Exploring Local Funding Mechanisms for MPOs Across the U.S.

Final Report

PREPARED BY

Center for Urban Transportation Research
University of South Florida

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Executive Summary

Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) depend on non-federal and non-state contributions to unlock federal planning dollars and carry out regional transportation planning. These local funds are essential, yet often difficult for MPOs to secure. This report provides a national assessment of how MPOs generate local revenue, the barriers they encounter, and the actions they have taken to address those challenges.

The project combined a national literature review with survey responses from 129 MPOs. Together, these sources reveal a system in which MPOs operate under significant structural constraints related to local fiscal capacity, administrative requirements, political dynamics, and state statutes. These conditions shape which funding strategies are realistically available. Despite these limitations, MPOs employ a wide range of approaches to meet match requirements and sustain their transportation planning programs.

Key Findings from the Literature and Survey

MPOs use a diverse mix of local funding tools. Across respondents, the most common sources of local funds were:

- Member dues or assessments: used widely but structured differently across MPOs.
- In-kind contributions: reported by about one quarter of respondents, including staff time, office space, and shared services.
- Local government cash match: sometimes concentrated in a single jurisdiction.
- Other locally generated revenue: such as fees, contract work, or pooled regional funds.
- Private-sector or philanthropic support: reported by a small number of respondents.

Among the 129 MPOs surveyed, the top barriers to generating local funds were:

- Limited local government resources (55 percent)
- Political barriers (19 percent)
- Staff capacity or administrative burden (14 percent)
- Legal restrictions or state statutes (9 percent)

These challenges align with what has been documented in the literature: MPOs operate in fragmented fiscal environments where local governments have limited authority or limited ability to contribute.

MPOs implement many strategies, but most address symptoms rather than root causes. Across all challenge areas, MPOs reported actions that help stabilize their programs in the short term. However, few of these strategies change the underlying fiscal or statutory constraints that shape local funding capacity.

What MPOs Are Doing Now:

When local fiscal capacity is limited, common approaches include:

- Stabilizing dues structures through predictable formulas, low minimum dues, or multi-year rate stability.
- Communicating return on investment to help members understand the value of participation.
- Centralizing match responsibilities in one or two core jurisdictions when smaller governments cannot contribute.
- Pursuing supplemental planning grants or legislative appropriations.
- Aligning project scope with available match to avoid overextension.
- Exploring structural tools such as state-supported planning funds or regional authorities.

When political barriers limit local funding, MPOs reported:

- Education and outreach to elected officials.
- Using data and technical materials to depoliticize funding discussions.
- Demonstrating value to members through technical assistance, data tools, or grant success.
- Adjusting governance or dues structures to reduce friction.
- Maintaining balanced engagement across political constituencies.

When staff capacity is the limiting factor, MPOs described:

- Using consultants when recruiting staff is difficult.
- Generating flexible revenue, such as contract work or administrative fees.
- Simplifying match administration through tools such as funding exchanges or TDCs.
- Hiring or reallocating staff to reduce administrative workload.
- Improving contract and agreement processes to streamline required documentation.

When legal or statutory restrictions apply, MPOs reported:

- Legislative engagement to expand revenue authority.
- Support for enabling legislation, such as local-option taxes or fee authority.

- Providing technical analysis to strengthen legislative proposals.
- Exploring regional authorities with revenue powers.
- Commissioning feasibility studies when constrained by policies such as Colorado's Taxpayer's Bill of Rights (TABOR).

Implications for MPOs and Policy Makers

The findings point to several broader implications:

Local fiscal capacity sets the limits on what MPOs can do. Many MPOs cannot meaningfully increase dues because member governments have limited or no revenue authority. State policy plays a central role in expanding match options, authorizing local revenue tools, or establishing dedicated planning funds that create more stable planning environments.

Administrative workload is a major constraint, especially for small MPOs. Federal requirements create a fixed staffing burden that does not scale with MPO size. When local revenues are limited, MPOs cannot reduce staff obligations without jeopardizing compliance. Streamlined reporting, standardized contracting tools, and centralized administrative support would substantially ease this burden.

Communication and visibility are key to sustaining political support. MPOs that regularly demonstrate value to local governments are more likely to maintain consistent local funding. Statewide associations, regional coalitions, or State DOT investment in shared data resources, statewide tools, and training can strengthen this visibility and help reduce political resistance to dues or match commitments.

In-kind contributions are heavily used but unstable. Staff time and donated space help many MPOs meet match requirements, but these arrangements can disappear suddenly due to turnover or budget cuts, and documentation practices vary widely across states. Clearer guidance and more predictable match options would make in-kind support a more reliable tool.

Long-term coalitions are necessary for structural solutions. Durable reforms such as dedicated planning funds, new revenue authorities, or expanded local-option taxation require coordinated action over multiple years. MPOs that have made progress did so through broad coalitions involving local governments, state DOTs, and legislators working toward shared goals.

SECTION 1

Introduction

Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) play a central role in shaping the transportation future of their regions. They bring together local governments, transit agencies, state departments of transportation, and the public to develop plans and programs that guide investments in roads, transit, bicycle and pedestrian facilities, and other transportation priorities in their metropolitan area.

Most MPO funding comes from the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and Federal Transit Administration (FTA). Under 23 U.S.C. §134 and 49 U.S.C. §5303, MPOs are required to carry out a continuing, cooperative, and comprehensive (3-C) planning process. The federal funds that support this work—FHWA's Planning (PL) funds and FTA's Metropolitan Planning (5303(d)) funds—are generally available at an 80% federal share. The remaining 20% match must come from non-federal sources (23 U.S.C. §120). Because these programs operate on a reimbursement basis, MPOs must first incur and pay costs before receiving federal reimbursement, which can create cash flow challenges for smaller or independent organizations.

Federal guidance (2 CFR § 200 Subpart E) further specifies the types of costs that are allowable, and these cost principles are implemented by FHWA and FTA through program-specific guidance. In many cases, State DOTs apply their own fiscal rules, which may further define or restrict eligible uses of federal planning funds.

States typically serve as the pass-through entities for federal planning dollars, and therefore also play a key role in shaping how MPOs meet match requirements. Some states provide direct financial support, such as cash match or toll credits, to help MPOs meet their non-federal match obligations. Others may offer in-kind contributions or allow flexibility in how match is documented.

In most regions, however, MPOs must secure reliable local contributions to unlock their federal planning dollars. This often means relying on member governments to provide cash or in-kind support. Without these local dollars, MPOs would be unable to access the majority of their planning resources.

Local funds are also vital for other reasons. They allow MPOs to pay for activities that federal or state rules do not permit, such as certain types of public outreach, advocacy, certain travel, or costs deemed "unallowable." They provide flexibility to pursue quick-turn studies or pilot projects outside the scope of the federally approved Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP). And they are often needed to participate in discretionary grant programs, like the U.S. Department of Transportation's Safe Streets for All (SS4A) program, which require a non-federal match.

Yet raising local dollars is rarely easy. Cities and counties face their own budgetary pressures, and MPOs may struggle to justify dues or contributions when the benefits of regional planning are not immediately visible to every jurisdiction. Because MPOs depend on local funds in so many ways, learning more about how they raise these resources can empower MPOs of all sizes to strengthen their planning efforts and deliver better outcomes for the communities they serve.

This report was prepared by the Center for Urban Transportation Research (CUTR) at the University of South Florida. The project combined a national literature review with survey responses from 129 MPOs. Together, these sources reveal a system in which MPOs operate under significant structural constraints related to local fiscal capacity, administrative requirements, political dynamics, and state statutes. These conditions shape which funding strategies are realistically available. Despite these limitations, MPOs employ a wide range of approaches to meet match requirements and sustain their transportation planning programs.

To meet this objective, we combined two approaches. First, we conducted a review of reports, academic studies, and guidance documents to understand what is already known about MPO funding practices. Second, we carried out a national survey of MPOs to gather first-hand insights into how organizations across the country raise non-federal funds, what challenges they face, and what creative strategies they have tried. Together, these methods provide a snapshot of the current landscape of MPO local funding.

SECTION 2

A Review of MPO Funding Literature and Guidance

Why MPOs Need Local Funds

Although MPOs are primarily funded through federal and state sources, these dollars are not sufficient on their own. Local funds are essential for several reasons, each rooted in federal requirements, fiscal realities, and the practical demands of running a regional planning agency.

1. To meet federal and state match requirements.

The most immediate reason MPOs need local dollars is to provide the non-federal match required for federal planning funds. The FHWA and FTA typically require a 20% non-federal share to match the 80% provided by federal planning funds (Kramer, Carroll, Karimi, Bond, & Lee, 2017). While some states allow toll credits or other mechanisms in lieu of cash, many MPOs must rely on local government contributions to meet this requirement. Research has consistently shown this to be one of the most difficult aspects of MPO finance—national surveys, federal reviews, and recent National Cooperative Highway Research Program (NCHRP) studies all point to the local match requirement as a persistent challenge that can limit MPOs' ability to use their full federal funding and expand into new planning areas (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2022; GAO, 2009; AMPO, 2024).

Exceptions to the 80/20 Match Rule

Higher Federal Shares for Some Programs – Certain programs (such as highway safety improvements) may be funded at 90% or even 100% federal share.

Hardship Waivers – In rare cases, USDOT may waive or reduce the local match requirement for small, rural, or economically distressed communities.

Sliding Scale States – Some states with large federal land holdings (e.g., Nevada, Alaska, Idaho, and Oregon) qualify for a higher federal share—up to 95%—based on a formula in federal law.

2. To manage cash flow while awaiting federal reimbursement.

Federal transportation planning funds are provided on a reimbursement basis—meaning MPOs (or a fiscal agent that acts as a host or provides financial support through a contractual arrangement) must first pay for eligible expenses with their own resources and then request repayment from FHWA or FTA. This creates a timing gap between when expenses are incurred and when federal dollars are received. To keep staff paid and operations running smoothly, MPOs rely on access to local funds or other non-federal resources that can serve as a capital float. Larger MPOs or those with host agencies that advance the costs may be

better positioned to absorb this lag, but smaller MPOs without reserves can find it especially challenging (Kramer, Carroll, Karimi, Bond, & Lee, 2017; GAO, 2009).

3. To fund activities that are not reimbursable with federal or state dollars.

Federal funds come with strict rules on what can and cannot be charged to a grant. The Office of Management and Budget's Uniform Guidance (2 CFR § 200 Subpart E, 2025) and state-specific fiscal rules prohibit certain costs from being reimbursed with federal dollars. For example, items such as food and beverages at meetings, lobbying, or other expenses that do not directly advance transportation planning may be considered unallowable. Costs deemed unallowable under federal or state guidelines must be covered by non-federal, non-state sources.

4. To maintain flexibility within the work program.

Federal planning funds are tied to the approved UPWP. While this structure supports accountability, it can limit flexibility when new opportunities or issues arise between UPWP updates. MPOs often encounter short-term needs such as quick-turn planning studies, pilot projects, or additional public outreach that are not already covered by PL or §5303(d) funds. Local funds must still be shown in the UPWP, but agencies can maintain some flexibility by including a catch-all task or setting a threshold that allows the Executive Director to approve smaller local expenditures without a full amendment. This flexibility enables MPOs to respond quickly to these opportunities and needs without going through lengthy federal approval processes (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2022).

5. To participate in discretionary grant programs.

Many recent federal discretionary grant programs, such as the Safe Streets for All (SS4A) program created under the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), require applicants to provide a non-federal match, often set at 20%. MPOs that want to apply for or support their member jurisdictions in applying for these funds must have access to local contributions that can be used as match (USDOT, 2025). Without reliable local funds, MPOs are less able to compete for these opportunities.

6. To sustain organizational capacity and independence.

MPOs often use local funds to sustain staff, data systems, and other capacities beyond what federal planning dollars cover. A national survey of MPO structures found that state and local support, including member dues, is a significant factor in maintaining staffing and operational stability (Kramer, Carroll, Karimi, Bond, & Lee, 2017). In some large MPOs, local dues make up a substantial portion of the overall budget, reflecting their importance in ensuring MPOs can remain effective, independent regional planning entities.

Supplementing Federal Funds: Local, State, and Alternative Sources

As discussed in the previous section, non-federal resources are essential for MPOs to meet match requirements, maintain operational flexibility, and support planning activities beyond the scope of federal programs. These resources come from a mix of local, state, and alternative sources, each playing a distinct role in supplementing federal funds.

This section outlines the primary mechanisms MPOs rely on. It begins with direct local contributions, such as member dues and payments for services, which are managed by the MPO itself. The next subsection examines locally generated revenue—funds raised by cities, counties, or transit agencies through mechanisms like sales taxes or property taxes. These revenues may be used in several ways: to support MPO operations directly, to fund local infrastructure projects that align with regional plans, or to meet match requirements for federally funded initiatives. Even when these funds do not flow through the MPO's budget, they are often reflected in the UPWP, transportation improvement program (TIP), or other MPO documents due to their relevance to regional planning.

The third subsection explores state-level mechanisms that assist local entities in meeting match obligations, particularly in regions where local capacity is limited. The final subsection considers alternative sources, including contributions from nonprofit organizations, private sector partners, and public–private partnerships.

Together, these funding streams illustrate the diverse and complex landscape of non-federal financial support that sustains MPO functions and advances regional transportation goals.

Direct Contributions to MPOs

Member Dues and Assessments

One of the most common approaches to obtaining direct financial support from member jurisdictions is the collection of dues from local governments. While these contributions are generally approved collectively by the MPO board and established through interlocal agreements, they are not legally mandated. Participation is voluntary but widely practiced as part of each member jurisdiction's commitment to regional planning. These dues can be structured in several ways (Kramer, Carroll, Karimi, Bond, & Lee, 2017):

- *Per capita fees:* Each local government pays an amount based on its share of the MPO's population. For example, if the MPO requires $100,000 in local funds and a city makes up 14% of the region's population, that city would contribute $14,000.
- *Fixed rate per resident:* Instead of setting a target dollar amount, some MPOs charge a flat rate, like 8 cents per resident.

- *Fixed fee per jurisdiction:* Every member pays the same amount, regardless of size.
- *Hybrid models:* Some MPOs combine methods, adding in factors like lane miles, vehicle miles traveled, number of voting members, or even the share of federal project funding a jurisdiction receives.

In-Kind Contributions

Local match requirements can sometimes be met through in-kind services rather than cash. These may include staff time, provision of office space, or local data collection efforts. While not flexible in the same way as cash, in-kind contributions can reduce the financial burden on smaller jurisdictions and help MPOs meet their match requirements.

In-kind contributions toward local match requirements can come from MPOs as well as third parties such as member governments, transit agencies, host organizations, or private partners. These contributions must be properly documented and valued according to federal cost principles (2 CFR § 200.306). However, many MPOs and project sponsors have reported confusion about how in-kind contributions work. According to AMPO's 2024 survey of 96 MPOs, nearly half (48%) of project sponsors indicated they were not familiar with how to properly value in-kind contributions for federal match purposes, and one-third of MPOs found federal guidance on match requirements unclear (AMPO, 2024). This lack of clarity can limit the use of in-kind contributions, even when they could provide meaningful financial relief.

Fees for Services and Special Contracts

Some MPOs generate local revenue through fees for specialized services, such as traffic modeling, data analysis, or grant administration, offered to local jurisdictions or partner agencies. These arrangements supplement dues and also strengthen MPOs' technical role in the region.

Locally Generated Revenues

MPOs generally cannot levy taxes themselves. Instead, they rely on local governments, counties, and transit agencies to generate revenue streams through sales taxes, property taxes, vehicle fees, or other mechanisms. While these dollars are primarily used to build or operate transportation projects, they still matter for MPO planning in two important ways. First, they often provide the 20% local match required to unlock federal planning funds. Second, MPOs are responsible for documenting these revenues in long-range plans and TIPs to show that projects are financially realistic. In short, even though these funds are not "planning dollars" in the strict sense, they shape the financial environment in which MPOs operate and have the potential to sustain their planning capacity.

Sales Tax

Local option sales taxes are the most significant and widespread form of dedicated transportation funding. Typically approved by voters, they are administered by transit agencies or county transportation commissions rather than MPOs themselves. Within the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) region, county transportation commissions such as Los Angeles Metro and the Riverside County Transportation Commission administer voter-approved transportation sales taxes. Between FY2025–FY2029, these taxes are projected to generate $38.1 billion—approximately 61% of the region's transportation revenue (Southern California Association of Governments, 2025). Although SCAG does not collect these revenues directly, they constitute the financial foundation for projects programmed through the MPO process.

Property taxes

In some states, property taxes collected by cities, counties, or special districts provide a steady stream of revenue for transit and local road maintenance. Their importance lies in stability: unlike sales taxes, property taxes are not as vulnerable to recessions. Local governments may use these revenues to pay their MPO membership dues or to provide the local match required to unlock federal planning funds. In Michigan, transit agencies such as Ann Arbor's TheRide and Detroit's SMART operate on dedicated property tax milages approved by local voters. These revenues sustain regional transit services and, in some cases, contribute to MPO membership dues or collaborative planning initiatives (Regional Transit Authority of Southeast Michigan, 2025).

Fuel, Payroll, and Vehicle Fees

Other local revenue streams include fuel taxes, payroll levies, and vehicle registration fees. In Oregon, more than 30 cities and two counties impose local option fuel taxes, which brought in about $34 million in FY2023 (Oregon Department of Transportation, 2024). TriMet and Lane Transit District also collect local payroll taxes, giving them a stable base for operations (Oregon Department of Transportation, 2024). In Washington, more than 120 cities use Transportation Benefit Districts (TBDs) to levy small vehicle registration fees. Tacoma, for example, raises about $2.5 million annually for street resurfacing and sidewalk upgrades (City of Tacoma , 2025). These funds support local projects, and when regionally significant, they are programmed through the MPO process.

Tolling

Locally controlled toll systems are another source of revenue. Examples include Lee County, Florida (Sanibel Causeway, Cape Coral Bridge), the Transportation Corridor Agencies in Orange County, California, and Harris County, Texas, which operates one of the largest county-level toll systems in the U.S. (Lee County, 2025; Transportation Corridor Agencies, 2025; Post, 2024). While tolls are

primarily collected to operate and maintain the facilities themselves, they can generate surplus revenue that local governments or special districts may reinvest in broader transportation needs, including transit service and regional mobility improvements (Schank, Donohue, & Shoup, 2025).

For MPOs, the relevance of tolling lies in its flexibility. Federal law (23 U.S.C. §129) allows toll revenues to be used as the non-federal match for federal-aid programs, including planning funds, so long as they are not already committed elsewhere. Although toll authorities rarely dedicate these dollars directly to MPO planning budgets, the revenues can offset match requirements or free up other local funds that MPO members use for planning activities. This makes tolling one of several non-federal revenue streams that, while not designed for MPO operations, can indirectly sustain the MPO planning process.

State Support Mechanisms

While MPOs and local governments often shoulder the responsibility of meeting federal match requirements, state DOTs can provide critical support, especially in states that offer "soft match" mechanisms or flexible funding strategies.

Soft Match and State Toll Credits

Toll credits are a federal tool that allows states to count past investments made with toll revenue (like building or improving highways, bridges, or ferries) as a substitute for the required local match. These credits are earned when a state spends toll revenue on eligible transportation projects without using federal funds.

Instead of transferring cash to an MPO, the state DOT records those qualifying toll expenditures and applies them as a credit when the MPO programs federal funds. From the federal government's perspective, the match requirement is satisfied, even though no new money changes hands. That's why it's called a soft match: it exists on paper, not in the MPO's bank account.

For MPOs, toll credits can be a lifeline when local governments struggle to provide a cash match. They allow projects to move forward with federal funding, freeing up local dollars for other uses. However, toll credits do not expand the MPO's budget or provide flexibility for expenses outside federal rules. They simply reduce the need for local cash to unlock federal funds. Several states, such as Florida, Texas, Michigan, and California, have made use of toll credits to reduce the need for cash contributions from local governments.

State-Funded Match Pools

Some states have created state-funded match pools to help smaller jurisdictions and MPOs meet match requirements for federal grants. These pools are especially valuable for rural or economically disadvantaged areas that struggle to generate local funds. For instance:

- ***Massachusetts*** created the Commonwealth Federal Matching and Debt Reduction Fund, a $750 million pool that helps state agencies, municipalities, tribes, and regional planning agencies meet the non-federal match required for discretionary federal grants. Regional planning agencies, including those that serve as MPOs, can apply to use the fund so that projects in their regions remain competitive for federal dollars (Massachusetts Federal Funds & Infrastructure Office, 2025).
- ***Colorado*** created an $80 million Local Match Grant Program to help counties, municipalities, special districts, and tribes meet the non-federal match required for IIJA infrastructure grants. By covering part of the local share, the program allows smaller jurisdictions and regional partners, including MPOs through their host agencies, to compete more effectively for federal funds (Colorado Department of Local Affairs, 2025).
- ***Arizona*** launched the SMART Fund (State Match Advantage for Rural Transportation) to help rural communities cover match requirements and pre-development costs for federal discretionary grants. While direct eligibility is limited to small jurisdictions, MPOs may benefit through partnerships with eligible local governments or by coordinating regional applications that qualify under the program's rules (Arizona Department of Transportation, 2025).

In-Kind Match Recognition

State DOTs can play a critical role in enabling MPOs and their partners to use in-kind contributions to meet federal match requirements. While MPOs and third parties may offer non-cash resources like staff time, office space, or donated services, these contributions must be carefully documented and accepted under federal rules. According to the NCHRP Task 75 report, many state DOTs actively assist subrecipients by clarifying eligibility, helping with valuation methods, and even developing guidebooks to simplify compliance. For example, some states provide standardized forms or valuation rates for volunteer time, while others offer direct technical assistance to ensure that the in-kind match is properly recorded and meets federal cost principles. The report also highlights that without state-level support, recipients often struggle with the administrative burden and uncertainty around federal approval—especially when valuing land, indirect costs, or third-party services. By offering clear guidance and proactive support, state DOTs can help MPOs unlock valuable non-cash resources and reduce reliance on limited local funds (Zhong, Baker, Wagner, King, & Durante, 2020).

Alternative Sources

While many MPOs rely on direct contributions and locally generated public revenues, some have supplemented their budgets with alternative sources of funding. These include private sector contributions, support from nonprofit organizations or foundations, partnerships with universities, and public-private

partnerships (PPPs). Although these sources are typically project-specific and not dependable for core operations, they can expand MPO capacity and enable work that might otherwise be difficult to fund.

Private Sector Contributions

Some MPOs have leveraged direct contributions from private sector actors, typically in cases where the private sector stands to benefit directly from regional transportation investments. These contributions are often voluntary or tied to specific agreements, but fall short of the long-term contractual commitments that characterize formal public–private partnerships.

One common approach is through developer exactions and joint development agreements, in which developers fund or provide transportation improvements that support their projects. These arrangements ensure that new development contributes directly to needed infrastructure and reduces the burden on MPOs and local governments (D'Angelo et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2020).

In addition, MPOs have benefited from contributions by local businesses with strong ties to regional economic and transportation systems. For example, the Wasatch Front Regional Council identified the Alta Ski Area in Utah as a private partner supporting active transportation and transit-related projects. As a major employer and recreational hub, the ski resort has a vested interest in improved access and mobility, making it an example of how private businesses can align their resources with MPO-led planning efforts (Wasatch Front Regional Council, 2019).

Public–Private Partnerships (PPPs)

In contrast to direct contributions, PPPs involve formal, long-term agreements in which private entities assume significant responsibility for financing, delivery, or operation of transportation infrastructure. These arrangements are typically structured around risk-sharing and revenue generation, making them more complex but also more financially impactful than one-time contributions. While PPPs are increasingly common in large-scale infrastructure delivery, MPOs rarely enter into PPP agreements directly. This is because MPOs typically lack the legal authority to own assets, design or construct projects, or collect revenues—functions usually handled by state DOTs, transit agencies, or toll authorities. Still, MPOs can play an important role in shaping the environment for PPPs by identifying regional priorities, including projects in long-range plans, and coordinating with state and local partners to evaluate the viability of private-sector participation.

Some MPOs have even developed frameworks to guide PPP decision-making. For example, the Miami-Dade Transportation Planning Organization (TPO) created a Public–Private Partnership (P3) Reference Guide to evaluate how potential PPP

projects could advance regional transportation goals. While the TPO itself does not sign PPP contracts, the guide demonstrates how MPOs can act as facilitators (Miami-Dade TPO, 2016). In this way, MPOs can provide institutional support for PPPs that are ultimately led by other implementing agencies.

Nonprofit and Foundation Support

Philanthropic organizations and community-based nonprofits also play a role in supplementing MPO budgets, especially when their missions overlap with transportation, health, or environmental goals. These contributions are typically project-specific and situational, but they can enable MPOs to deliver projects that might not otherwise be feasible.

The Atlanta BeltLine offers one of the most prominent examples. Beyond its core Tax Allocation District financing, nonprofit organizations such as the Atlanta BeltLine Partnership and the PATH Foundation raise private funds, build community support, and develop plans for the trail network. Other nonprofits, including the Trust for Public Land and Trees Atlanta, provide land acquisition and environmental improvements. These organizations mobilize philanthropic capital and community advocacy to complement traditional funding streams and accelerate project implementation (D'Angelo et al., 2019). Smaller-scale examples also exist. For instance, as noted earlier in the discussion of private contributions, the Wasatch Front Regional Council identified Alta Community Enrichment (ACE) as a nonprofit partner in advancing pedestrian, bicycle, and transit-supportive projects. By aligning its mission with regional transportation priorities, ACE demonstrates how community-based organizations can provide flexible resources that enhance MPO capacity (Wasatch Front Regional Council, 2019).

Nonprofit foundations have also provided MPOs with resources for technical assistance, planning, and public engagement. For example, the Innovative MPO report, published by national non-profit Transportation for America, notes that some MPOs have tapped nonprofit foundations to fund activities such as multimodal analyses and feasibility studies that would otherwise strain local budgets (Zimmerman et al., 2014).

University partnerships

MPOs sometimes collaborate with universities for staff support, data analysis, modeling, and grant-funded research. These arrangements do not always bring direct cash into MPO budgets, but they lower costs and expand technical capacity. Universities often hire student assistants who contribute to MPO projects at a fraction of the cost of full-time staff, while also bringing in innovative methods and analytical tools.

For example, the Memphis MPO partners with the University of Tennessee's Center for Transportation Research on household travel surveys and planning/modeling work, reducing in-house burden while advancing corridor and land-use scenario analyses (Memphis MPO, 2025). Likewise, Metro (Portland) and the Transportation Research and Education Center (TREC) at Portland State University have a long-running collaboration that supports Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) evaluation, survey research, and joint model development (including a dynamic tour-based model) used in regional planning (TREC, 2024). In North Carolina's Triangle region, the Capital Area MPO (CAMPO) and Durham-Chapel Hill-Carrboro (DCHC)-MPO co-developed and maintain the Triangle Regional Model with the Institute for Transportation Research and Education (ITRE at North Carolina State University), which also regularly conducts the regions multi-county household travel survey—another example of a university providing analytics that MPOs can leverage without carrying the full cost using local funds (CAMPO, 2025).

SECTION 3

Insights

Survey Methodology and Response Rate

To document how MPOs across the United States approach acquiring local funding, a nationwide survey was developed and distributed using a combination of national, statewide, and direct outreach strategies. National associations whose members include MPOs, namely the Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations (AMPO) and the National Association of Regional Councils (NARC), assisted by distributing the survey to their member organizations. In states with statewide MPO associations, those associations also assisted in sharing the survey with their members. Flyers were also distributed at the AMPO Annual Conference in September 2025 to encourage participation among attending MPO representatives, and targeted reminder emails were sent to MPOs in states with low participation rates to improve representation.

The survey, conducted between September and October 2025, included a mix of closed- and open-ended questions designed to capture a national snapshot of practices used by MPOs to raise local funds, challenges they have faced in the pursuit of local funding, and strategies they have employed to overcome those challenges. Questions covered whether MPOs currently receive local (non-federal, non-state) funds; the sources and types of those funds; how local funds are allocated and managed; and the challenges or barriers MPOs face in securing or maintaining them. Respondents were also invited to share innovative or emerging practices and describe how state policies influence their ability to generate or use local funds. Together, these questions aimed to identify common trends and unique approaches, as well as to understand the role that local funding plays in the broader financial framework of MPO operations.

As of 2025, there are 410 MPOs across the country. In total, 129 MPOs from 43 states completed the survey (Figure 1). Because several MPOs oversee Metropolitan Planning Areas (MPAs) that extend across state boundaries, those multi-state MPOs were counted in both states for visualization purposes only. This approach made it possible to illustrate the percentage of MPOs responding by state and better represent the survey's geographic reach. However, for all data analysis and reporting, each MPO was counted only once, regardless of how many states its MPA spans.

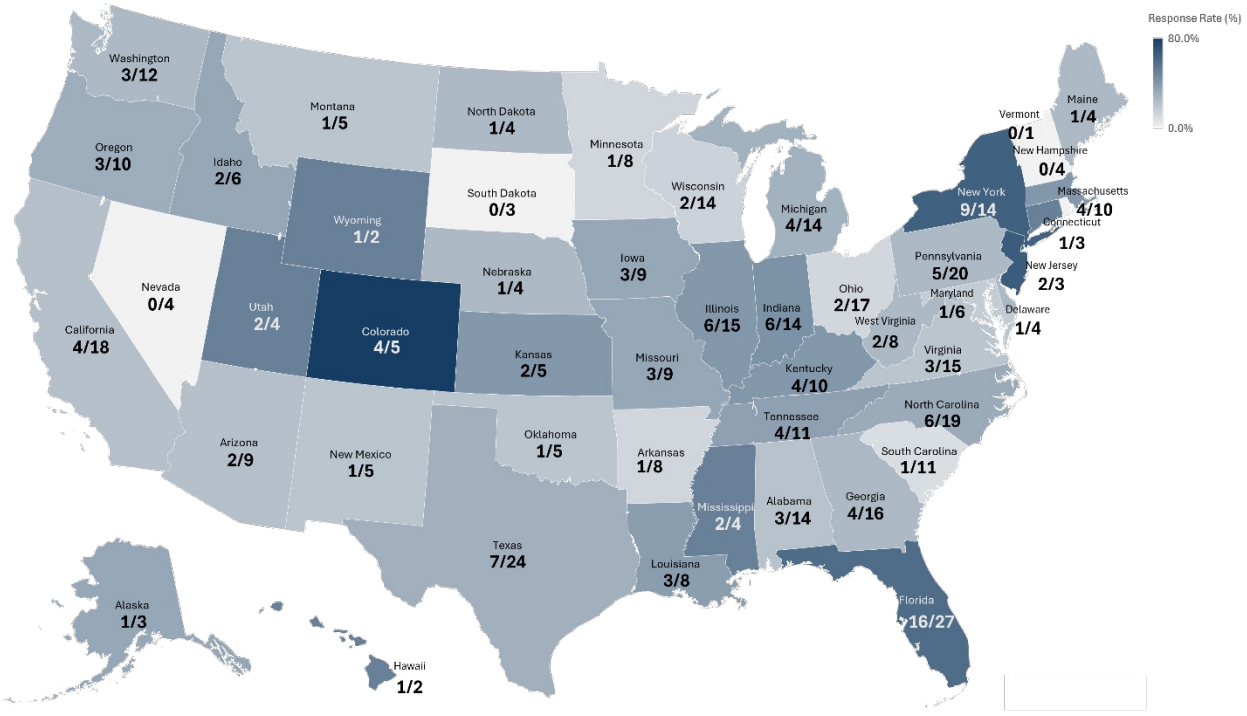


FIGURE 1. *Survey Responses by State (Number of MPOs Responding out of Total MPOs per State)*

The Landscape of Local Funding

Across all MPOs surveyed, the median metropolitan planning area (MPA) covers ~746 square miles, serves a population of about 344,000, and has a density of roughly 520 people per square mile (Figure 2). Among the 129 MPOs that responded to the survey, 115 (89%) reported that they currently receive local (non-federal, non-state) funds.

MPOs that receive local funds span the entire spectrum for both area and population—from small MPOs to large regional organizations serving millions of residents. MPOs that do not collect local funds, by contrast, tend to fall within the lower half of the national distribution for both area and population, but slightly above the median in population density. In other words, these MPOs often serve moderately sized, compact metropolitan regions rather than large, multi-county areas.

Variation also exists within states. In several cases, such as Florida, Massachusetts, and New York, both locally funded and non-locally funded MPOs are present.

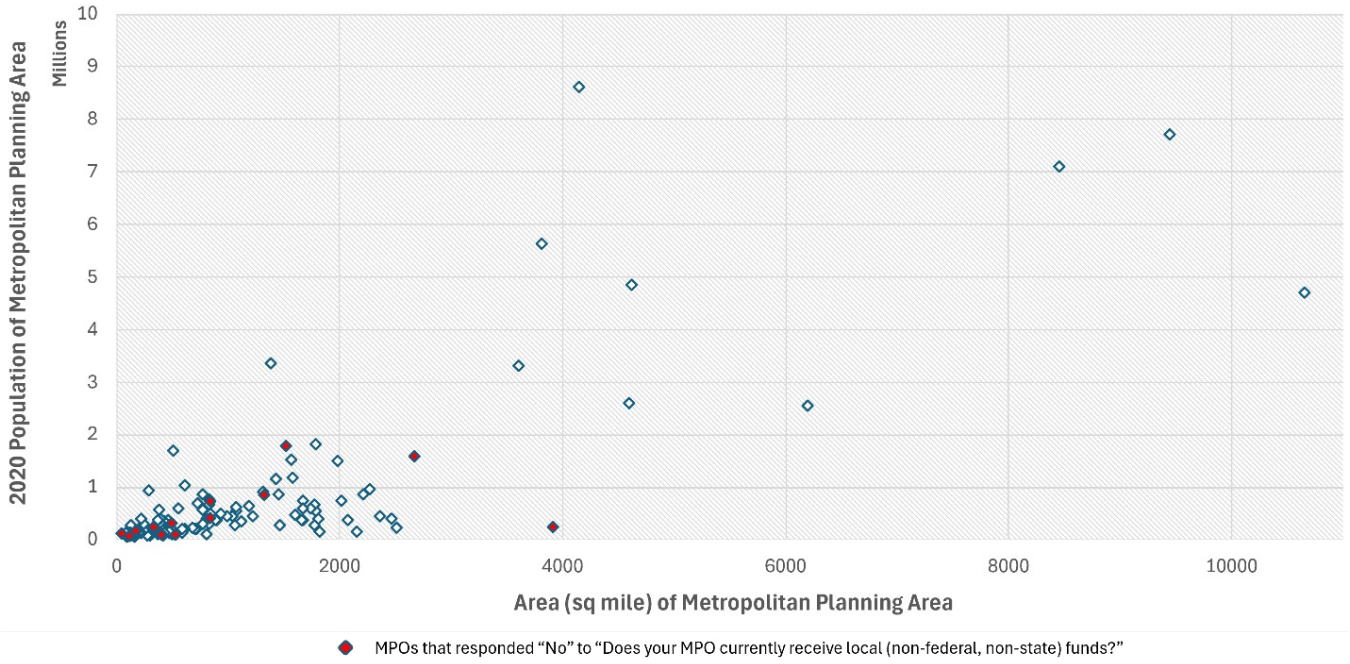


FIGURE 2. *Relationship Between MPO Planning Area Size and Population (2020 Census)*

(Note: The Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) does collect local funds, but is excluded from the visible range of this scatter plot due to its large scale (38,641 square miles; 18.8 million population). Its inclusion would compress the scale and obscure patterns among other MPOs.)

Notably, the states where some MPOs reported not receiving local funds (Connecticut, Florida, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, and Texas) all maintain programs that help offset local match requirements. These include toll-credit ("soft match") programs, state-provided match funding, or planning assistance through state-supported programs.

Sources of Local Funding

Member Dues or Assessments

Among the 115 MPOs that reported receiving local funds, the most common source was member dues or assessments, cited by approximately 71% (n=82) of respondents. When asked how member dues are determined, 53 of those 82 (64%) responded that they determine contributions on a per capita basis, 11% (n=9) charge a fixed fee per member, 2% (n=2) apply fixed fees based on the number of voting member allotment for each agency on their policy board, 1% (n=1) based their dues on property tax value, and 19% (n=16) use hybrid methods that blend population, geography, or other factors to ensure fairness across different types of members. Examples include:

- *Flat rate plus population (n=3):* Three MPOs use a combination of a flat base contribution and a population-based amount. For example, the Champaign Urbana MPO (Illinois) assesses a $5,000 base fee plus a per capita multiplier, the Coastal Region MPO (Georgia) charges a $1,000 base fee for each member plus an additional amount based on population, and SCAG applies a similar flat fee plus per capita formula across its large multi-county region.
- *Per capita for some, flat rate for others (n=3):* Three MPOs calculate dues based on population for larger or primary members, while assigning a flat rate to smaller entities or special members. For instance, the Thurston Regional Planning Council (Washington) bases contributions on population for cities, counties, and tribes; student FTE (full-time equivalent) counts for school districts; and flat rates for associate members such as universities or economic development councils, with a small "technology fee" added to each assessment. The Indianapolis MPO (Indiana) applies a per capita formula for local governments but uses fixed fees for transit providers and municipalities below a population threshold. Similarly, the Bi-State Regional Commission (Illinois) charges per capita dues for members over 5,000 in population and a flat rate for those under 5,000.
- *Population and infrastructure factors (n=5):* Five MPOs combine population with physical or operational measures of their transportation system. The Macatawa Area Coordinating Council (Michigan) bases dues on population for local governments and road mileage for road agencies. The Grand Valley MPO (Colorado) uses a similar split based on population and lane miles, following a historical percent distribution. Both the South Western Region MPO (Connecticut) and Housatonic Valley MPOs (Connecticut) divide dues evenly between population and land area. The Bangor Area Comprehensive Transportation System (Maine) uses a comparable 50/50 split, balancing vehicle miles traveled (VMT) and population.
- *Population and fiscal capacity (n=2):* Two MPOs consider both population and local wealth or fiscal ability. The Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG) bases county contributions on property tax value, while cities, villages, and townships pay according to population. Likewise, the Denver Regional Council of Governments (Colorado) uses a blend of population and assessed property value.
- *Project-based or percentage formulas (n=3):* Some MPOs tie contributions to project activity or shared work responsibilities rather than pure demographics. The Bay City Area Transportation Study (Michigan) includes a fixed fee for its transit member and divides remaining costs based on each member's share of expected work tasks. The Omaha–Council Bluffs Metropolitan Area Planning Agency (Nebraska) charges per capita dues for counties but adds a TIP administrative fee (1% of the federal share of projects) to fund regional planning operations. Similarly, the Wichita Area

Metropolitan Planning Organization (Kansas) combines annual membership dues with a TIP administration fee (about 2.4–3% of the federal project share), linking its funding to the volume of projects it administers.

Fee-for-service Arrangements

Following dues, fee-for-service arrangements were the next most common source of local funding, reported by 30% (n=35) of MPOs. These allow MPOs to expand technical assistance and strengthen relationships with member governments by directly supporting local projects. Although less predictable than dues, this model provides a way to recover costs for specialized services such as modeling, public engagement, or grant preparation that fall outside traditional planning grants. Fee-for-service structures are often used by MPOs that have built strong in-house technical capacity and operate in regions where members prefer to pay only for services they use.

In-Kind Contributions

Roughly 23% (n=27) reported receiving in-kind contributions from member governments, state partners, or host agencies. These non-cash resources reduce the need for direct local funding and help MPOs meet federal match requirements while keeping administrative costs low.

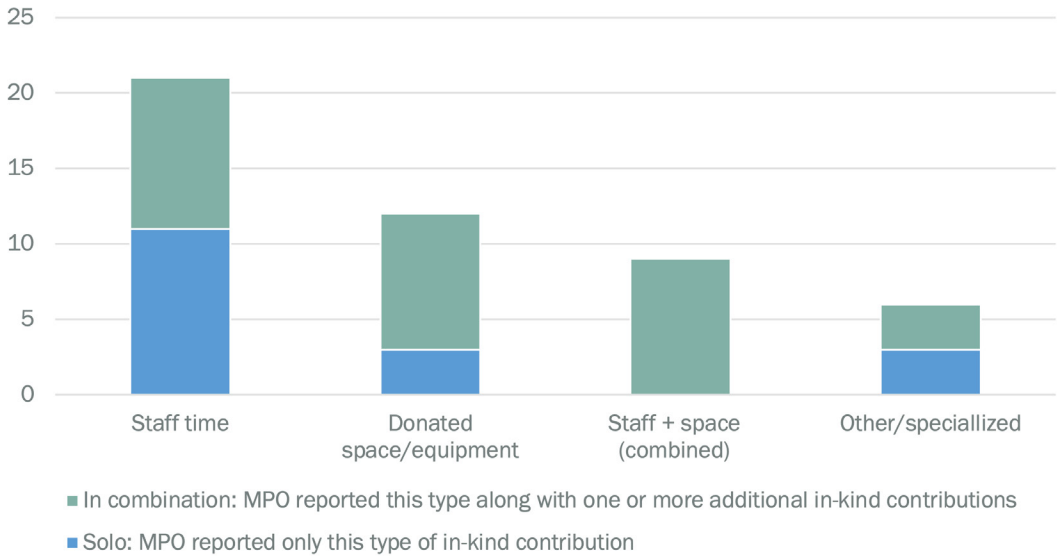
As shown in Figure 3, MPOs reported several types of in-kind support, and many reported receiving more than one type. In the figure, "solo" indicates MPOs that reported receiving only that single type of in-kind contribution, while "in combination" indicates MPOs that reported receiving that type alongside one or more additional forms of in-kind support.

The survey responses revealed several common types of in-kind support:

- *Member government staff time (n=21):* Many MPOs receive in-kind support through the time local government staff spend participating in planning activities, technical committees, or data collection.
- *Donated office space, equipment, or supplies (n=12):* Some MPOs benefit from donated space or equipment.
- *Staff time AND donated space or equipment (n=9):* A combination of staff time and shared facilities is another common arrangement.
- *Specialized or unique in-kind arrangements (n=6):* A few MPOs reported distinctive forms of in-kind assistance. Only two described these arrangements in more detail; the North Central Texas Council of Governments (Texas) shares office space with the Texas DOT, maintaining reciprocal workspaces in two district offices and the Denver Regional Council of Governments (Colorado) receives staff-time support from regional transit agencies.

FIGURE 3.

Types of in-kind contributions reported (n=27 MPOs, multiple responses allowed)



Hosting or Staff Service Agreements

About 23% (n=27) of MPOs reported receiving local support through hosting or staff service agreements, in which a larger governmental or regional entity provides administrative, financial, or personnel services to the MPO. These arrangements are especially common in smaller or mid-sized regions where creating a stand-alone organization would be inefficient. The host agency—often a council of governments, county government, or regional planning commission—typically supplies accounting, human resources, and IT services and may contribute staff time or office space as part of the local match requirement.

Voluntary Contributions from Member Governments

Voluntary contributions were cited by 11% (n=13) of respondents. These are discretionary payments made by local governments or transit agencies that are not required under the MPO's formal funding structure but are offered occasionally to support specific studies or short-term planning needs. Although these contributions are unpredictable and depend on local priorities and fiscal conditions, they can provide useful supplemental resources that allow MPOs to expand or enhance activities in their UPWP. Respondents noted that counties or cities sometimes contribute funds for corridor studies, data collection efforts, or targeted outreach when those efforts directly benefit their jurisdictions.

Private-Sector or Philanthropic Partnerships

Only a small number of MPOs (5%, n=6) reported receiving contributions from private-sector entities or philanthropic organizations. The survey did not collect additional details about the nature of these contributions, but the limited number of MPOs reporting them suggests that such partnerships remain relatively uncommon and are not a major source of local revenue for most regions.

Direct Local Appropriations

The survey also revealed a funding category not included among the original response options: direct local appropriations established through formal agreements between MPOs and two or more local partners. Approximately 4% (n=5) of respondents described this arrangement, in which multiple local governments allocate funds annually or as needed to meet the MPO's required local match for federal planning funds. Unlike member dues, which are typically based on a formula applied across all participating jurisdictions, or voluntary contributions, which are discretionary and informal, these appropriations are defined through formal intergovernmental agreements or established cost-sharing commitments. They also differ from hosting arrangements, in which a single city, county, or regional agency provides the local match as part of its fiscal responsibilities for the MPO. In this case, funding responsibility is distributed among two or more member governments through a negotiated cost-sharing framework.

For example, the Santa Fe MPO (New Mexico) operates under a Joint Powers Agreement in which the City of Santa Fe provides 70% and Santa Fe County 30% of the required local match and operating funds. Similarly, the Bloomington-Monroe County MPO (Indiana) receives about $70,000 each year from each of its two member counties, and the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission (Pennsylvania) relies on annual appropriations from Lehigh and Northampton Counties to fund its local share. The Morgantown Monongalia MPO (West Virginia) follows a comparable model, where two principal members—Monongalia County and the City of Morgantown—each provide a portion of the match requirement, while other member jurisdictions do not contribute financially. In each of these cases, the arrangement functions as a structured cost-sharing mechanism that ensures the MPO can meet federal match obligations without relying on a traditional dues system.

Local Funding Exchange

The North Central Texas Council of Governments (NCTCOG) has developed a distinctive funding mechanism that allows local agencies to exchange local dollars for an equivalent (or greater) amount of federal funds on eligible projects. In doing so, NCTCOG collects the local funds into a flexible pool called RTC Local Funds, named after its policy board, the Regional Transportation Council. The process typically begins when a local government has an eligible project programmed in the TIP and is prepared to provide a local match. Instead of contributing those funds directly to the project, the local government agrees to swap its local dollars with NCTCOG for federal funds, allowing the project to proceed with an equivalent or higher federal share. The local agency still administers the project in accordance with federal requirements, but benefits from timely access to funds and greater delivery certainty. The local funds contributed by the agency are then retained by NCTCOG and pooled into the RTC Local Funds account.

RTC Local Funds are governed by policies adopted by the RTC and provide a more flexible funding source that can be used in a wider variety of ways, with fewer restrictions than federal transportation funds. Because the program is built on voluntary exchanges, NCTCOG must identify willing partners whose projects are already federally eligible and whose timing aligns with available federal balances.

Several examples illustrate the model in practice. The City of Dallas contributed $10 million in local funds in exchange for $15.4 million in federal funds for the Five Mile Creek Trail project (NCTCOG, 2023). Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART) completed a similar trade in 2022, providing $40 million in local funds in return for $44 million in federal funds to support transit improvements (NCTCOG, 2023). The City of Arlington traded $17.5 million in local funds for an equal amount of federal funds to advance infrastructure upgrades ahead of the 2026 FIFA World Cup (NCTCOG, 2023). Likewise, in 2020, Collin County's U.S. 380 partnership involved a swap of $60 million in local funds for an equivalent amount of federal funds, with the local dollars directed to the RTC Local Funds pool (NCTCOG, 2023).

Challenges to Generating Local Funds and How MPOs are Addressing Them

While the previous section summarized the types of local funds MPOs currently receive and the mechanisms through which they are generated, the survey also sought to understand the challenges that accompany these efforts and the strategies MPOs use to respond to them. Even among MPOs that have successfully established local revenue streams, sustaining those sources and meeting federal match requirements can pose significant obstacles. The following section explores the barriers that MPOs face in generating or maintaining local funding, including cases where limited match capacity has prevented MPOs from fully utilizing available federal funds.

Turning Down Federal Funds Due to Match Limitations

As discussed earlier, federal planning programs are structured around shared responsibility between federal, state, and local partners. Federal transportation funds are not automatically available to MPOs. To use them, MPOs must provide a non-federal match that "unlocks" the federal share. In most cases, this match follows the standard 80/20 split, meaning the MPO or its member jurisdictions must contribute twenty percent of the total project cost (see Chapter 2 for exceptions). This dependency between local and federal funds is what makes the match requirement so critical. Without sufficient non-federal resources, an MPO can have federal funds programmed and approved but still be unable to spend them. To understand how often this happens, the survey asked MPOs whether they have ever declined federal funding because they lacked the capacity to provide the required match.

Figure 4 shows the distribution of responses to the survey question, "Has your MPO ever declined federal funding due to a lack of non-federal match capacity?" Out of 129 MPOs, 13 (10%) reported that they had declined federal funds at least once because they were unable to provide the required local match. The vast majority, 102 MPOs (79%), said they had not, while 14 MPOs (11%) were unsure whether this had occurred in the past..

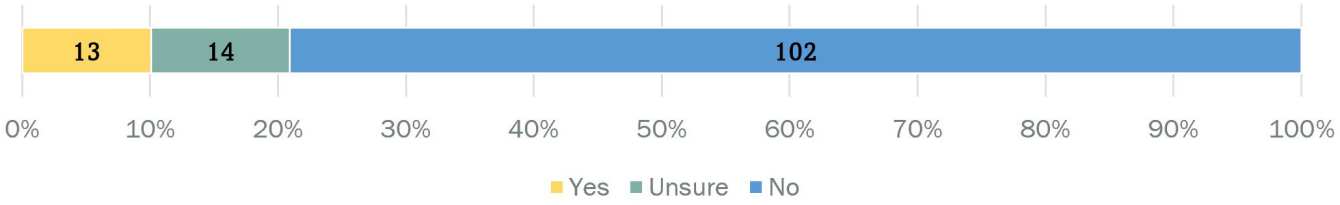


FIGURE 4. *Responses to the survey question, "Has your MPO ever declined federal funding due to a lack of non-federal match capacity? (129 Responses)*

A review of the "Yes" responses revealed that they were geographically dispersed rather than concentrated in a particular region. MPOs that had turned down federal funds were located in both large urban areas (such as Houston, Denver, and Indianapolis) and smaller regions (such as Frontier MPO in Arkansas and New Bern MPO in North Carolina). This pattern suggests that the challenge of meeting match requirements is not limited by MPO size or geography. Similarly, there was no consistent relationship between these responses and whether a state provides assistance with match requirements, such as through toll credits, soft match, or state planning funds. Some MPOs in states that offer these supports still reported turning down funds, while others in states without such programs indicated they had not.

TABLE 1. *MPOs that reported "Yes" to the question "Has your MPO ever declined federal funding due to a lack of non-federal match capacity?"*

State	MPO(s)
Arkansas	Frontier MPO
Colorado	Denver Regional Council of Governments (DRCOG)
Connecticut	Central Naugatuck Valley MPO; South Central Region Council of Governments
Hawaii	Oahu MPO
Idaho	Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho (COMPASS)
Indiana	Indianapolis Metropolitan Planning Organization
Kentucky	Kentuckiana Regional Planning & Development Agency (KIPDA)
Louisiana	Houma-Thibodaux MPO
North Carolina	New Bern Area Metropolitan Planning Organization
Ohio	Brooke-Hancock-Jefferson Metropolitan Planning Commission (BHJMPC)
Tennessee	Johnson City MTPO
Texas	Houston–Galveston Area Council

Taken together, these findings suggest that local fiscal conditions and governance arrangements likely play a larger role than state-level policies in determining whether an MPO can reliably meet its match. Even in states with mechanisms to ease the local burden, MPOs may still struggle when local contributions are uncertain, uneven across member jurisdictions, or constrained by political or statutory limits. This finding helps frame the next discussion, which examines what MPOs identified as their biggest challenges in generating local funds and how these barriers differ between agencies that have and have not experienced difficulty meeting match requirements.

Challenges in Generating Local Funds

To better understand the factors that shape MPOs' ability to raise and sustain local revenue, the survey included a question about the biggest challenges to generating local funds. This question was presented to all respondents, regardless of whether their MPO currently receives local funds. In total, 129 MPOs provided responses.

Each respondent was asked to select up to three challenges from a list of common barriers identified in the literature and previous research on MPO funding practices. Allowing multiple selections helped capture the range of factors that can simultaneously affect local revenue generation. Because respondents could choose more than one option, the combined total of responses exceeds 100 percent. However, each percentage represents the share of the 129 MPOs that selected that particular barrier.

The results provide a broader picture of how MPOs perceive the obstacles to generating local funds—both among those that have faced difficulty meeting match requirements and those that have not. Table 2 summarizes these findings, highlighting which challenges are most prevalent across the national sample.

TABLE 2. *Reported challenges to generating local funds among all MPOs. Respondents were asked to select up to three options. (129 responses)*

Rank	Challenge	Count	% of Respondents
1	Limited local government resources	71	55%
2	None – we have not faced challenges in generating local funds	30	23%
3	Political barriers (e.g., lack of voter or elected official support)	25	19%
4	Staff capacity or administrative burden	18	14%
5	Legal restrictions or state statutes	12	9%
6	Difficulty securing private sector participation	6	5%

The differences between MPOs that have declined federal funds and those that have not reveal important insights into how local financial capacity shapes regional planning outcomes. Among the 13 MPOs that reported declining federal funds, the vast majority (85%) identified limited local government resources as a key barrier to generating local funds. This share was considerably higher than among MPOs that have not declined funds, where about half (51%) selected the same challenge. The next most common responses among MPOs that had declined funds were political barriers (23%) and legal restrictions or state statutes (15%), followed by difficulty securing private-sector participation (15%). None of the MPOs in this group cited staff capacity or administrative burden as a major issue (Figure 5).

By comparison, MPOs that have not turned down federal funds reported a more varied mix of challenges. About 18% cited political barriers, 16% noted staff capacity or administrative burden, and 7% selected legal restrictions. A small number (3%) identified difficulty engaging the private sector. Notably, more than one-quarter (28%) of these MPOs indicated that they had not faced any challenges in generating local funds.

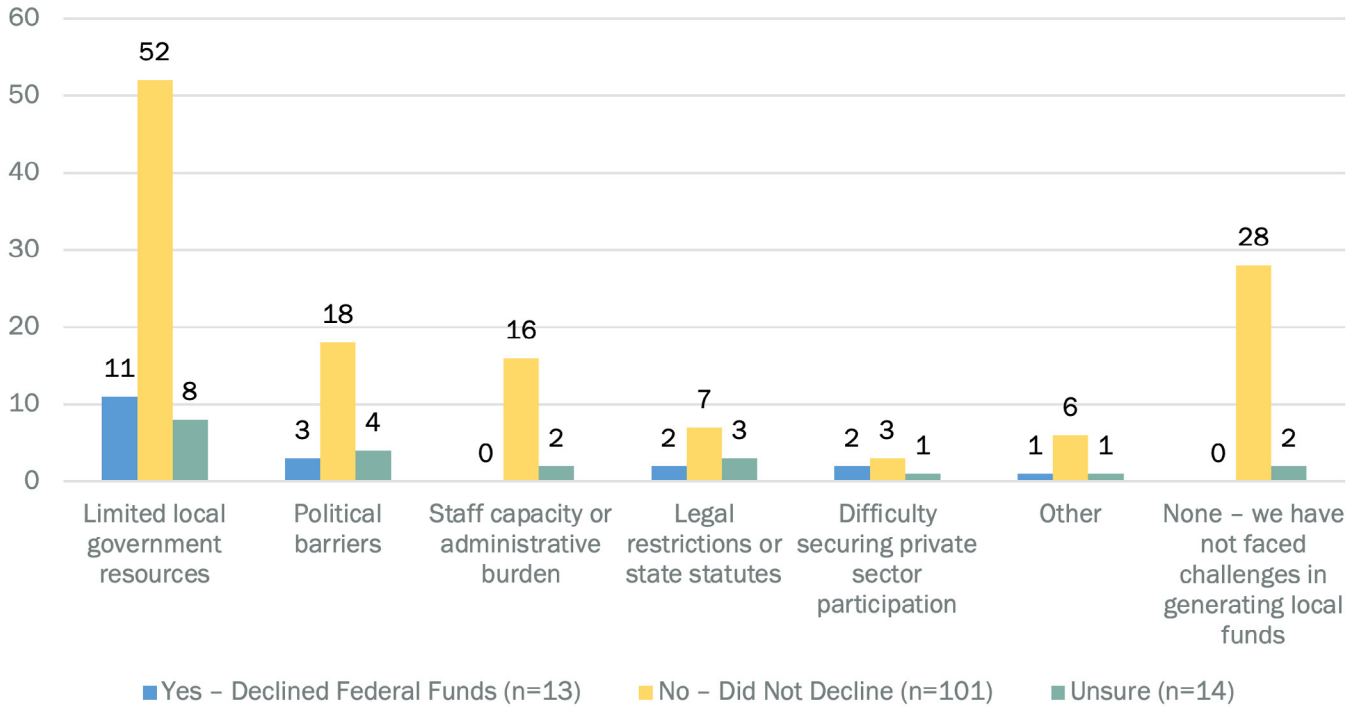


FIGURE 5. *Differences in reported challenges to generating local funds among MPOs that have and have not declined federal funds. (129 responses)*

A comparison of MPOs that currently receive local funds with those that do not suggests some meaningful differences, although the number of MPOs without local revenue was small. Among that group, just over half identified limited local government resources as a challenge, and several also cited political barriers, indicating that their difficulties tend to center on local fiscal capacity or authority to raise match funds. By contrast, MPOs that do receive local contributions reported a wider mix of challenges, including administrative workload and staffing constraints (Figure 6). These patterns imply that the types of barriers MPOs face may shift once they move from exploring local funding to actively managing it, which points to a need for different kinds of support depending on an MPO's funding model.

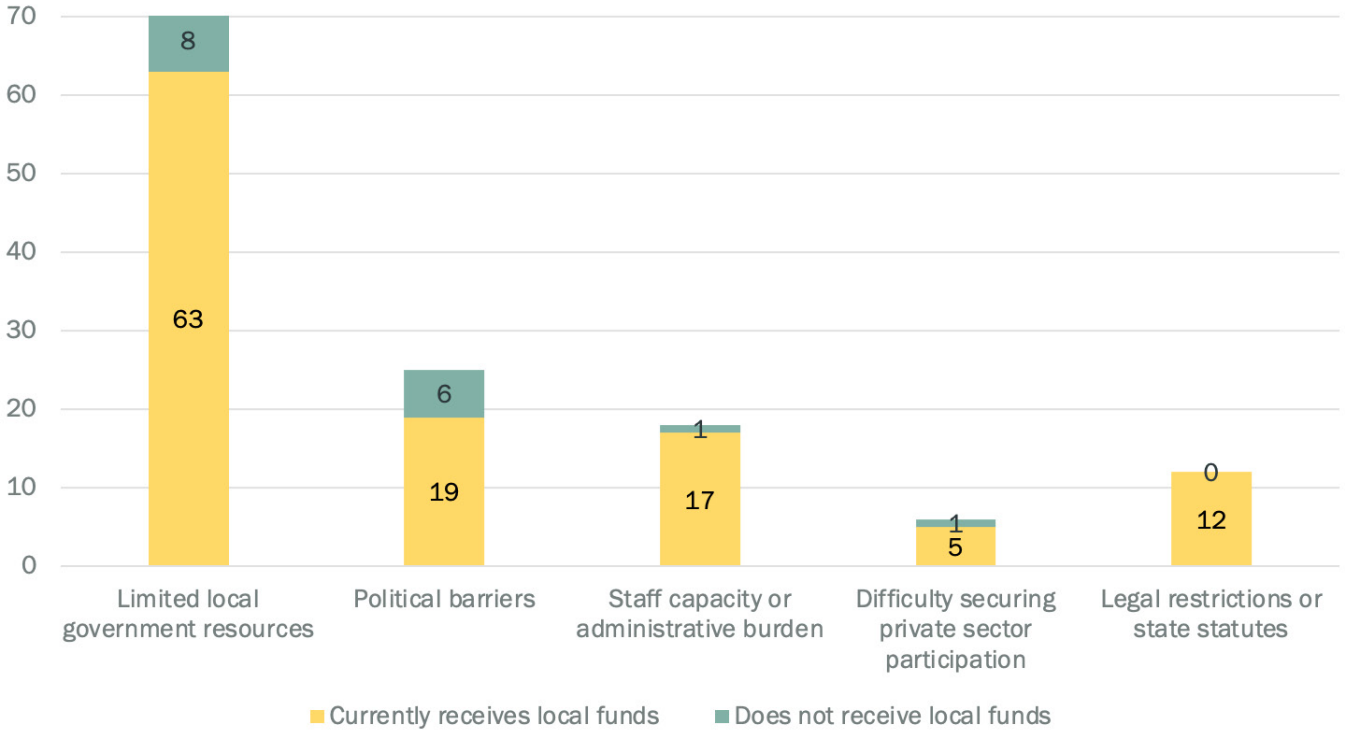


FIGURE 6. *Differences in reported challenges to generating local funds among MPOs that do and do not currently receive local contributions. (129 responses)*

Eight MPOs provided additional written comments that shed light on their specific challenges to generating local funds. Several described administrative or procedural difficulties, such as limited staff capacity or delays in completing contracts and pass-through agreements. One MPO noted the lack of a formal agreement with local entities regarding indirect support, which can create uncertainty about contributions and complicate long-term financial planning.

Other responses pointed to policy or legal restrictions that limit flexibility in meeting match requirements. One MPO mentioned that its state Department of Transportation does not allow in-kind contributions, such as donated staff time or services, to count toward the local match. Another cited Colorado's Taxpayer's Bill of Rights (TABOR), which caps the amount of revenue state and local governments can collect without voter approval, thereby restricting the ability to raise or allocate new local funds for planning purposes. A few MPOs highlighted political and relational challenges that affect local contributions, for instance, one agency noted that its state port authority declined to pay MPO dues.

Two MPOs referenced declining population as a significant structural barrier to generating local funds. Both described how long-term demographic decline has reduced the local tax base and constrained the fiscal capacity of member jurisdictions, making it more difficult to contribute to MPO operations or provide matching funds for federal planning dollars. These comments point out that in regions experiencing population loss, the challenge is not simply unwillingness to pay, but a shrinking economic foundation that limits what local governments can realistically provide.

Actions Taken to Address Identified Challenges

After identifying the primary challenges to generating local funds, respondents were presented with a series of follow-up questions tailored to the barriers they selected. These open-ended questions were designed to capture how MPOs are responding to their most significant constraints. The goal was to move beyond simply documenting obstacles and instead understand what actions, if any, MPOs have taken to mitigate them and what results they have observed.

Addressing limited local government resources

The 71 respondents who identified "limited local government resources" as a challenge were asked what actions their MPO has taken to address this issue and what results they have observed. Their answers showed that MPOs are adapting in many different ways to secure the non-federal match, maintain participation from member jurisdictions, and keep their planning programs functioning despite local fiscal constraints. Although the responses varied widely, several distinct approaches emerged. The following section summarizes twelve types of actions MPOs reported taking, ranging from stabilizing dues structures to pursuing legislative change. Each reflects a different strategy for addressing the underlying pressures created by limited local government capacity.

1. Ensuring predictable and sustainable member contributions (11 MPOs)

Several MPOs reported modifying or maintaining their dues and local match formulas to reflect members' fiscal realities. These actions do not necessarily increase total local funding but are aimed at stabilizing participation and maintaining a predictable revenue stream. In regions with small or resource-

constrained jurisdictions, even modest increases in membership dues can prompt withdrawal or reduced engagement in the MPO process.

For example, the Collier MPO (Florida) maintains a low membership dues structure of $1,000 per voting member and exempts its smallest municipality because of its limited fiscal capacity. Although the MPO typically meets its federal match requirements through toll credits, these local contributions remain important because they provide funding for activities that are not eligible for federal reimbursement. The dues policy is intentionally modest to ensure that all jurisdictions remain active participants in the MPO process. Similarly, the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments and the Southern California Association of Governments have chosen not to raise dues in many years, recognizing that even minor cost increases could burden local governments with limited budgets.

Other MPOs, such as the Southeast Metropolitan Planning Organization (Missouri) and the Greater Hickory MPO (North Carolina), use predictable allocation formulas by dividing the local contributions proportionally among members or applying per capita assessments to maintain fairness and transparency. The Denver Regional Council of Governments (Colorado) follows a similar approach by setting a low annual minimum dues requirement, sometimes as little as $500, to keep smaller jurisdictions engaged while preserving a steady revenue base.

Some agencies evaluate member capacity each year before adjusting rates. The Bi-State Regional Commission (Illinois) reviews its members' fiscal conditions annually and may defer planned increases to prevent hardship. The Kentuckiana Regional Planning and Development Agency recently raised dues for the first time in three decades but emphasized that its long history of stability was based on sensitivity to members' fiscal limits.

2. Communicating the value of participation (8 MPOs)

Some MPOs emphasized that communicating value to their member jurisdictions is essential to sustaining local funding. These MPOs focus on demonstrating return on investment (ROI) and showing that participation in the MPO yields tangible benefits, such as access to federal funds, data resources, and technical assistance. The Wasatch Front Regional Council (Utah), Birmingham MPO (Alabama), and SEMCOG (Michigan) all reported ongoing efforts to educate local governments about the MPO's role and the value it provides, helping to reinforce why local contributions are necessary. The Western Connecticut Council of Governments, which hosts both the South Western Region MPO and the Housatonic Valley MPO, noted that clearly communicating how local dollars are leveraged has been an effective argument for maintaining or modestly increasing dues, emphasizing that each local dollar helps unlock roughly nine dollars in federal funding for the region.

The Maricopa Association of Governments (Arizona) ties its funding model and work program directly to the priorities of its member agencies, including cities, towns, counties, and Native nations. By ensuring that dues and initiatives align with local needs, the MPO effectively communicates the connection between participation, influence, and measurable outcomes. Similarly, the Brook-Hancock-Jefferson Metropolitan Planning Commission (Ohio), Duluth-Superior MPO (Minnesota), and Region One Planning Council (Illinois) maintain engagement by emphasizing the relevance of their services, highlighting the broader economic value of regional transportation planning, and/or providing direct technical support that benefits local partners.

3. Centralizing local fund collection to one or two jurisdictions (5 MPOs)

Five MPOs reported arrangements in which one or two local jurisdictions assume full responsibility for providing most or all of the MPO's locally generated funds. The Johnson City MTPO (Tennessee) relies on the City of Johnson City, its host agency, to supply the majority of local support, noting that this contribution competes with other local needs. The Polk TPO (Florida) receives its full local contribution from Polk County, as many of its member governments have populations under 5,000 and limited revenue capacity. Other MPOs operate under formal cost-sharing agreements between one or two core members: the Santa Fe MPO (New Mexico) (70% City of Santa Fe, 30% Santa Fe County), the Morgantown Monongalia MPO (West Virginia) (shared between the City of Morgantown and Monongalia County), and the Bloomington-Monroe County MPO (Indiana) (joint appropriations from two counties). This centralized approach helps MPOs maintain a predictable local funding base for planning activities and agency operations, even when smaller jurisdictions cannot contribute, but places the financial burden on a limited number of entities.

4. Pursuing supplemental planning grants and discretionary funding (3 MPOs)

A few MPOs are addressing local funding shortfalls by actively seeking additional planning funds rather than relying solely on dues or cutting back operations. The Macatawa Area Coordinating Council (Michigan) reported pursuing competitive grants to bring "new" planning revenue into the region, because their members are generally more willing to support "new" revenue. The Whatcom Council of Governments (Washington) similarly looks for discretionary or short-term planning funds to fill temporary gaps in its budget. When such funds cannot be secured, the agency strategically reduces expenditures to remain within available resources. Meanwhile, FAST Planning (Alaska) has worked directly with the state legislature and Department of Transportation to obtain supplemental state funding when local match contributions fall short.

5. Aligning work scope with available match (2 MPOs)

Two MPOs reported addressing limited local government resources not by expanding revenue, but by tailoring the scale and type of their planning work to the match they can realistically secure. The Lowcountry Area Transportation Study (South Carolina) noted that it has become highly selective about which discretionary grant opportunities it pursues, given the difficulty experienced in securing local match funding. The Calhoun Area Metropolitan Planning Organization (Alabama) similarly reported "finding ways to reduce match burden through special projects or scoping of projects," indicating that the MPO shapes project scopes to keep required local contributions manageable. This approach reflects a conservative but practical strategy in which MPOs align their ambitions with available local capacity to maintain a sustainable planning program over time.

6. Establishing a state-supported planning fund (1 MPO)

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (Illinois) worked with the Illinois legislature to create the Comprehensive Regional Planning Fund (CRPF), a line item in the state budget dedicated to supporting MPOs and regional planning commissions across Illinois. This fund supplements federal and local contributions, helping MPOs meet the 20 percent match requirement for federal planning funds and support projects that go beyond traditional transportation planning (Illinois General Assembly, 2025; Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, 2025). Because the CRPF provides a predictable state contribution, MPOs can maintain staff capacity, deliver technical assistance to local governments, and invest in projects like bicycle plans or corridor studies without relying entirely on local dues.

7. Building a regional funding pool through exchanges (1 MPO)

As described earlier in this report, the North Central Texas Council of Governments' Local Funding Exchange allows local governments to swap their cash contributions for an equivalent or greater amount of federal funds on eligible projects. The local dollars are then pooled into a flexible regional account, known as RTC Local Funds, which can support initiatives that federal funds cannot easily cover. This approach not only expands local project delivery capacity but also builds a sustainable pool of regional funds for future use.

8. Leveraging shared services to generate match (1 MPO)

The Omaha–Council Bluffs Metropolitan Area Planning Agency (MAPA) has adopted multiple approaches to generate non-federal contributions for its planning program. One strategy involves partnering with county GIS departments. MAPA reimburses those departments for most of their eligible costs using federal planning funds, but leaves a portion unreimbursed. That unreimbursed share is credited as an in-kind contribution, which MAPA can then apply toward its own operations. In effect, the counties' ongoing GIS work not

only supports their local needs but also helps MAPA meet its non-federal funding requirement without requiring additional cash from member governments.

MAPA also coordinates a regional joint purchase of aerial photography as part of its UPWP. In this case, local governments contribute cash to buy the imagery through MAPA. Because those dollars are direct local expenditures, MAPA is able to count them as local match for MPO operations. This arrangement turns a shared data purchase into a dual benefit: jurisdictions receive high-quality imagery for their planning work, while MAPA simultaneously satisfies part of its match requirement.

Together, these strategies show how MAPA blends in-kind contributions (through unreimbursed GIS staff time) with local cash match (through joint purchases) to reduce the burden on member governments and ensure that federal planning funds can be fully utilized.

9. Pursuing voter-approved regional revenues (1 MPO)

Oregon Metro (Oregon) has attempted to secure a more direct and sustainable local revenue stream through voter approval. In 2020, the agency referred a measure known as Get Moving 2020 (Measure 26-218) to the ballot (Oregon Metro, 2020). The proposal would have established a long-term, dedicated source of funding for both planning and project delivery by levying a payroll tax on large employers in the Portland metropolitan area. Revenues were intended to support a $7 billion package of investments, including a new light rail line, a regional rapid bus network, youth transit passes, safety improvements on high-injury corridors, and expanded bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure. Although the measure did not pass, it demonstrates that an MPO can explore long-term, self-sustaining funding mechanisms through local or regional approval processes.

10. Pursuing the creation of a regional transportation authority (1 MPO)

The Tri-Cities MPO (Virginia) reported that it is working toward establishing an area transportation authority, a regional body that could raise or manage dedicated transportation revenues on behalf of multiple jurisdictions. The MPO itself does not have the statutory authority to levy or collect such funds. However, under Virginia law, transportation authorities may be created through state legislation and granted powers to collect regional taxes, fees, or tolls to fund transportation improvements. A recent example is the Central Virginia Transportation Authority (CVTA), established in 2020 under Va. Code § 33.2-3700, which serves the same region as the Richmond Regional Transportation Planning Organization (RRTPO). The CVTA provides a dedicated revenue source through a regional sales and fuel tax, supplementing federal and local funds for planning, construction, and operations.

11. Supporting economic development to strengthen the local tax base (1 MPO)

The Central Naugatuck Valley MPO (Connecticut) reported aligning its efforts with regional economic development initiatives aimed at expanding the local tax base. While not a direct funding action, this strategy recognizes that stronger local economies can improve fiscal capacity and, over time, enhance the ability of member jurisdictions to contribute to transportation planning. By engaging in broader development efforts, the MPO supports the long-term financial stability that underpins the availability of local funding for match and other non-federal eligible purposes.

12. Leveraging institutional partnerships for capacity support (1 MPO)

Frontier MPO (Arkansas) has addressed the absence of state planning funds and limited local revenue options by partnering with regional colleges and health organizations. These collaborations provide data, technical expertise, and public engagement support that help the MPO advance multimodal and health-focused transportation planning. In a state where MPOs lack a mechanism to compel local financial participation, these partnerships allow Frontier MPO to strengthen planning capacity and deliver regional benefits without relying solely on member dues (Frontier Metropolitan Planning Organization, 2021; Nolte, 2022).

Addressing political barriers

The 25 respondents who identified "political barriers" as a challenge were asked how their MPO has worked to address them. Political barriers mentioned by respondents included competing local priorities, limited fiscal capacity, or differing levels of understanding about the MPO's role. To navigate these challenges, MPOs described actions focused on improving communication, demonstrating value, and strengthening relationships with elected officials and partner agencies.

1. Building relationships and educating partners (6 MPOs)

Six MPOs emphasized that political tension often decreases when local officials understand the MPO's role, feel included in decision-making, and have regular opportunities to engage with staff. The Wasatch Front Regional Council (Utah) described working closely with member governments to ensure each jurisdiction feels heard and represented, which helps reduce natural political divides. The Dover/Kent County MPO (Delaware) takes a similar approach, meeting regularly with municipalities to explain MPO responsibilities and processes, noting that this ongoing education is essential but challenging. The Tri-County Regional Planning Commission (Pennsylvania) reported sustained outreach to elected officials and stakeholders to strengthen relationships and maintain broad regional support.

Education and trust-building were also central strategies for the Calhoun Area MPO (Alabama) and the Pikes Peak Area Council of Governments (Colorado), both of which use data and clear communication to help elected officials understand regional needs and see how MPO decisions align with local priorities. Additionally, the Tri-Cities MPO (Virginia) noted that maintaining support across political differences requires a balanced approach and consistent engagement with leaders from both major parties.

2. Demonstrating value (4 MPOs)

Four MPOs addressed political challenges by clearly demonstrating the value of regional participation and the return on investment that local governments receive. The Pikes Peak Area Council of Governments (Colorado) works to educate elected officials about the benefits of MPO services, helping them weigh those benefits against other local expenses. The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (Illinois) uses its legislative affairs team to maintain regular communication with local leaders, highlighting technical assistance programs, data tools, and planning resources that directly support member governments. The Oahu MPO (Hawaii) has strengthened goodwill with partners by offering training programs funded entirely with federal dollars and successfully securing competitive grants that bring new funds into the region, efforts that have helped justify modest increases in local dues. Likewise, the Santa Fe MPO (New Mexico) reinforces its value by demonstrating that it provides planning services at a lower cost than private consultants and by showing how local contributions can leverage additional non-federal funds for community benefit.

3. Governance or policy reform (2 MPOs)

Two MPOs addressed political challenges through policy or governance changes. The Denver Regional Council of Governments (Colorado) is piloting a new model that replaces half of its membership dues with a TIP fee, linking local financial participation more directly to project delivery. This approach seeks to reduce friction among members while maintaining a stable funding base. In Fairbanks, Alaska, FAST Planning reported using a more assertive governance approach by signaling the potential revocation of voting rights on the MPO board for jurisdictions that fail to meet participation or funding expectations. This tactic reportedly helped resolve participation issues and maintain accountability among member governments.

Addressing staff capacity and administrative burden

Eighteen MPOs identified staff capacity or administrative burden as a major challenge. In describing the steps they have taken to address these issues, three underlying challenges came through clearly. First, many MPOs struggle to recruit or retain qualified planners, often because competition for experienced staff is high or relocation is difficult. Second, several MPOs reported that they do not

have enough federal, state, or local funding to support the staffing levels their workload requires. Third, many noted that the volume of administrative tasks, documentation, and grant management often exceeds the capacity of their existing teams. Together, these challenges help explain why staffing shortages persist and why administrative demands can be difficult to manage. Survey respondents described a range of strategies to ease these pressures, although most approaches address only one challenge at a time.

1. Approaches to difficulty recruiting or retaining qualified staff

Across the responses, no MPO described a long-term strategy to strengthen staff recruitment or retention. Instead, the examples provided point to short-term approaches that help agencies stay afloat when vacancies or limited staffing make it difficult to manage core planning work.

Several MPOs are relying on consultants as a substitute for staff capacity. The Lehigh Valley Planning Commission (Pennsylvania) has advocated to its counties and the state DOT for additional resources to support both staff and third-party consultant services, reflecting that consulting support has become essential as staffing needs outpace available funding. The Orange County Transportation Council (New York), struggling to attract experienced transportation planners, is preparing an RFP (request for proposals) for on-call consulting services, even though doing so may limit the funding available for its existing staff positions. The Birmingham MPO (Alabama) similarly uses consultants to bridge gaps when internal staffing is insufficient.

2. Approaches to insufficient funding for staffing or operations

Several MPOs are addressing funding constraints by stretching existing resources, restructuring how match is generated, or seeking additional support from state or local partners. Madison County Council of Governments (Indiana) has taken on outside contract work to bring in non-federal revenue, though limited staff capacity often prevents the agency from accepting as much work as it could otherwise pursue. Other MPOs focus on reducing the amount of staff time required to meet match obligations. The Boston Region MPO (Massachusetts) uses MPO-funded technical assistance programs to support local governments with specific planning tasks. By providing a structured and funded mechanism for this work, the MPO prevents ad hoc local requests from overwhelming staff capacity and keeps its core planning responsibilities on schedule. The North Central Texas Council of Governments (Texas) shifted away from collecting dozens of small match payments and now relies more heavily on Transportation Development Credits (TDCs) and RTC Local Funds, a change that streamlines administrative requirements and reduces strain on staff. Some MPOs have taken structural steps to improve their operational funding. The Omaha–Council Bluffs Metropolitan Area Planning Agency (Nebraska) has increased administrative shares on discretionary grants and adopted a TIP

administrative fee, while the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission (Pennsylvania) has advocated for additional support from both PennDOT and its member counties to supplement staffing and consultant resources.

3. Approaches to administrative workload that exceeds available staff time

Although the survey question asked about challenges to generating local funds, several MPOs interpreted "administrative burden" and "staff capacity" as barriers that indirectly constrain their ability to pursue or manage local funding. For these MPOs, limited staff time made it difficult to complete required documentation, manage agreements, or take on additional projects that might strengthen their financial position. As a result, some respondents described actions focused on increasing internal capacity rather than directly increasing revenue.

Some MPOs addressed administrative burden by adding or reallocating staff capacity. The Gallatin Valley MPO (Montana) and the Cheyenne MPO (Wyoming) each hired additional full-time staff after operating for extended periods with understaffed teams. Their responses suggest that staffing shortages were creating operational bottlenecks that made it difficult to keep up with required planning and administrative tasks. Similarly, the Bay City Area Transportation Study (Michigan) hired new staff specifically to manage documentation required for revenue collection, which allowed existing staff to focus on planning tasks.

Other MPOs improved their capacity without increasing headcount. The Calhoun Area MPO (Alabama) addressed workload pressures by increasing staff training and reallocating responsibilities. While this approach does not increase the number of employees, it helps staff adapt to changing demands and improves the MPO's ability to meet administrative requirements.

Addressing legal and statutory restrictions

The 12 respondents who identified "legal restrictions or state statutes" as a challenge were also asked what actions their MPO has taken to address this challenge. This question sought to understand how MPOs are responding to laws and policies that limit their ability to raise or manage local funds. While many respondents noted that these restrictions are largely beyond their direct control, several described efforts to engage in legislative processes, build coalitions, or provide technical support to improve local funding flexibility.

Several MPOs have pursued legislative engagement or policy collaboration to expand local revenue authority or secure more stable funding sources. The Southern California Association of Governments (California) has lobbied for greater state resource allocation, securing one-time grants but emphasizing the need for recurring revenue authority. In Pennsylvania, both the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission and the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission have supported multi-year legislative efforts to allow MPOs and their local partners

to raise transportation revenues through new taxes or fees. Similarly, the Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho (COMPASS) has sought authorization for a local-option sales tax, reflected in recent legislation such as Idaho House Joint Resolution 5 and House Bill 375 (2025).

Other MPOs have contributed technical expertise to support state or regional policy reform. The Madison County Council of Governments (Indiana) has provided data and analysis to assist partner organizations working to amend statutory language, while the Chattanooga–Hamilton County/North Georgia MPO (Tennessee/Georgia) has collaborated with its state DOT to support updates to Georgia's Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST) law.

Two examples discussed earlier in this report (the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (Illinois) and the Tri-Cities MPO (Virginia)) also illustrate how MPOs can address structural funding barriers through legislative change. The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning worked with the Illinois legislature to establish the Comprehensive Regional Planning Fund (CRPF), creating a dedicated state revenue stream to support regional planning. Likewise, the Tri-Cities MPO is pursuing the creation of a regional transportation authority, which would have the statutory authority to raise or manage revenues that MPOs themselves cannot.

FIGURE 7.
Headlines from 2025 highlight ongoing state and regional efforts to expand or clarify local revenue authority for transportation.

In Colorado, the Grand Valley MPO is navigating funding constraints shaped by the state's Taxpayer's Bill of Rights (TABOR). TABOR requires voter approval for most new taxes, many fee increases, and any revenue changes that increase government collections, while also imposing annual revenue caps on local governments (Colorado Department of Revenue, 2024). Because of these limits, local jurisdictions cannot increase transportation revenues or expand MPO contributions without pursuing a ballot initiative, and even routine revenue adjustments may trigger TABOR requirements. To address these constraints, the Grand Valley MPO is commissioning a Transportation Financial Study to determine whether a future ballot initiative could be viable and to identify which revenue tools are legally permissible under TABOR.

Addressing challenges in securing private-sector participation

Only six MPOs identified private-sector participation as a major challenge. Of these, two reported taking some action in this area, and one described planned activities aimed at expanding private engagement. The Frontier MPO (Arkansas) has worked with private partners in a limited capacity, primarily around trails, bikeshare, and bicycle or pedestrian initiatives. These efforts suggest that private businesses may engage when a project provides clear, visible community benefits, although Frontier noted that such partnerships remain difficult to maintain. The North Central Texas Council of Governments (Texas) has had some success securing private matching funds or leveraging private contributions for specific projects. While these dollars typically support capital initiatives rather than MPO staff time, they show that private partners may participate when the work aligns closely with their interests. The Southwest Louisiana Regional Planning Commission (Louisiana) is actively exploring public-private partnership models, with staff noting that the coming year will help determine whether these approaches can become a viable tool for increasing private-sector involvement in regional planning.

Taken together, these actions show that MPOs are not passive in the face of funding limitations. They are adjusting dues structures, strengthening relationships with elected officials, pursuing legislative reforms, experimenting with public-private partnerships, and reshaping their work programs to reflect the resources they have. Many of these strategies are modest and incremental, reflecting the limited control MPOs have over local tax authority or state statutes. Even so, the range of approaches illustrates how MPOs continually adapt to keep planning programs functioning despite fiscal, political, and administrative constraints.

The next section draws together these findings and discusses their implications for MPOs seeking to diversify local funding, meet federal match requirements, and maintain stable planning capacity.

SECTION 4

Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this project was to understand how MPOs across the United States generate local (non-federal, non-state) funds, what barriers they encounter, and what actions they take when those barriers limit their ability to meet federal match requirements and conduct vital regional transportation planning activities that are not eligible for federal reimbursement. The survey results, combined with insights from the literature, show that the challenge is not simply "how to raise local funds." Instead, MPOs operate inside a set of structural, political, administrative, and statutory constraints that fundamentally shape the options available to them. The actions MPOs reported reflect real creativity and resilience, but they also highlight deeper issues that are larger than any one individual agency to address independently.

This section brings together the major findings and interprets what they mean for MPOs, state partners, and national policy discussions. It builds on the thematic analysis in the previous section and reconnects them directly with the research question: What strategies are MPOs using to generate or manage local funding, and what can other MPOs learn from their experiences?

Interpreting the Findings in Context

The descriptive results show that MPOs use a wide range of mechanisms to generate local funds, including member dues, fee-for-service arrangements, in-kind contributions, hosting agreements, voluntary payments, direct appropriations, and (in rare cases) local funding exchanges. While these mechanisms create multiple pathways for MPOs to meet local funding needs, the survey responses also reveal that underlying conditions strongly shape which strategies are actually feasible in a given region. Across all challenge areas, MPOs are not simply coping with funding issues. They are navigating broader structural realities:

- Local governments often have limited ability to increase local revenues streams due to issues related to local, regional, and/or state tax structures, economic conditions, or statutory impediments.
- The federal planning program carries heavy administrative requirements, which create high fixed staffing costs regardless of MPO size.
- State statutes frequently constrain local revenue-generating authority, limiting the MPOs' ability to diversify funding even with strong local support.
- Political support for MPO dues is fragile, especially when elected officials have a limited understanding of the MPO's role.

These themes echo prior research, which has noted that MPOs must coordinate across fragmented local governments, rely on matching funds that many

localities struggle to provide, and operate within statutory frameworks that vary widely across states. The survey confirms that these dynamics remain central, and that many MPOs are compensating for structural constraints with short-term, incremental fixes.

What MPOs Can Try: Lessons Learned from Peer Strategies

The sections below synthesize the strategies MPOs reported using, organized by the specific challenges those strategies are intended to address. In many cases, MPOs are not only trying to generate local revenue but also navigating political, administrative, and statutory barriers that shape their ability to secure or manage that revenue. The examples that follow illustrate how MPOs adapt to these constraints in practice. These are not best practices, but rather practical examples drawn from peer experiences.

1. When local fiscal capacity is limited

Limited local capacity was the most common challenge noted in the survey. MPOs often serve jurisdictions with small tax bases, limited staff, or narrow revenue authority. The responses showed that MPOs are using a variety of approaches to stabilize participation and keep local contributions predictable enough to unlock federal planning funds and pay for federally ineligible expenses as needed.

Strategies MPOs might consider include:

- **Stabilize dues structures:** Use predictable formulas, low minimum dues, or multi-year rate stability (e.g., Collier MPO, Southeast Michigan Council of Governments, Southern California Association of Governments, Denver Regional Council of Governments).
- **Communicate the return on investment (ROI):** Show how local dollars leverage federal funds or support local priorities (e.g., Wasatch Front, Maricopa Association of Governments, Western Connecticut COG).
- **Centralize match contributions:** Have one or two core jurisdictions cover the full federal match when most members cannot (e.g., Polk TPO, Johnson City MTPO, Santa Fe MPO).
- **Pursue supplemental grants:** Seek planning funds that introduce "new" revenue without increasing local match obligations, such as discretionary grants with low or no match requirements or supplemental state legislative appropriations (e.g., Macatawa Area Coordinating Council, Whatcom Council of Governments, Fairbanks Area Surface Transportation Planning).
- **Align project scope to match availability:** Constrain the pursuit of discretionary grants or scale planning activities to align with what can be supported using existing local contributions, rather than introducing new funding obligations (e.g., Lowcountry Area Transportation Study, Calhoun Area MPO).

- **Explore structural or regional tools:** Seek creation of state-supported planning funds or regional authorities with revenue powers (e.g., Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, Tri-Cities MPO).

2. When faced with political barriers

Political challenges varied widely. Some MPOs face skepticism from elected officials, while others struggle with uneven support across jurisdictions. Several noted that political barriers often stem from limited understanding of the MPO's role or from tight local budgets that make any contribution difficult to justify.

MPOs facing political barriers may consider the following strategies:

- **Increase partner education and direct outreach:** Regular briefings, municipal visits, and relationship-building clarify MPO roles (e.g., Dover/Kent County MPO, Tri-County RPC).
- **Use data to depoliticize discussions:** Technical evidence can shift conversations away from political tension (e.g., Calhoun Area MPO, Pikes Peak COG).
- **Demonstrate MPO value clearly and repeatedly:** Highlight grant wins, technical assistance, data tools, and cost savings (e.g., Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, Oahu MPO, Santa Fe MPO).
- **Adjust governance or financial structures:** Use mechanisms like TIP fees or clarified board participation rules (e.g., Denver Regional Council of Governments, Fairbanks Area Surface Transportation Planning).
- **Use bipartisan or multi-stakeholder engagement:** Maintain balanced outreach to diverse political actors (e.g., Tri-Cities MPO).

3. Staff Capacity

Staffing and administrative challenges were the third most common barrier and often overlapped with local funding constraints. Many MPOs reported that administrative requirements for federal funds consume significant staff time and that recruitment difficulties make it hard to keep up.

Survey respondents described several approaches that have helped continue MPO planning operations when staff capacity becomes an issue:

- **Strategically use consultants to stabilize workload:** Especially when recruitment is difficult (e.g., Lehigh Valley Planning Commission, Orange County Transportation Council, Birmingham MPO).
- **Generate flexible local revenue where possible:** Contract work, TIP fees, administrative shares, or discretionary grant overhead (e.g., Madison County Council of Governments, Omaha–Council Bluffs Metropolitan Area Planning Agency).

- **Simplify match administration:** Shift from dozens of small local match contributions to Transportation Development Credits (TDCs) or regional pools (e.g., North Central Texas Council of Governments).
- **Add staff selectively or reallocate roles:** Hire administrative or grants staff, or retrain existing staff to fill multiple roles (e.g., Gallatin Valley MPO, Cheyenne MPO, Bay City Area Transportation Study, Calhoun Area MPO).
- **Improve contracting and agreements processes:** This reduces the administrative load on limited staff (e.g., Omaha–Council Bluffs Metropolitan Area Planning Agency's Grants & Agreements Coordinator).

4. Legal and Statutory Restrictions

Some MPOs operate in states where local revenue authority is limited or where statutory restrictions affect match flexibility. These MPOs often have fewer tools available, but several are working to change that through legislative engagement, coalition-building, or technical analysis. It is important to note that MPOs cannot use federal planning funds for direct lobbying activities. However, they may provide technical information, respond to legislative inquiries, and participate in policy discussions in an educational capacity. When MPOs have access to local or other non-federal funds, those dollars may support activities that fall outside federal restrictions, including certain forms of policy engagement that help advance long-term funding solutions. Within these limits, some MPOs have supported efforts to clarify revenue authority, modernize funding statutes, or explore new mechanisms that would expand local or regional funding options.

MPOs in similar situations might try the following peer-identified strategies:

- **Engage in state legislative processes:** Work with DOTs or coalitions to pursue expanded revenue authority or clarifications (Southern California Association of Governments, Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission, Lehigh Valley Planning Commission).
- **Support enabling legislation for local revenue tools:** Examples include local-option sales taxes, fee authority, or TDC flexibility (Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho; Idaho legislation).
- **Provide technical analysis to inform statutory change:** Data-driven support can strengthen legislative proposals (Madison County COG).
- **Pursue creation of regional authorities:** Regional entities may have revenue powers that MPOs lack (Tri-Cities MPO).
- **Commission legal or financial feasibility studies:** For regions with restrictions like TABOR (Grand Valley MPO).

Implications for MPOs and Policy Makers

The survey results point to several broader implications that extend beyond individual MPO experiences.

Local fiscal capacity sets a ceiling on MPO financial strategies. Many MPOs operate in regions where local governments have limited revenue authority or very small tax bases. In these cases, raising dues or expanding the local match is not a realistic option. This suggests that strengthening MPO funding will often depend on broader fiscal or statutory tools that exist outside the MPO's direct control. Future state or regional policy discussions may benefit from examining how local revenue authority, eligibility for match sources, or dedicated non-federal planning funds can affect MPO stability over time. States that have adopted planning funds or regional revenue mechanisms offer reference points that may be worth studying further.

Administrative workload is a hidden cost driver, especially for small MPOs. The survey illustrates that many staffing challenges are rooted in the volume of federally required administrative tasks. These requirements do not scale down with agency size, which means small MPOs must carry nearly the same administrative load as large ones. This creates a fixed staffing need that local revenues cannot always support. The findings indicate that any statewide or national efforts to understand how administrative processes create workload pressures, or to consider streamlining administrative tasks or offering administrative support through centralized services, could meaningfully expand MPO capacity even without increasing planning funds.

Communication and visibility matter as much as financial policy. MPOs that consistently demonstrate their value, by showing grant wins, delivering technical assistance, or providing data tools, tend to sustain more stable local funding. This reinforces research showing that political support is heavily influenced by visibility and trust, not just financial need. Statewide associations, regional coalitions, or State DOTs may have opportunities to develop shared communication tools, training, or MPO awareness initiatives that help local officials understand the purpose and value of regional planning activities and processes. This investment strengthens local willingness to participate and can reduce political barriers to meeting match requirements.

In-kind contributions are essential, but fragile. Many MPOs rely on in-kind support such as staff time or donated office space to meet match requirements. For small and medium-sized MPOs, these non-cash resources often fill the gap between what local governments can provide and what is needed to carry out planning responsibilities. However, these arrangements are vulnerable to staff turnover, reorganizations, budget cuts, and inconsistencies in documentation. State policies also vary widely, with some prohibiting in-kind match and others actively encouraging it. Clearer state standards, stronger documentation practices, and more predictable match options would make in-kind contributions a more reliable tool.

Structural solutions require long-term coalitions. Some of the most impactful examples in the survey involve structural approaches such as regional authorities, dedicated state planning funds, or expanded revenue tools. These solutions are significant because they change the environment in which MPOs operate, rather than adjusting agency-level practices. However, these approaches typically require sustained work by multiple partners over many years. The survey results indicate that future progress in these areas will likely depend on coordination among MPOs, local governments, statewide associations, and state or federal agencies. Additional research into successful coalition-building or state-enabling frameworks could support regions exploring these paths.

Limitations of This Study

While this project provides insight into MPO funding challenges, several limitations should be noted:

- The survey sample, while diverse, represents a subset of MPOs nationally and may underrepresent certain state contexts.
- Responses are self-reported and may reflect internal perceptions rather than formal policies.
- Several MPOs noted challenges but reported no actions taken, which limits interpretation in those areas.
- State-level statutory nuances are difficult to fully capture from survey responses alone.

These limitations do not undermine the findings, but do highlight opportunities for deeper exploration.

Suggestions for Future Research

The findings from this project point to several areas where additional research could significantly advance understanding of MPO funding challenges and provide more actionable tools for practitioners.

More detailed analysis of in-kind contributions. Many MPOs rely on staff time, donated office space, or other services to meet match requirements, but at present, there isn't a clear overarching picture of how stable these arrangements are, how MPOs document them, or how they are interpreted by federal oversight agencies. A national assessment of in-kind match policies, documentation practices, and risks could help MPOs use these tools more effectively while maintaining compliance and audit readiness.

Expanding private sector engagement. Only a small share of MPOs report any engagement with private-sector partners for financial or technical support, and even fewer have established processes for doing so. The survey suggests that private partners typically participate only when their interests directly align with

a specific project, and even in those cases, the support is ad hoc and difficult to sustain. Future research could examine what types of projects, governance structures, or outreach strategies create the conditions for more consistent private-sector participation.

Impact of state policies on MPO funding. The survey responses make clear that state policies significantly shape what MPOs can do to raise or manage local funds. However, existing research does not provide a comprehensive, cross-state assessment of how statutes, administrative codes, DOT policies, or revenue limitations affect MPO financial flexibility. Future research could map these state-level enabling environments and compare how differences in law and policy influence MPO funding outcomes. Such a study could investigate variations in match requirements, in-kind allowances, revenue authority, local-option tax frameworks, or state-supported planning funds. It could also analyze how states that provide strong supplemental support differ in performance from those that rely solely on local funds to provide for federal match and for other non-federal aid eligible purposes. This work would help identify which state policies most effectively support MPO stability and where statutory barriers most severely restrict local contributions.

Adapting to declining local tax bases. Several respondents noted that long-term population decline or economic decline has reduced their regions' ability to generate local funding streams, particularly their ability to provide local match for federal funds. Yet little research explores how MPOs operate in shrinking or fiscally distressed regions, or what tools help maintain planning capacity when the local tax base erodes. Future studies could examine how demographic change affects match reliability, staffing levels, and planning scope; how MPOs adjust their work programs in response; and which strategies offer the most resilience.

Staffing and workforce dynamics in MPOs, particularly in small and rural regions. Existing national scans have documented MPO staffing structures and organizational models, but far less is known about the other side of the equation: why some MPOs, especially those in rural or lower-density regions, struggle to attract and retain qualified planners even when funding is available. Future research could examine what discourages planners and technical staff from relocating to smaller or more remote areas, and what mix of salary, benefits, telework flexibility, and career development opportunities would make these roles competitive. It would also be valuable to identify which recruitment strategies have succeeded for MPOs that have managed to bring in new talent. Case studies of MPOs that have overcome these challenges, paired with survey data on job preferences and perceived barriers among prospective applicants, could give MPO leaders concrete guidance on how to structure positions, design incentives, and create work environments that support long-term recruitment and retention.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

ACE	Alta Community Enrichment
AMPO	Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations
BHJMPC	Brooke-Hancock-Jefferson Metropolitan Planning Commission
CAMPO	Capital Area MPO
CFR	Code of Federal Regulations
CMAP	Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning
COG	Council of Governments
COMPASS	Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho
CRPF	Comprehensive Regional Planning Fund
CUTR	Center for Urban Transportation Research
CVTA	Central Virginia Transportation Authority
DART	Dallas Area Rapid Transit
DCHC	Durham-Chapel Hill-Carrboro
DOT	Department of Transportation
DRCOG	Denver Regional Council of Governments
FHWA	Federal Highway Administration
FTA	Federal Transit Administration
FTE	full-time equivalent
GAO	Government Accountability Office
GIS	Geographic Information System
IIJA	Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act
IT	information technology
ITRE	Institute for Transportation Research and Education at NC State University
KIPDA	Kentuckiana Regional Planning & Development Agency
MAPA	Omaha–Council Bluffs Metropolitan Area Planning Agency
MPA	metropolitan planning area
MPO	Metropolitan Planning Organization
MTPO	Metropolitan Transportation Planning Organization
NARC	National Association of Regional Councils
NCHRP	National Cooperative Highway Research Program
NCTCOG	North Central Texas Council of Governments
PL	Planning Funds
PPP OR P3	Public–Private Partnerships
RFP	request for proposals
ROI	return on investment
RRTPO	Richmond Regional Transportation Planning Organization
RTC	Regional Transportation Council
SCAG	Southern California Association of Governments
SEMCOG	Southeast Michigan Council of Governments
SMART	State Match Advantage for Rural Transportation
SPLOST	Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax
SS4A	Safe Street for All
TABOR	Taxpayer's Bill of Rights
TDC	Transportation Development Credits
TIP	transportation improvement program
TOD	Transit-Oriented Development
TPO	Transportation Planning Organization
TREC	Transportation Research and Education Center at Portland State University
UPWP	Unified Planning Work Program
USDOT	U.S. Department of Transportation
VMT	vehicle miles traveled
WFRC	Wasatch Front Regional Council

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