

Flagstaff Metropolitan Planning Organization Case Study

1995 Census Population	53,355 (Mid-decennial Census)
Central City	Flagstaff, AZ
Air Quality Status (1995)	Attainment
Governor Designation Date	June 24, 1996 (designated an urbanized area based upon the 1995 Mid-Decennial Census)
Voting Policy Board Members	Three elected or appointed officials from the City of Flagstaff (one of whom is the mayor) Two elected or appointed officials from Coconino County (one of whom is the chair of the board of supervisors) Arizona DOT (State Transportation Board)
Non-voting Board Members	FHWA FTA
PL and 5303 Funding (FY 1997)	\$246,667 (not including local match)
Initial Staff Size	One full-time transportation planner One city employee as director
Initial Staff Location	City of Flagstaff
GIS Responsibility	City and county
Contacts	David Wessel, Flagstaff MPO Ron Spinar, Flagstaff MPO (928) 779-7685 Jess Jarvis, Arizona DOT Matt Carpenter, Arizona DOT (602) 712-8144 Jeff Meilbeck, Mountain Line Bill Towler, Coconino County (928) 226-2700
Website	No website



The Flagstaff Metropolitan Planning Organization (FMPO) was formed in 1996 after the results of a mid-decennial Census showed that Flagstaff qualified as an urbanized area. The FMPO planning area consists of two units of government—the City of Flagstaff and Coconino County. Both of these entities hold seats on the MPO’s six-member executive board, with Flagstaff holding three seats and the county holding two. The Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT) holds the sixth seat. At the time of the mid-decennial census, the City of Flagstaff’s population was 52,507 and the total urbanized population was 53,355. As of the 2000 Census, the urbanized area population had increased to 57,050.

Steps to Designation

In early 1995, city officials from Flagstaff approached the U.S. Census Bureau office in Denver with a request for a mid-decennial census to determine if the area qualified as an urbanized area. The City paid for this mid-decennial census. At the same time, the city’s planning staff convened the Flagstaff MPO Working Group, consisting of the city, the

county and ADOT, to discuss the possibility of Flagstaff forming an MPO. One subject at this early meeting was a comparison of different models for MPO structure, with Colorado Springs and Albuquerque being two that were discussed in detail. According to the MPO's director, the city stood to benefit from the urbanized area designation not only through the creation of an MPO but also by becoming eligible for community development block grants. These incentives caused the city to take the lead on pursuing MPO designation. The director also explained that there had been some recent transportation planning efforts in the region that had failed and that the city was interested in finding a "better way of planning". By the end of 1995, the Census Bureau had confirmed that the area population exceeded 50,000 and in March of 1996 they officially announced that Flagstaff's urbanized population of 53,355 qualified it as an urbanized area.

Once it became clear that Flagstaff would qualify as an urbanized area, the working group began to meet more frequently. The MPO director, who was a city engineer at the time, an ADOT official, and FHWA staff from the Phoenix office made several presentations to the Flagstaff city council and the Coconino County board of supervisors to educate them about the responsibilities and products of an MPO. Once city and county officials reached an agreement on policy board membership and the size of the planning area, they submitted a package of documentation to the Governor for his designation of the MPO. These documents included intergovernmental agreements between the city, county, and ADOT, as well as the new MPO's bylaws. On June 24, 1996, the Governor forwarded his recommendation to designate the FMPO to the FHWA Division Administrator and FTA Regional Administrator.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Policy Board Membership

The FMPO director identified the membership of the policy board as one of the main issues during the MPO's formation. All respondents agree that the inclusion of the city and county as members was not controversial as they were the only two units of government within the urbanized area. An ADOT official explained that there had been a long history of the county and city working together, and referred to city-county coordination meetings that have taken place for decades. In the years leading up to FMPO designation there had been several other regional efforts. During the mid-decennial census, the two jurisdictions were going through a visioning process called "Flagstaff 2020" to focus on shared goals in the areas of housing and transportation. In addition to fostering cooperation between the city and county in advance of MPO designation, Flagstaff 2020 helped create a receptive environment for the MPO's expanded public involvement role.

Most of the discussion around board membership centered on the number of representatives that the county and city would have. The working group looked at other MPOs' boards for guidance. According to the FMPO director, they decided against going with representation based on population, as this would have left the county with one or no votes since the overwhelming majority of the urbanized population lived in the city. The

group finally decided to give the city three seats and the county two seats on the board. This was roughly proportional to the size of their governing bodies (seven city councilors in Flagstaff and five county supervisors in Coconino). ADOT was added as the sixth vote to balance representation between the city and the rest of the MPO. FMPO also created a technical advisory committee with the same 3/2 split between city and county membership. The Flagstaff members of the committee are the community development director, traffic engineering manager, and planning director. The transit operations manager and community development director represent the county. ADOT has two seats on the seven-member committee—a district engineer and the director of the transportation planning division.

Planning Area Boundary

The Flagstaff urbanized area covers approximately 525 square miles, 65 of which fall within the Flagstaff city limits. ADOT officials recommended that the planning area boundary be drawn to match the Coconino County boundary in order to provide the body with a regional focus. The officials in Flagstaff preferred a planning area boundary that only covered the urbanized area in addition to those areas expected to become urbanized in the next twenty years. According to the FMPO director, the reason the city was reluctant to expand the boundaries to include all of Coconino County was its size—at 18,608 square miles it is the second largest county in the country. At only 108,000 residents it is also one of the most sparsely populated counties in Arizona. FMPO agreed to the smaller planning area, which resulted in an MPO area population of over 61,000 (more than 8,000 of whom lived outside the city limits). As of 2000, the planning area population in the unincorporated portion of the county had increased to 12,000.

Transit's Role

Coconino County operated a transit system called Pine Country Transit at the time the MPO was formed. Although the county operated the system its services were provided entirely within the city limits of Flagstaff, and the city provided a significant portion of the funding for the system. Rather than a fixed route urban transit system, Pine Country was primarily a social services provider with just three fixed routes in addition to private medical transportation. During MPO formation, FTA's regional office in Denver sent a representative to Flagstaff for several meetings, the result of which was an agreement that Coconino County would be the designated recipient for federal section 5309 transit capital funds. This agreement became part of the documentation that was forwarded to the Governor of Arizona during MPO designation. ADOT, Coconino County, and Flagstaff all credited FTA with providing a high level of support.

Three years after FMPO was formed, Pine Country Transit became Mountain Line, a fixed route bus service funded by a combination of federal and city funds. Service is oriented towards downtown Flagstaff and Northern Arizona University (NAU). According to the county's director of Mountain Line, the system is well represented at the FMPO table. He has a seat on FMPO's technical advisory committee (TAC), which makes recommendations to the policy board. He is active in the TAC process and also provides regular updates to the policy board. Although NAU is not a formal member of the TAC, the school, which operates their own bus system around campus and into

downtown, also attends every meeting. Mountain Line’s governing board consists of the Flagstaff city manager, the county manager, NAU, a citizen member, Coconino Community College, the Flagstaff Unified School District, and FMPO. As a result, FMPO has a direct say in budget development, operations, and the feasibility of capital projects for the region’s transit system. In addition, FMPO board members from the city and county effectively represent both their unit of government and Mountain Line at the FMPO level. This results in a climate where, in the Mountain Line director’s opinion, FMPO “respects, understands, and pursues transit legitimately.”

NACOG

Before the creation of FMPO, the Northern Arizona Council of Government (NACOG) conducted transportation planning at the sub state level. There are four COGs in Arizona which cover the areas not included in FMPO or the other three MPOs. FMPO’s planning area is a subset of NACOG’s. In all other areas of COG work—the Head Start program, housing, etc.—the Flagstaff area is still part of NACOG. FMPO and NACOG also work together closely on the planning of enhancement projects, and their offices’ location within three blocks of one another facilitates their joint meetings to review those project proposals. The FMPO director still regularly attends NACOG transportation advisory committee meetings as well. Another area of cooperation between NACOG and FMPO is their dealings with the state government in Phoenix. The state’s four COGs, with input from the state’s two small MPOs (Flagstaff and Yuma), have joined to hire a liaison to work with state government in the capital. Each COG contributes to the liaison’s salary and expenses based on population (roughly eight cents per capita). The liaison meets regularly with the governor’s transportation staff—an important contact in a state as large geographically as Arizona and one dominated by two large metropolitan areas (Phoenix and Tucson).

Staffing and Technical Support

FMPO’s transportation planner is its only full-time employee. The FMPO director is a city employee, and all of the administrative and legal support is provided as in-kind services (in lieu of financial support) by the City of Flagstaff. This arrangement, with the MPO so closely tied to the city, was a point of concern for ADOT officials at the time of formation. Both the Flagstaff city manager and the community development director at the time had experience in the Beloit, Wisconsin MPO, which was also staffed and hosted by the city. FHWA, ADOT and FMPO are continuing to work together to improve the business practices and the independent functionality of the MPO.

The FMPO director views the city’s desire to house the MPO and staff it as one of necessity. The county had also been suggested as a potential host, but did not have available office space in downtown. Funding availability was the primary driver of staffing decisions. Discussions with Santa Fe’s MPO, which is housed within the city’s planning department, suggested that the city-hosted model could work. FMPO used federal funds available through ADOT to hire a transportation planner. In other areas, the director believes sufficient expertise already exists in city government. The city and county both contribute technical support through traffic counts and GIS work.

MPO Products

The initial Unified Planning Work Program for FMPO was developed by ADOT with assistance from the city and county, and covered the first three years of the MPO's existence. ADOT also provided FMPO with \$160,000 for the development of the first long-range transportation plan. A consultant produced the first Transportation Plan, the scope of which included land use in addition to transportation, with input from the city and county. One important result of the first plan was the identification of transit routes for the new Mountain Line bus system. In subsequent years, FMPO's share of federal planning funds has remained fairly constant at roughly \$100,000 per year.

Surface Transportation Program (STP) funds had previously been distributed to Flagstaff through NACOG based on population. The MPO received about \$95,000 in its first year in STP funds from NACOG. Since the first year, FMPO has received roughly \$550,000 per year in capital funds directly from ADOT. In addition, FMPO receives \$200,000 a year in federal planning funds from the state from through the SPR and PL programs. These funds are also distributed based on population. FMPO has had to save the money until this year when there was enough on hand to build the \$1.2 million Schulz Pass Road Realignment. All parties cite the project as an example of effective planning as each of the four stakeholders—ADOT, Flagstaff, Coconino County, and FMPO—contributed financially. This first project was selected, in part, because of its ability to bring together the different members of FMPO. Schulz Pass Road is owned by ADOT. The road also serves as the boundary line between the city and county.

Note: Six officials involved in the work of the Flagstaff MPO were contacted for this study. These officials were the FMPO Director, the FMPO transportation planner, two ADOT officials, Coconino County's community development director and the director of Mountain Line.

Flagstaff MPO Planning Area

