

Transportation Management Area (TMA) Certification Review Highlights and Trends

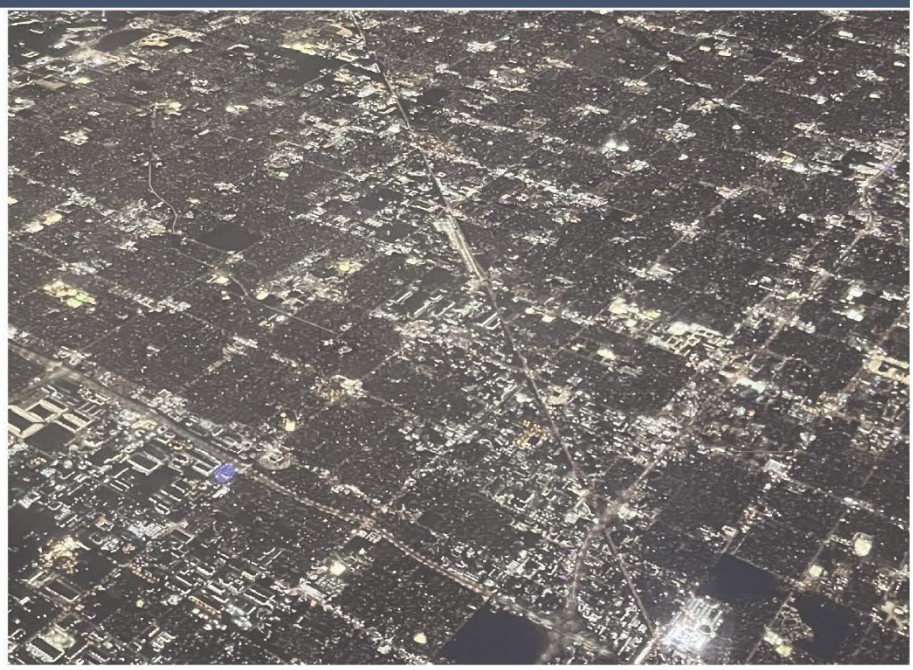
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14. ABSTRACT

This report documents the highlights and trends of the data from a four-year cycle of Transportation Management (TMA) certification reviews, as part of the Federal oversight of the Metropolitan Planning Process. This data represents the content of all Federal Actions issued during this period of TMA Certification Reviews, which are classified into different topic areas for the purposes of analysis by the U.S. DOT Volpe Center.

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List of Abbreviations & Acronyms

3C	Continuing, Comprehensive, and Cooperative (metropolitan transportation planning process)
ALOP	Annual Listing of Obligated Projects
CFR	Code of Federal Regulations
CMP	Congestion Management Process
FTA	Federal Transit Administration
FHWA	Federal Highway Administration
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
MPO	Metropolitan Planning Organization
MPA	Metropolitan Planning Area
MTP	Metropolitan Transportation Plan
PBPP	Performance-Based Planning and Programming
PPP	Public Participation Plan
TIP	Transportation Improvement Program
TMA	Transportation Management Area
UPWP	Unified Planning Work Program
U.S. DOT	United States Department of Transportation
U.S.C.	United States Code

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Introduction

This report provides a high-level overview of the Transportation Management Area (TMA) certification review process, and the reviews conducted from 2020-2023. TMA certification reviews are an important part of the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and Federal Transit Administration (FTA) joint oversight and stewardship of the continuing, comprehensive, and cooperate (3C) metropolitan transportation planning process pursuant to Federal law and regulation. This report provides insight into the outcomes of these once-every-four-years reviews.

This report will be a useful resource for local and state officials, or anyone seeking to understand the TMA certification review process. The report indicates the topics that are most frequently referenced in certification reviews and provides theoretical examples to help readers understand why these topics may be the subject of Federal Actions when reviewing the metropolitan transportation planning process. Some of the most commonly addressed themes in certification reviews included:

- Coordination among partner agencies.
- Consistency across planning documents.
- Alignment with performance targets.
- Demonstration of fiscal constraint.

What is a TMA?

A TMA is an urbanized area, as designated by the U.S. Census Bureau, with a population of over 200,000 and designated by the Secretary of Transportation.[1] At least one Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) is responsible for carrying out the metropolitan transportation planning process for each TMA, in cooperation with State Departments of Transportation (State DOTs), providers of public transportation, and other state and local stakeholders that are also key partners in the metropolitan planning process. Many TMAs have more than one MPO, which share joint responsibility for the TMA. In some cases, an MPO is responsible for two or more TMAs. At least once every four years, FHWA and FTA jointly review and certify the metropolitan planning process for each TMA. The work of all parties in the TMA is the subject of the review, not only the MPO(s).

What is a Certification Review?

During a certification review, a Federal Review Team, lead by FHWA and FTA staff, examines whether the metropolitan planning process in the TMA is in compliance with statutory and regulatory requirements (e.g., 23 U.S.C. §134, 49 U.S.C. §5303, 23 CFR part 450), illustrated in Figure 1. The process begins with a desk audit, consisting of a review of the prior certification review report, insights from on-going oversight activities, and planning process documents, including the Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP), Transportation Improvement Program (TIP), and the Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP). Following the desk audit, the Federal Review Team conducts a site visit (in-person or virtual) with the MPO staff and representatives of planning partners in the TMA (e.g., State DOT(s), providers of public transportation) to discuss the planning process and to address questions from the desk review. The Federal Review Team also conducts at least one public involvement opportunity to gather input from the public on how the planning process is working in the TMA, such as a public meeting, listening session, public comment period, or a combination thereof.

[1] TMAs may also have 200,000 or less population if specially designated by legislation or by special request.

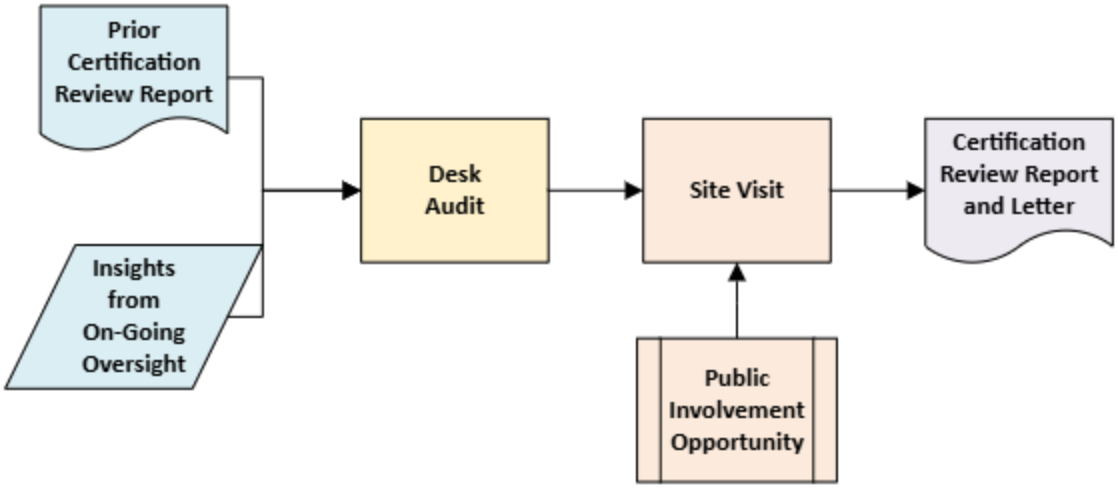


Figure 1: TMA Certification Review Process Components Diagram

Certification Reports, Federal Actions, and Certification Letters

The Federal Review Team develops a report that summarizes the findings of the certification review and issues a certification letter. The report may include Federal Actions that the Federal Review Team has issued in response to their review of the metropolitan transportation planning process in the TMA. Three types of Federal Actions may be issued:

- A **Corrective Action** is issued when the TMA is not in compliance with a statutory or regulatory requirement of the metropolitan transportation planning process.
- A **Recommendation** is issued when the TMA is demonstrating a practice that is in compliance with statutory and regulatory requirements, but the Federal Review Team identifies an opportunity for improvement.
- A **Commendation** is issued when the Federal Review Team determines that the TMA is demonstrating an exemplary practice that goes above and beyond statutory and regulatory requirements.

The certification letter is the formal certification of the planning process in the TMA and may be issued subject to certain specified Corrective Actions being taken. FHWA and FTA may also jointly certify the planning process only for certain categories of programs or projects if the process does not meet all requirements.

Summary of TMA Certification Reviews, 2020-2023

This section provides a high-level summary of the 176 TMA certification reviews conducted between 2020-2023. It discusses the number of certification reports completed by year as well as the average number of each type of Federal Action issued per review.

Number of Reviews by Year

The number of TMA certification reviews that occur each year is related to the date of the last certification for each TMA, determined by the date of the last certification letter. Reviews tend to occur around the same time, every four years. In practice, TMA certification reviews are spread across each year in the four-year cycle, but with some unevenness, resulting from the timing of the original designation, the timing of each TMA's first certification review, and new TMAs added following the Census and subsequent designation by the Secretary of Transportation. Figure 2 displays the distribution of TMA

Certification Reviews by year from 2020-2023. This same pattern is expected for the next four-year cycle, with adjustments for new TMAs and other minor adjustments in the timing of reviews.

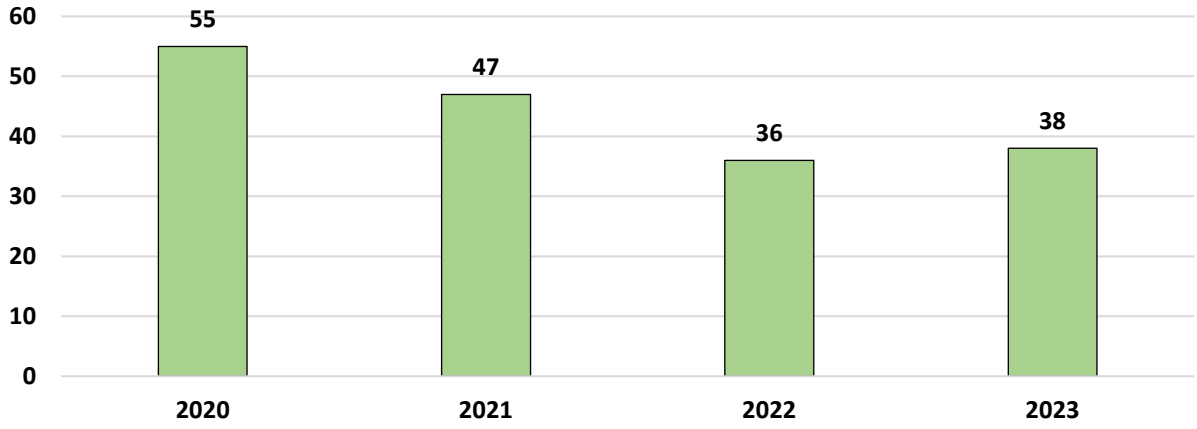


Figure 2: TMA Certification Reviews by Year, 2020-2023

Summary of Federal Actions by Type

The 176 TMA certification reviews from 2020-2023 contained a total of 2,494 Federal Actions. Figure 3 displays this distribution by Federal Action type, showing the majority were Recommendations (61%), approximately one-third were Commendations (33%), and that Corrective Actions (5%) were the least common. Approximately 14 Federal Actions were issued per review, on average, from 2020-2023. Figure 4 breaks this number down by Federal Action type. While every certification review is different, these graphics show that Corrective Actions are relatively rare.

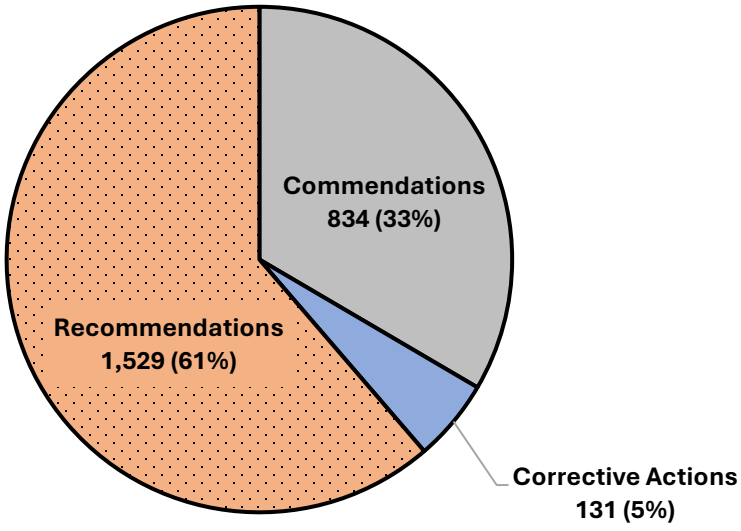


Figure 3: Distribution of Federal Actions by Type, 2020-2023

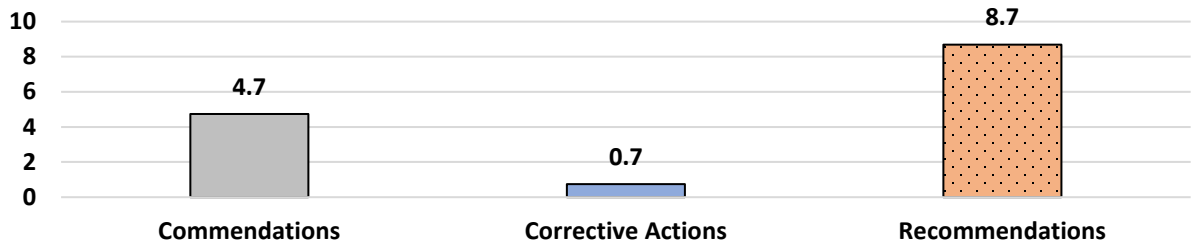


Figure 4: Average Number of Federal Actions per Review, by Type, 2020-2023

TMA Certification Review Topics

TMA certification reviews are focused on ensuring that the metropolitan planning process in a TMA is being carried out in accordance with applicable provisions of Federal law (23 U.S.C. §134, 49 U.S.C. §5303, and other applicable laws) and regulation (23 CFR part 450). As such, Federal Actions that are issued as part of a Certification Review can be classified by topics which correlate with requirements in 23 U.S.C. §134, 49 U.S.C. §5303, and 23 CFR 450. These topics are shown in Table 1 and briefly described below.

Table 1: TMA Certification Review Topics with Statutory and regulatory References

TMA Certification Review Topic	23 U.S.C. References	49 U.S.C. References	23 CFR 450 References
MPO Organizational Structure & Policy Board	23 U.S.C. §134(d)	49 U.S.C. §5303(b-d)	23 CFR 450.310
Metropolitan Planning Area (MPA) Boundaries	23 U.S.C. §134(e)	49 U.S.C. §5303(e)	23 CFR 450.312
Metropolitan Planning Agreements	23 U.S.C. §134(f-g)	49 U.S.C. §5303(f)	23 CFR 450.314
Scope of the Planning Process & Process Coordination	23 U.S.C. §134(h)	49 U.S.C. §5303(g-h)	23 CFR 450.306
Participation by Interested Parties	23 U.S.C. §134(i-j)	49 U.S.C. §5303(i)	23 CFR 450.316
Congestion Management Process (CMP)	23 U.S.C. §134(k)	49 U.S.C. §5303(k)	23 CFR 450.322
Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP)	23 U.S.C. §134(p)*	49 U.S.C. §5305(g)*	23 CFR 450.308
Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP)	23 U.S.C. §134(i)	49 U.S.C. §5303(i)	23 CFR 450.324
Transportation Improvement Program (TIP)	23 U.S.C. §134(j)	49 U.S.C. §5303(j)	23 CFR 450.322
Annual Listing of Obligated Projects (ALOP)	23 U.S.C. §134(j)	49 U.S.C. §5303(j)	23 CFR 450.334

**This section discusses the use of metropolitan planning funds but does not reference the UPWP directly.*

MPO Organizational Structure & Policy Board

This topic addresses the structure, designation process, and Policy Board composition requirements for MPOs in TMAs.

Metropolitan Planning Area (MPA) Boundaries

This topic includes requirements for the establishment of metropolitan planning area boundaries, including special considerations for areas designated as nonattainment areas for ozone or carbon monoxide, and required updates following each decennial census.

Metropolitan Planning Agreements

This topic deals with written agreements that specify the roles and responsibilities that States, MPOs, and providers of public transportation have when carrying out the metropolitan transportation planning process.

Scope of the Planning Process & Process Coordination

This topic covers the requirements described in 23 U.S.C. §134(h), including the planning factors to be addressed in the planning process and performance-based planning and programing requirements. It also concerns coordination between agencies in the transportation planning process.

Participation by Interested Parties

This topic addresses public participation and consultation requirements in the transportation planning process, including development and implementation of the Public Participation Plan (PPP).

Congestion Management Process (CMP)

This topic is concerned with the Congestion Management Process requirements for TMAs, including additional requirements for air quality nonattainment areas for ozone or carbon monoxide.

Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP)

This topic addresses the Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP) requirements for MPOs, which describe activities MPOs intend to complete with federal transportation planning funds.

Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP)

This topic concerns the development and contents of the Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP), which identifies how the region intends to invest in the transportation system over the long-range, 20-year minimum planning horizon.

Transportation Improvement Program (TIP)

This topic concerns the development and contents of the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP), which identifies that transportation projects and strategies the region will pursue over the next four years.

Annual Listing of Obligated Projects (ALOP)

This topic concerns the required annual listing of obligated projects (ALOP), which identifies funds under 23 U.S.C. or 49 U.S.C. Chapter 53 that were obligated in the preceding program year.

Topics Addressed in TMA Certification Review Federal Actions, 2020-2023

Some topics are addressed more frequently in TMA certification review Federal Actions than others. Federal Actions that deal with the scope of the planning process, public involvement, and the development of core planning products like the MTP and TIP tend to be the focus of the majority of Federal Actions issued.

Figure 5 displays the share of topics addressed in Federal Actions in reviews conducted from 2020-2023, the most recent complete four-year cycle for which data is available. Although Federal Actions may address more than one topic, for the purposes of this report, each Federal Action was assigned to a single topic to avoid any potential double counting.

Overall, the topics most frequently addressed in TMA certification review Federal Actions include: *Scope of the Planning Process & Process Coordination*, *Participation by Interested Parties*, *Metropolitan Transportation Plan*, and *Transportation Improvement Program*.

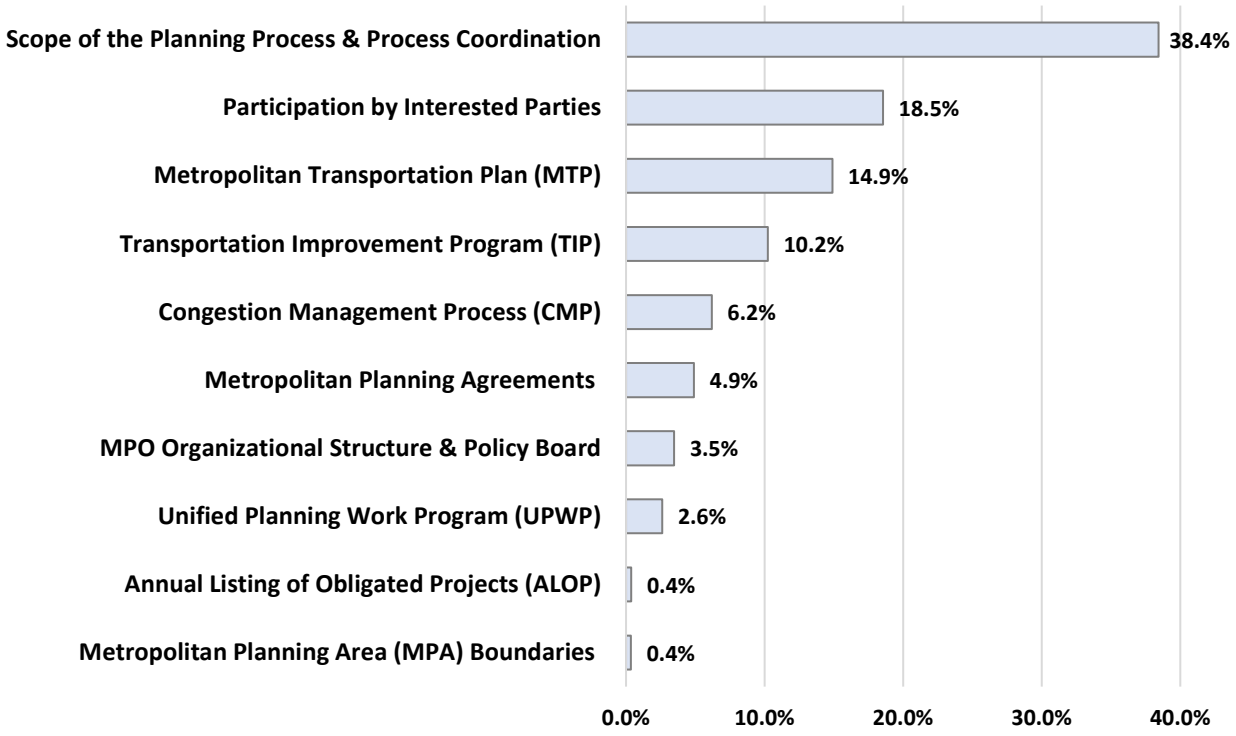


Figure 5: Percentage Share of Topics Addressed in TMA Certification Review Federal Actions, 2020-2023

Topics Most Frequently Addressed in Recommendations and Corrective Actions

Separating out Commendations, which are issued to recognize successful or innovative planning approaches, and focusing only on Corrective Actions and Recommendations, which are issued to address deficiencies or improve planning practices, the distribution by topic is similar. However, as shown in Figure 6, Corrective Actions comprised a small minority of the total Federal Actions issued (less than 2 percent in any category). Recommendations were by far the most common type of Federal Action issued.

Although Corrective Actions are uncommon in all topics, the *Congestion Management Process* and *Metropolitan Planning Agreements* topics stand out for a somewhat higher share of Corrective Actions relative to Recommendations. Other topics had very few or no Corrective Actions issued, including *Annual Listing of Obligated Projects, MPA Boundaries, Unified Planning Work Program, and MPO Organizational Structure and Policy Board.*

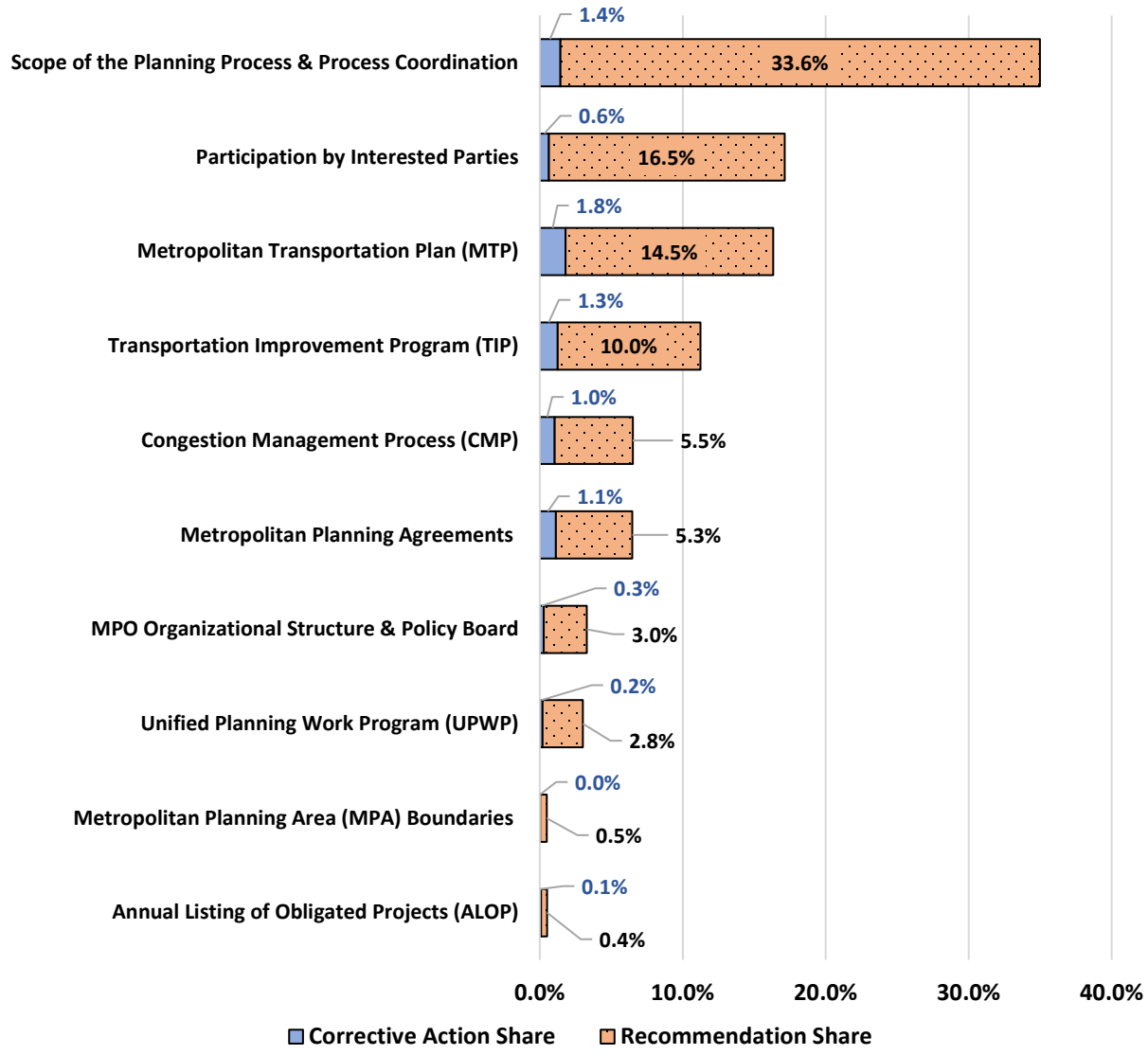


Figure 6: Percentage Share of Topics Addressed in TMA Certification Review Corrective Actions and Recommendations, 2020-2023

Share of Recommendations vs Corrective Actions by Topic Area

The three topics most frequently referenced in Recommendations and Corrective Actions are *Scope of the Planning Process & Process Coordination*, *Participation by Interested Parties*, and *Metropolitan Transportation Plan*. Each of these topics were referenced in more than 250 Federal Actions. Figure 7 shows the percentage breakdown of Recommendations and Corrective Actions for these three topics.

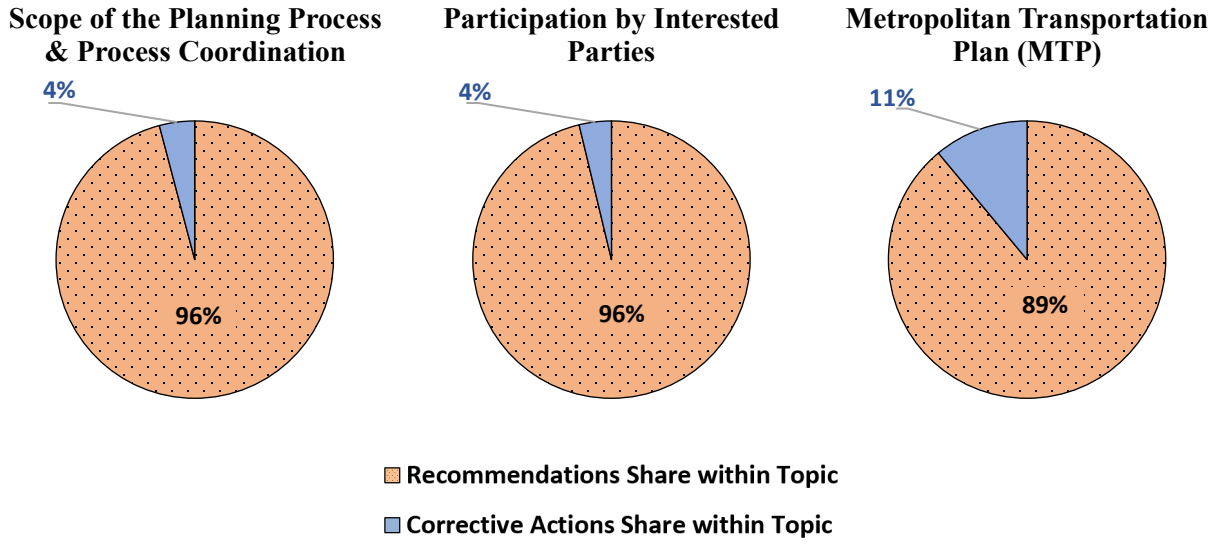


Figure 7: Percentage Share of Corrective Actions and Recommendations – Three Most Frequently Referenced Topics, TMA Certification Reviews 2020-2023

The next three most commonly cited topics were *Transportation Improvement Program*, *Congestion Management Process*, and *Metropolitan Planning Agreements*. Each of these topics were referenced in at least 100 Federal Actions. Figure 8 shows the percentage breakdown of Recommendations and Corrective Actions for these three topics, and shows that Corrective Actions were relatively more common than Recommendations when compared with the three most-cited topics.

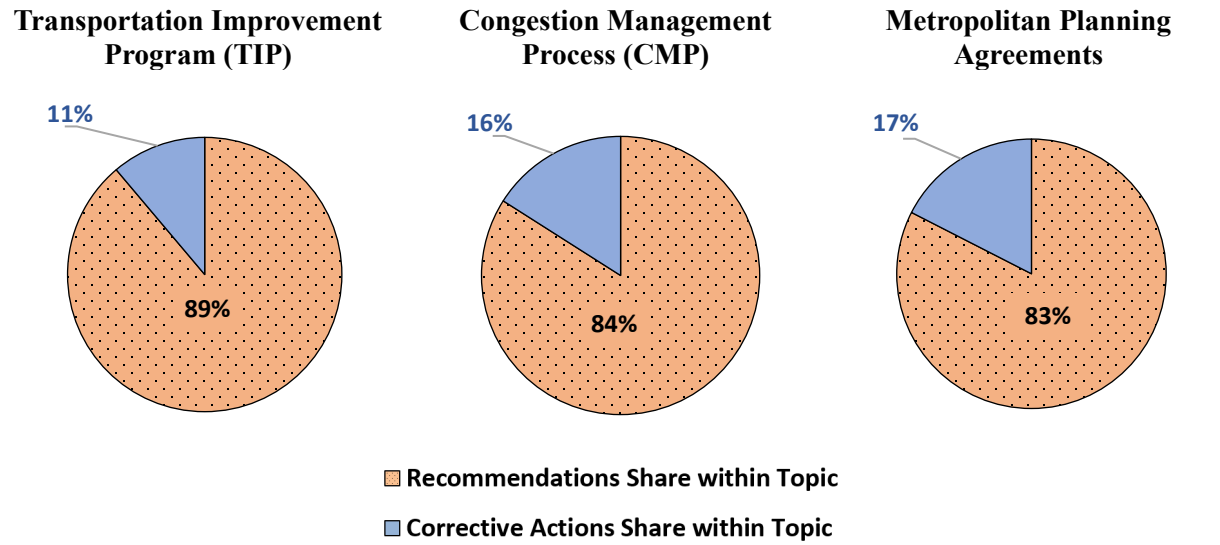


Figure 8: Percentage Share of Corrective Actions and Recommendations – Next Three Most Frequently Referenced Topics, TMA Certification Reviews 2020-2023

Topics Most Frequently Addressed in Commendations

The distribution of which topics were most frequently addressed in Commendations is similar to that of Corrective Actions and Recommendations (Figure 9). *Scope of the Planning Process & Process Coordination* was most frequently referenced, with nearly half of all Commendations issued from 2020-2023 referencing this topic. *Participation of Interested Parties* was the second most common, followed by *Metropolitan Transportation Plan* and *Transportation Improvement Program*.

Commendations are intended to recognize and encourage outstanding planning practices. These trends may represent the topics that are the focus of the planning process in TMAs or potentially the topics that Federal Review Teams focus on when identifying potential practices for Commendations.

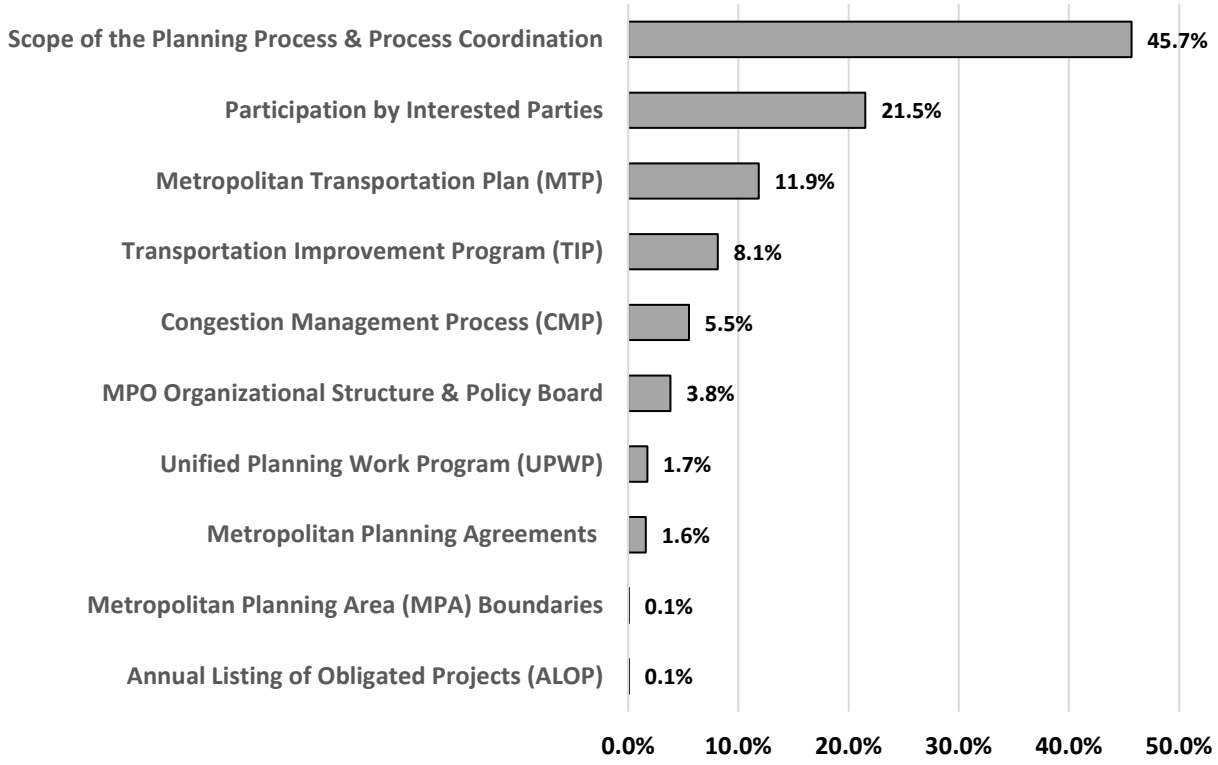


Figure 9: Percentage Share of Topics Addressed in TMA Certification Review Commendations, 2020-2023

Themes and Trends in TMA Certification Review Federal Actions, 2020-2023

This section summarizes themes and trends in TMA certification review Corrective Actions and Recommendations from 2020-2023 for each of the planning topics listed in Table 1. Hypothetical Federal Action language is also provided for illustrative purposes only, showing how Federal Review Teams might address the topic in practice.

MPO Organizational Structure & Policy Board

Corrective Actions and Recommendations on this topic addressed three main themes: the organizational structure of the MPO, the MPO's staffing and planning capacity, and MPO staff's technical capabilities.

In Federal Actions that discuss the organizational structure of the MPO, specific committees or advisory groups were often referenced, usually pertaining to a specific planning topic area such as freight or safety. Memoranda of understanding (MOUs) or agreements with other agencies were also frequently referenced, including the role of a liaison to coordinate information sharing among agencies. MPO staffing and planning capacity, and MPO staff technical capabilities were referenced in Federal Actions that discuss the MPO's capacity and expertise in specific planning topic areas. Table 2 shows example Federal Actions that might be issued in relation to this topic.

Table 2: Example Federal Actions that Address the "MPO Organizational Structure & Policy Board" Topic

Federal Action Type	Example
Corrective Action	Before beginning the development of the next MTP, the MPO must update its policies and procedures to clearly identify the roles and responsibilities in the structure of the Policy Board as required by 23 CFR 450.310(d).
Recommendation	The Federal Review Team recommends that the MPO develop language on the MPO Policy Board's operating procedures, including its election processes, term limits, and other administrative procedures in the next MOU Update.

Metropolitan Planning Area (MPA) Boundaries

Corrective Actions and Recommendations on this topic primarily addressed the alignment of MPA boundaries with the growth of the respective region. This topic typically arises following changes to U.S. Census-defined urban areas following a decennial census. Table 3 shows example Federal Actions that might be issued in relation to this topic.

Table 3: Example Federal Actions that Address the "MPA Boundaries" Topic

Federal Action Type	Example
Corrective Action	By December 29, 2026, the MPO must redraw its MPA boundaries to include the entire urbanized area in accordance with 23 CFR 450.312(a)(1).
Recommendation	The Federal Review Team recommends that the MPO coordinate with neighboring jurisdictions in anticipation of major growth and future adjustments to the MPA Boundaries.

Metropolitan Planning Agreements

Corrective Actions and Recommendations on this topic deal with formal MOUs or agreements between agencies. These often discuss roles and responsibilities between the MPO and agencies that it closely coordinates with, including the respective State DOT(s), providers of public transportation, and air quality or resource agencies. Table 4 shows example Federal Actions that might be issued in relation to this topic.

Table 4: Example Federal Actions that Address the "Metropolitan Planning Agreements" Topic

Federal Action Type	Example
Corrective Action	Before August 15, 2025, the MPO must update its MOU to document current responsibilities of the agencies within the respective TMA in the development of financial plans that support the MTP and TIP (23 CFR 450.314(a)).
Recommendation	The Federal Review Team recommends that in the next planning agreement, the MPO and the respective State DOT use more general streamlined language that make future changes simpler to process.

Scope of the Planning Process & Process Coordination

Corrective Actions and Recommendations on this topic addressed a wide variety of themes. This topic covers the 10 planning factors, as well as the overall planning process, performance management, and important coordination requirements. Federal Actions frequently focused on integrating content into plans that address all aspects of the multimodal, 3C planning process, and the coordination needed to facilitate an effective process. Table 5 shows example Corrective Actions or Recommendations that might be issued in relation to this topic.

Table 5: Example Federal Actions that Address the "Scope of the Planning Process & Process Coordination" Topic

Federal Action Type	Example
Corrective Action	By September 15, 2024, the MPO must establish performance targets for transit asset management in alignment with 23 CFR 450.306(d)(3).
Corrective Action	Before December 31, 2024, the MPO must update its travel forecasting analysis to use the most up-to-date estimates for population, employment, travel, and land use data, and must coordinate with partner agencies to forecast future travel demand as required in 23 CFR 450.306(c) and 23 CFR 450.324(e).
Recommendation	The Federal Review Team recommends that the MPO continue coordination with providers of public transportation and the State DOT on transit performance measures and adjusting targets as appropriate.
Recommendation	The Federal Review Team recommends that the MPO develop transportation studies to monitor changes in freight demand and land use in the region.
Recommendation	The Federal Review Team encourages the MPO to further its collaboration with the State DOT in discussing asset management conditions, strategies, and investment priorities for the region's controlled-access highway system.

Participation by Interested Parties

Corrective Actions and Recommendations on this topic addressed the public involvement and public information requirements of the metropolitan planning process. Federal Actions in this topic frequently addressed the Public Participation Plan (PPP) and public involvement activities, such as the identification of interested parties, the accommodation of persons with disabilities, the evaluation of public involvement techniques, use of electronic communication methods, and documentation of input and how it was used. Table 6 shows example Federal Actions that might be issued in relation to this topic.

Table 6: Example Federal Actions that Address the "Participation by Interested Parties" Topic

Federal Action Type	Example
Corrective Action	The MPO must amend its PPP by May 31, 2025, to meet the requirement in 23 CFR 450.316(c) and (d) of including procedures in the plan for involving and consulting with Tribal Governments and Federal Land Management Agencies.
Recommendation	The Federal Review Team recommends that the MPO improve its website structure by creating one shared link to house all its adopted policies, including MPO project selection and street design standards.

Congestion Management Process (CMP)

Corrective Actions and Recommendations on this topic focused on the data collected and used for travel demand modeling, the identification of traffic congestion problems and mitigation strategies, and monitoring system performance. Table 7 shows example Federal Actions that might be issued in relation to this topic.

Table 7: Example Federal Actions that Address the "Congestion Management Process" Topic

Federal Action Type	Example
Corrective Action	By September 30, 2025, the MPO must update its CMP to include language on the operational management strategies incorporated into capacity increasing projects in the region as required in 23 CFR 450.322(f).
Recommendation	The Federal Review Team recommends that in the next CMP update, the MPO use specific language to discuss congestion performance measures and a periodic assessment of the effectiveness of implemented strategies.

Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP)

Corrective Actions and Recommendations on this topic addressed consistency in the financial systems with regards to planned planning activities. Federal Review Teams emphasized the importance of a performance and expenditures report that delineates expenditures by task in order to demonstrate fiscal responsibility. Federal Review Teams also focused on how the UPWP reflects and aligns with the goals and projects reflected in other planning documents, including the MTP and TIP. Table 8 shows example Federal Actions that might be issued in relation to this topic.

Table 8: Example Federal Actions that Address the "Unified Planning Work Program" Topic

Federal Action Type	Example
Corrective Action	By March 15, 2025, the MPO must revise the UPWP to include all required components, including a discussion of the planning priorities of the MPA and an annual expenditure report by each activity and task (23 CFR 450.308(c) and 23 CFR 420.117).
Recommendation	The Federal Review Team recommends that the MPO work with the State DOT to provide improved estimates of consultant project costs identified in the UPWP.

Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP)

Corrective Actions and Recommendations on this topic primarily focused on four elements of the MTP: the financial plan, performance-based planning, project selection and consistency, and integration with the greater metropolitan transportation planning process. Federal Review Teams emphasized the importance of the financial plan to demonstrate fiscal constraint and that the MTP can be implemented. The system performance report requirement was a focus, as was the importance of addressing all modes of transportation as an integrated system. Table 9 shows example Federal Actions that might be issued in relation to this topic.

Table 9: Example Federal Actions that Address the "Metropolitan Transportation Plan" Topic

Federal Action Type	Example
Corrective Action	In the next MTP update planned for February 2022, the MPO must better collaborate with the State DOT to update the system performance report to reflect performance targets in accordance with 23 CFR 450.324(f)(4).
Recommendation	The Federal Review Team recommends that in the next MTP update, the MPO update the financial plan to better detail the system-level cost estimates and revenue sources needed and forecasted to operate and maintain highways and the public transportation system.

Transportation Improvement Program

Corrective Actions and Recommendations on this topic focused on financial strategies, fiscal constraint, performance management, project selection processes, and consistency with other documents in the planning process. Federal Actions addressed details of the financial plan, emphasizing fiscal responsibility and transparency. They also frequently referenced the importance of the TIP in achieving performance targets and alignment with other elements of the planning process such as the CMP. Table 10 shows example Federal Actions that might be issued in relation to this topic.

Table 10: Example Federal Actions that Address the "Transportation Improvement Program" Topic

Federal Action Type	Example
Corrective Action	The MPO must update the TIP by July 31, 2025, to include a discussion of how programmed projects are anticipated to achieve performance targets, linking investment priorities to performance targets, per 23 CFR 450.326(d).
Recommendation	The Federal Review Team recommends that the MPO update the financial plan of the TIP to include a more detailed description of how the MPO is demonstrating fiscal constraint, specifically including the use of all reasonably available highway and transit revenues from State and local sources.

Annual Listing of Obligated Projects

Corrective Actions and Recommendations on this topic were rare and typically focused on the relationship between the ALOP and other planning documents, such as the TIP and MTP, or in the context of improving coordination with other regional planning partners. Table 11 shows example Federal Actions that might be issued in relation to this topic.

Table 11: Example Federal Actions that Address the "Annual Listing of Obligated Projects" Topic

Federal Action Type	Example
Corrective Action	The MPO must revise the MOU by February 15, 2025, to address roles and responsibilities for the development of financial plans that support the Annual Listing of Obligated Projects as required in 23 CFR 450.314(a) and 23 CFR 450.334(a).
Recommendation	The Federal Review Team advises the MPO to increase coordination with providers of public transportation to help ensure all applicable FTA funding programs and projects are captured in the Annual Listing of Obligated Projects.

Conclusion

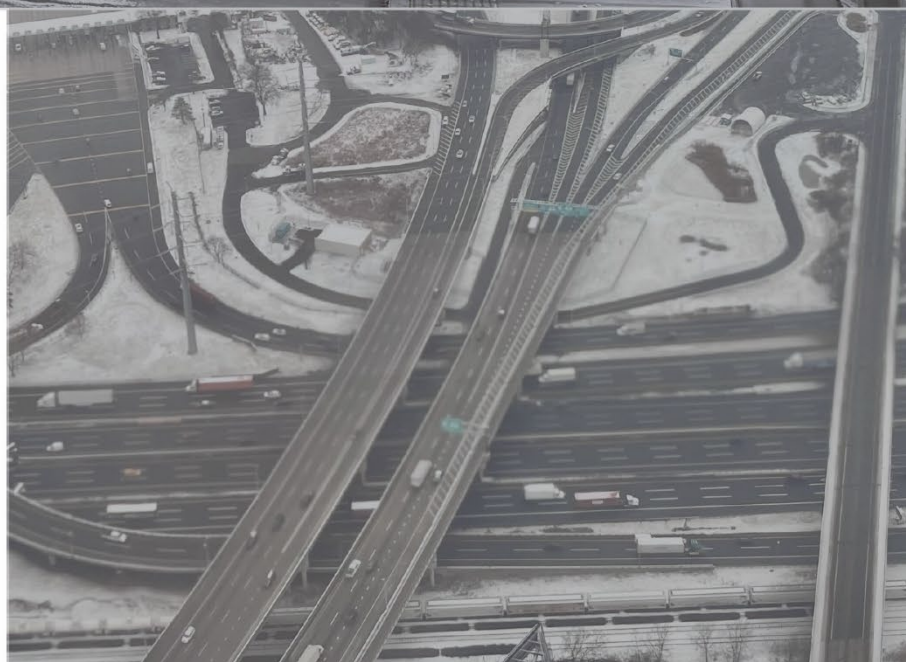
The TMA certification review process is an important part of FHWA and FTA's oversight and stewardship of the metropolitan transportation planning process. It provides an opportunity not only to help ensure compliance with Federal law and regulation, but also to identify potential areas of improvement, training or technical assistance needs, and notable practices. Through an ongoing interagency partnership, FHWA and FTA seek to support MPOs, State DOTs, and providers of public transportation to execute a successful, 3C planning process that delivers the best outcomes for the traveling public.

In June 2023, the Secretary of Transportation published a new list of TMAs, following the Census Bureau's delineation of urban areas from the 2020 Census. This process led to the designation of 14 new TMAs, all of which will be reviewed for the first time during the next four year cycle (2024-2027). We look forward to working in partnership with the MPOs, State DOTs, providers of public transportation, and other local partners in all TMAs to help ensure a successful metropolitan transportation planning process.

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