

# **CENTRAL ARKANSAS REGIONAL PLANNING NEEDS ASSESSMENT**

Opportunities to Enhance Collaboration  
between Metroplan and Central Arkansas  
Planning and Development District (CAPDD)

January 2026



## **INTRODUCTION**

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This needs assessment was developed to evaluate regional planning activities and identify opportunities for greater collaboration between Metroplan and the Central Arkansas Planning and Development District (CAPDD). The assessment responds to a shared commitment to improve efficiency, reduce duplication, and strengthen service delivery across the region. It examines current organizational structures, statutory responsibilities, and planning functions, while highlighting unmet needs and emerging priorities. After analyzing gaps and potential synergies, this report provides three options with actionable recommendations for enhancing coordination and leveraging resources to better serve communities in Central Arkansas. Ultimately, the goal is to create a stronger partnership between Metroplan and CAPDD to advance regional growth, economic development, and quality of life.

## **ASSESSMENT PROCESS**

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EverStrive Solutions designed a collaborative process to assess the current landscape and gaps of regional planning activities across Metroplan and CAPDD.

### **Document Review**

The consulting team conducted an in-depth review of existing regional plans, budgets, the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS), and other foundational documents. This review informed the development of a comparative summary outlining each organization's mission, statutory responsibilities, structure, and staffing, ensuring a shared understanding of the context in which both agencies operate (see Appendix A).

### **Stakeholder Interviews**

Building on this foundation, EverStrive engaged in a robust insight-gathering phase that included in-person and virtual interviews with staff, board members from both organizations, and key external partners. These conversations were designed to surface organizational strengths, challenges, and opportunities, as well as perceptions of each agency's effectiveness in the region. The interviews also helped identify areas where deeper collaboration could enhance service delivery and advance shared regional goals. A summary of participants is included in Appendix B.

### **Peer Research**

EverStrive Solutions interviewed leaders from peer regional organizations and relied on its experience working with and for other regional councils. These interviews examined organizational structure, funding models, programmatic scope, and leadership practices. The insights gathered provided valuable lessons and identified emerging trends to inform the needs analysis and collaboration options. A peer research summary is included in Appendix C.

## KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

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### Regional Context

Central Arkansas is experiencing uneven growth and fragmented planning across jurisdictions. Suburban expansion contrasts with needs in downtown and rural areas, creating strains in transportation, housing, and workforce systems. Aging infrastructure, especially transportation, water/sewer, and housing, creates complex challenges that require coordinated investment and long-range planning. Despite the region's central location and natural assets, many stakeholders perceive that the region's economic potential remains underleveraged. Stakeholders note competitive pressure from peer regions that are advancing faster and securing more resources through coordinated strategies and diversified funding (including philanthropic sources). Limited local match capacity and low philanthropic engagement are recurring obstacles that weaken grant competitiveness and hinder execution of regional priorities.

### Organizational Perceptions

**Metroplan** is widely regarded as visionary, analytical, and future-oriented, effectively functioning as a regional think tank. It has strong professional expertise and statewide credibility in transportation planning, with emerging capacity in environmental and sustainability planning. Metroplan is leading the Arkansas Tri-Region Climate Pollution Reduction Grant (CPRG) Coalition that received a \$99.9 million award from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). This effort has raised Metroplan's profile in grant writing and administration, and it opens the possibility for more major regional awards. While smaller cities have at times felt overshadowed, staff's support for the Small Cities Council has helped address this perception. **Metroplan's culture is best described as proactive, urban-focused, and planning-centric.**

**CAPDD** is praised for grant writing and administration, high-touch customer service, and responsiveness in workforce development, particularly following major corporate layoffs. The organization is seen as productive and reliable in meeting core responsibilities yet not widely recognized as a regional convener or strategic leader in economic development. Stakeholders do not commonly reference the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDs). CAPDD faces recruitment and retention challenges tied to pay and location. **CAPDD's culture is responsive, rural-oriented, and operationally broad, spanning solid waste, workforce, emergency services, and small business support.**

The relationship between Metroplan and CAPDD is courteous but largely incidental rather than strategic. Stakeholders describe "shopping" for support and information across organizations which may be unwittingly creating duplication of services. Both organizations have strengths that could benefit the other.

**Curious Enthusiasm:** Many external stakeholders interviewed are impressed by the willingness of both organizations to undertake this assessment, and they are eager to see the outcomes and learn about the next steps. They applaud the leadership to try bold new ideas to nudge the region forward.

### **Planning Needs and Gaps**

The following are recurring themes from stakeholder interviews that represent opportunities for enhanced collaboration.

- **Unified Vision:** Metroplan, CAPDD, and other regional and civic organizations are each doing impressive work within their respective domains. However, stakeholders noted the absence of a shared, long-term economic and growth strategy that clearly defines roles and responsibilities among these entities. This lack of cohesion often results in fragmented efforts, duplication of work, and missed opportunities for leveraging resources. A unified vision would help align priorities, reduce inefficiencies, and amplify regional impact.
- **Holistic Integration:** While Metroplan is recognized for its leadership in transportation planning and CAPDD for its expertise in grant administration, stakeholders consistently emphasized the need for cross-sector integration. Regional planning should not occur in silos; instead, it should connect transportation (including public transit), housing, land use, workforce development (including childcare access), hazard mitigation, and resilience planning. These were the topics most often cited as key issues that would benefit from enhanced regional planning. Without this holistic approach, communities risk implementing solutions that address one issue while unintentionally creating challenges in another.
- **Infrastructure & Systems:** The most common regional challenges cited in stakeholder interviews were growth related. As the region continues to grow, particularly sprawl into suburban communities, aging transportation, water/sewer, and housing stock require coordinated planning. Stakeholders stressed the importance of coordinated planning and sequencing of investments to avoid piecemeal solutions that fail to address interconnected needs. Both rural and urban areas must be considered together to ensure equitable access to resources and prevent disparities.
- **Funding & Capacity:** Local governments are eager to collaborate with Metroplan and CAPDD to secure state and federal grants for infrastructure improvements. However, local match requirements often pose a significant barrier, especially for small and rural communities with limited revenue streams. More collaboration is needed to leverage limited resources across organizations and funding programs and to pursue joint strategies for private and philanthropic funding to supplement limited local resources.

## Barriers and Benefits to Enhanced Cooperation

### Barriers

- **Programmatic Independence:** While there are no known structural or statutory barriers that prevent collaboration, further analysis and legal review are required to fully understand the ramifications of options. Both organizations want to preserve autonomy and eligibility for critical programs (e.g., EDA planning grant, Solid Waste District, Delta River Authority, MPO, WIOA). There is a healthy tension between expanding scopes of service (risking dilution) and remaining narrowly focused (risking missed innovation).
- **Staff Concerns & Operational Mindset:** Employees are open-minded but cautious about changes involving co-location or merger. Primary concerns focus on ensuring service quality and continuity, but underlying anxieties relate to personal impacts such as commute changes, employee benefits impacts, and leave policies. Staff tend to frame improvements within current services rather than broader regional impact. Most staff talked about the differences between the agencies and failed to appreciate the areas of alignment.

### Benefits

- **Leadership Willingness:** Officers and executive directors of both organizations are forward-looking and open to structural changes that advance regional goals.
- **Funding Competitiveness:** Funding challenges and the difficulty of securing local match for projects were forefront in nearly every public stakeholder conversation. Coordinated planning strategies can reduce duplication in grant applications and combine capacity to pursue large-scale awards. For example, following merger of the MPO and EDD, the Acadiana Planning Commission found they were more successful at leveraging economic development grants to complete non-eligible components of projects funded with transportation grants, such as utility relocations. A unified planning effort could better position the region to approach business and philanthropic partners to engage more in regional challenges.
- **Shared Services:** Exploring shared planning and development services could enhance efficiency, minimize duplication, and strengthen overall staff capacity while raising the region's profile. Establishing a single, shared location would also help members who are uncertain about where to seek assistance.
- **Regional Reach:** Collaboration opens doors to broader cross-jurisdictional partnerships beyond Metroplan and CAPDD, like the Tri-Regional CRPG Coalition, positioning Central Arkansas to compete with faster-moving out-of-state peer regions.
- **Staff Expertise and Teamwork:** Integrating the diverse skill sets and expertise of staff at Metroplan and CAPDD will foster collaborative problem-solving and enable broader strategies that connect regional planning with funding opportunities.

## COLLABORATION OPPORTUNITIES

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The following three options are presented for enhanced collaboration between Metroplan and CAPDD. These scenarios are based on models identified through peer research and are responsive to the regional planning needs outlined in the key research findings. Options are presented in order of increasing complexity and potential benefit. These approaches are not mutually exclusive and could be implemented sequentially over time. Pros and cons for each scenario were derived, in part, from peer research of other regional organizations, and additional context can be found in the Peer Research Summary in Appendix C.

### 1. Institutionalize Collaboration

In this scenario, both agencies remain fully independent but formalize their partnership through one or more Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs). These agreements would outline a shared approach to planning and grant administration to provide more structure and predictability. For example, Metroplan could provide data and mapping services to CAPDD for grant applications under a defined fee structure or in-kind recognition. This approach would reduce reliance on staff goodwill and ensure continuity over time through inevitable staff turnover and leadership changes.

#### Pros:

- **Low complexity:** Quick to implement without major organizational changes; least disruptive to staff.
- **Preserves autonomy:** Each agency retains its governance and identity.
- **Consistency for stakeholders:** MOUs can document a consistent approach to grant applications across both organizations, including potentially a shared fee-for-service model or criteria for determining grants to pursue. This would clarify service expectations for jurisdictions served by both agencies and potentially reduce the inherent redundancy of “service shopping” currently described by some members.
- **Immediate benefits:** There could potentially be many applications for cooperative work through MOUs, but this approach would allow both organizations to quickly formalize coordination of their grant application strategies and regional planning work.
- **Flexibility:** MOUs can be tailored to specific functions and updated as needs evolve.

#### Cons:

- **Limited impact:** Does not address duplication of administrative functions or overhead.
- **Relies on goodwill:** MOUs are typically non-binding, so success depends on sustained commitment from leadership and may diminish over time.
- **Incremental efficiency gains:** This approach will likely result in incremental gains to the existing grant application process, but it is the least likely to achieve transformative regional alignment.

- **Lacks centralization:** This option does not resolve the current dynamic where stakeholders must navigate between both organizations to find information or resources when they are uncertain which entity is best equipped to assist. A centralized location would streamline access and reduce confusion.

## 2. Co-Location

Under this scenario, the agencies maintain functional independence but share office space to improve coordination and reduce overhead. This physical proximity fosters informal collaboration and could serve as a step toward deeper integration.

### Pros:

- **Moderate complexity:** Requires logistical planning but no structural merger.
- **Cost savings:** Shared facilities present opportunities to reduce rent and overhead expenses.
- **Enhanced communication:** Daily interaction among staff improves alignment and responsiveness.
- **Symbolic commitment:** Demonstrates regional unity to external stakeholders and potentially enhances engagement if meetings are coordinated to reduce travel time for shared participants.

### Cons:

- **Partial solution:** This option does not fully integrate administrative systems or staff. This option is highly disruptive for staff who will be directed to relocate yet does not achieve the full benefits of consolidation.
- **Unintended consequences:** The most likely scenario is that office consolidation would occur in the region's population center in Little Rock/North Little Rock, either in the current building occupied by Metroplan (that has capacity for expansion), or another facility selected to meet all space needs. This leaves a vacant building in downtown Lonoke. Repurpose of that space should be considered to minimize negatives impacts on the Lonoke community. CAPDD owns its building but has an outstanding equity line of credit that would need to be resolved financially.
- **Upfront costs:** Moving and space reconfiguration may require initial investment.
- **Cultural challenges:** Agencies must navigate differences in organizational norms that will persist without a strategy for full merger.

## 3. Consolidation

This scenario involves a merger of the organizations under a single umbrella entity with shared leadership and administrative functions, while preserving programmatic autonomy as required by state and federal regulations (e.g., MPO, EDD, WIOA, solid waste would continue to operate as stand-alone programs housed administratively in a new joint operating structure). This model would create a truly unified regional planning and development organization.

### Pros:

- **High impact:** Maximizes efficiency and consolidates the strengths of both organizations in a unified leadership structure to best position the region to pursue major initiatives and grants.
- **Unified vision:** Aligns regional leaders under one strategic framework and reduces duplication of meetings.
- **Resource leverage:** Consolidated staff and systems reduce duplication and improve service delivery.
- **Stronger external presence:** Consolidating under a single entity sends a bold message to the civic community about enhancing regional coordination in Central Arkansas. The merger can be leveraged as a catalyst to attract more business and philanthropic engagement.
- **Regional Influence and Alliances:** A single agency acting on behalf of the region presents increased opportunities for regional and legislative influence.

### Cons:

- **High complexity:** This is the most time and resource intensive scenario. It will be highly disruptive for staff and will take multiple years to implement, requiring legal, financial, governance, and operational restructuring.
- **Regulatory constraints:** Certain functions (e.g., MPO, workforce board) must remain distinct organizationally.
- **Cultural and political resistance:** Stakeholders may fear loss of representation or identity, particularly in those communities currently served by only one of the two organizations.
- **Mission mismatch:** Full consolidation could result in certain programs being left without a clear home if they are not well aligned with the organizational structure and mission of the consolidated organization.

### Recommendation

A **consolidation** is necessary to achieve the vision of transformational integration of regional planning and grant services:

- Regional leaders aligned on vision.
- Stronger position for major grants and bold regional initiatives.
- Continued representation for small cities and rural counties.
- Increased business and philanthropic engagement.
- Leave the region better than we found it.

To achieve this, the consultant's recommendation is to pursue all three options in a sequential order. Begin with **institutionalized collaboration** through MOUs to achieve quick wins and build trust. This option is a good starting point but falls short of achieving the bold vision that prompted organizational leaders to pursue this assessment. **Co-location** is equally disruptive on staff as a full consolidation, but it does not involve the benefits of

operational efficiencies. Co-location should only be pursued as part of a long-term vision for full consolidation and transformative regional alignment, contingent on stakeholder buy-in and regulatory feasibility.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE ANALYSIS AND IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS**

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Any successful integration effort ultimately depends on the people responsible for carrying it out. It is essential to empower employees throughout this journey by listening to their concerns, engaging them directly, and ensuring they have a meaningful role in shaping how changes are implemented. Board-level policy decisions can set the direction and define the objectives for enhanced collaboration, but the mechanics of how to get there with the least disruption should be entrusted to the teams who understand the day-to-day operations best. Their insight, buy-in, and leadership will determine whether the transition is successful.

The integration of Metroplan and CAPDD can be understood as a phased, multi-year process that moves from early decision-making to full organizational unification. The first 30–90 days represent the **“Go or No-Go”** phase, during which both boards determine whether to proceed and establish the foundation for a structured transition. During this period, the organizations focus on early due diligence and defining success.

### **30–90 Days: GO or NO-GO**

- Action by both boards to authorize or decline moving forward
- Organize a joint board transition team with representatives from Metroplan and CAPDD Boards of Directors
- Organize a joint staff transition team with representatives from Metroplan and CAPDD
- Define success criteria and shared objectives

If the boards choose to proceed, **Year 1** becomes the **“Framing”** phase, where the structural and operational groundwork for integration is established. This includes governance adjustments, space planning, and the beginning of financial and staffing alignment.

### **Year 1: FRAME**

- Develop an internal and external communication plan, keeping full transparency to staff and impacted stakeholders at the forefront of the process
- Conduct a staffing assessment and outline a preliminary staffing plan
- Complete a financial feasibility review to fully understand the financial position of both organizations, including existing commitments, and devise a phased plan for financial integration
- Clarify programmatic scope and areas of overlap for consolidation
- Assess space and facility needs

- Research governance models and statutory considerations including a full legal analysis of administrative steps required to achieve consolidation
- Establish checkpoints throughout the process to assess progress and feasibility, allowing “off ramps” to discontinue the consolidation effort or to modify the approach or timeline as needed as more information becomes available

**Years 2 & 3**, the organizations enter the “**Forming**” phase, where they begin to operate more cohesively and initiate the internal changes for long-term success. This phase emphasizes operational efficiencies and administrative changes.

### **Year 2 & 3: FORM AND IMPLEMENT**

- Implement required governance changes
- Plan for and initiate space and facility transitions
- Begin phased financial integration planning
- Address staffing changes, including reassignment or natural attrition
- Determine a rebranding and communication strategy for full merger
- Deliver coordinated regional services as a single team
- Expand coalitions across jurisdictions and sectors
- Convene partners to establish a cohesive regional vision

By **Year 4 and beyond**, the process moves into the “**Fulfill**” phase, where the goal is to fully realize the benefits of integration. At the conclusion of this stage, Metroplan and CAPDD function as a unified organization structurally, financially, and legally.

### **Year 4+: FULFILL**

- Operate as one agency with a unified structure, finances, and legal standing
- Expand private and philanthropic support for regional initiatives, including exploring establishment of an affiliate 501(c)3 organization to pursue tax-exempt grant opportunities
- Develop a legislative advocacy team

## PROPOSED IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE

30-90 DAYS	YEAR 1	YEARS 2-3	YEARS 4+
GO or NO-GO	FRAME	FORM	FULFILL
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Action by CAPDD and Metroplan Boards</li> <li>• Organize Transition Team</li> <li>• Define Success</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication Plan (internal and external)</li> <li>• Staffing Plan</li> <li>• Financial Feasibility</li> <li>• Programmatic Scope</li> <li>• Space Needs</li> <li>• Research Governance</li> <li>• “Off Ramps”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Governance Changes</li> <li>• Space Changes</li> <li>• Initiate Financial Integration Plan (phased)</li> <li>• Staff Changes / Attrition</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coalition Building</li> <li>• Cohesive Regional Vision</li> <li>• Expand Private &amp; Philanthropic Support</li> <li>• One Agency – One Team (structurally, financially, legally)</li> </ul>

## CONCLUSION

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Central Arkansas stands at a pivotal moment to strengthen regional collaboration and unlock its full economic and planning potential to address complex growth related challenges associated with aging infrastructure and constrained local resources. This assessment confirms that while Metroplan and CAPDD each bring distinct expertise and proven value to the region, there is limited integration among transportation, land use, and economic development planning. A phased approach toward full consolidation, beginning with institutionalized collaboration and progressing to structural unification, offers the greatest opportunity to align vision, leverage resources, and deliver transformative outcomes. Success will depend on strong leadership, transparent communication, and active engagement of staff and stakeholders throughout the process. By embracing bold, coordinated action, the region can position itself to compete nationally, attract new investment, and improve quality of life for communities across Central Arkansas.

# Appendices

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- A. Agency Comparison
  - A.1. Service Area Map
- B. Participants in Stakeholder Interviews
- C. Peer Research Summary

# Appendix A – Organizational Comparison: Metroplan and CAPDD

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**Background:** Councils of Governments (COGs) and Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) are both regional planning entities, but they differ in origin and mandate. COGs are voluntary associations of local governments that address a broad range of regional issues including economic development, housing, environmental planning, and emergency management. In contrast, MPOs are federally mandated once a metropolitan area reaches 50,000 in population and are primarily responsible for transportation planning and programming of federal transportation funds. Metroplan and CAPDD are considered COGs with broad authority under state law, but both are primarily focused on work aligned with their federal designations: Metroplan as the MPO and CAPDD as the Economic Development District (EDD) and Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) grantee.

Nationwide, there are over 500 COGs with governance structures and relationships varying widely. Approximately 69% of MPOs are hosted by another agency, often a local government or COG, while 31% operate as independent entities (including Metroplan). Approximately one-third of regions combine COG and MPO functions under one organization, one-third house them together but maintain separate boards, and the remaining third operate them entirely independently. *(Source: National Association of Regional Councils).*

The tables below provide a side-by-side comparison of the current organizational structure and scope of services for both agencies as a foundation for considering collaboration opportunities.

## Founding and Legal Status

Category	Metroplan	CAPDD
Year Established	1955 (reorganized 1970)	1968
Tax Status	501(c)(4)	501(c)(3), 509(a)(1)
Federal Designation	Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO)	Economic Development District (EDD); Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) agency

## Programmatic Scope

Category	Metroplan	CAPDD
Mandated Plans & Functions	Long-range transportation planning and related services	Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS), Solid Waste District, WIOA

Optional Services	Energy/environmental planning; water/utility planning; data & research; parks/open space	911 mapping; grant writing; hazard mitigation; revolving loan fund; emergency management; brownfields
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## Authority

Category	Metroplan	CAPDD
Debt Issuance	No	Yes
Own Property	Not specified	Yes
Invest Funds	Not specified	Yes
Broad Authority	Planning authority granted by State of Arkansas	Broad corporate authority under state law
Taxing Authority	None	None
Regulatory Authority	None	None
Political Activity Restrictions	Not specified	Prohibited from political campaigns

## Governance: Board of Directors

### Board Composition by County

County	Metroplan	CAPDD
Faulkner	County Judge; Mayors of Conway, Greenbrier, Guy, Mayflower, Mount Vernon, Vilonia, Wooster	County Judge; Mayor of largest municipality; 2 at-large (1 diverse minority)
Grant	Non-voting: County Judge; Mayor of Sheridan	n/a
Lonoke	County Judge; Mayors of Cabot, Austin, England, Keo, Lonoke, Ward	County Judge; Mayor of largest municipality; 2 at-large (1 diverse minority)
Monroe	n/a	County Judge; Mayor of largest municipality; 2 at-large (1 diverse minority)
Prairie	n/a	County Judge; Mayor of largest municipality; 2 at-large (1 diverse minority)
Pulaski	County Judge; Mayors of Cammack Village, Jacksonville, Little Rock, Maumelle, North Little Rock, Sherwood, Wrightsville	County Judge; Mayor of largest municipality; 2 at-large (1 diverse minority); 1 additional mayor

Saline	County Judge; Mayors of Alexander, Bauxite, Benton, Bryant, Haskell, Hot Springs Village, Shannon Hills, Traskwood	County Judge; Mayor of largest municipality; 2 at-large (1 diverse minority)
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### Board Special Memberships

Category	Metroplan	CAPDD
Transportation Voting Members	ARDOT, Rock Region METRO, Little Rock Port Authority, Clinton National Airport	n/a
Non-Voting Members	LR Housing Authority, NLR Urban Renewal Agency, AR State Planning Commission, jurisdictions outside MPO, unincorporated communities	n/a

### Current Board Composition (December 2025)

Metroplan Board Members = 39 (23% overlap with CAPDD)

CAPDD Board Members = 25 (36% overlap with Metroplan)

### Operations

Category	Metroplan	CAPDD
Fiscal Year	October–September	July–June
Operating Budget	\$2.31 million (FY25)	\$2.99 million (FY26)
Pass-Through Grants	\$18.5 million	Not specified
Employees	14	20

### Staffing and Leadership Structure

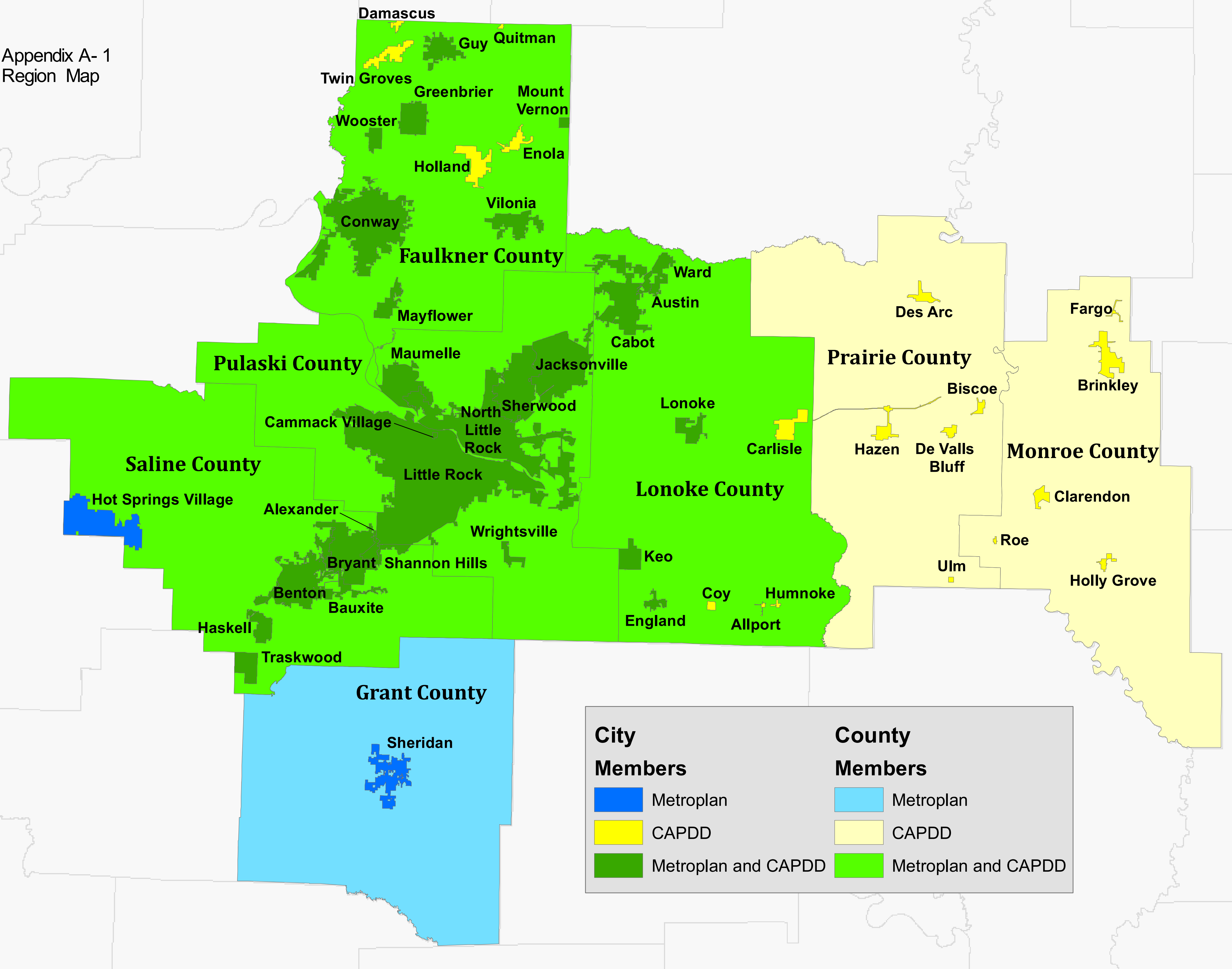
#### Executive Leadership

Category	Metroplan	CAPDD
Direct Reports to Executive Director	9	8

#### Key Leadership Roles

Functional Area	Metroplan	CAPDD
Internal Services	Administrator	Deputy Director

Grants Planning	Deputy Director	Director of Economic Development Director of Environmental Services
Workforce Development	n/a	Directors of Workforce Programs & Compliance
Solid Waste Management	n/a	Director of Environmental Services
Research & Publications	Senior Planners, GIS Manager, Graphics Specialist	n/a
Community Engagement	Public Engagement Planner	n/a
Transportation & Land Use	CARTS Study Director, Community Planner	n/a
Small Business Services	n/a	Director of Business Services & Special Projects



City Members		County Members	
<span style="display:inline-block; width:15px; height:15px; background-color:blue;"></span>	Metroplan	<span style="display:inline-block; width:15px; height:15px; background-color:lightblue;"></span>	Metroplan
<span style="display:inline-block; width:15px; height:15px; background-color:yellow;"></span>	CAPDD	<span style="display:inline-block; width:15px; height:15px; background-color:paleyellow;"></span>	CAPDD
<span style="display:inline-block; width:15px; height:15px; background-color:green;"></span>	Metroplan and CAPDD	<span style="display:inline-block; width:15px; height:15px; background-color:limegreen;"></span>	Metroplan and CAPDD

# Appendix B – Stakeholder Interviews

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Special thanks to the following individuals who gave their time and valuable input in the stakeholder engagement process for the needs assessment.<sup>1</sup>

## **City and County Officials**

### **Faulkner County**

Robbie Alberson – Conway  
Judge Allen Dodson – Faulkner County  
Chris Matthews - Mayflower  
Mayor Terry Don Robinson – Wooster

### **Lonoke County**

Mayor Bernie Chamberlain – Austin  
Mayor Charles Gastineau - Ward  
Mayor Ken Kincade - Cabot  
Mayor Wayne McGee - Lonoke  
Lauren Nobles - Cabot  
Mayor Jon Plafean - Carlisle  
Brice Rimmer – Public Works Director - Austin  
Mayor Stephenie White - Keo

### **Pulaski County**

Robert Birch – Jacksonville  
David Cook - North Little Rock  
Grant Cox – Little Rock  
Leland Couch – Little Rock  
Mayor Jeff Elmore - Jacksonville  
Josh Fout – Little Rock  
Judge Barry Hyde - Pulaski County  
Brad Jordan – Little Rock  
Maneesh Krishnan - Little Rock  
Van McClendon – Pulaski County  
Mayor Caleb Norris - Maumelle  
Leland Couch – Little Rock  
Jamal Williams – Little Rock

### **Saline County**

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<sup>1</sup> Apologies are extended for inadvertent omission of participants. Oversight is unintentional.

Jeff Arey - Planning Commission – Haskell (former Saline County Judge)  
Judge Matt Brumley – Saline County  
Mayor Tom Farmer - Benton  
Mayor Chrystal Herman – Alexander  
Mayor Mike Kemp - Shannon Hills  
Mayor Chris Treat - Bryant

### **Prairie County**

Butch Callahan  
Judge Lawrence Halloway

### **Monroe County**

Judge P.K. Norman

### **Community Stakeholders**

Justin Avery – Rock Region Metro  
Ryan Benefield – Little Rock Water Reclamation Authority  
Todd Benton – Saline Regional Water Authority  
Tad Bohannon – Central Arkansas Water  
Bobbie Bournes-McNutt – University of Arkansas – Pulaski Technical College  
Shane Broadway – ASU Three Rivers  
Travis Brooks - Arkansas Department of Transportation  
Leslie Cooper – Quail and Pheasants Forever  
Lamont Cornwell – Saline County Economic Development  
Jeff Crownour – Conway Corporation  
Bryan Day – Port of Little Rock  
Kelly Fleming – Habitat for Humanity  
Gina Gimberling – Little Rock Convention & Visitors Bureau  
Marsha Guffey – Port of Little Rock  
Derrell Hartwick – North Little Rock Regional Chamber  
Parker Higgins - Entegrity  
Chris Kant – Argenta Downtown Council  
Heather Kouns – North Little Rock Convention & Visitors Bureau  
Kyle Lamberger – Downtown Little Rock Partnership Lt. Col. Matt Leimburg – Camp Robinson  
Col. Joel Lynch – Arkansas National Guard  
Ebony Mitchell – Arkansas Advanced Energy  
Anna Metrailler – Nature Conservancy  
Buckley O’Mell – Little Rock Regional Chamber of Commerce  
Corey Parks – Conway Chamber of Commerce  
Suzanne Peyton – Clinton National Airport  
Kristi Price – Lyon College  
Gina Quattlebaum – Jacksonville Chamber of Commerce  
Tim Shaw – Mid-Arkansas Water Alliance  
David Siskowski – Arkansas Department of Transportation  
Deb Smith – Arkansas Enterprises for Developmentally Disabled  
Mayor Joe Smith – Arkansas Municipal League

Stephen Taylor – Arkansas Department of Transportation  
Matt Twyford – Arkansas Economic Development Council  
Chris Villiens – Arkansas Association of Counties  
Lauren Waldrip – Arkansas Advanced Energy  
Blake Weindorf – North Little Rock Water Supply  
Jared Wiley – Arkansas Department of Transportation

**Metroplan Staff**

Lynn Bell  
Casey Covington  
Sydney Dozier  
Leesa Freasier  
Hans Haustein  
Daniel Holland  
Tammy Gillis  
Paritosh Jambhale  
Jonathan Lupton  
Brittany Nichols  
Bernadette Rhodes  
Jeff Runder  
Allen Skaggs

**CAPDD Staff**

Vivian Brittenum  
Tanya Childers  
Carmen Edwards  
Rodney Larsen  
Leigh Anne Pool  
Timothy Riley  
Tina Roush  
Conya Spencer  
Bobby Strobel

# Appendix C – Peer Research Summary

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This report synthesizes insights from interviews with executive leaders of regional planning organizations and MPOs in regions comparable to Central Arkansas. Each interview explored organizational structure, governance, funding, and programming scope. The findings inform best practices and organizational considerations for Metroplan and CAPDD.

## 1. Northwest Arkansas Regional Planning Commission (NWARPC) – Springdale, Arkansas

**Executive Director:** Tim Conklin, AICP

**Region Served:** 39 units of government in Benton, Madison, and Washington Counties

**Population Served:** 600,000

**Staff Size:** 8

**Annual Budget:** \$3.5 million

### Organizational Overview

NWARPC functions as both a council of governments and Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), providing transportation, transit, bicycle/pedestrian, and environmental planning services. Like Metroplan, NWARPC was created under Act 26 of 1955, A.C.A. § 14-56-503 (1955) which authorizes broad regional planning functions. NWARPC also assists member communities with comprehensive plans, master street plans, zoning ordinances, and subdivision regulation. The commission operates independently from the Northwest Arkansas Economic Development District and Workforce Board (based in Harrison, AR), with minimal interaction between the entities. NWARC staff also serves as staff for the Northwest Arkansas Regional Mobility Authority.

### Key Takeaways

- **Funding drives capacity and innovation.** NWARPC relies almost entirely on federal grants requiring local match, with only \$22,000 annually from the state. This structure limits flexibility and constrains program expansion, even though state law grants broad authority. Staff time allocation is dictated by grant requirements, which restricts the ability to pursue new initiatives such as a regional stormwater authority.  
*Lesson:* Innovation requires creative application of federal funds or alternative revenue streams.
- **Philanthropy can unlock federal dollars.** NWARPC successfully leverages philanthropic contributions (e.g., \$2 million currently from Walton Family Foundation) to meet match requirements for major grants like SS4A and RAISE.

*Lesson:* Building relationships with philanthropic and private partners can amplify federal funding opportunities and expand regional impact.

*Note:* Many regional organizations have established affiliate 501(c)3 entities that are administratively housed within the regional organization yet provide a mechanism to access tax-exempt philanthropic grant funding that would not otherwise be eligible for quasi-governmental regional entities.

- **Regional governance models matter.** Conklin had prior career experience in the MPO in Springfield, Missouri that also operated independently from the council of governments. The MPO served a much smaller urbanized area and therefore did not address smaller jurisdictions' needs. NWARPC's broader scope helps bridge that gap.

*Lesson:* Aligning organizational boundaries with regional realities improves service delivery and equity.

## 2. Greater Madison Metropolitan Planning Organization (GMMPO) – Madison, Wisconsin

**Director:** Alexandra Andros

**Other Planning Staff:** Ben Lyman

**Region Served:** Dane County, Wisconsin

**Population Served:** 500,000

**Staff Size:** 8-9

**Annual Budget:** unknown

### Organizational Overview

GMMPO is hosted by the City of Madison, Wisconsin (fiscal and administrative agent since 1999) and is co-located with the Capital Area Regional Planning Commission (CARPC). The organizations are functionally independent but share office space to strengthen the integration between land use and transportation planning.

### Key Takeaways

- **Co-location accelerates integration.** Sharing space with CARPC has enabled joint staffing touchpoints and smoother data/model integration. For example, the organizations share the cost and time of a communication staff position and have completed a co-branding initiative.

*Lesson:* Physical proximity and intentional shared roles can convert “coordination” into practical, recurring collaboration.

- **Co-Location is not perfect.** The organizations “live” on separate IT networks which hampers data sharing and has practical limitations. For example, the office requires duplicate print/copy equipment to run on the separate networks.

*Lesson:* If pursuing co-location instead of merger, be intentional about fully aligning

back office services possible to avoid undermining collaboration and operational efficiencies.

- **Plan for space and hybrid work.** Variable in-office presence causes port/desk shortages and renewed space pressure.

*Lesson:* Co-location works best with a facilities plan sized for hybrid work realities and growth.

### 3. Acadiana Planning Commission (APC) – Lafayette, Louisiana

**CEO & Director of Transportation:** Sarah Fawcett-Gary

**MPO Planning & Policy Manager:** Ashley Moran, AICP

**Region Served:** Seven parishes (Acadia, Evangeline, Iberia, Lafayette, St. Landry, St. Martin, Vermilion)

**Population Served:** ~300,000 in MPO; ~500,000 region-wide (EDD)

**Staff Size:** ~12

**Annual Budget:** typically \$2–4 million (outside special programs or pass-through)

#### Organizational Overview

APC operates as the region’s MPO and EDD, delivering transportation planning alongside economic development, watershed resiliency, and broadband initiatives. The integrated structure enables fee-for-service offerings (GIS, grant application/admin) and project support both inside and beyond MPO boundaries when contracts warrant. Notable initiatives include securing \$30 million for fiber-to-the-home broadband and leadership in watershed planning and brownfields work.

About 10 years ago, APC consolidated its MPO and EDD into a single umbrella organization. Initially, staff were anxious about job security and unclear on how roles would change. Over time, the merger proved beneficial, but it required deliberate leadership and cultural adaptation. Today, APC sees the merger as fully positive, providing greater value to members and reducing isolation. While initial discomfort is inevitable, the long-term benefits of expanded capacity and regional impact justified the effort.

#### Key Takeaways

- **Integration multiplies impact.** Housing the MPO and EDD together enabled APC to braid funding and expertise. For example, they are more adept at utilizing EDA funding for transportation related improvements that are not eligible for transportation funding, such as utility relocation. They view the alignment as particularly advantageous to help small communities access multiple funding streams to complete complex projects.

*Lesson:* Structural integration turns adjacent mandates into complementary levers that unlock larger, multi-benefit projects.

- **Fee-for-service builds capacity.** APC charges for grant applications and is frequently written into awards for administration; it also offers GIS and other technical services where the consulting market is thin.  
*Lesson:* A scalable billable services model can sustain staff capacity and help smaller jurisdictions become grant ready.
- **Specialization still matters.** Despite overlap between transportation and economic development, staff roles are not interchangeable. Transportation and economic development programming still largely operate in siloes.  
*Lesson:* Integration doesn't erase specialization. Leaders must protect domain expertise while building shared workflows for overlapping projects.
- **Broaden mission to meet regional needs.** APC's watershed work (FEMA-linked) and broadband expansion illustrate how MPO/EDD synergies reach beyond roads.  
*Lesson:* Expanding into resilience and digital infrastructure positions the region for federal opportunities and long-term competitiveness.
- **Leadership and Governance are Critical.** Consolidation required strong executive and board leadership. Without it, coordination would have been inefficient.  
*Lesson:* Metroplan and CAPDD would need clear governance agreements and committed leadership to avoid turf battles and meeting fatigue.
- **Boundary Differences Are Manageable.** MPO and EDD boundaries did not align perfectly for the merger, but this was not a significant challenge.  
*Lesson:* Don't let boundary mismatches derail integration. Focus on functional coordination rather than perfect geographic alignment.

## 4. Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham (RPCBG) – Birmingham, Alabama

**Director of Planning Operations:** Scott Tillman

**Principal Planner:** Lindsey Puckett

**Region Served:** 55 municipalities in six counties

**Population Served:** 1 million

**Staff Size:** 50+

**Annual Budget:** unknown

### Organizational Overview

RPCGB staffs the Birmingham MPO and serves as the region's Economic Development District (EDD) and Local Development District (land use planning), pairing transportation planning with community planning and economic development services. It administers the Building Communities Grant Program (80% STP / 20% local), delivering comprehensive plans and implementation studies via in-house staff and on-call consultants, with eligibility limited to MPO-area member governments.

## Key Takeaways

- **Shared administration yields economies of scale.** Combining MPO staffing with EDD and planning functions reduces duplicative overhead and enables larger program portfolios.  
*Lesson:* Consolidated back-office functions free up resources for planning delivery and strategic initiatives.
- **Use transportation dollars strategically.** The Building Communities program earmarks STP funds for local planning with a clear 80/20 structure and defined eligibility criteria.  
*Lesson:* Purpose-built funding models can seed comprehensive planning capacity across member governments at scale.
- **Blend in-house and on-call capacity.** RPCGB maintains multi-year on-call contracts with private sector partners to deliver ordinance updates, long-range planning, urban design, and engineering when internal bandwidth tightens.  
*Lesson:* Central Arkansas could develop a shared services model with private partners to expand planning and development services for smaller communities.
- **Stay mission-focused and collaborate where it fits.** MPO compliance requirements create natural silos; joint projects (e.g., housing studies that feed the long-range transportation plan and CEDS) demonstrate where cross-departmental work adds value.  
*Lesson:* Pick collaboration lanes that directly inform required plans to avoid mission drift.

## 5. Indian Nations Council of Governments (INCOG) – Tulsa, Oklahoma

**Executive Director:** Rich Brierre

**Region Served:** 50+ municipalities across five counties; overlaps with Cherokee, Muscogee, and Osage Nations

**Population Served:** ~1 million (Tulsa MSA)

**Staff Size:** ~50

**Annual Budget:** \$8–10 million (excluding pass-through and discretionary grants)

### Organizational Overview

INCOG is a Council of Governments formed in 1967 to serve greater Tulsa, Oklahoma. The organization manages the region's Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), serves as the Economic Development District (EDD), administers the Area Agency on Aging (AAA), staffs the regional 911 board, and operates the Clean Cities program for the eastern one-third of Oklahoma. INCOG's service geography varies by program, enabling participation from communities outside the formal five-county area and facilitating flexible collaboration across jurisdictions. The agency also manages a six-county HOME Consortium and provided some staff support to the Tulsa Area Metropolitan Planning Commission.

## Key Takeaways

- **Functional consolidation increases efficiency.** INCOG integrates MPO, EDD, AAA, Clean Cities, and planning functions under one organization, allowing shared staffing, shared data platforms, and reduced duplication in HR, finance, mapping, and modeling.  
*Lesson:* Consolidating regional functions helps smaller organizations avoid redundant overhead and strengthens planning capacity.
- **Flexible boundaries allow pragmatic service delivery.** The EDD and MPO have different boundaries, and INCOG supports other services in nearby jurisdictions when it benefits the region.  
*Lesson:* Services are driven by need less than geographics boundaries. Boundaries should be flexible and determined at a programmatic level.
- **Balanced governance sustains regional buy-in.** INCOG maintains a 57-member board with roughly equal representation of cities and counties and avoids weighted voting to preserve consensus-based decision-making.  
*Lesson:* Resolving the governance structure is a key consideration for a merger; focus on consensus-building models rather than weighted voting.

## 6. Greater Nashville Regional Council (GNRC)

**Executive Director:** Michael Skipper

**Region Served:** 52 municipalities across 13–14 counties (program-dependent)

**Population Served:** ~1.7 million within the 7-county MPO boundary (GNRC's full footprint is larger)

**Staff Size:** ~80 employees

**Annual Budget:** unknown

### Organizational Overview

The Greater Nashville Regional Council is the federally mandated regional planning agency for Middle Tennessee, coordinating transportation, economic development, aging and disability services, and local planning across a 14-county footprint. GNRC serves as one of Tennessee's nine Economic Development Districts (EDD) and the Area Agency on Aging and Disability. On October 1, 2017, GNRC integrated with the Metropolitan Planning Commission of Nashville-Davidson County to assume the administrative functions of the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) for a 7-county area.

## Key Takeaways

- **Integration was about insulating the MPO and strengthening regional credibility.** GNRC's integration stemmed from a major funding setback in which the Nashville-Davidson MPO lost a multimodal grant due to perceptions of being too focused on the urban core. Leadership recognized that integrating with GNRC would distribute

governance more evenly across the region, strengthen suburban and rural participation, and reduce political vulnerability.

*Lesson:* Structural realignment can protect regional planning from political dynamics and improve legitimacy with federal and state partners.

- **Language and staff engagement matter.** Partners were intentional in framing the change as *integration* rather than *merger*, underscoring that the MPO became a GNRC program, not a dissolved or absorbed agency. This framing helped set a clear tone of cooperation and reduced fears of a “hostile takeover.” Leadership invested heavily in staff communication, job clarity, and teambuilding between the former MPO and GNRC employees.

*Lesson:* Communication is vital to address fears about identity and authority. Anxiety among staff is to be expected, but mergers succeed when staff feel secure and included in creating a strong shared identity.

- **Formal processes build trust.** GNRC and Nashville Area MPO executed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that established a joint task force to explore integration. The process took about a year and was more about building confidence among state and federal partners than convincing local leaders, who largely supported the change. Milestones included checkpoints with opportunities for jurisdictions to slow down, pivot, or discontinue. Detailed FAQs and supportive resolutions were adopted throughout the transition to maintain transparency.

*Lesson:* A structured, transparent process with defined checkpoints reduces uncertainty and strengthens partner buy-in.

- **Integration increased competitiveness and accountability.** Leaders recognized that informal collaboration across separate organizations reached a natural ceiling. There is only so much interagency coordination that is possible no matter how cooperative the relationship. Before integration, GNRC functioned as a subgrantee of the MPO and played a limited role in regional planning. After integration, staff became fully unified, sharing work seamlessly across disciplines and programs. Confusion among board members to distinguish between the roles of the MPO and GNRC was eliminated through the creation of programmatic committees, including an independent transportation policy board. GNRC quickly became more competitive for discretionary grants, a finding confirmed by an oversight committee charged with monitoring early implementation and ensuring accountability to desired outcomes.

*Lesson:* Integration breaks through the ceiling of inter-organizational collaboration and can yield performance gains, especially in grant competitiveness.