

Alternatives...

Regional Councils

Resources:

[National Association of Regional Councils](#)

[NARC Map of Regional Councils](#)

Legislative Resources:

[Metropolitan Planning \(23 U.S.C. §134\)](#)

[Statewide Transportation Planning \(23 U.S.C. §135\)](#)

[Public Works and Economic Development Act of 1965, As Amended \(42 U.S.C. §3121\)](#)

Interesting Reads:

Harry Caudill (1962). *Night Comes to the Cumberlands: A Biography of a Depressed Area*. Boston: Little Brown & Co.

If you are not familiar with “regional councils, you may know them by another name,:: regional planning commission, planning district commission, regional council of governments, council of local governments, associations of government, metropolitan planning organizations, and the list goes on. They exist in all 50 states; they exist for different purposes; and they exist, occasionally with overlapping boundaries and and missions that can be or are at odds. That said, regional commissions provide a broad range of services that are available to member governments, from helping member jurisdictions to create comprehensive plans and land use ordinances to coordinating and encouraging economic and community development to regional transportation planning.

Regional planning, in the United States, has two separate presidential antecedents: Eisenhower's Interstate Highway System and Johnson's War on Poverty.

In 1962, Congress passed Title 23 USC §134 (Metropolitan Transportation Planning) and §135 (Statewide Transportation Planning) which mandated the establishment of Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) in urbanized areas with a population of at least 50,000. Lawmakers wanted make sure that urban areas based their decisions about and expenditure of federal highway monies on sound regional planning. The MPOs were designed to bring an even-handed, regional approach to long-range planning decisions and were required to reach out to the general public to involve citizens and stakeholders in the planning process.

In 1962, Harry Caudill published *Night Comes to the Cumberland*, which focused national attention on poverty in Appalachia. Caudill's work, both informed and led to Johnson's War on Poverty and presaged the expansion of regional planning in the mid-1960s. In 1965, Congress passed the Public Work and Economic Development Act (PWEDA), which encouraged the development of regional planning at the state and local level, codified the need for active citizen participation in the planning process, and, spelled out the role and requirements of the comprehensive planning process in relation to the provision of public works (economic development, transportation, environmental protection, workforce development, and technology--a later addition). Among other things, the PWEDA established cost-sharing programs, business outreach and incubator assistance programs, and a host of other programs.

Currently, regional commissions vary by state. The National Association of Regional Councils, started in the 1960s, following the passage of PWEDA, provides a full list of the regional councils, by state. Be aware, however, that not all states have planning district commissions or regional commissions for all areas, and that the regional councils in your state may not cover all areas of planning. In addition, the level of planning assistance or the focus of planning assistance may vary from commission to commission.

Depending on location and level of state support, planning district commissions and regional councils may provide direct planning assistance, although many require grant funding to cover the cost of projects. Most of the commissions and councils surveyed to provide access to local and regional data, a vital service to smaller governments that may not have someone on staff to tackle the background research necessary for local comprehensive plans. If you are not sure whether or not your jurisdiction is a member of a regional council, check with the administration of your local government or the state-by-state listing from the National Association of Regional Councils.