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Federal review: Des Moines Area MPO is a national model, setting best practices

The Des Moines Area MPO is a national model of an intermodal transportation planning agency, establishing best practices across the country.

That's the one-line takeaway from the recently completed 2017 Federal Certification Review, which included 10 commendations and 0 corrective actions. Recommendations were also made for the MPO's continuous improvement. The findings were presented to the MPO Policy Committee this month.

"Due to your cutting-edge planning – including Data Bike, water trails, and Container Locator – I am excited to bring my FTA mentee from Boston Region 1 to your MPO to learn about your intermodal planning," said Mark Bechtel, Deputy Regional Administrator for Federal Transit Administration Region 7, which covers Missouri, Iowa, Nebraska and Kansas.

The MPO's planning process is scrutinized every four years by a review team from the Federal Highway and Federal Transit Administrations to ensure the MPO complies with federal guidelines. The 2017 review of the Des Moines Area MPO took place over several days this spring and was finalized in July.

The U.S. DOT commended the MPO's highly professional staff; timely allocation of federal funds; commitments to all modes of transportation, notably freight, transit, bicycle; initiatives to support livability and public health; use of performance measures; regional sustainable-development planning; public participation; and its reader-friendly presentation of planning products.

"It's rewarding to see our MPO's work being recognized at such a high level," said Tom Armstrong, Mayor of Grimes and Chair of the Des Moines Area MPO. "The review speaks volumes about the leadership of Executive Director Todd Ashby and the great staff he's put together."

This year's review was noteworthy because it was the first since the 2015 passage of the FAST ACT, which enacted new requirements or "planning factors" on MPOs. Under these federal regulations, MPOs are now required to address storm water mitigation, tourism, and travel in their planning and implementation of projects. The review team listed the Greater Des Moines Water Trails and Greenways Master Plan and the MPO's coordination of watershed management authorities within central Iowa as noteworthy examples of the MPO meeting these new federal planning factors.

"You are absolutely doing great work here, and we commend the staff for that," said Darla Hugaboom, transportation planner with the Federal Highway Administration Iowa Division.

The Des Moines Area Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) acts as a regional forum to ensure coordination between the public and local, state, and federal agencies in regard to planning issues and to prepare transportation plans and programs. The MPO develops both long- and short-range multimodal transportation plans, selects and approves projects for federal funding based upon regional priorities, and develops methods to reduce traffic congestion.