

Transportation Planning FAQ

What are the essential functions of the Transportation Planning Branch (TPB)?

Our mission is to provide multimodal transportation planning services to municipalities, counties, regions, MPOs (Metropolitan Planning Organizations) and RPOs (Rural Planning Organizations), and statewide coverage of quality traffic count information using innovative analysis and traffic data collection methods.

Why was there a branch name change?

Effective February 2, 2004, the Statewide Planning Branch changed its name to the Transportation Planning Branch (TPB). This name change will more accurately reflect our mission (see above question).

What is a comprehensive transportation plan (CTP)?

The Transportation Planning Branch of NCDOT works with local areas to develop a transportation system to meet the future needs of the area. It is a mutually adopted multimodal planning set of vision maps that serves present and anticipated future travel demand in a safe and effective manner. Due to recent revisions in state law (136-66.2), thoroughfare plans are being replaced with comprehensive transportation plans (CTP). CTPs show highway, transit/rail, and bicycle/pedestrian modes. It also is more specific on the access control of the road in the future (is it a freeway, expressway, boulevard, etc.) State Law also specifies that an area must have a land development plan and a public hearing on the draft plan for consideration.

Why is NCDOT phasing out thoroughfare plans?

Thoroughfare Plans only reflect one element of planning, the highway element. As the Transportation Planning Branch and the state's needs evolved, so did the need to accurately reflect long range planning goals beyond the highway element. Comprehensive plans are multimodal, and include the highway element along with transit and bicycle/pedestrian elements.

What is an MPO?

MPO is short for Metropolitan Planning Organization. MPOs were formed in 1962 when Congress enacted the federal aid highway act that initiated a requirement that a continuing, cooperative, and comprehensive (3-C) transportation planning process be established for all urban areas over 50,000 in population in order to qualify for federal transportation funds. Statewide and metropolitan transportation planning processes are governed by Federal law (23 USC 134 and 135). Applicable state and local laws are required if Federal highway or transit funds are used for transportation investments. Federal planning regulations are codified in 23 CFR 450. NC General Statute 136-66 provides additional transportation planning requirements and is consistent with Federal Law. Subsequent Federal Aid reauthorizations have added to the planning requirements of the MPOs. There are 17 MPOs in North Carolina.

What is an RPO?

RPO is short for Rural Planning Organizations. RPOs are a counterpart to the MPOs (Metropolitan Planning Organizations). In July 2000, Senate Bill 1195 became part of Article 17 General Statute 136-210 through 213, which stated that the NCDOT will develop a plan to establish RPOs. The purpose of these organizations is to work cooperatively with NCDOT to develop Comprehensive Transportation Plans (CTP) in non-metropolitan areas and assist the Department in carrying out other transportation planning activities. RPOs consist of groups of counties, between 3-15 counties, and must have at least 50,000 population. MPOs cannot be a member of RPOs. Not all municipalities in an RPO must be a member, but the county must be a member. There are currently 20 RPOs in North Carolina.

What are the core duties of an RPO?

- 1) Develop in cooperation with NCDOT, Comprehensive Transportation Plans
- 2) Provide a forum for public participation in the transportation planning process
- 3) Develop and prioritize suggestions for projects to be included into State TIP
- 4) Provide transportation related information to local governments and other interested organizations and persons.

What is an MPO's Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP)?

Federal Planning regulations require Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) to develop a long range transportation plan (LRTP). An LRTP must be updated every four years and incorporates all modes of transportation, including transit, bicycle, pedestrian, rail, aviation, ports and ferries. The plan must be constrained and only projects that can reasonably be expected to be funded within the planning period are included in the LRTP.

Why does it take so long to build a project after it is identified in the comprehensive transportation plan or thoroughfare plan?

After a project is included on the LRTP/CTP, it may take many years for the project to be funded. Here are some of the steps involved in the highway construction process:

- Congestion and need are evaluated by NCDOT.
- Traffic studies and other planning is conducted.
- Alternate route studies are collected.
- Preliminary relocation studies are collected and evaluated.
- An environmental impact study is prepared.
- Preliminary engineering is accomplished and public hearings are held.

- Location of the corridor is approved.
- Design and detailed plans are prepared.
- Right of Way personnel contacts property owners.
- Real estate market studies, evaluations, appraisals and detailed relocation studies are conducted.
- Comprehensive appraisal and evaluation review by Right of Way representatives is conducted.
- Negotiations begin. Needed property is acquired by agreed settlement with the owner. Relocation assistance is provided when applicable.
- Payment is made to the property owner and the title is transferred.
- Condemnation of property is instituted, if necessary.
- Appeals are made, if necessary, with regard to real property tax reimbursement.
- Appeals are made, if necessary, with regard to relocation benefits.
- The highway project is advertised to contractors to submit their bids.
- The bids are reviewed by department members and contracts are awarded by the North Carolina Board of Transportation.
- The highway is built.
- The highway is opened for public use.

Generally it takes 7-12 years to build a project after it is funded. This time could be shorter or longer depending on the complexity of the study.

What is the difference in a major or minor thoroughfare on a thoroughfare plan?

(The Transportation Planning Branch is in transition from a thoroughfare plan to a comprehensive transportation plan.) Municipal thoroughfare plans were based on major and minor thoroughfares. The underlying concept of a thoroughfare plan is that it provides a functional system of streets which permits travel from origins and destinations with directness, ease, and safety. Major thoroughfares are the primary traffic arteries of the municipality. Their main function is to move traffic in and around the area. Minor thoroughfares are more important streets on the municipal system. They collect traffic from local (like neighborhood) streets and carry it to the major thoroughfares. There is no set amount of traffic that makes a road a major or a minor, it is based on the function, outlined above. Routes on county thoroughfare plans were designated according to their functional classification.

What is the difference in a major or minor thoroughfare on a CTPs?

(The Transportation Planning Branch is in transition from a thoroughfare plan to a comprehensive transportation plan.) Major thoroughfares on CTPs are usually designated as multilane (more than 2) either now or in the future, or are designated as NC or US routes. There are exceptions to this, but this is a general rule.

Has NCDOT Transportation Planning Branch developed a plan for my area?

A complete status report of all the studies started or completed in the branch is located here. If the area is not listed, either a plan has not been cooperatively developed, or, in the case of smaller municipalities, it may be incorporated with a county plan. If you have a question about a particular study, we recommend that you contact the assigned TPB geographic unit head by phone or e-mail, and they will direct you to the appropriate staff member.

How do I request that a comprehensive transportation plan be developed for my (non-MPO) area?

Any area may request a comprehensive transportation plan to be cooperatively developed at any time by simply requesting the study, by letter, to the appropriate TPB geographic unit head, or to the RPO that covers your area. Study requests are prioritized by the Rural Planning Organizations (RPOs), so we recommend coordinating with your local RPO, if the municipality or county is a member. Studies are assigned to NCDOT-TPB staff based on resources available.

How often does the Transportation Planning Branch fully update comprehensive transportation plans?

A full update is generally every eight to ten years, unless circumstances warrant a faster reevaluation (high growth, etc.). Studies usually take 18-24 months after it is assigned to a TPB engineer. This time frame could be longer or shorter depending on the type and complexity of the study.

How often does the Transportation Planning Branch make minor revisions to comprehensive transportation plans?

A minor revision to any plan based on changing needs can be requested at any time, in writing, to the appropriate TPB geographic unit head. If the revision is accepted by the Transportation Planning Branch, a map will be prepared to show the revision. The local area adopts the revised map, and then it is mutually adopted by the NC Board of Transportation on behalf of NCDOT.

Do municipalities or counties have to pay for comprehensive transportation plans?

RPOs assist the Department in developing CTPs for local areas. Local areas provide assistance and funding to carry out some data collection and public involvement activities. Minor revisions to plans are considered and processed at no charge.

What happens if a municipality or county does not adopt the latest cooperatively developed comprehensive transportation plan?

The older plan, if any, remains in force until the older plan is revised or a new plan is adopted.