

Response from AMPO on the Future of BTS

On behalf of the Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations (AMPO), thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS) Request for Information, “Shaping the Future of the Bureau of Transportation Statistics,” Docket No. DOT-OST-2026-1387. AMPO appreciates BTS’s effort to evaluate the utility of its product portfolio, identify data gaps in the national transportation picture, improve the user experience for stakeholders, and align BTS resources with evolving technical and analytical needs.

AMPO’s comments reflect feedback gathered from members of AMPO’s Applied Research and Training Committee, including metropolitan planning organization (MPO) practitioners representing regions of different sizes, geographies, institutional structures, and analytical capacities.

Overall Value of BTS to MPOs

AMPO strongly supports the continued role of BTS in providing national transportation data, standards, and statistical products. MPOs play an essential role in the process of improving our nation’s transportation infrastructure, bringing together cities, counties, transit agencies, state partners, local officials, freight stakeholders, businesses, and the public to identify regional needs, evaluate options, set priorities, and align transportation investments with both local priorities and national goals. Their work of producing such critical documents as metropolitan transportation plans (MTPs), transportation improvement programs (TIPs), and congestion management plans (CMPs) depends on locally generated or state-provided datasets. However, many transportation issues extend beyond regional boundaries. Freight flows, interregional travel, interstate corridors, international border crossings, aviation activity, and national economic trends require a consistent national data framework that most MPOs cannot develop on their own.

BTS is especially valuable where a national perspective, common methodology, or cross-regional comparability is needed. BTS products help fill gaps that cannot be addressed effectively through local datasets alone, particularly for freight and goods movement, airport activity, border crossing data, and interregional comparison. AMPO encourages BTS to continue serving as a convener and steward for transportation data standards, national datasets, and analytical frameworks that support comparability across metropolitan regions, states, and modes.

Current MPO Use of BTS Data

MPO use of BTS data varies substantially. Some MPOs report limited routine use of BTS data for day-to-day regional planning – despite the enormous value in the data that BTS produces – because other sources better match their geographic boundaries or analytical needs. However, our members identified several areas where BTS data is currently useful:

- Freight planning and modeling, including use of the Freight Analysis Framework as an input to regional models and freight studies.
- Airport activity and aviation-related measures, including airport performance, aviation tonnage, and related reporting.
- International border crossing analysis, including data used for international mobility and trade corridor planning.

- High-level trend analysis and contextual information, including national, statewide, or interregional comparisons.
- General data sharing and reporting where a national source is useful for communicating broad transportation trends.

For many MPOs, BTS data is most valuable when it provides information that is uniquely national, multimodal, interregional, or difficult to compile locally. Our members note that freight, aviation, and border crossing datasets are among the most relevant BTS products for MPO practice. In contrast, datasets that duplicate information available from other federal, state, or local sources are less likely to be used by MPOs unless BTS provides added value through easier access, better integration, or more useful geographic options.

Primary Barriers to MPO Use

Many MPOs report that BTS data often does not align with the geographies, scales, or workflows used in metropolitan transportation planning. MPOs typically need data at regional, corridor, traffic analysis zone, or census tract scales. Data reported primarily at national, state, or county levels may be useful for context but is less useful for MPO decision-making, modeling, impact analysis, project prioritization, and performance reporting.

Participants also noted that MPO boundaries frequently do not correspond neatly to counties or other standard administrative geographies. Some MPOs cover multiple counties; some span multiple states; and some operate within councils of government, regional planning commissions, or other special-purpose regional entities. In some states, traditional county structures are not used for planning purposes. When BTS data cannot be selected, aggregated, or disaggregated to match MPO boundaries, its utility for metropolitan planning is limited.

Our members identified several other specific barriers:

- Some data products duplicate information MPOs already obtain from the Census Bureau, state DOTs, transit agencies, crash databases, or other sources that may be more familiar or easier to use.
- The BTS website and data interfaces can be difficult to navigate without tutorials, examples, or clear guidance on which product is best suited to a particular use case.
- Some BTS products appear oriented toward commerce, freight, and economic activity, while MPOs also need data that supports overall access to key destinations, accessibility, safety, land use interaction, and multimodal system performance.

Recommendations for Improving Geographic Relevance

AMPO recommends that BTS prioritize geographic flexibility as a key improvement area. MPOs would be able to use BTS data more frequently and more effectively if data products could be queried, downloaded, and visualized using MPO-relevant geographies. Specifically, AMPO encourages BTS to:

- Add MPO boundaries as selectable geographies where feasible.
- Allow users to select and combine multiple counties, states, or other geographies in one query or download.

- Provide data at more granular levels, such as traffic analysis zones, census tracts, block groups, corridors, or other subregional units where data quality and confidentiality allow.
- Support aggregation and disaggregation tools that allow MPOs to build datasets matching their planning areas.
- Provide clear metadata describing geographic coverage, limitations, update frequency, and appropriate uses at each scale.

These improvements would make BTS data more useful for regional modeling, freight planning, corridor analysis, performance reporting, grant applications, long-range transportation plans, transportation improvement programs, and public-facing dashboards. Even when BTS cannot provide highly localized data for every measure, offering more flexible geographic tools would allow MPOs to better integrate BTS products into their existing analytical workflows.

Recommendations for Data Access and Technical Integration

AMPO encourages BTS to provide both user-friendly dashboards and access to underlying raw data. MPOs vary widely in staff capacity, technical expertise, and analytical needs. Some users need quick visual summaries to understand trends, communicate with decision-makers, or determine whether a dataset is relevant. Other users need downloadable raw data, documentation, and machine-readable formats for modeling, local analysis, GIS workflows, and integration with regional datasets.

For this reason, AMPO recommends BTS provide both rather than choosing between dashboards and raw data. Dashboards should provide an accessible entry point, while raw data downloads and technical documentation should allow advanced users to perform their own analysis. BTS should also consider application programming interfaces, standardized metadata, bulk downloads, and consistent file formats to support modern analytical workflows.

AMPO also encourages BTS to improve discoverability across its product portfolio. MPO users would benefit from clearer product descriptions, use-case examples, and guidance that distinguishes data that is uniquely produced or curated by BTS from data that is republished from other sources. When BTS republishes or integrates data from other federal agencies, AMPO recommends making the added value clear, whether that value is standardization, cross-modal integration, historical continuity, visualization, or national comparability.

Recommendations for User Experience, Training, and Guidance

Several MPOs noted that BTS data can be difficult to navigate without more structured guidance. AMPO recommends that BTS develop tutorials, short training modules, example workflows, and plain-language user guides for priority datasets. These resources should show users how to identify the right dataset, understand its limitations, select geographies, download data, interpret metadata, and apply the data in common transportation planning contexts.

Examples tailored to MPO practice would be particularly helpful. Potential examples include using BTS freight data in a regional freight plan, incorporating aviation activity data into a long-range transportation plan, using border crossing data for international trade corridor planning, comparing regional trends to national benchmarks, or integrating BTS data into grant applications. Practical, MPO-

oriented examples would help agencies determine when BTS data is appropriate and how to use it effectively.

AMPO also recommends that BTS consider conducting focus groups with MPO users. These focus groups should include MPOs of different sizes, MPOs from different parts of the country, multi-county and multi-state MPOs, MPOs with significant freight or aviation activity, border-region MPOs, and MPOs with varying technical capacity. Direct engagement with MPO practitioners would help BTS better understand how its data products are discovered, interpreted, downloaded, and applied in real-world regional planning workflows.

Recommendations for Data Gaps and Product Priorities

AMPO recommends that BTS continue strengthening products that are uniquely valuable at the national level, especially freight, goods movement, aviation, border crossing, and interregional travel data. These are areas where local and regional agencies often lack the ability to collect or standardize data independently and where BTS can provide essential national context.

At the same time, MPOs encouraged BTS to consider a broader framing of metropolitan transportation needs. BTS products are often perceived as heavily oriented toward commerce and economic activity. While those topics are important, MPOs also need data that supports the movement of people, access to jobs and services, multimodal mobility, transportation system performance, safety, infrastructure resilience, accessibility, and the interaction between transportation and land use. Expanding or better organizing BTS products around these planning needs could improve relevance to MPOs.

AMPO also encourages BTS to continue supporting national data standards and common methodologies. Committee members highlighted the value of BTS participating in or facilitating conversations about data specification standards, including active transportation infrastructure standards and other emerging data needs. BTS is well positioned to help bring together regional and state work into common approaches that allow consistent metrics and more comparable analysis across jurisdictions.

Conclusion

AMPO appreciates BTS's commitment to maintaining relevant, accessible, and technically useful national transportation statistics. MPOs need reliable national data resources, especially for freight, aviation, border crossings, interregional travel, and cross-jurisdictional comparison. BTS plays an important role that cannot be fully replicated by individual MPOs, state DOTs, or local agencies.

To increase the value of BTS products for metropolitan transportation planning, AMPO recommends that BTS improve geographic flexibility, add MPO-relevant geographies where feasible, provide both dashboards and raw data, strengthen tutorials and user guidance, clarify the unique value of BTS products, and engage directly with MPO practitioners through focus groups or similar feedback mechanisms. AMPO welcomes continued collaboration with BTS and would be pleased to help facilitate trainings, connections with the MPO community, or other mechanisms to improve the impact of the valuable work that BTS does.