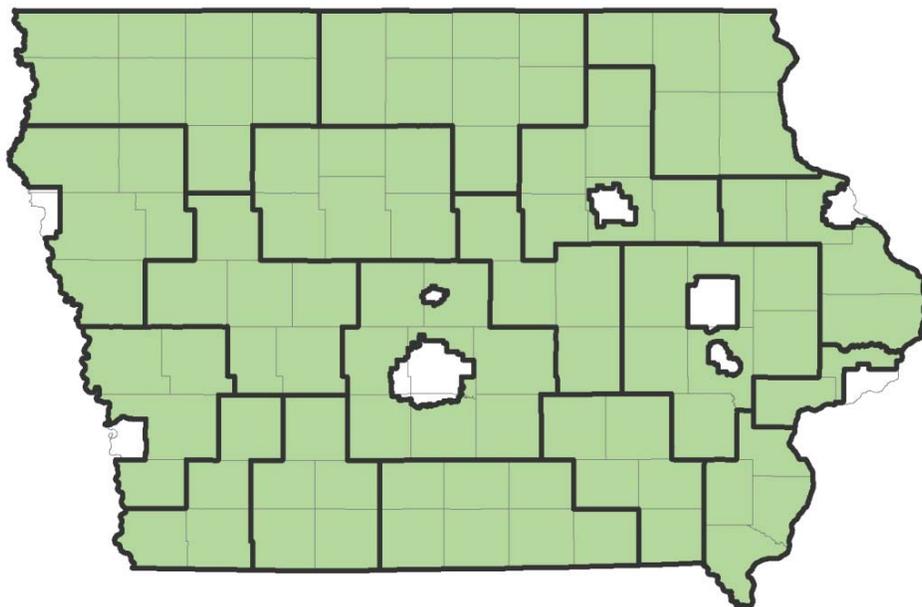


Best Practices for Regional Transportation Project Selection

Iowa Department of Transportation

Office of Systems Planning

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Introduction

Transportation planning on the non-metropolitan level in Iowa takes place within the state's eighteen Regional Planning Affiliations (RPAs). Created after the passage of the 1991 Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA), one responsibility of Iowa's RPAs is to program federal transportation funds on a regional basis.

Prior to ISTEA, federal transportation funding was allocated directly to counties and local jurisdictions through the Federal Aid Primary, Federal Aid Urban, and Federal Aid Secondary road funds. Funds were proportionally distributed based on formulas that considered city and county population. ISTEA changed this funding structure by establishing the Surface Transportation Program (STP), a more flexible funding program that allowed individual states to administer federal funds and establish their own planning and programming process. STP funds can be used to help pay for road and bridge projects, bicycle and pedestrian facilities, transit capital improvements, and transportation planning activities.

As part of this new funding program, ISTEA also mandated that "new, non-traditional partners" be brought into the state planning and programming process. This required a greater effort on the part of states, cities, and counties to provide for increased public involvement and intergovernmental cooperation. To fulfill these new requirements, the State of Iowa saw an opportunity embark on a partnership with the state's regions through the establishment of RPAs, and identified these agencies as the vehicle for programming STP funds throughout the state.

Regional Transportation Planning Expectations and Responsibilities

This delegation of programming authority did not come without expectations. When RPAs were first adopted by the Iowa Transportation Commission in 1993, the goal was to provide a flexible, participatory, inclusive, and proactive state and regional planning partnership. Since one of the drivers for the creation of RPAs was to encourage collaboration and decision-making on the regional level, the Commission initially wanted to discontinue traditional formula sub-allocation of funds to cities and counties. This

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was never formally implemented, and the Commission decided to give RPAs the flexibility to choose how they make their project selection and spending decisions, with the anticipation of gradually moving away from sub-allocation.

Taking into consideration the federal and state planning requirements, RPAs develop their own goals, policies, and priorities for transportation projects in their region. In addition to planning staff, each RPA has a Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) that is responsible for reviewing the technical components of transportation projects, as well as a Policy Board that makes the final project and policy decisions for the region. Each year, RPAs are required to submit a Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) to the Iowa Department of Transportation for inclusion in the State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP). This document goes through an approval process with the TAC and Policy Board and includes all of the programmed projects for the following four years.

RPA Project Selection Processes

Recently, the Iowa Department of Transportation's Office of Systems Planning collected and verified updated information on each RPA's project selection process for STP funds. This information was assembled with the intent of identifying the most common approaches to project selection practices. Three distinct methods were identified, including:

1. Sub-allocation: RPAs proportionally distribute STP funds to counties and cities; this is often based upon pre-ISTEA funding allocation formulas.
2. Discussion and consensus: The RPA works to come to an agreement on projects to fund through TAC and Policy Board discussions, as well as input from public meetings, presentations, stakeholder committees, and more. Typically, the RPA has identified primary transportation objectives for the region, which are used as a guide when coming to a consensus.
3. Scoring and ranking: RPAs develop a scoring system based upon a set of pre-defined criteria for evaluating transportation projects. Typically, the TAC

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reviews and scores the potential projects based upon how well they address these criteria. Projects are then ranked according to the total points received, and a recommendation is sent to the Policy Board.

It should be noted that project selection processes among Iowa's RPAs are not limited strictly to one of these three approaches. Some RPAs choose to combine two of the above methods for a more blended process, while others have a primary project selection process and a secondary method if a decision cannot be reached using the primary process.

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Of the three project selection processes identified above, the Office of Systems Planning recommends the scoring and ranking method. The scoring and ranking approach to project selection allows RPAs to establish regional objectives for transportation planning, while providing a consistent method for evaluating each proposed project. This competitive process allows for more flexibility when programming larger projects of regional significance, and ensures that cities and counties propose well-rounded and viable projects that they expect to score well. Furthermore, the objective application of an accepted scoring and ranking process can go a long way towards minimizing the influence of regional politics.

Several RPAs in Iowa utilize a scoring and ranking process. The evaluation criteria used in each scoring system vary in complexity and criteria weight, but the outcome is the same: once scores are calculated, projects are ranked and programmed into the TIP beginning with the highest scoring project.

Sample evaluation criteria include:

- a) Accessibility and mobility (e.g. volume-to-capacity ratio)
- b) Connectivity (e.g. integrating multiple modes of transportation)
- c) Economic impact (e.g. potential job creation)
- d) Local and regional investment in the project (e.g. sponsors, local match)

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- e) Project readiness (e.g. project development phase)
- f) Public safety (e.g. crash data)
- g) System preservation (e.g. pavement condition)

It is the Iowa DOT Office of Systems Planning's position that scoring and ranking projects based upon objective criteria is consistent with the Iowa Transportation Commission's original intent for the regional planning process, and represents the "best practice" project selection method for Iowa's RPAs.

Case Study #1: Scoring and Ranking

The Southeast Iowa Regional Planning Commission (RPA 16) recently transitioned from distributing funds through sub-allocation to a competitive scoring and ranking process. The change in practice was precipitated by the desire of the TAC and Policy Board to be more informed and involved in the project selection decision-making process.

In the past under sub-allocation, it was the responsibility of the region's counties and larger communities to choose how and when to use their funding, and the SEIRPC TAC and Policy Board would then approve these decisions with minimal involvement in the process. Through the new scoring and ranking process, board members receive more information on each project and are able to make informed decisions on which projects to fund.

As part of this movement towards a more involved regional planning process, RPA 16 also decided to modify their TAC to include a wider range of backgrounds. In doing so, the TAC shifted from exclusively engineers and public works officials to include representatives of regional business, agriculture, and economic development.

One challenge that RPA 16 has encountered is that the competitive scoring and ranking process rewards only the best projects received in an application cycle, and not necessarily the "highest priority" projects as identified in the Long Range Transportation Plan. However, this is not necessarily a flaw of the scoring and ranking process in

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general, since it's possible to incorporate specific scoring considerations or evaluation criteria in order to account for these factors.

Overall, the scoring and ranking project selection method has been beneficial for the region. SEIRPC is fiscally constrained each year, which has simplified and streamlined the process for project selection, programming funding, and assembling the TIP. The TAC and Policy Board are also more informed and involved, which has increased the overall discussion and brought many diverse perspectives to the process. Lastly, the region as a whole benefits from a system that, according to SEIRPC staff, “rewards larger projects that have a stronger regional impact.”

“Transitional” Project Selection Process

For RPAs that currently sub-allocate their STP funds to cities and counties, shifting directly to a scoring and ranking process may be a challenge. As an intermediary approach, RPAs may elect to implement a discussion and consensus practice as a primary project selection method, while retaining sub-allocation as a secondary assurance in the event that an agreement cannot be reached. This secondary or “back up” method can also help create more buy-in among those who may be skeptical of transitioning to a completely new project selection process.

By utilizing a discussion and consensus approach as part of the selection process, the quality of proposed projects would likely improve as cities and counties are competing against all other candidate projects for funds, rather than having their own dedicated allocation. Another potentially positive outcome of this transitional process is that the RPA is much more flexible in how it programs its STP funds. This increased flexibility would allow cities and counties to consider proposing larger projects that benefit a greater portion of the region.

Case Study #2: Discussion/Consensus and Sub-allocation

The Iowa Northland Regional Transportation Authority (RPA 7) currently utilizes a selection process similar to the transitional project selection process described above.

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In this case, the Policy Board discusses the merits of each proposed project, and is typically able to come to a consensus on how to distribute funds throughout the region. If an agreement cannot be reached, the RPA has determined an “allocation factor” for each city and county that is based largely upon historical sub-allocation allotments. These allocation factors provide a funding range for each jurisdiction that can be used to suggest who should reduce or remove projects.

According to RPA 7 staff, this selection process promotes regional cooperation more so than strict sub-allocation. Although an agreement is generally achieved without needing to use the allocation factors, maintaining this funding range keeps a feeling of “fairness” among the different jurisdictions, and minimizes geographical domination through even distribution.

Since each jurisdiction submits projects at their own discretion, the process is less formal than a scoring and ranking system. One drawback of this is that projects may not have the benefits (such as vehicle miles traveled, safety improvements, etc.) that those in a ranking system would need to be competitive.

Final Thoughts

The intent of the Office of Systems Planning in collecting RPA project selection methods and identifying a “best practice” approach is not to recommend that all RPAs adopt this project selection process. Rather, it is to provide information and options to RPAs that may be considering a change to their current programming structure. It is recognized that each RPA is unique, and a scoring and ranking system is not a priority for every region at this time. However, one benefit of a scoring and ranking project selection method is that it can be tailored to fit each region’s needs. By selecting projects on a regional basis and through an objective process, RPAs are representing the flexible, participatory, and inclusive regional planning process as envisioned by the Iowa Transportation Commission.