

Why Schools, Public Health, Local Officials & Other Healthy Living Advocates Should Get to Know Their MPO

What is a MPO?

Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) are federally mandated bodies for any metropolitan area larger than 50,000 people. The policy board is usually composed of local elected officials, DOT representatives and the providers of major modes of transportation (transit services or airports). MPOs decide how all the federal transportation funds for the area will be spent, so they are very important in setting transportation policy and approving different types of transportation facilities.

Why Should I Care About My MPO?

Most people are unaware of their MPO. Because the MPO makes decisions about how transportation dollars are used in your community, they play an important role in making your community physical activity friendly. They play a role in deciding whether bike and pedestrian facilities are built, a role in the design of roadways (are they pedestrian & bike friendly?) and even if traffic safety education is done in your community.

Because your MPO helps set recommendations for local transportation plans and policies, it can impact projects that may affect the health of people in your community. Regional MPOs make recommendations on local laws and ordinances that affect such things as:

- Neighborhood development
- Interconnected streets
- Building of sidewalks
- Bike lanes
- Bike paths
- Trails
- Bridges
- Traffic calming measures

MPO directors can be your ally in establishing local building laws that create healthier environments and opportunities for people to be more active.

How to Make a Difference—Providing Your Input

You can have a big influence on what gets built in your area.

Every MPO has documents and plans that need to be updated on a regular basis.

- **The Transportation Improvement Program (TIP)** is a list of all transportation plans that the MPO wants to build within the next 5 years. While some projects on the list may not get built because of funding, no project gets built unless it is part of the **TIP**. There are public hearings each year on what should be in the **TIP** and this is where you can speak up if you don't believe the list reflects what is in the best interest of your community. Check out the plan—does it accommodate bicyclists & pedestrians? Comments can be submitted at the hearings or in writing.
- **The Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP)** is updated every 5 years. It reflects the plans for the area for the next 20 years. Here MPO priorities will reflect traffic congestion, public transit, connections, bicycle & pedestrian projects and the mode split that these projects are likely to facilitate. Again there are public hearings and opportunities to submit comments.
- **The Citizen Participation Process** is key to getting broader input on transportation plans. Most MPOs have Technical Coordinating Committees (TCC), professionals in different fields that advise the MPO board and staff on aspects of policy related to their fields. Although these TCCs are often composed of transportation and planning professionals alone, Public Health concerns can and should be represented. Ask your MPO about getting on the TCC.

At this time, the only MPO that has a Citizen Participation Process (CPP) – an advisory group composed of citizens representing different interests and local concerns – is the Madison Area MPO. However, forming a CPP in your area would be an excellent idea to improve public input. Ask if that is possible.

Finally, any citizen can come before the MPO and voice opinions and concerns. Ask to receive meeting notices and agendas, and come speak up. Ask for designs and plans that facilitate physical activity. If your employer or group will allow you to speak on their behalf, all the better, but you can also speak as a private citizen. If you cannot attend in person, letters or emails that are distributed to the TCC and MPO board are also effective.

What Affects the Built Environment?

Local Government Officials, Planners & Developers can also be your allies. They potentially can decide where and what is built for new development and reconstruction of existing streets, trails and neighborhoods. Spending time to understand the process of how local decisions are made may put you in a position to impact real policy or environmental change in your city, village or town. Being involved on the front end of development decisions may give you the opportunity to incorporate active, healthy living ideas. Environmental changes are often easier and less expensive if they're done in new development rather than retrofitting them into reconstruction projects.

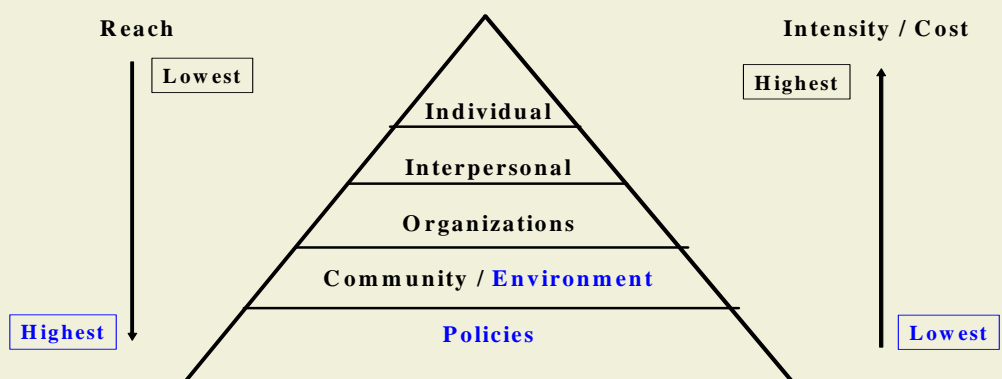
In addition to the list of transportation and development issues listed for MPOs, local planners may be able to help you with things such as Geographic Information Systems (GIS) maps, which may be helpful in your own health planning by identifying key places or environments that can support healthy eating and physical activity, such as:

- Parks
- Recreational facilities
- Schools
- Walking and biking routes to local destinations
- Grocery stores
- Convenience stores
- Restaurants
- Farmer's Markets

Why Should I Get Involved With Shaping the Built Environment When I Already Have Too Much Work To Do?

Policy and environmental change has the potential to reach many more people and have a greater impact than education and programming to change individual behavior alone. Time spent changing the built environment may be better spent. A schematic to illustrate this concept is shown below.

Levels of Change & Scope of Impact The Goal is Behavior Change



If you want to learn more about MPOs, including a map of MPOs in Wisconsin, go to:
<http://www.dot.wisconsin.gov/projects/planorg/mpo.htm>. Contacts for each MPO can be found at:
<http://www.dot.wisconsin.gov/projects/planorg/mpo-contacts.htm>

For additional technical assistance on how you can work with your MPO or local planner to create healthier policies and environments, contact:

Robbie Webber, Co-chair, WI Partnership for Activity & Nutrition Environment Committee robbie@bfw.org

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For additional information about increasing physical activity in your community, contact the Wisconsin Nutrition and Physical Activity Program:

Jon Morgan, Physical Activity Coordinator morgajg@dhfs.state.wi.us

Amy Meinen, Nutrition Coordinator meineam@dhfs.state.wi.us