This report spotlights proven ways that biking and walking advocates can work with their Metropolitan Planning Organizations to unlock crucial federal funds for healthier, safer communities.
Introduction

If you live in a city or suburb and want to make biking and walking safer and more convenient, your Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) is an important agency to understand.

MPOs make big behind-the-scenes decisions about how federal transportation dollars are spent in cities and their surrounding regions. These choices affect every transportation project in a greater metropolitan area that uses federal funds. For advocates who want to make sure that available dollars go towards creating great places to bike, walk and live, it’s important to work with the MPOs that make these critical funding decisions.

Under the current federal transportation law, MAP-21, large MPOs are the new major players in the biking and walking funding picture. Regional agencies have always played an important role in long-term planning and allocation of federal funds, but MAP-21 created a new requirement that MPOs administer Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) funds through a competitive grant process.

Advocacy Advance spoke with several bicycling and walking advocates who have formed productive working relationships with staff at their MPOs — and have won progress for biking and walking projects.

In this report, Advocacy Advance spotlights proven ways that biking and walking advocates can work with their MPOs to unlock crucial federal funds for healthier, safer communities.

We discuss five principles:

1. Learn Who Makes Decisions
2. Show Up
3. Get the Right Project Prioritization Process
4. Be a Watchdog
5. Treat it Like Any Other Campaign
1. Learn Who Makes Decisions

What processes matter the most? Where are the levers of power? Who has the most influence? Take some time to understand how your MPO works.

Get the basic facts about your agency’s configuration, too. Leadership structures may vary depending on whether your MPO is:

- Council of Governments
- Free-standing MPO
- County-level MPO
- State-level MPO

Whatever the type, your MPO will have a board – often made up of representatives from the region’s jurisdictions – with final say and responsibility. MPO boards often follow a one-jurisdiction, one-vote rule. Advocates will need to cultivate leaders in small municipalities as well as center cities.

“It’s an absolute necessity that our elected officials who serve on our MPO board be advocates for walkability and bicycle-friendly design,” says Scott Bricker, executive director of Bike Pittsburgh. “This is where funding for transportation projects is decided upon.”

Cultivating support on the MPO board, said Bricker, helps “elevate the discussion of these modes among decision makers. That’s why it’s part of Bike Pittsburgh’s strategy to educate the mayoral candidates on our platform and the importance of the MPO, while also educating voters on where the candidates stand on bike/ped issues.”

It’s important to build good relationships with the staff of your MPO, too. Staff can help provide crucial information like policy details, deadlines and political barriers.

Productive relationships with MPO staff can help you learn what is going on before it’s too late to do anything about it.
2. Show Up

In decision-making processes, you’re either at the table or you’re on the menu. When stakeholders who prioritize biking and walking are not represented in decision-making bodies, active transportation often falls to the wayside.

Perhaps the most common refrain we hear from advocates who have worked with their MPOs is, “Show up!” Participation can ensure that bicycling voices are heard through the planning and funding process.

There are several “tables” where biking and walking advocates can plug in: regional Bicycle Pedestrian Advisory Committees, project selection committees (as voting members or observers), bicycle or pedestrian master plan committees, safety committees, or other citizen input vehicles. In Washington State, Barb Chamberlain,¹ chair of Bike to Work Spokane (now Spokane Bikes) gained a voting board position at the Spokane Regional Transportation Council, greater Spokane’s MPO.

Chamberlain was on the Spokane Bicycle Advisory Board when she was invited to serve as chair of the Spokane MPO’s Transportation Advisory Committee. Critically, the MPO’s amended charter specified that the Advisory Committee’s chair would also be a voting member of the full board. This meant that Chamberlain:

- Had an active voice in developing project evaluation criteria to reflect the benefits that bike/ped projects bring to economic vitality, multimodal travel, and environmental friendliness.
- Had a role in selecting Transportation Enhancements (now Transportation Alternatives) projects.
- Was able to support adoption of a model Complete Streets policy.²
- Participated in community outreach, planning and document review.

¹ Chamberlain is now executive director of the Bicycle Alliance of Washington.
² http://srtctransportation.blogspot.com/2012/10/complete-streets-policy-checklist-now.html
“That seat at the table really mattered,” Chamberlain said. In her position, she had the rare chance to ask questions in board meetings. She was also able to raise issues that weren’t well understood by other board members, like how travel prediction models accounted for mode shift to bicycling. (Answer: They didn’t.)

Even before getting involved with the MPO, Chamberlain was known and respected by those responsible for appointing the committee chair thanks to her work in higher education policy.

Chamberlain recommends that biking and walking organizations find advocates who can “bring a balanced perspective and be fair to other modes,” then make sure that the people making appointments know them.

“Your most passionate person may be alienating for a local committee,” she noted. “Be realistic about that.” The board that appointed the members of the Advisory Committee included savvy bike-friendly elected officials. They were able to appoint committee members who were bike-friendly and also politically savvy.

“Some of these things won’t happen just because they’re the right thing to do,” Chamberlain explained. “You have to understand what else is in play politically. Timing really matters —and morale matters, too.”

Showing public support for your champions’ work and lending more strength to your champions’ team can be a big boost. Bicycle and pedestrian staff are happy to have help and support from eager volunteers, so build relationships and work with key staff.

Chamberlain also directed lots of bicycle blog commenters to MPO blog posts that related to bikes. The MPO’s web page views, Facebook comments, and Twitter mentions demonstrated a strong community interest in bicycling.

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<th>Actions: Plugging in with MPOs</th>
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<td>Campaign for transportation funds and policy change</td>
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<td>Sit on Transportation Advisory Committees and Bicycle Pedestrian Advisory Committees</td>
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<td>Help shape the project prioritization process</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monitor Transportation Improvement Programs and campaign for non-motorized improvements in upcoming projects</td>
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<td>Build and maintain relationships with MPO staff and leadership</td>
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3. Get the Right Project Prioritization Process

Why fight for just one active transportation project when improving the selection process can systematically boost all bicycling and walking projects?

One of the most important things advocates can do – as Barb Chamberlain did in Spokane – is to help develop the project selection process.

The new Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) is a good place to start. Under MAP-21, MPOs are responsible for distributing a portion of TAP funds for local bicycling and walking projects through a competitive grant process. While some MPOs have already set up grant applications, others have not. If your MPO does not yet have an application process set up, work with MPO staff to create a process that will help communities invest smartly in active transportation. For examples of MPO applications, see Advocacy Advance’s application guide.3

Many advocates have already jumped at the opportunity to help MPOs establish their TAP grant processes and to ask that TAP funds be spent for bicycling. Ed Barsotti of the League of Illinois Bicyclists spent time meeting with all five of the TAP-eligible MPOs in his state, after enlisting advocacy local groups to join in the policy asks.

“Our role as statewide advocates is to know how the funding flows, know the national guidelines and be a facilitator for local groups,” explained Barsotti. “We could provide background information for people who don’t spend as much time on it. We could say: ‘Here’s the opportunity now. Stand with us. Here’s what to ask for.’”

“From our past relationships with our MPO’s, we suspected they would emphasize biking in their TAP grants,” Barsotti added. “But we felt it was important to organize local bicycling leaders to ask for that, with one voice. This provides some ‘cover’ from pressures to use TAP funds elsewhere.”

3 http://www.advocacyadvance.org/site_images/content/MPO_TAP_(Final).pdf
Bike- and walk-friendly project selection isn’t just for Transportation Alternative Program funds. MPOs are also tasked with allocating funds from the Surface Transportation Program (STP) and the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement Program (CMAQ). Bicycle and walking projects are not only eligible for funding under these programs; they are frequently funded by them.

### Important Steps in the TAP Funding Process

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<th>Applications</th>
<th>In their applications, all relevant funding programs should ask specifically about non-motorized transportation components of projects.</th>
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<td>Prioritization</td>
<td>Significant weight should be given to bicycling and walking components in larger projects. Stand-alone bike/ped projects should be able to compete fairly with other project types.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Selection</td>
<td>Bicycling and walking advocates should have a legitimate voice in the project selection process.</td>
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### Actions: Achieving a Functional TAP Funding Process

- Help MPOs write or re-write funding applications. Use Advocacy Advance’s examples of great regional TAP applications.
- Work with applicants to prepare and submit good applications.
- Ensure applicants understand federal funding process so projects don’t get held up
- Provide sample letters for local stakeholders to send to their local officials.

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4 [http://www.advocacyadvance.org/site_images/content/CMAQ_flow_chart.pdf](http://www.advocacyadvance.org/site_images/content/CMAQ_flow_chart.pdf); [http://www.advocacyadvance.org/site_images/content/CMAQ_flow_chart.pdf](http://www.advocacyadvance.org/site_images/content/CMAQ_flow_chart.pdf); [http://www.advocacyadvance.org/site_images/content/HSIP_flow_chart.pdf](http://www.advocacyadvance.org/site_images/content/HSIP_flow_chart.pdf)
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4. Be a Watchdog

“You’re the only person who comes to these meetings who doesn’t have to be here.”

For Kim Irwin, a health and transportation advocate with Health by Design, those were good words to hear from a member of the Indianapolis MPO. That feedback let Irwin know that she was doing her job.

“You have to go to the meetings,” Irwin said. “Make sure they know who you are – and that you are paying attention from an advocacy standpoint.”

Irwin always makes a point to comment on regional plans, she said, “because it shows them that I am paying attention.” Through her dedicated advocacy, Kim worked with external stakeholders and staff to create a regional bike plan that used health as a factor for prioritization of projects. She also helped shape a Regional Long Range Plan, which dedicated 7% of regional funds to bike/ped projects.

Here’s a handy tip for commenting on projects: read your TIP.

MPOs are required to produce a document called a Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) that lays out all of the projects the regions plans to build and where the funds will come from. It’s not just a wish-list of projects; these documents present an opportunity for advocates to monitor what projects are coming up and ask questions about them.

“In the TIP, there are quarterly amendments,” explained Irwin. “I’m watching what projects are being added and what projects are being moved up. … When I see a project is a higher priority than it was, I ask ‘What’s it going to look like? How are you going to make it a Complete Street?’”
When you see an upcoming project, you can call the jurisdiction and ask what the plans are around bike/ped and multi-modal components. “We see what they say and figure out what to do,” Irwin said. “Ask, ‘how can we make this a good project?’”

It’s worth working with your MPO because the agency keeps track of key local projects in a large region. “All politics is local,” Irwin explained. “You have the most power to influence a project at the local level. I can’t cover the 25 jurisdictions in the region, so the MPO is the place where I see all the projects they are working on.”

For more on TIPs and the statewide STIP, see Advocacy Advance’s “Planning for Bicycling and Walking Facilities” report. 7

7 http://www.advocacyadvance.org/site_images/content/Planning_for_Bicycling_and_Walking_Facilities_(1)_copy.pdf
5. Treat it Like Any Other Campaign

In 2010, all eyes were on Portland’s MPO, known as Metro. The agency’s Joint Policy Advisory Committee on Transportation (JPACT) was about to set funding targets for $20 to $24 million in Regional Flexible Funds for the 2014-15 fiscal year.

The dollars in question were a critical funding source: Regional Flexible Funds had yielded an average of $19.9 million for bicycling and walking infrastructure in the past two funding cycles, accounting for one fifth of region’s active transportation funds.

This time, there was a problem. Historically, about 80 percent of the flexible funds had gone to bicycling and walking projects while around 20 percent went to freight projects. The Advisory Committee was considering a plan to reverse that ratio, committing 80 percent of funds to freight. This would have been a major setback for bicycling.

Gerik Kransky, advocacy director at the Bicycle Transportation Alliance, wrote at the time, “At the current level of funding for active transportation, it will require 166 years to build out all of the trail, bicycle and pedestrian projects in Metro’s 2035 Regional Transportation Plan. The majority of these projects derive support from Regional Flexible Funds. Powerful business groups have organized a campaign to leverage funding for freight.”

Kransky and the BTA leapt into action. The advocates knew that JPACT was made up of twelve local elected leaders and five transportation and state agency officials. They urged Portland’s bicyclists to take three actions:

- Call local elected JPACT representatives to tell them “how important this issue is and that now is not the time to cut funding for beneficial active transportation projects.”
- Write a letter to the key MPO staff person. “Tell your personal story and be sure to ask for active transportation funding at or above previous levels.”
- Tell a friend, spread the word and build public sentiment for the funding.

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8 [http://btaoregon.org/2010/06/jpact-demystifying-one-of-portlands-powerful-acronyms/]
“An MPO campaign is just like any other campaign,” Kransky explained recently. It requires understanding the issues, cultivating allies, and powerfully demonstrating that public is behind your issue.

In this case, the effort was effective. The final vote split the funds with 75 percent for active transportation projects and 25 percent for freight projects. 9 10

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9 http://www.portlandmercury.com/BlogtownPDX/archives/2010/07/08/with-bike-funding-even-a-cut-is-a-win