

Remarks from Matt Day, President of North Carolina Association of Rural Planning Organizations, and Chris Lukasina, President of the North Carolina Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations, to the NC FIRST Commission, May 3, 2019

Thank you for this opportunity to speak to the Commission this morning. We represent the 18 Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) and 18 Rural Planning Organizations (RPOs) across North Carolina. MPOs are established under Federal law, and serve urban areas with populations over 50,000 and the surrounding areas that are expected to become urban in the near future. RPOs are established under State law, and serve all areas of the state that are outside of the MPOs. MPOs and RPOs provide a number of transportation planning services at the regional level, including:

- Development of long-range transportation plans (Comprehensive Transportation Plans, Metropolitan Transportation Plans, Area/Corridor Studies, Bicycle/Pedestrian Plans, Transit Plans, etc.)
- Prioritization of projects through the Strategic Transportation Investments (STI) process
- Development of a Transportation Improvement Program (MPOs only)
- Participation in project development activities on funded projects
- Sharing information and serving as a liaison between local governments and NCDOT
- Serving as a forum for public involvement in transportation decision making

One of the things that we often hear in the media and on the street is the idea that there is an “urban/rural divide.” While there are certainly differences between the needs in urban communities and rural communities, there is actually a great deal of commonality between the two. We see many opportunities for collaboration between MPOs and RPOs on these common issues, and we would prefer to focus on these commonalities rather than the issues that divide us.

MPOs and RPOs already work together on a number of regional and statewide initiatives and committees, and we are committed to continuing this collaboration. We also see a number of opportunities for cooperation between urban areas and rural areas on issues such as:

- Coordination on project submittals to the STI prioritization process and the sharing of local input points in that process
- Joint plans that span MPO/RPO boundaries
- Working collaboratively on individual projects that span MPO/RPO boundaries

It is important to note that when discussing MPOs and RPOs there are fuzzy distinctions between these planning boundaries and what we typically think of as urban and rural areas. While MPOs are primarily urban and RPOs are primarily rural, there are some relatively large communities located in RPOs that face issues typically thought of as urban (such as congestion and transit needs) and there are some small communities on the outer edges of MPOs that are primarily facing rural issues and needs. There is also a fuzzy distinction when discussing urban projects and rural projects, since the benefits of projects often extend far beyond the immediate project area. As an example, the East End Connector project in Durham is an urban project, but it also provides a major benefit to travelers from rural Granville County by improving their connection to the rest of the Triangle region.

MPOs and RPOs across the state are facing some major challenges. One that we all face is the competition for limited funding available through the STI process. The difficulty of this competition

varies widely across the state depending on the Division and Region where the MPO/RPO is located. We are committed to working with NCDOT to ensure that MPOs and RPOs are being strategic and submitting the best projects possible for consideration in STI to make this competition as fair as it can be within the STI framework.

Another challenge is the need to make improvements to long corridors that pass through multiple urban and rural communities. These long corridors provide the necessary connections between urban communities, rural communities, ports, logistics hubs, healthcare facilities, and job centers. Not only is it necessary to work together on planning for these corridors, but it also necessary to cooperate on implementation of projects to make the necessary improvements on these corridors.

An additional challenge is identifying ways to fund and build the types of projects that may not traditionally do well through the STI scoring process. This includes projects such as modernization of substandard roads, small projects of local importance, economic development-related improvements, and multimodal projects. We are working within the STI framework to address some of these challenges, but may need to consider additional creative solutions.