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FOCUSING ON EQUITY IN REGIONAL PLANS

A NITC report offers guidance for MPOs on conducting equity analysis in regional transportation plans.

The Issue

Transportation equity issues can arise in a variety of ways. A new freeway or train track, with all its attendant air and noise pollution, might cut through a part of town where low-income and minority populations are the highest. Bike lanes sometimes wait to make an appearance until a neighborhood has begun to gentrify. People over the age of 60, as well as people of color, are disproportionately likely to be killed by a car while walking. Low-income neighborhoods often have poor access to regional transportation networks, making getting to and from work and other destinations a challenge for residents. To address problems like this, equity needs to be a priority in every regional transportation planning process.

Metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) have long been required to consider the equity implications of their regional transportation plans and processes. Federal law and guidance relative to Title VI and Environmental Justice requires MPOs to engage historically disadvantaged communities in the planning process, to address the equity effects of MPO plans and projects, and to systematically incorporate these analyses into their planning processes. Despite widespread evidence that MPOs are making efforts to address equity goals, the role of equity analysis in shaping long-range transportation plans and project decisions is often unclear and undefined. More guidance is needed on best practice methods and performance measures for addressing equity in a regional transportation planning context.

THE ISSUE

Metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) have long been required to consider the equity implications of their regional transportation plans and processes.

THE RESEARCH

Researchers:

- Conducted case studies in Florida and Oregon;
- Reviewed methods used for measuring transportation equity;
- Documented metrics for various dimensions of equity.

IMPLICATIONS

This research offers guidance to MPOs on how to evaluate distributional equity in regional plans and projects.

Photo: Aerial view of Tampa, Florida; one of the case studies in the research

The Research

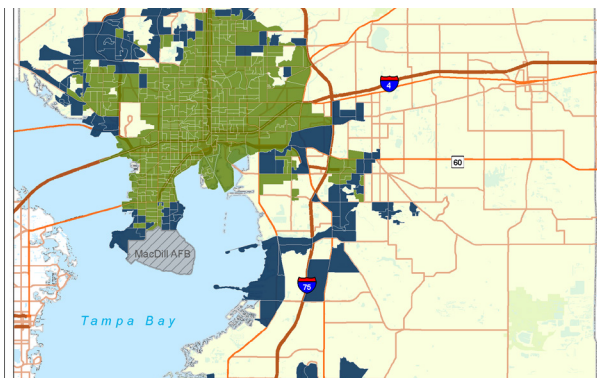
A NITC study, Evaluating the Distributional Effects of Regional Transportation Plans and Projects, took a look at how MPOs address these types of equity concerns. Led by Kristine Williams of the University of South Florida and Aaron Golub of Portland State University, the project's goal was to provide guidance to metropolitan planning organizations on how to evaluate distributional equity in regional plans and projects.

The research began with an assessment of national research on the topic of equity in transportation planning. MPO planning documents and current literature were reviewed to determine the range of transportation equity analysis strategies employed nationally. The comparative review addressed how MPOs defined communities of concern and located them spatially, what strategies were employed to engage them in the planning process, and metrics used to evaluate several dimensions of equity relating to accessibility, affordability, health and safety, and distributional equity of investments. Publicly available documents were used to conduct the analysis.

Researchers also conducted exploratory case studies with their respective MPO partners – Hillsborough MPO (Tampa, FL) and Metro (Portland, OR). They attempted to engage directly with the planning processes of each MPO, and to support their research needs while also learning from them.

Implications

The research found that locating and reaching out to low income and minority communities, and other communities for whom transportation is a challenge, is a powerful first step for planning agencies attempting to proactively address equity issues in the planning process. Researchers emphasized that it is vital that affected communities are brought to the table to develop a shared



Areas with least job accessibility within 45 minutes via transit.

This map of Hillsborough County shows the transit service areas with lowest job accessibility in dark blue. This can provide a basis for evaluating impacts of transit investment on job accessibility.

understanding of the key issues, opportunities and project needs illuminated by the analysis, as this helps to ensure that project identification and performance monitoring are directly aligned with community needs. The most essential steps identified by the research team to achieve equity in regional plans are: developing community profiles and locating communities of concern within the planning area; establishing a concerted public involvement effort that is specially oriented toward achieving a better understanding of the needs and concerns of the various populations; developing a system-level process for understanding the distributional effects of transportation investments, including the adoption and monitoring of equity-related performance measures.

PROJECT INFORMATION

TITLE: Evaluating the Distributional Effects of Regional Transportation Plans and Projects

LEAD INVESTIGATOR:
Kristine M. Williams, AICP,
University of South Florida

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CONTACT:
Justin Carinci, 503-725-2843
carinci@pdx.edu

MORE INFORMATION
[http://nitc.trec.pdx.edu/
research/project/862](http://nitc.trec.pdx.edu/research/project/862)