

## Ithaca-Tompkins Case Study

<b>1990 Census Population</b>	50,133
<b>Central City</b>	Ithaca, New York
<b>Air Quality Status (1990)</b>	attainment
<b>Governor Designation Date</b>	June 11, 1992 (MOU signed by NYSDOT)
<b>Voting Policy Board Members</b>	Tompkins County City of Ithaca Town of Ithaca Village of Lansing Village of Cayuga Heights New York State DOT
<b>Non Voting Policy Board Members</b>	TCAT Cornell FHWA FTA All local governments
<b>PL and 5303 Funding (Year of Designation)</b>	\$147,243 (not including in-kind state and local funds)
<b>Initial Staff Size</b>	1
<b>Initial Staff Location</b>	Tompkins County
<b>Modeling Responsibility</b>	MPO
<b>GIS Responsibility</b>	MPO and County
<b>AQ Conformity Responsibility</b>	N/A
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<b>Website</b>	<a href="http://www.co.tompkins.ny.us/itctc/">www.co.tompkins.ny.us/itctc/</a>



The Ithaca-Tompkins County Transportation Council (ITCTC) in New York was formed in 1992 and has oversight on regional transportation planning matters. In addition to staff, it consists of a policy committee and a transportation planning committee. The policy committee or board is the MPO's final decision-making body, while the transportation planning committee is charged with coordinating the area's transportation planning work and providing technical advice to the board. The policy board originally had six voting members and one non-voting member (Cornell University), but in the last

ten years two changes were made to its composition. The Town of Dryden was added at the town supervisor's request, although only a portion of Dryden lies within the urbanized area boundary. When Tompkins Consolidated Area Transit (TCAT) inherited the systems of three pre-existing transit providers, it was added as a non-voting member of the policy board. The planning area boundary for ITCTC is the same as the Tompkins County boundary, although the urbanized area covers only a portion of the county.

### **Steps to Designation**

The Ithaca area's urbanized population barely surpassed the 50,000-person threshold for designation as an urbanized area as a result of the 1990 Census. Local and state officials had not expected the designation when it was announced in September 1991. County planning officials spent the next two months researching the responsibilities of an MPO and the different models that existed within the state. In November, Tompkins County formally expressed the interest of the county and the urbanized area's municipalities to form an MPO. County officials also met with NYSDOT's Transit Division and Urban Planning Division Staff to discuss the possibility of the county hosting the MPO.

NYSDOT initially recommended that the MPO be hosted by the state rather than by the county. After discussions with the state's other MPO directors, the county became more convinced of the merits of a locally hosted MPO. In an effort to build consensus around the locally hosted model, Tompkins County drafted "A Plan for Establishing the Ithaca MPO" and distributed it to the area's municipalities and Cornell University in January 1992. The Plan outlined a possible hosting arrangement including the MPO's use of office space and sources of budget revenue. In March 1992, after local officials had agreed to support the locally hosted MPO, Tompkins County forwarded a letter to NYSDOT expressing their desire to host the MPO. At this point, the state officially announced its preference for a state-hosted MPO. The NYSDOT proposal featured a state employee based out of Cornell University. In late March, a meeting was held in Ithaca at which Tompkins County and local officials and staffs heard presentations from both NYSDOT officials and two New York state MPO directors on the different options for hosting. The support for the county-hosted MPO by local officials was reaffirmed after this meeting and the state acceded to their wishes.

In the state of New York, NYSDOT acts on the behalf of the Governor for matters relating to MPOs. Since the NYSDOT had been involved in the process of forming the MPO, it was not necessary to send a formal package of documentation to support designation of the MPO. Instead, ITCTC was designated when NYSDOT, Tompkins County, and the four municipalities signed the Memorandum of Understanding on June 11, 1992. The process of forming the MPO after the initial expression of interest by the county had taken roughly seven months.

## **ISSUES AND CHALLENGES**

### **Policy Board Membership**

One significant issue during formation, in addition to the hosting of the MPO, was the composition of the policy board. NYSDOT had designated an Interim Policy Committee consisting of NYSDOT, the City of Ithaca and Tompkins County. An MPO official said that with smaller MPOs it is not too difficult to decide who should be on the board, and the Town of Ithaca, and the villages of Lansing and Cayuga Heights were included by mutual agreement of the interim committee. The decision to keep the number of policy board members at the six mentioned above was made after discussions with other New York MPOs. Many directors across the state had encouraged ITCTC to keep the number of seats at the policy board table small. They cited the need to balance adequate citizen representation with the fact that you still need to make decisions. One MPO official believed that government and business groups alone cannot solve problems alone and that non-profits and citizens groups' input were needed. However, he suggested that this input be brought in at the transportation planning committee level rather than on the policy board.

Cornell University, an institution with considerable impact on the region economically, intellectually, and in the area of transportation as a key provider of public transportation, was left off of the policy board. The university is an active member of the transportation planning committee. ITCTC policy members agree that the needs and interests of Cornell have been very closely considered. Still, both Tompkins County and MPO staff involved at the outset agree that, as the dominant non-governmental organization and a large partner in the transit system, Cornell should have been included on the policy board. As for the transit system, no representative was named to the policy board initially as there were multiple transit providers (Ithaca, the county, and Cornell) in the region, and all were represented on either the transportation planning or policy committees.

The ITCTC policy board's decision-making is guided by a consensus system whereby all "affected parties" (defined as the City of Ithaca, Town of Ithaca, NYSDOT, and Tompkins County) had to agree on policy board decisions. According to county staff, the system has worked very well in Ithaca due to a political culture where people try to be responsible and see it as being in the collective interest to reach agreement. Although the consensus system effectively gave each policy board member a veto, it was in the interest of members not to use it frivolously. The state was reluctant to use its "veto" since they had an interest in moving products like the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) along. As a result, local officials were successful in negotiating to get some additional projects approved that were not state priorities. Local officials also hesitated to use their potential veto power as there was concern that NYSDOT would move some of its spending outside of Tompkins County. In addition to the consensus system, another strong point of the policy board was that an early chair of the policy committee was the chief elected official of Tompkins County. Having the chief elected official of the hosting agency as the policy board chair was viewed as important, since it can be difficult to get the host agency to understand the nuances of MPOs otherwise.

### **Funding and Staffing**

County and MPO staff view all members of the MPO as being supportive of the process. Whenever there has been a need to conduct a study, there has been a strong tradition of interested parties “putting up the cash.” In the first couple of years, ITCTC produced a regional trails plan, which became instrumental in their subsequent success at securing enhancement funds.

The first person hired to the MPO staff was the Director. He was hired during the first year and his initial focus was on investing in GIS capabilities. Tompkins County and the MPO Director worked together to simultaneously enhance their respective capacities to do mapping work. For highway-side travel demand modeling, they contracted for assistance with Cornell, although in recent years the MPO has done this work itself. Until recently, the MPO staff had grown to four (director, administrative assistant, planning analyst with TIP and GIS responsibilities, and a modeler). Currently the staff has been reduced to three full-time employees and one part-time employee whose responsibility includes modeling and other data needs. Some GIS work is contracted out to the county.

### **Transit’s Role**

The nature of the region’s transit service at the time of formation resulted in the initial absence of a transit-specific member on the policy board. According to the planner of the County’s transit system at the time, this did not lead to an absence of a strong transit role in the MPO’s planning process. The Ithaca area has a strong transit culture, evidenced by its identification by FTA as a “small transit intensive city” in a 2000 report to Congress. The report identified small urbanized areas with ridership, route mileage, fleet sizes and other system characteristics that were more typical of medium-sized urbanized area systems. Many of the new initiatives that emerged from the MPO process in the first years had a transit emphasis. Under the MPO framework, flexible funds were now available to purchase bicycle racks for the bus fleet as well as additional buses. Transit studies that would not have been done otherwise were other recipients of flexible funds. The three policy board members operating a transit system made up for the absence of a “transit” vote.

After the creation of TCAT, the City of Ithaca, Tompkins County, and Cornell continued to be strong advocates for transit. Now TCAT itself has a voice as non-voting member of the board as well. Some of the policy board representatives from the former transit operators also sit on the TCAT board. Since some of the ITCTC board members are wearing many hats, there is motivation to not leave TCAT as the sole advocate of transit on the board. The TCAT planner explained that, although there may not always be enough money around to fund all of the transit project or studies the board supports, transit is at the heart of the MPO’s transportation planning process.

### **MPO Products**

Another early challenge faced by ITCTC was that the first TIP and Transportation Plan had to be completed within one year of the director’s hiring. At the time, the MPO was still working to increase its technical capacity so creating programs and plans based on solid data was very difficult. To compensate for this initial lack in technical expertise, the

MPO placed a priority on the public involvement process in the first years. As one county official puts it, “being Ithaca, everyone is an expert.”

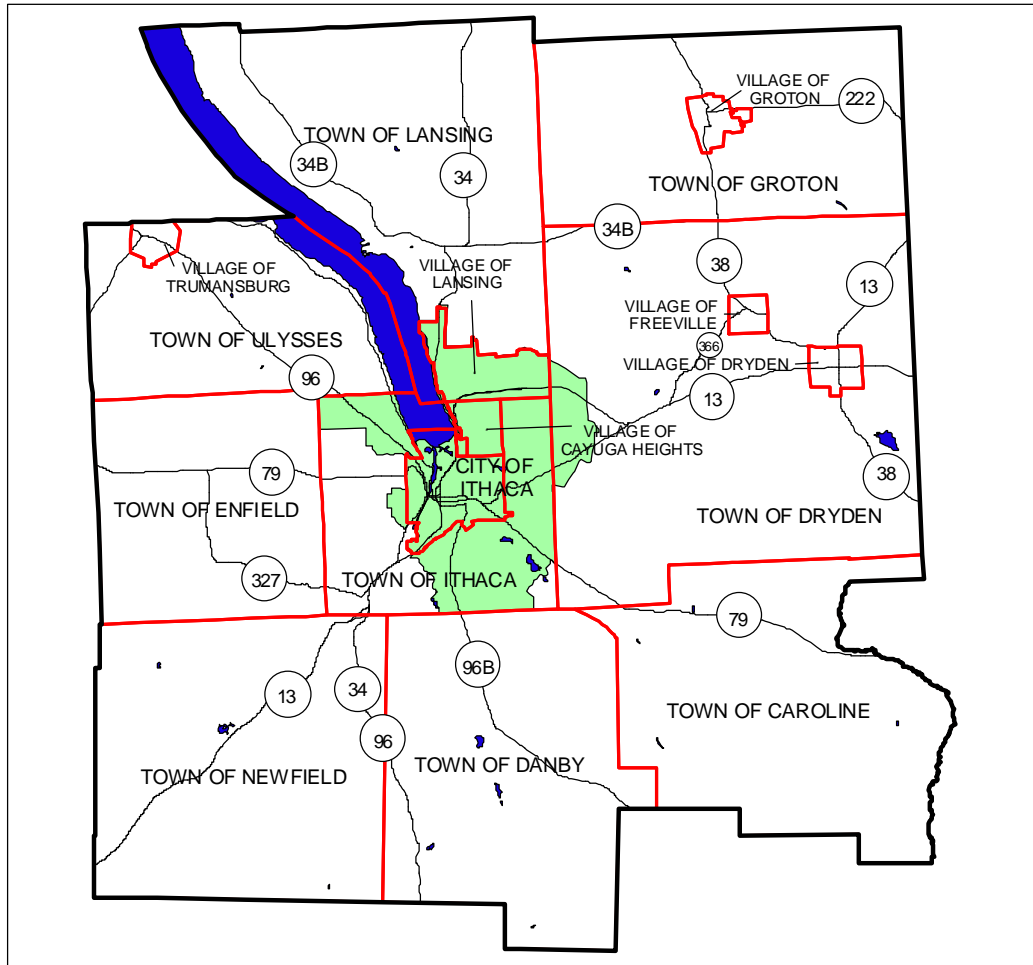
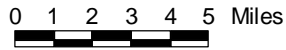
With the TIP, NYSDOT’s Regional office had a priority of projects that predated the MPO. The initial TIP bore a strong correlation to the state list, but as both the state and the local officials on the policy board were educated on the proper role for an MPO, the state and local project selection process was melded over a few years.

The first Plan had been a challenge because there had not been a regional framework for thinking about transportation planning before. One body, the Ithaca-Tompkins County Transportation Commission, predated the MPO and had attempted to achieve consensus for the construction of new arterials in the urban area. It had been an advisory group that was defunct as of the formation of the MPO. It took time for all of the stakeholders to adapt to an organization with the authority and the access to resources that the MPO wielded.

Work on the Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP) and the other certification documents was enhanced by the access to documents produced previously by the MPO’s peers in the state. In the “pre-internet” era, it was difficult to get copies of documents. The former ITCTC director considered the New York State Association of MPOs (NYS AMPO) to be a great resource in the early years. The ability to obtain hard copies of other MPO’s certification documents contributed greatly to the development of ITCTC’s own documents in the early years. Over time, ITCTC became even more involved with NYS AMPO.

Note: Four individuals involved in the ITCTC were contacted for this study. They included both the first and the current MPO directors, a Tompkins County planning official now employed by TCAT, and NYSDOT official from the regional office. Much of the information on the formation of the MPO was obtained from a 1993 paper written by Dwight Mengel titled “A Short History: Creating the Ithaca-Tompkins County Transportation Council.”

# Metropolitan Area Planning Boundary Ithaca-Tompkins County, New York



Source: Ithaca-Tompkins County Transportation Council