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The MPO Wants to Know: Iowa Smart Planning

In an effort to better understand public views, the MPO has launched a series of online surveys about various transportation-related topics. The survey results will help the MPO develop plans and projects for the future. The responses also will be shared with appropriate roundtables and policymakers. For a list of available surveys, please visit the MPO website at <http://www.dmampo.org/user/survey.html>. Below are the results of a survey related to the Iowa Smart Planning Task Force’s draft recommendations. If passed, the recommendations will have implications for planning across the state.

Question 1. Are you familiar with the concept of smart planning?

Yes82.1%
 No.....17.9%

Question 2. The draft recommendations propose making the definition of “local comprehensive plan” uniform throughout the Iowa Code. Are you familiar with the components of such plans?

Yes71.4%
 No.....28.6%

Question 3. One of the draft recommendations suggests creating one or more council of governments (COG) in central Iowa. According to the recommendations, a COG would “ensure that integrated, regional planning may occur in a manner consistent with the regional planning efforts across the state.” Do you think a COG should be established in central Iowa?

Yes64.3%
 No.....35.7%

Question 4. Alternatively, the draft recommendations state that the duties of the Des Moines Area MPO or another organization could be expanded to incorporate regional planning responsibilities. How do you feel about the MPO taking on this role?

Nearly 60 percent of respondents support the idea of the MPO taking on regional planning responsibilities. Respondents feel that the MPO is “well suited” to take on this role; “the MPO has the most credibility, leadership,

and professional qualifications to do regional planning in central Iowa.” Another respondent notes that this role would be a “logical extension of what the MPO already does.” Though additional resources would be needed, this expansion of duties for the MPO would eliminate the need for an additional level of government.

Another individual notes that “the MPO is a trusted regional forum. Additionally, the MPO’s transportation planning function directly impacts other decisions related to housing and land use, and should be expanded to be more comprehensive in nature.”

This emphasis on transportation, though, results in concerns from several other respondents. One individual is concerned about the impact on local communities, while another notes that “land use is the sacred power of local governments in Iowa, and it will be very hard for the locals to share that control with the MPO.” Still another respondent mentions that “while transportation is central to regional planning, it might have the potential to crowd out other important and necessary components.”

A few respondents feel that a new body should be created, while others do not think that the state should mandate a COG in central Iowa. As one individual notes, “Is this necessary, especially in central Iowa? What role/purpose/services would a COG or expanded MPO provide?”

Question 5. Another draft recommendation of the Task Force is to require the completion of regional comprehensive smart plans within five years after legislation is enacted. The recommendation notes that such plans will guide the “coordinated, efficient, and effective development of the region.” Do you feel that the creation of a smart plan is important for central Iowa?

Yes89.3%
No.....10.7%

Question 6. The draft recommendations identify goals to measure the progress of smart planning efforts. One goal is to promote livable communities and maintain a high quality of life through housing and transportation diversity, and one strategy to address this goal is to encourage multimodal transportation. How do you think the MPO should help encourage multimodal transportation?

Many respondents want more public transportation options, including bus rapid transit, light rail, and water taxis. Some think that the Des Moines Area Regional Transit Authority “should be required to work more closely with the MPO’s planners.” One respondent feels that more park and ride facilities should be made available. Another respondent believes there should be a focus on constructing multi-unit housing on current bus routes, while another individual notes that the area must “be sure that new and

redevelopment land use plans incorporate designs sufficient to support enhanced transit planning services. The MPO should be involved in such planning efforts.” Other respondents desire more bike trails and lanes. There also should be more emphasis on walkability and complete streets.

Automobile driving, according to one respondent, should be made “more difficult and time consuming.” Another respondent suggests, “Stop making new roadways and roadway expansions the top priority. Make a statement that, until the balance is completely shifted, all new focus will be on mass transit options for the entire region. The intention will be that, with effective mass transit options, road expansion will be unnecessary for the foreseeable future... Automobile use does not need any encouragement... Building and expanding roadways ignores this reality and fuels the problem.” In order to achieve this, another respondent suggests that the MPO award more points to projects that include multimodal transportation.¹

Other respondents note that the MPO needs to entice the public to “take advantage of multimodal amenities.” “The MPO should be leading experts in how to encourage multimodal transportation... The most effective way that the MPO can help encourage multimodal transportation is to reach out to the public to let them know that they can provide information on a variety of transportation issue and are a useful resource. The MPO website is a great resource, but, if people do not know that it is there, how effective is it? The MPO needs some positive-reinforcing media attention (like a spot on a local newscast or a *Des Moines Register* article).

Question 7. The MPO will participate in one of the public meetings regarding the Task Force’s recommendations. What would you like the MPO to share with the Task Force?

The MPO will share the following ideas with the Iowa Smart Planning Task Force:

- “The recommendations call for too much additional government and regulation; need to simplify.”
- “Most smart growth principles apply to large, dense metropolitan areas. How can those effectively be translated to a small/moderately sized, lower density metro area like Des Moines?”
- “The Des Moines Area MPO needs to be a key part of the new legislation for the region, in principle and out of necessity since it is the fastest growing metropolitan area in the State of Iowa.”
- “Keep planning.”

¹ The MPO Surface Transportation Program Funding and Review Committees currently are considering this option.

- “Communities should be required to have comprehensive plans utilizing smart planning principles for all types of state funding.”
- “Strong integration between transportation and land use planning is critical.”
- “We need more efficient and safe traffic systems. This can be achieved by increasing the use of public mass transit, utilizing more fuel efficient busses and passenger rail, and fewer single occupant vehicles.”
- “COGs should replace MPOs, and an Office of Sustainable Planning and Programming should oversee, coordinate, and provide program development support for the COGs and all smaller entities.”
- “Expand to more than just Boone, Dallas, Jasper, Marion, Polk, Story, and Warren counties.”
- “Where will the initial investment come from? Where will sources of funds come from in the future? Will funding subsidies be required to keep a service in five or ten years?” and,
- “Smart local and regional plans are very important, and even more important is a mechanism to guarantee implementation of the plans.”