

# Regional Transportation Project Selection: Requirements and Best Practices



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## Acronyms

- CY: Calendar Year
- DOT: Department of Transportation
- FFY: Federal Fiscal Year
- ISTEA: Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act
- LRTP: Long Range Transportation Plan
- MPO: Metropolitan Planning Organization
- PPP: Public Participation Plan
- PTP: Passenger Transportation Plan
- RPA: Regional Planning Affiliation
- STBG: Surface Transportation Block Group Program
- STIP: Statewide Transportation Improvement Program
- STP: Surface Transportation Program
- TIP: Transportation Improvement Program
- TPMS: Transportation Program Management System
- TPWP: Transportation Planning Work Program



## Overview

- RPA history and responsibilities
- RPA project selection methods
- Updates to 2010 project selection paper
  - ▣ Required items
  - ▣ Strongly recommended items
- Best Practice Examples
- Next Steps



## RPA history

- RPAs created following passage of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) in 1991
  - ▣ ISTEA eliminated prior funding programs that directed allocations to cities and counties; replaced with flexible STP funding
  - ▣ Required additional planning partners – cities under 5,000, rural transit operators, non-motorized, rail, freight; required greater level of public involvement and intergovernmental cooperation
- Rather than programming funds at the state level, the Iowa Transportation Commission decided to make a portion of the funding available to local planning organizations to facilitate this process and to prioritize for regional needs
  - ▣ Survey of other states after ISTEA – about half kept all available STP funds to program at the state level



## RPA history (cont.)

- Commission's goal was to create a framework for decision-making on the use of STP funds that establishes regional needs and funding priorities and develops an investment plan which represents the aggregate interests of Iowa
  - RPA structure and responsibilities were modeled off MPOs
  - RPAs were asked to determine regional needs and priorities through development of a LRTP, and to prioritize projects for regional funding based on the LRTP
  - Initial post-ISTEA plan was that suballocation would gradually be reduced and phased out
- Iowa has remained committed to regional transportation planning through subsequent federal bills
  - After each bill, the distribution of funding to MPOs/RPAs for programming as part of their planning processes has been reaffirmed by the Commission



## MPO and RPA responsibilities

- The transportation planning process is a condition of receiving federal funds through the Iowa DOT
  - RPA planning process includes the same five core planning products as MPOs (TPWP, PPP, PTP, LRTP, TIP)
- Annual planning agreement: All transportation planning requirements not completed by the Agency may be completed by the Department. If this happens, projects from Agency planning area will compete for funding with any other projects in the state when the STIP is developed.
  - In other words, regional programming authority is forfeited



## RPA project selection

- Each RPA has a unique project selection process; broad categorizations include:
  - Scoring and ranking
  - Discussion and consensus
  - Suballocation
- Suballocation is discouraged but has not been formally disallowed



## Updated Regional Transportation Project Selection paper

- Update to 2010 whitepaper on regional project selection processes
  - Additional background on regional transportation planning and programming process
  - Clarify the minimum elements that are required within any project selection process as well as elements that are recommended
  - For RPAs that suballocate, recommend steps they can take to move towards a more regional, objective, and transparent process
- Paper is specific to RPAs and STBG funding
  - MPOs have federal requirements that require TIP projects to be consistent with the LRTP and that disallow suballocation
  - TAP program has its own guidelines
  - Regarding the federal aid swap, the swap occurs after the project selection process, applies only to road and bridge projects, and does not impact the RPA's responsibilities for the regional planning and programming process



## RPA project selection process: required and strongly recommended elements

- Paper outlines required elements that must be present in all RPA processes as well as strongly recommended elements
  - Most RPAs have historically met these requirements
  - These items are commonly discussed at RPA planning reviews
  - Elements are being documented to ensure a consistent baseline among RPAs
- Some items are already noted in the TIP development guidelines issued by the Office of Program Management; all required items in the paper will be included in the document issued in CY 2020 for the development of the FFY 2021-2024 TIP
- All project selection processes occurring for the development of the FFY 2021-2024 TIP are expected to include the required elements



## RPA project selection process: required and strongly recommended elements (cont.)

- Required elements
  - Full consideration of eligible projects
  - Consistency with the LRTP
  - Application or information form
- Strongly recommended elements
  - Discussion of RPA priorities
  - Flexible suballocation targets
  - Award letters or project agreements



## Required element: Full consideration of eligible projects

- Eligible projects must be submitted to and considered by the RPA itself
  - For example, cannot be a requirement that an individual county approve a project that a city within it wishes to submit for RPA consideration
  - Full applications for all submitted projects need to be available to the Technical Committee and Policy Board for their review and discussion
  - Ultimately, the Policy Board must consider the submitted projects and approve the projects to be included in the region's TIP.
- RPAs that suballocate funding cannot do so to the degree that only certain entities can receive funding
  - Process needs to have a mechanism to consider all eligible projects across jurisdictions
  - Example ways to achieve this within suballocation structure
    - Have separate allocations of funding for these types of activities/sponsors
    - Only suballocate a portion of the RPA's overall funding and award the remainder through competitive selection
  - RPA needs to broadly distribute information about its project selection process



## Required element: Consistency with the LRTP

- Projects programmed in the region's TIP are required to be consistent with the RPA's LRTP
- The RPA project selection process needs to incorporate a linkage between the LRTP and projects that are awarded funding
  - For example, provide the page number in the LRTP where the project is referenced, or provide a description of how the project meets goals, objectives, or priority actions established in the plan



## Required element: Application or information form

- An application or information form is required to be submitted to the RPA for all projects, including projects from entities that receive suballocations
  - ▣ Application or information forms provide clear documentation of what projects are submitted to the region for a given funding cycle, which is important for public transparency and maintaining an accurate historical record
  - ▣ Application or information forms provide a mechanism to ensure the other required project selection elements (full consideration of eligible projects and consistency with the LRTP) are being met
- Solely submitting projects through TPMS is not sufficient
  - ▣ TPMS is not accessible to all potential project sponsors
  - ▣ TPMS does not enable the project sponsor to explain the project's merits, regional significance, or tie to the LRTP, and the system cannot be tailored to reflect additional project information that may be important to a specific region
- Application or information forms can range from simple to complex and be tailored based on the RPA's priorities



## Strongly recommended element: Discussion of RPA priorities

- Consider projects from a regional perspective
- Applicants should have an opportunity to discuss their project submittals, explain their importance within the region, and answer questions about them
- RPA staff are encouraged to develop a summary of projects and associated information about them, such as a matrix comparing project attributes



## Strongly recommended element: Flexible suballocation targets

- RPAs that suballocate are encouraged to allow flexibility in 'borrowing' among jurisdictions
  - Enables the timely completion of larger projects
  - Keeps STBG balances from accruing
  - Avoids the decrease in buying power that occurs when funding remains unspent for several years
- A further step to enhance flexibility is to track allocation targets in the background, rather than as the deciding factor for what projects are funded
  - Helps ensure distribution of funding across entities over time
  - Enables regional needs and priorities to be addressed as they arise



## Strongly recommended element: Award letter or project agreements

- Several potential benefits
  - Document the project has been programmed
  - Verify programming/project information details
  - Identify Iowa DOT staff with whom the sponsor will need to work
  - Provide a brief overview of the project development process, including swap requirements or federal aid regulations, as applicable
  - Provide a reminder that costs cannot be incurred until required authorizations/approvals are in place
  - Valuable documentation should there be staffing changes for the RPA or project sponsor



## Best practice examples

- Paper provides thoughts on the benefits of two project selection processes and case studies of RPAs using them
  - Scoring and ranking: RPA 16
  - Discussion and consensus: RPA 7



## Next steps

- If project selection process for FFY 2020-2023 TIP has not yet occurred, recommend ensuring all required elements are included
- All project selection processes occurring for the development of the FFY 2021-2024 TIP are expected to include the required elements
- Iowa DOT is available to discuss the items outlined in the paper and other aspects of RPA project selection processes on a one-on-one basis

