



March 20, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell  
Majority Leader, United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi  
Speaker, United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Charles Schumer  
Minority Leader, United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy  
Minority Leader, United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Leader McConnell, Speaker Pelosi, Leader Schumer, and Leader McCarthy:

On behalf of the nation's metropolitan, regional, and rural planning organizations, the undersigned organizations are writing to thank you for strong leadership and swift action to help contend with the extensive challenges raised by the COVID-19 pandemic, including confronting the public health issues and the economic fallout of this ongoing and unprecedented situation.

The nation's metropolitan and regional planning organizations represent the collective voices of city, municipal, and county officials, all of which are contending with the extensive fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic. Our members are playing significant roles on behalf of their communities, including critical coordination for the provision of transportation services to support public health and the basic functions of the economy during this time of unprecedented challenges. These organizations will also help support the economic recovery through the efficient and prioritized expenditure of infrastructure funds. Like others, planning organizations face uncertain futures with regard to staffing and funding.

As you consider future legislation to promote the public health response and bolster economic recovery, we encourage you to include or consider the following:

- **Provide additional funds to metropolitan, regional, and rural planning organizations through the Metropolitan Planning (PL) program, Federal Transit Administration planning funding, and the State Planning and Research (SPR) Program.** Collectively, planning organizations anticipate tens of millions of dollars in unanticipated spending from additional IT expenses, additional sick time and health care costs, loss of productivity, and project delays. Additional and robust funding can help ensure they are able to continue their important efforts at the regional level to support the public health response and prevent staffing losses that could hamper the expenditure of recovery funds over time. **These additional planning funds should be provided at 100 percent federal share**, to reduce the burden on local areas and to ensure the availability to utilize these funds during times of critical challenges to local budgets.
- **Utilize the Surface Transportation Block Grant Program (STBGP)** (23 U.S.C. § 133) under the federal-aid highway program and public transportation program for stimulus spending. **Distribute this funding using existing formulas and suballocation procedures** under 23 U.S.C. § 133. **Remove local match requirements** so federal funds can cover 100% of a project's costs.

- **Allow funds provided in a stimulus bill to be used as the local share funds for any program**, including Surface Transportation Block Grant Program, Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality, and Metropolitan Planning. Allowing new funds to be used to match other program funds would help ensure speedier project delivery.
- **Waive all restrictions under 49 U.S.C. § 5307 on the use of funds for operating expenses for the remainder of fiscal year 2020 and fiscal year 2021.** During this period, **allow federal funds to be used for 100 percent of project costs.**
- **Consider ways to accelerate the current reimbursement of funds to States and subsequently to sub-state entities.** The current reimbursement process can require states and local entities to incur expenses with their own funds and then wait to be reimbursed. In some cases, this may present an impediment that could slow down the expenditure of resources.
- **Provide regulatory relief.** The following changes will help planning organization meet federal requirements during a period of disruption to their normal operations while at the same time protecting public health by not requiring gatherings of any size.
  - Encourage the Federal Highway Administration, Federal Transit Administration, and others to **liberally grant extensions to organizations for requirements** such as long-range transportation plan (LRTP) approvals, Unified Public Work Program (UPWP), FTA triennial reviews, quadrennial certifications, invoice processing, and other relevant deadlines that occur during fiscal year 2020 to provide up to 180 days after the National Emergency Declaration is lifted for compliance.
  - **Extend deadlines for discretionary grant programs**, including obligation deadlines, so recipients are not penalized with the loss of their grant due to an extended period of slowdown or stoppage of required work.
  - Encourage FHWA and FTA to **provide maximum flexibility in regards to public involvement requirements**, allowing for distribution of materials on the internet or through other reasonable distribution methods, and allowing for gathering of comments electronically as sufficient under such requirements for the duration of the national state of emergency and until Federal, State, and local health officials agree that it is safe for public gatherings to recommence.
  - Encourage FHWA and FTA to **allow, pursuant to federal law, a MPOs policy board to meet electronically or telephonically** during the period in which a national disaster is declared. Policy boards meeting in this way should be able to vote and otherwise make decisions as if they were meeting in person. Further, **grant emergency powers to an organization's Executive Director or Board Chairperson** to approve documents on behalf of the MPO as needed.
  - **Ease lapsing requirements** if a State can demonstrate that an impact of the national emergency declaration is the proximate cause of the funding lapse.
  - Provide **flexibility to states and MPOs to update required performance targets and set new targets** as appropriate to adequately reflect the anticipated conditions. Further, **allow for or automatically grant extensions of performance target setting deadlines** as appropriate, including the MPO CMAQ Performance Plan which is currently due on October 1, 2020.
  - **Consider changes to procurement processes** that will be necessary if whole offices are teleworking, such as allowing for electronic signatures.

Planning organizations play a critical supporting role for the ongoing local public health response and economic stimulus that will be required in the future. We look forward to working with Congress to help support these efforts and ensure as robust a response as possible to the many challenges raised by COVID-19.

Sincerely,



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Planning Organizations



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