

Streetsblog

What Washington Can Do For — And Alongside — Metro Area Planners

by [Elana Schor](#) on October 14, 2009

At one point midway through yesterday's Brookings Institution [forum](#) on metropolitan planning, moderator [Chris Leinberger](#) quipped that Portland was deliberately not represented. It's not that Portland isn't a model of sustainability, he explained, but that "we all have Portland fatigue" -- that urban policy thinkers are eager to expand the models of local development beyond Oregon.

The Uptown development in Oakland, cited as a success story yesterday. (Photo: [SF Chronicle](#))



And the forum fulfilled that objective. Planners from Salt Lake City, the Twin Cities of Minnesota, and Sacramento's Area Council of Governments (SACOG) shared successes and setbacks while attempting to forge a way forward for Washington's often uncertain relationship with metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs).

Leinberger, [an experienced](#) land use strategist, described the core question as: "What kind of built environment do we want? Over the past 50 years, it has been imposed by a bureaucracy, either in D.C. or by the state capitals."

But as more planners and local residents come to the (non-partisan) conclusion that "it's time to be conscious about what kind of development our transportation choices spark," as Leinberger put it, what can the federal government do to help local success go national?

Michael McKeever, executive director of the SACOG, and Peter McLaughlin, a commissioner of Minnesota's Hennepin County, agreed that the upcoming congressional climate change bill [is essential](#) to achieving land use reform.

If the climate bill "does some fairly simple things and requires ... high quality [MPO planning] to be done as a pre-condition of getting federal funds," local development can become a more transparent and rational process, McKeever said.

He warned, however, that the legislation should not "go so far as mandating, 'these are exactly the kinds of savings you should achieve' in terms of reductions in carbon emissions and congestion. "I think, if localities are required to do that kind of high-quality planning, they'll figure it out on their own terms."

In fact, language to that effect was included in both the House and [Senate](#) climate bills. How much aid Washington would provide to help MPOs become more environmentally aware remains to be seen, though; the Senate's first climate draft has restored language stricken from the House bill that sets up a grant program to help MPOs, but the provision's fate in the House leaves it at risk of falling out of the Senate measure.

Without using the phrase "grant program," McKeever underscored the importance of incentivizing changes to MPO decision-making by funneling less federal money through state DOTs.

"If some reasonable pot of money is given out based on performance, not some kind of a fair-share formula," MPOs will respond, he said, quipping: We are easy to bribe ... chasing money is a non-partisan American value."

McLaughlin, who played a key role in the construction of the Twin Cities' [Hiawatha](#) rail line, offered similar recommendations. The funding that [is headed for](#) the Obama administration's nascent sustainable communities office "needs to be not only for planning, but for supplementary investments as well," he said.

McLaughlin also pointed to several transportation policy reforms that were included in the current long-term House infrastructure bill, which has stalled amid intramural [disputes](#) -- among them, more flexibility for local governments to spend highway money on transit projects and greater support for public-private partnerships.

But of course, he was most concerned with the climate bill: "We've gotta get into the [legislation] more money, to not only invest in the planning side of this but to fund the basic transit infrastructure."

Without "a major contribution in the [climate] bill," McLaughlin added, there won't be enough federal funding to support needed new transit investments.

Fortunately, that climate bill is poised to get its [first airing](#) in the Senate in less than two weeks...