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Integrating Equity into MPO Project Prioritization

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Executive Summary:

Introduction and objectives

Metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) are required to comply with federal laws and Executive Orders that extend protections to specific demographic groups. These include Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act, and Executive Orders 12898 and 13166, which further require consideration of the needs of minority, low-income, and limited English proficiency (LEP) populations. Because of these requirements, and the general need for and importance of equity, MPOs are increasingly committed to ensuring a fair distribution of the benefits and burdens of transportation investments.

Nonetheless, methods used by MPOs to address equity in project prioritization and selection vary widely in scope and potential effectiveness. Additional guidance is needed to help MPOs identify and prioritize projects that best target the needs of communities of concern (COCs), including low income and minority populations (including LEP populations), working poor, the elderly, youth, and the disabled. This research aims to provide such guidance.

This research, sponsored by the Center for Transportation Equity, Decisions & Dollars (CTEDD), aims to document effective methods used by MPOs in project prioritization with a focus on improving access of COCs to opportunities. The study explores thirty-five case examples across the nation, including sixteen in Florida, and reviews numerous project prioritization methods that are relevant to equity. Specific research objectives include the following:

1. Summarize the national state of the practice in advancing equity through project prioritization.
2. Document methods currently used by MPOs in Florida to address equity when prioritizing transportation projects.
3. Identify notable practices for prioritizing equity and access to opportunity for COCs used by MPOs of different sizes and governance structures.
4. Develop a resource document with specific methods and case examples to guide MPOs in addressing equity and access to opportunity in project prioritization process.

Methodology

This research began with a national review of project prioritization approaches relevant to equity, with a focus on methods and indicators used by MPOs to prioritize equity and improve access to opportunity for COCs. Documents reviewed included long range transportation plans (LRTPs), transportation improvement programs (TIPs), equity analysis reports, public involvement plans, and other relevant materials. The research also examined useful strategies, tools, and data for selecting projects for COCs.

A special assessment was done that focused on local Florida MPOs and explored approaches used by sixteen of Florida's twenty-seven MPOs (covering about half of the MPOs in the state of Florida) to prioritize projects based on equity and access to opportunity.

This assessment reviewed available planning documents, tools, and materials that were readily available online. The goal of this assessment was to identify how Florida MPOs currently address access to opportunity and equity in their project prioritization processes and to identify best practice approaches.

Finally, the research team identified six out of the sample of thirty-five MPOs with notable practices in selecting projects that address equity and access to opportunity for further in-depth evaluation. The selection process was subjective and based on the level of effort made by the MPOs to promote the choice of useful projects for COCs, with attention to variation in size and geographic location. Staff from the six MPOs were also interviewed in a semi-structured format for additional information and to learn more about success factors and lessons learned. Criteria, methods, and tools for project prioritization relevant to equity are summarized and catalogued.

Findings

The review of current practice revealed that MPO project prioritization practices relevant to equity vary widely from broad to narrow, explicit to implicit, and subjective to quantitative. Some MPOs include broad terminology about access to opportunity, sometimes targeting minority and low-income populations. Other MPOs employ a more explicit approach to equity. Some MPOs mainly focus on transit for equity, while others evaluate and incorporate equity for all modes.

Public involvement is typically performed by all MPOs; however, a number of MPOs employ effective methods to engage COCs during project prioritization process. These include inviting representatives of COCs to special focus groups and open houses with materials translated in diverse languages. Identifying and mapping areas with higher concentrations of COCs and overlaying projects to ensure equitable distribution of investments is another common strategy for project prioritization. Both subjective and quantitative evaluations of individual projects were identified. Additionally, some MPOs are examining equity from a variety of dimensions (e.g., access to opportunity, health, safety, and affordability). In each case, the broader local context and the MPO's unique planning environment and role in their respective communities shaped the approaches.

Typically, to move groups or a mix of projects to the long range transportation plan, MPOs use geographic information systems (GIS), travel demand models, and scenarios. For individual project evaluations, MPOs either employ a scoring system or a holistic approach that evaluates projects qualitatively through the lens of equity, accessibility, and connectivity. Various evaluation methods are also utilized by MPOs to assess equity in their systems (plans) and programs during or following the project prioritization process. MPOs prioritize projects based on equity at different stages (plan or/and program). Some MPOs prioritize projects only in the plan or program, and other MPOs select useful projects for COCs in both the plan and program. Overall, MPOs employ various methods to move projects to the program for funding.

Scope of Problem:

Incorporating equity in planning and prioritization is a continuous challenge for MPOs in a competitive funding environment. There is no standard approach to integrate equity into MPO planning processes, especially during project prioritization. Therefore, the levels of consideration given to equity in planning activities and project prioritization vary widely across MPOs.

Policy Alternatives:

Establishing equity policies is suggested as a way to influence all aspects of the plan and improvement program, including project prioritization.

Policy Recommendations:

1. Include equity as a vision and goal to ensure that the planning process addresses the needs of COCs.
2. Systematically prioritize projects for COCs and consider user benefit of projects specific to those populations (regardless of project type or mode).
3. Consider equity from multiple perspectives, including access to opportunity, affordability and health.
4. Evaluate outcomes and return on investment from an equity lens, using performance measures and targets.
5. Engage COCs during project prioritization to identify projects that best meet their needs.
6. Dedicate funding for the purpose of increasing equity in project prioritization.

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