of bringing into being even weakened forms of metropolitan government appear to be nearly insurmountable" (Altshuler et al. 1999, 107). A small but intensely referenced set of cases where government consolidation or regional institutions were established to direct metro- or county-scale planning activities (e.g. Indianapolis, Jacksonville, Minneapolis-St Paul, Portland) remain exceptional.

Metropolitan Governance: The New Regionalist Approach

The poor record of attempts to actualize local government consolidation or new regional governmental institutions led so-called "new regionalists" to promote deeper inter-jurisdictional cooperation and collaboration or "bottom-up city-regionalism" to tackle problems of metro growth (Benjamin and Nathan 2001; Jonas, Goetz, and Bhattacharjee 2014; Norris 2001; Savitch and Vogel 2000). Whereas "cooperation" might include sharing information or data and discussing challenges, collaboration involves making decisions to act.

An extensive literature has chronicled "new regionalist" arrangements (Barbour and Teitz 2006; Bennett and Grannis 2017; Innes, Booher, and Di Vittorio 2010; Jonas, Goetz, and Bhattacharjee 2014; Mitchell-Weaver, Miller, and Deal 2000; Nunn and Rosentraub 1997; Salkin 1999; Savitch and Vogel 2000). The hallmark of these governance initiatives is their reliance on voluntary, horizontal networks of actors—including government units and public agencies as well as private sector and non-profit organizations—to make decisions and tackle shared challenges, distinguishing them from top-down strategies directed by formal government entities and elected leaders.

The literature on "new regionalist" initiatives suggests that such strategies to address metro-regional policy and planning challenges have become pervasive over the past several decades (Alpert, Gainsborough, and Wallis 2006; Barbour and Teitz 2006; Bennett and Grannis 2017; Innes, Booher, and Di Vittorio 2010; Scott 2007; Wheeler 2002). Examples include the path-breaking Land Use, Transportation, Air Quality Connection (LUTRAQ) study developed in the late 1980s and early 1990s by civic organization 1000 Friends of

Oregon; subsequent efforts like Envision Utah (2014; Chakraborty 2010); and the Chicago Metropolis 2020/Mayors Caucus initiative (Hamilton 2002). Numerous multi-stakeholder regional coalitions have also formed around the provision of transportation infrastructure in a number of regions including the Detroit, Milwaukee, and Denver regions (Jonas, Goetz, and Bhattacharjee 2014). Scholars contributing to this case-based literature suggest that less formal, more voluntary, and collaborative new regionalist strategies can be more effective for regional problem-solving, by minimizing the political, institutional, and financial fetters associated with formal government approaches.

First, new regionalist strategies can stem political resistance by preserving local government control over decision-making while simultaneously communicating the advantages of region-wide action and support around regional projects (Bennett and Grannis 2017). Metro Denver's multi-stakeholder initiative to plan and build a light and commuter rail system is an instructive case. After decades of failure by Denver's regional transportation board, key business organizations succeeded in the mid-2000s in enlisting thirty-two mayors across the Denver metro region to negotiate planning goals across jurisdictions and influence public and business attitudes toward funding regional mass transit (Jonas, Goetz, and Bhattacharjee 2014). The complex collaborative process transcended urban–suburban divides, yielding steps to plan and finance a large-scale regional rail network. However, this case also demonstrates that collaboration to implement major infrastructural projects can never be a purely bottom-up process. In the end, state government sanction and federal approval and substantial funding are required (Jonas, Goetz, and Bhattacharjee 2014).

Second, proponents of collaborative regional problem-solving suggest it can also reduce the transaction costs of joint action. Shared study and dialogue can isolate areas where collaboration yields joint benefits while reducing risks and resource demands for individual parties (Innes, Booher, and Di Vittorio 2010). Cooperation allows individual institutions to pool administrative, financial, and knowledge resources, limiting costs and "bandwidth" constraints (Barbour and Teitz 2006; Bennett and Grannis 2017; Margerum and Parker 2019; Vella et al. 2016). For instance, the Southeast Florida Regional Climate Change Compact—formed across four metro Miami counties in 2009 to build regional capacity for climate adaptation—yielded a cooperative agreement on area-wide climate goals but left specific implementation measures to the participating jurisdictions (Vella et al. 2016).

Finally, collaborative activities that include private-sector actors and their concerns in policy and plan development can showcase the collective benefits of regional collaboration and temper resistance to new levels of government activity or taxes (Bennett and Grannis 2017; Innes, Booher, and Di Vittorio 2010). Efforts by Denver metro mayors and the major business coalition, for instance, persuaded the broader business community to support a regional sales tax increase to fund the rail projects (Jonas, Goetz, and Bhattacharjee 2014).

Despite their potential political, institutional, and financial advantages, some argue that new regionalist initiatives have significant limitations (Barbour and Teitz 2006; Innes, Booher, and Di Vittorio 2010). One criticism is that such collaborative regional governance efforts have produced many visioning exercises, reports, and prospective plans, but only limited implementation and resource commitments (Mitchell-Weaver, Miller, and Deal 2000; Norris 2001). Limited buy-in or easy exit by some parties may increase transaction costs and stifle action as parties enter and withdraw from compacts and/or demand renegotiation (Brenner 2002; MacLeod 2001). Moreover, policy implementation or investment in transportation, land use, or regional equity measures requires explicit commitments to a broader agenda by local political and administrative leaders (Norris 2001; Vella et al. 2016). It is unclear the extent to which many new regionalist initiatives have led to meaningful cross-jurisdictional action to implement and finance plans.

Planning at Larger Scales: New Regionalism and Planning between Metro Regions

Alongside the metro-regional focused discourse of new regionalism, scholars, non-profits, and select federal agencies began in the twenty-first century to attend to larger spatial scales, namely agglomerations of metros known as megaregions. As expanding metro regions grew ever more proximate to each other and more interconnected, linked by shared infrastructures, economic flows, and settlement patterns, planners and scholars worked to delineate these interdependencies and to identify specific megaregional geographies where population and employment growth concentrated in metropolitan networks or clusters. Planning and policy actors—from the USDOT to the Regional Plan Association—explored the potential for inter-metropolitan governance. They emphasized the need for new strategies to accommodate and manage megaregional growth and advocated for collaboration *between* metropolitan regions (MSAs) *within* megaregional geographies (Carbonell and Yaro 2005; Dewar and Epstein 2007; Lang and Dhavale 2005; Nelson and Lang 2011; Ross 2009).

While the megaregional scale has commanded considerable attention, much of the analysis and case studies in this literature highlight initiatives and collaborations that do not clearly map to megaregional geographies. The spatial scale and framing of most of the cases were shaped by the territory of the functional element or system(s) addressed, not a defined megaregion (Dewar and Epstein 2007; Loftus-Otway, Miller, Harrison, Marriott, Dharmadhikari, and Mingo 2017; Peckett and Lyons 2012; Ross et al. 2011).

Moreover, most initiatives profiled in the megaregion literature emerge from significant state and federal government involvement rather than the strong "bottom-up" impulse characteristic of new regionalist approaches. For example, state agencies directly fostered and supported new large-scale collaborative efforts to develop subnational carbon trading markets, including the multistate Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative launched in 2005 from Maine to Maryland and the Western Climate Initiative (WCI) founded in 2007 across Arizona, California, Montana, Utah, New Mexico, Washington, and Oregon and several Canadian provinces (Loftus-Otway, Miller, Harrison, Marriott, Dharmadhikari, and Mingo 2017). One participating Governor described the WCI as "states . . . taking the lead on combating global climate change" (López-Vallejo 2016, 143).

The literature also highlights a few cases where state governments and USDOTs have incentivized collaboration *between* regional transportation planning bodies within a state. For example, Florida has provided funds for "MPOs, counties, or regional transportation authorities that form regional transportation areas" to jointly plan for and develop "critically needed projects that benefit regional travel and commerce." The funds have supported multimetro projects, including inter-metro rail, highway corridors and bridges, and multimodal transit (Ross et al. 2011, p. 27)

A few examples of MPO and state agency collaborations across different territories are included too, often focused on specific functional transportation challenges and network and spillover problems at the multi-metro scale. Through the I-95 Corridor Coalition,[1] state USDOTs, tolling agencies, MPOs, USDOT, and other affiliates work to improve operations, modal integration, and planning on the interstate highway running from Maine to Florida. Similarly, the Niagara International Transportation Technology Coalition focuses on U.S.–Canada corridor and border-crossing management, and the Southern California Transportation Planning initiatives engage in multimodal transit corridor problems (Loftus-Otway, Miller, Harrison, Marriott, Dharmadhikari, and Mingo 2017; Peckett and Lyons 2012; Read et al. 2017; Ross et al. 2011).

In sum, the planning literature sheds limited light on whether the advantages of bottom-up collaborative governance approaches shown to counter political, transaction cost, and economic barriers to collective problem-solving at the regional scale might also operate across multiple metro regions. Exploration of these barriers at larger scales is fairly thin in the literature.

In this paper, we address this gap, implementing a national survey of MPOs to gauge whether voluntary "new regionalist" strategies might effectively reduce the risks and transaction costs associated with cooperation and collaboration between regions. We hypothesize that inter-metro planning is likely to operate as a spatial fix addressing large-scale functional issues across metro regions where cooperation and collaboration between MPOs in the transportation realm are pervasive, involve substantive collaboration and joint work, and are considered an important priority by MPO leadership. We also anticipate that support from higher government levels would help overcome barriers and facilitate cooperation and collaboration between MPOs. The section below explains how our study design addresses these questions.

Research Approach and Method: MPOs as a Critical Case for Inter-metro Collaboration

This work focuses on the prospects for inter-metropolitan collaboration in the domain of transportation. There are clear arguments that metro-to-metro coordination on transportation and related issues is vital as urban regions grow and become more interconnected and as transport networks depend increasingly on factors outside the control of single local or metro territories. Highway corridors, freight and logistics connections, passenger and rail transit corridors, and intermodal connection points constitute larger scale network systems, and problems in a distant network link will impact more localized service standards (Beiler et al. 2013; Teitz and Barbour 2007).

As one of the most ubiquitous and formalized U.S. regional bodies, MPOs represent a potentially compelling building block for such inter-metropolitan cooperation. MPOs are one of three key institutional actors around which the governance framework for U.S. transportation systems is centered: the USDOT, the 50 state USDOTs, and the over 400 MPOs serving designated urbanized areas. The MPO role in this framework emerged gradually, with federal transportation authorization laws in the 1960s first requiring states to engage local officials in transportation investment decisions in urban regions. Later, federal laws formalized MPOs as discrete planning bodies responsible for crafting long-term transportation plans, approving key investments, and coordinating transportation systems within a metro region (Sciara 2017).

Within this federally defined framework, the existing institutional capacity for transportation planning at scales beyond a single metro region is limited. The Florida funding described above to incentivize MPO-MPO planning is somewhat anomalous, but state USDOTs may use their powers to coordinate statewide planning and operations within state boundaries, and select federal directives provide for state-to-state coordination and compacts on significant interstate highway and rail corridors. Yet, no federal directives or incentives exist for MPOs serving proximate urbanized areas or larger regions to coordinate on inter-metropolitan transportation issues. Federal statutes and policy make MPOs responsible for only their defined metropolitan planning area and suggest MPO-to-MPO coordination only where a metro

area crosses state lines or where a federally funded transportation project crosses MPO boundaries. At the same time, prospects for metro-to-metro planning would seem especially dim if MPOs did not already exist to coordinate planning within single metro areas.

But how pervasive are collaborative initiatives *between* metropolitan regions? Do the same previously delineated barriers to inter-jurisdictional planning within a single region also deter inter-metro coordination and collaboration? The literature leaves us to speculate. On one hand, political opposition rooted in perceived threats to local autonomy may be less relevant for planning between multiple metros than within a single region. On the other hand, local interests—particularly the elected officials of jurisdictions and representatives of transit agencies comprising MPO boards—might prefer local governments and agencies "stick to their knitting" and focus on planning issues within the home region, not on joint work with institutions in other regions.

Furthermore, larger scale initiatives involving multiple metros could generate additional transaction costs, as the scale and the number of partnerships in a collaborative effort would track positively with such costs. MPOs that would collaborate outside their territories may also encounter their own resource and capacity limits. Many MPOs struggle to execute their basic responsibilities within their regions given constrained transportation funding from the federal government and the states (Sciara and Handy 2017), a fact that could stifle collaborative efforts outside their territories.

MPO Survey on Inter-metro Collaboration

Given potential constraints, we examine whether MPOs are pursuing newer forms of voluntary collaboration between institutions across different metro regions and, if so, whether such efforts are substantive and lead to joint planning and project work. We consider interactions and joint work *between* MPOs as largely voluntary in that such activities are not mandated by higher levels of government and are therefore consistent with new regionalist strategies. To evaluate the current status of inter-metropolitan collaboration, we report on a national survey of MPOs conducted in 2018. To our knowledge, this is the only research to examine planning across metro regions since the work by Ross, Hylton, and Lee (2014), which examined cooperation between MPOs, state USDOTs, and other institutions and which specifically examined partnerships and collaboration at the megaregional level.

Of MPOs serving over 400 urbanized areas, we invited 382 MPOs to participate in the survey, drawing on a 2018 list of MPOs from the USDOT and the Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations. We excluded MPOs in Alaska, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico from the sample, given our interest in MPOs and their geographically proximate partners. We sent individualized emails inviting either MPO directors or a senior transportation planner at each MPO to participate, directing invitees to an online survey administered using Qualtrics.

We surveyed MPOs to learn about cooperation and collaboration between MPOs at multiple scales, building on Ross, Hylton, and Lee (2014). We specifically asked respondents to distinguish in their responses between forms of metro-to-metro collaboration in general and collaborations specifically focused on megaregional issues. Our first set of survey questions was directed to cooperation and collaboration among MPOs and other partners at *any* spatial scale (in neighboring regions, across a single state, or at larger scales *not* identified as a megaregion). A second set focused on collaborative activities of MPOs within nine recognized megaregions as defined by Read et al. (2017; see megaregional map, p. 2). We concentrate in this paper on results from the first part of the survey focusing on inter-metro collaboration at any scale. We briefly contrast these findings with the survey results about MPO collaborations specifically addressing megaregional-scale issues (presented in a separate article).

About 50 percent (192) of the 382 invited MPO leaders responded to the survey, and responding MPOs are fairly—but not perfectly—representative of the universe of MPOs in the forty-eight U.S. states. In particular, among responding MPOs, medium-size MPOs are slightly over-represented, and large MPOs (representing populations over one million) are slightly under-represented (see Figure 1). Nonetheless, we still obtained a reasonable response rate from larger MPOs, with 11.5 percent of responding MPOs located in large regions compared with 12.5 percent in the overall sample. The distribution of respondents by state reveals slightly higher response rates among MPOs in some states and slightly lower response rates in others, but no major divergence or strong patterns across larger groups of states.

The survey first queried about the types and number of organizational partners with which MPOs have engaged in collaborative activities and, then, about the specific forms of activities between MPO partners. We sought to learn about the extent to which the activities underpinning cooperation and collaboration were substantive, potentially requiring significant investments of participants' time and resources. We followed Morley et al. (2020, 4–5) by asking about a range of inter-MPO activities associated with different intensities of effort generally moving from cooperation (discussing issues, exchanging data, sharing work products) to coordination (working with counterparts to ensure compatible methods and goals) to collaboration (executing joint strategies and plans and implementing a holistic strategy for the combined planning area). The seven specific forms of activities asked about in the survey are listed in Table 1, ordered from less (e.g. information exchange and discussion) to more intensive collaboration (e.g. including joint projects in their Long Range Transportation Plans [LRTP] or Transportation Improvement Plan [TIP]).

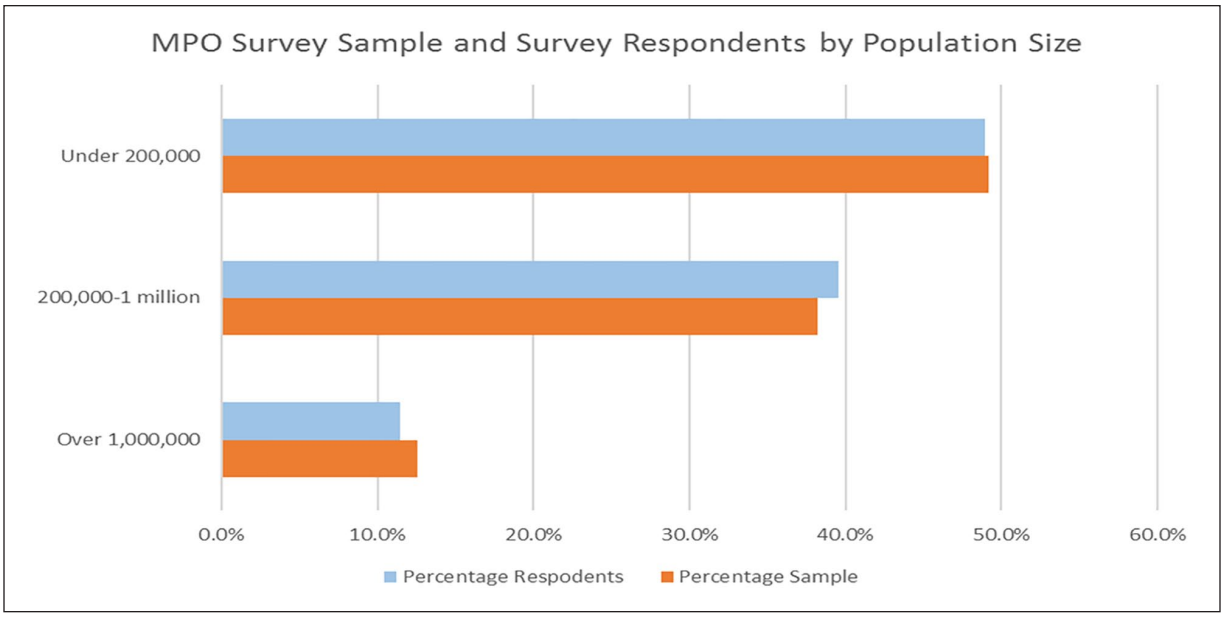

Figure 1. Responding MPOs by size of regional population served.
Note: MPO = Metropolitan Planning Organization.

We consider activities such as meetings and information exchange as potentially requiring less time or fewer institutional resources than interactions at national or statewide conferences or meetings. Such interactions might influence decisions made within the participating government or governance institution, yet leave control with the local MPO. These activities differ from the ongoing coordination among parties needed to formulate plans and from the organizational commitments needed to adopt project investments (Morley et al. 2020).

Discussion of Survey Results

The survey results show that the greatest number of MPOs was engaged in activities involving less intensive collaboration, i.e. types 1 and 2, including joint meetings, information exchange, data sharing, and identifying joint challenges and potential strategies. Cooperation between MPOs is pervasive in these two categories; almost 98 and 89 percent of MPO respondents reported collaborating in these activity areas. In terms of institutional partners, MPOs most commonly collaborated with other MPOs within a given state (Table 1). Less common but still significant partners were MPOs in adjacent states. Only nine MPOs responded to an open-ended question about "other" partners in their activities; non-profit organizations including universities and regional non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were the most common participants in these partnerships.

We also observe inverse relationships between the level of commitment associated with a given category of collaborative activity and both the share of MPOs engaged in that activity and the average number of partners associated with that activity. Thus, as the intensity of requisite collaboration and commitment increases from one category to the next, fewer MPOs report engaging in increasingly intensive activities, and they report having fewer partners. This result is consistent with the proposition that more durable and time-intensive interactions are limited by pressures to focus on local issues and MPO resource and time constraints.

In contrast, the number of respondents engaged in more intensive collaborative activities was higher than might be expected given the barriers to deeper collaboration highlighted in the literature. As shown in Table 1, almost 50 percent of the MPO respondents reported that they "integrated goals identified through collaboration with other MPOs into our LRTP," while over 40 percent reported proposing joint investments or project work in their LRTPs or their TIPs. These results suggest that deeper inter-metro collaboration and joint planning and project work have become priorities for a significant subset of MPOs.

We also learned about the specific transportation and related policy issues that were the subject of multi-MPO collaborations. As seen in Table 2, major transportation corridor and multimodal freight issues and services were the most common subjects of interregional collaborations, with coordination of transportation and land use planning issues a close third. These issues logically flow from basic rationales for larger scale planning to enhance both local and system-wide efficiency around functional issues with clear spillovers and bottleneck problems.

A further notable finding is the 897 instances reported by the responding MPOs of collaborations involving joint work on multiple issue areas. This suggests that MPOs recognize the intrinsic interrelationships between transportation system

Table 1. Collaborative Activities Involving MPOs and Other Partners.

Intensity of collaboration required	Form of collaborative activity	Average number of partners reported for this activity	MPO collaboration partnerships between metros					
			Other MPOs in our state (%)	Other MPOs in adjacent state(s) (%)	Other MPOs in nonadjacent states (%)	Transit-related planning organizations in other countries (%)	Number of MPOs responding	Share of all MPOs responding (%)
Lowest	1. Met with leadership and staff of collaboration partner(s). Exchanged information and discuss issues of mutual interest.	1.8	54.2	27.3	12.6	6.0	189	97.9
	2. Collaborated with partner(s) to identify joint challenges, strategies, and priorities between MPOs.	1.6	59.8	23.6	11.2	5.4	172	89.1
	3. Collaborated with partner(s) to produce joint studies or recommendations about common issues or projects between MPOs	1.4	69.5	20.9	5.7	4.0	127	65.8
	4. Adopted memorandum of understanding with other MPOs and/or other partner(s).	1.3	65.6	28.1	3.9	2.3	98	50.8
	5. Integrated goals identified through collaboration with other MPOs into our Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP).	1.3	71.8	22.6	1.6	4.1	95	49.2
	6. Worked with partner(s) to propose joint investments to meet common goals in the LRTP.	1.3	67.9	23.6	3.8	4.7	84	43.5
Highest	7. Added projects identified through collaboration with partner(s) into our Transportation Improvement Plan.	1.2	74.5	16.3	4.1	5.1	80	41.5

Note: MPO = Metropolitan Planning Organization

Table 2. Topical Foci of Inter-metro Collaborations.

Area of Inter-metro Collaborative Activity	%	Count
1. Major transportation corridor issues	15.3	137
2. Multimodal freight issues and services	11.6	104
3. Coordination of transportation and land use planning issues	11.4	102
4. Congestion management issues	9.3	83
5. Intercity bus service	9.3	83
6. Air quality issues	8.6	77
7. Economic development issues	8.3	74
8. Intelligent transportation systems/operations	7.8	70
9. Intercity passenger rail service	6.7	60
10. Planning for potential future growth in driverless vehicles	4.7	42
11. Intercity high-speed rail service	3.5	31
12. Other environmental issues	3.1	28
13. International border transit and crossing issues	0.7	6
Total	100	897

Table 3. How MPOs View the Importance and Effectiveness of Inter-metro Planning Collaborations.

Importance	%	Count	Effectiveness	%	Count
1 Not very important	6.8	13	Not effective	4.8	9
2 Somewhat important	19.5	37	Somewhat effective	33.2	62
3 Important	41.1	78	Effective	42.8	80
4 Very important	32.6	62	Very effective	19.3	36
Total	100	190	Total	100	187

decisions and a range of related issues such as land use, economic development, and air quality.

When asked about the importance of inter-MPO planning and project work, MPO respondents largely indicate that planning across metro regions is an important priority.[2] Nearly, 75 percent of respondents ranked interregional MPO collaborations as "very important" or "important," 19.47 percent ranked them as "somewhat important," and fewer than 7 percent said they were not very important. In addition, MPOs broadly thought that these collaborations were effective: nearly 62 percent ranked their interregional activities as very effective or effective, as shown in Table 3.

Our survey results offer some evidence that state government support and incentives positively affect the frequency and intensity of inter-MPO cooperation and collaboration. Drawing on the literature, we isolated the results from six states where the state government (often through state USDOTs) offers support or incentives for collaboration between MPOs (Loftus-Otway, Miller, Harrison, Marriott, Dharmadhikari, and Mingo 2017; Loftus-Otway, Miller, Harrison, Marriott, and Mingo 2017; Peckett and Lyons 2012; Read et al. 2017; Ross et al. 2011). A greater share of responding MPOs from these states (Arizona, California, Florida, Iowa, Oregon, and Washington) reported being engaged in more intensive collaborative activities than the share of all respondents engaged in such activities.

For example, 57 percent of the MPO respondents in the six states reported that they "integrated goals identified through collaboration with other MPOs into our LRTP" (compared with 49% of national respondents); 57 percent "worked with partner(s) to propose joint investments to meet common goals in the LRTP" (compared with 43.5% of national respondents); and 49 percent of the respondents in the six states added projects identified through collaboration with partner(s) into their TIP (vs. 41.5% of national respondents).

Strong state support for MPO collaboration in Florida was noted earlier in the paper. Reported levels of MPO cooperation and collaboration were quite high among Florida survey respondents (54% of all Florida MPOs compared with 50% in the overall sample). Furthermore, regarding collaboration intensity, 92 percent of the Florida MPO respondents reported that they "integrated goals identified through collaboration with other MPOs into our LRTP" (compared with 49% of national respondents); 86 percent "worked with partner(s) to propose joint investments to meet common goals in the

Table 4. Barriers to Inter-MPO Collaborations.

	In your view, what are the major barriers to more extensive collaboration with other MPOs or international transit-related organizations? (click on all that apply)		
No.	Answer	%	Count
1	There are not sufficient financial resources for supporting staff to engage in more extensive collaborations	28.5	90
2	Collaborating with other MPOs is not a major priority given other demands on our time and resources	27.5	87
3	There are not specific funding sources to support joint projects with other MPOs	25.0	79
4	Collaborating with other MPOs is not facilitated by the planning frameworks and requirements of our State Department of Transportation	10.4	33
5	Collaborating with other MPOs is not facilitated by the planning frameworks and requirements of the federal transportation agencies	8.5	27
	Total	100	316

Note: MPO = Metropolitan Planning Organization.

LRTP" (compared with 43.5% of national respondents); and 86 percent of the respondents in Florida added projects identified through collaboration with partner(s) into their TIP (vs. 41.5% of national respondents). Of course, the high variation in responses from MPOs within individual states makes it difficult to draw strong conclusions.

An additional group of survey questions asked about barriers to more extensive inter-MPO collaboration around transportation and related issues. Consistent with the Ross, Hylton, and Lee's (2014) survey, significant barriers included limited funding to support staff for inter-metro collaborations and the lack of specific funding for joint project work. The second most significant barrier reported was that inter-MPO planning was not a priority given other demands. A small subset of MPOs viewed the lack of facilitation from state USDOTs or federal transportation agencies as significant fetters to more extensive collaboration (see Table 4).

In sum, these results suggest that collaboration *between* MPOs on a range of transportation-related issues is surprisingly robust and that new regionalist strategies appear to be yielding benefits in this domain. A supermajority of MPO respondents reported being engaged in some form of collaboration with other MPOs in the same or adjacent states. A significant minority of MPOs (40%–50%) reported integrating joint goals and project plans into the LRTP and TIP plans of their MPO. In addition, the majority of MPOs viewed these collaborations as important and effective in the context of their mission. These results suggest that the benefits of collaboration and joint work between MPOs are significant enough to overcome pressures to stick to local issues and limited financial and staff resources to put into collaborative activities.

Are MPO Interregional Collaborations Different for Megaregions?

A second part of our MPO survey explored the frequency and characteristics of collaboration directed explicitly to megaregional-scale planning issues. The megaregion-focused results, reported in a complementary paper (Oden and Sciara 2020), enable us to examine distinctions between MPO collaborative efforts at all levels of geography, and MPO efforts corresponding to specific agglomerations identified as megaregions, as shown in Figure 2.

We find that the share of respondents who reported collaborating on megaregional-scale issues was substantially lower than the share reporting overall inter-MPO collaboration.

Similarly, the share of respondents reporting involvement in intensive megaregional collaborative efforts was only 22 percent for proposing joint investments in LRTPs and 20 percent for coordinating TIP investments (Oden and Sciara 2020, 6, Table 2). By contrast, the share of MPOs collaborating across regions more generally on these activities was, respectively, 44 and 41 percent, likely reflecting that more substantive collaborative activities require more intense and complex interactions at the megaregional scale.

The share of MPO leaders who ranked collaborations as important or very important was much smaller for megaregional-scale efforts than for region-to-region efforts in general. MPO respondents were also broadly skeptical about the effectiveness of megaregional-scale activities; more than 65 percent of respondents ranked their megaregional collaborations as not effective or only somewhat effective (Oden and Sciara 2020, 7).

Megaregional planning advocates point to the megaregion as the dominant twenty-first-century spatial scale, influencing various functional systems and shaping economic growth, mobility, and competitiveness for urban regions and national economies (Harrison and Hoyler 2017; Ross 2009). Our contrasting survey responses offer important insights into the salience of collaborative planning at this scale. We find lower levels of active collaboration at the megaregional level and attribute this to several related factors. First, it is not clear that the most important functional challenges in transportation map closely to megaregional geographies. Issues around interstate corridors, inter-city public transit,

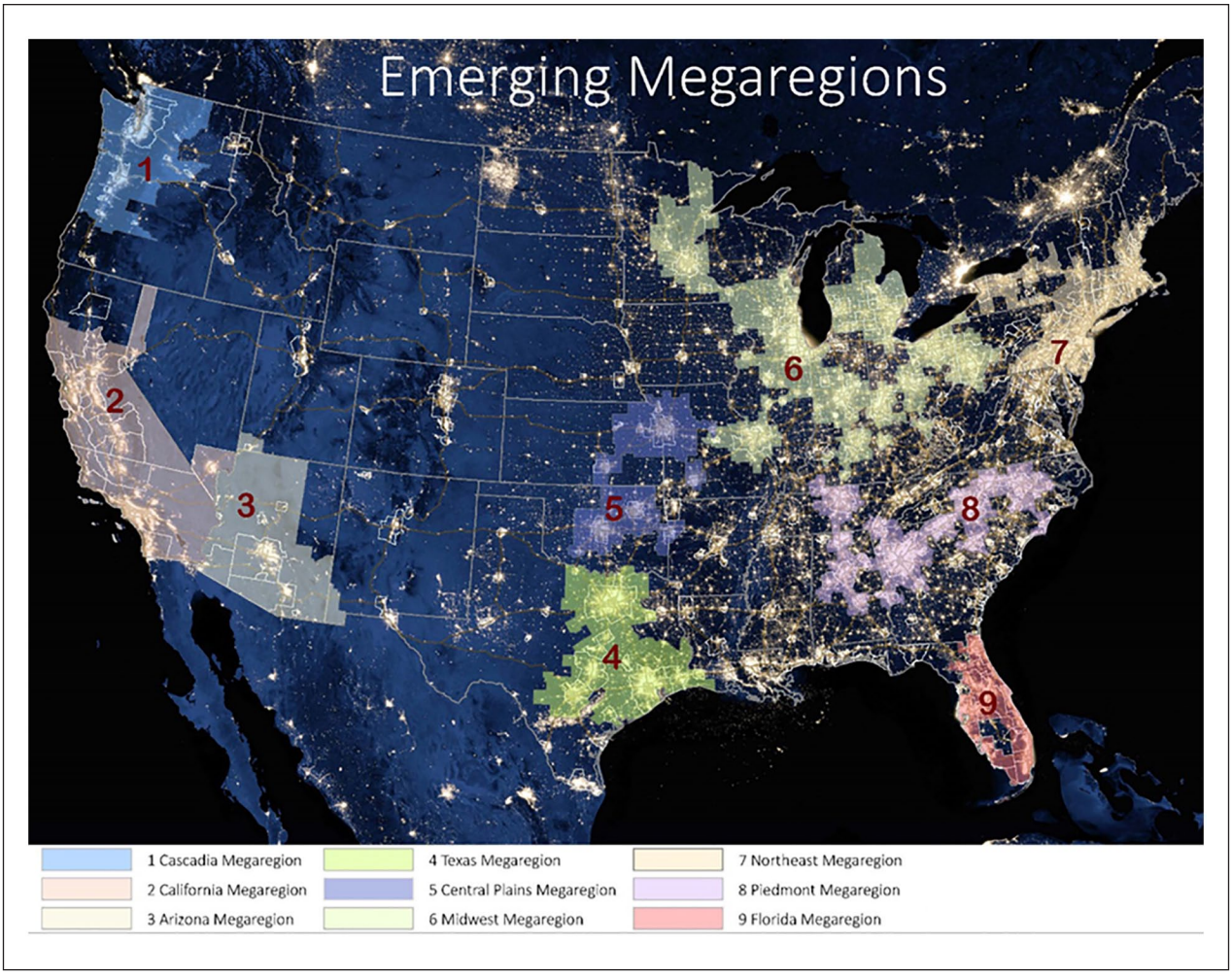

Figure 2. Geography of U.S. Megaregions.
Source: Read et al. (2017).

and air quality, for instance, may present both at smaller scales (more proximate MSAs) and at larger scales spanning multiple megaregions. Second, the political, institutional, and resource constraints associated with collaboration likely grow more formidable in complex megaregional spaces straddling numerous jurisdictional boundaries. Finally, the costs of megaregional collaborations may consequently be higher and the benefits less legible than more flexible collaborations that can occur at a scale more directly related to a specific functional challenge.

Concluding Discussion

Overall, our survey results capture interesting patterns in inter-metropolitan-scale planning, and reveal an important story that MPOs are transcending barriers to actively forge spatial fixes to address larger scale transportation and related challenges. Notably, these findings suggest that inter-MPO partnerships and joint planning activities are widespread and surprisingly substantive in light of potential barriers to such collaborations. It is especially noteworthy that a significant minority of MPOs (40%–50%) report integrating joint goals and project plans into their LRTP and TIP plans. Furthermore, the majority of MPOs see inter-metro planning and project work as an important priority and effective in the context of their overall mission. These results suggest that the benefits of collaboration and joint work between MPOs seem in many cases to overcome possible local resistance, transaction costs, and scarce financial and staff resources.

The range of functional challenges facing MPOs appears to map less legibly to megaregional geographies. Our survey of MPO leaders suggests that megaregional transportation planning is at a nascent stage, with MPOs engaging in less frequent and intensive collaborative activities, and with fewer MPO leaders seeing collaborative megaregional planning as a priority or as particularly effective in the current environment.

While these results suggest that voluntary, multi-institutional collaborations in the transportation domain are addressing larger scale challenges according to the basic new

regionalist script, we note several caveats. First, the survey found very limited evidence that private or non-profit partners were central to these inter-metro collaborations. But the survey did not query in detail about the possible role of non-public-sector entities. Second, because MPOs are heavily surveyed, our instrument was designed both to achieve a strong response rate and to collect valuable and original information about the extent, nature, and leader's perceptions of inter-MPO cooperation and collaboration. However, we did not probe leaders' deeper motivations or analyze in-depth institutional rules, norms, cultures, or network practices that might explain characteristics or patterns of collaboration within the inter-MPO initiatives. This would certainly constitute a compelling area for future investigation. Finally, we find interesting—though largely circumstantial—evidence about the importance of "top-down" facilitation or incentives in spurring these forms of inter-metro planning activities.

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Notes

1. Now called The Eastern Transportation Coalition.
2. The survey question was "In light of the other planning and implementation priorities of your MPO, how would you rank the importance of your collaborations with other MPOs or international transit-related organizations?"

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