

Chapter 6 of this textbook focuses on transportation planning at the scale of whole metropolitan regions, and how these metropolitan regions interact with the outside world. Metropolitan areas, however, are not self-contained units, and interact with the outside world through highways, rail transport, and other intraregional interdependencies. Defining and legislating metropolitan regions has been an ongoing issue since American cities began to expand rapidly, and new levels of complexity and control were needed to provide for cities at an industrial scale. The peculiarities of the American government meant that power is highly divided, where cities and state governments frequently exercise a great deal of control over local issues.

By the 1960s, new governance mechanisms were put in place to coordinate transportation, housing, and regional administration. Urban highways became a contentious issue across the country, and the 1962 Federal Aid Highway Act encouraged local involvement in transport planning, which spurred on the creation of Metropolitan Planning Organizations. Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) were further strengthened by environmental policies of the 1970s, and federal funding soon flowed into a wider range of investments, including public transit, cycling paths, and pedestrian roads. This unique interaction between metropolitan regions and the federal government meant remains contentious, and some feel that it should be devolved to state control.

Regional planning can be divided into two models: long-range transportation plans (LRTP) and short-term transportation improvement plans (TIP). LRTPs have a scope of 20 or more years, but are updated at least every 5. They have complex forecasting models and performance targets, and investment is often adjusted many times before the end of a project. They are subject to strict federal requirements such as air quality standards. TIPs are often implemented as part of a LRTP, and acts as a self-constrained project. While these were most commonly used to support specific types of highways, they are now used more flexibly. In the US, the regional transportation planning process now requires some public involvement, targets for project performance, and specific forecasting.

MPOs remain constrained by federal politics, and must also comply with state authorities. They must rely on an external agency to implement projects, deal with local land use authorities, generate funds for investment, and interact with other planning bodies. They rely on support both from the top down in the form of state and federal involvement, and from the bottom up through voters and city governments, as well as from inside the committees themselves. In the future, greater connections between cities, technological change, social equity and environmental sustainability, will all affect metropolitan planning.

In general, I am in favor of more federal involvement in transportation planning. State and local governments in the US can be notoriously corrupt,¹ and have a tendency to direct funds towards projects that benefit some communities above others. The federal government can be more of an objective observer of the needs of a community, and officials in Washington are much more expensive to bribe.²

1 For example: <https://www.oig.dot.gov/library-item/36916>

2 But not impossible: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/02/us/politics/elaine-chao-china.html>

At the same time, public input is necessary, but shouldn't be the final word, in my opinion. I have been recently reading about the Netherlands' *Autoluw*³ program, a series of local programs to reduce motor vehicle use in city centers. Translated as "car-sparse," it is a way of restricting roads and parking in inner cities in a way that encourages bicycle use and walking, while not restricting cars for those who actually need them. When this program was introduced, it faced widespread protest from business owners and local residents, fearful of the inconvenience and economic loss brought about by pedestrian streets. Local officials had to have armed guards while the program was being implemented, but after its roll-out, the program was seen as a widespread success, and it is now expected that Dutch towns will implement *autoluw* zones. If public opinion had had supremacy from the start, many experimental urban projects could never win out against public opinion. Not every experimental transport plan has been a success, and urban highways themselves are an example of community disenfranchisement, but are also often popular among city residents as a whole.

One parallel of the US governance structures discussed has been the European Union's involvement in urban planning across Europe. European cities vary in character enormously, but the EU provides funding for transportation and development projects in an attempt to encourage economic equity between countries. For example, the EU has revived a canal system across rural Scotland³ and funded bike lanes⁴ inside and between cities across the continent. Especially for the bike lanes, local implementation has been a mixed success, as some cities took the funding for the projects and use it haphazardly – many bike lanes are used for car parking in Eastern Europe, for example.

Modern cities are built at a scale far beyond a human scale – Shanghai and Seoul's metropolitan areas combined have a greater population than the Roman Empire at its height⁵. It is no surprise that the governance structures for transportation are complicated, imperfect and divided between many different actors. With the immense amounts of money required to build urban infrastructure, it is also no surprise that the political calculus to get projects approved must be likewise complicated and subject to general consensus. However, we still often view transportation and urban planning from a top-down Robert Moses-like perspective, where lines are drawn on a map and brought to fruition, instead of an emergent phenomenon that arises as the result of many different independent actors.

3 <https://www.scotsman.com/news-2-15012/scotland-set-to-lose-200m-a-year-in-funding-after-uk-leaves-eu-1-4167989>

4 <https://ecf.com/what-we-do/european-funding/eu-funds-observatory-cycling>

5 <https://archive.org/details/diebevölkerungde00beloogoo/page/n527> (In German)