

Federal Requirements for the Regional Transportation Plan (RTP)

Federal law requires the designation of metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) in areas with populations greater than 50,000. MPOs are responsible for the development and content of long-range transportation plans and transportation improvement programs (TIPs). In the Houston region, the long-range transportation plan is titled Regional Transportation Plan.

There are numerous requirements for the development of regional transportation plans. Chief among them are that RTPs must cover a minimum of twenty years and:

- Be fiscally constrained
- Meet state and federal air quality constraints in air quality non-attainment areas

Air Quality Constraint

The Houston region, encompassing Harris and the seven surrounding counties, has been designated by the EPA as severe non-attainment for the pollutant ozone. That is, the region does not meet national ambient air quality standards for the pollutant. In non-attainment areas, the MPO, the FHWA and the FTA, make a conformity determination on any updated or amended transportation plan in accordance with the Clean Air Act and the EPA transportation conformity regulations.¹ Transportation plans and TIPs must be fiscally constrained consistent with DOT's metropolitan planning regulations in order to be found in conformity.

Fiscal Constraint

RTPs must include a financial plan that demonstrates how the adopted plan can be implemented. Existing and proposed revenues must cover all forecasted capital, operating, and maintenance costs. All cost and revenue projections must be based on the data reflecting the existing situation and historical trends. Plans must include design concept and design scope descriptions of all existing and proposed transportation facilities in sufficient detail, regardless of funding source, in nonattainment areas for conformity determinations under the EPA's transportation conformity rule. In all areas (regardless of air quality designation), all proposed improvements shall be described in sufficient detail to develop cost estimates.

“Reasonably expected” is the standard for assessing funding strategies for the plan. Revenue and cost estimates that support plans and TIPs must reflect year of expenditure dollars based upon reasonable financial principles. New funding sources may be included in financial plans if strategies for ensuring their availability are identified.

For both the RTP and the TIP, federal rules state that in cases where the FHWA and the FTA find them to be fiscally constrained and a revenue source is subsequently removed or substantially reduced, the FHWA and the FTA will not act on an updated or amended regional transportation plan that does not reflect the changed revenue situation.²

¹ 40 CFR part 93

² 23CFR450.322 and 23CFR450.324