



Chapter 1

Introduction

The Laredo Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP) serves as an important tool in facilitating orderly urban and rural development through guiding the location and type of roadway facilities that are needed to meet projected growth and development in the area. The Plan addresses all modes of transportation and provides a structure and planning process for improving the region's transportation system. The MTP serves as an update of the previous plan that was prepared in 1999, and covers a 25 year planning horizon through the Year 2030. Due to passage of new legislation, described below, the plan was amended in 2007. Key elements of the Plan include, defining the region's transportation goals, evaluating the existing transportation system and future transportation needs and identifying recommended improvements that will enhance mobility and economic development in the Laredo Metropolitan area. Additionally, the MTP includes a financial plan which prioritizes the short- and long-term transportation improvements and identifies federal, state, local and/or private funding sources for each identified project.

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

According to the results of the 2000 U.S. Census, Laredo is one of the fastest growing cities in Texas and in the U.S. Laredo's location as the center of a primary trade route between Mexico, U.S. and Canada and increased trade activity have resulted in significant growth in the Laredo metropolitan area over the past decade. The Laredo MSA encompasses all of Webb County, while the MPO study area encompasses just a portion of the county. The Laredo MSA population grew from 133,239 in 1990 to 193,117 in the Year 2000 representing an annual increase of 3.8 percent. The Texas State demographer estimates the 2006 Laredo MSA population at 231,643. This growth in population coupled with increased trade traffic continues to place increasing demands on the transportation system. The Port of Laredo is the largest inland port on the US-Mexico border and consists of four international bridges plus a rail bridge. Two of the international bridges handle non-commercial traffic only, one handles commercial traffic only, and the fourth allows both types of traffic. A safe, efficient and well maintained multimodal transportation system will be important in enhancing the movement of goods and people and in continuing to promote international trade and economic development in the Laredo area.

The purpose of the MTP is to develop a comprehensive multimodal transportation plan to accommodate travel demands for the Laredo metropolitan area through the Year 2030. The study identifies the existing and future land use trends and transportation needs, and develops coordinated strategies to provide necessary transportation facilities essential for the continued mobility and economic vitality of the Laredo metropolitan area. Additionally, the development of the MTP is required under the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) to assure the continuation of federal transportation funds for the Laredo metropolitan area.

The Laredo MTP documents the urban area's existing transportation system and evaluates its future transportation needs for the next 25 years. SAFETEA-LU requires the MTP to be financially constrained, meaning each transportation project and strategy identified in the plan is backed by clearly specified federal, state, local and/or private funding and future expenditures are reflected in "year of expenditure" dollars. The Laredo Urban Transportation



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Study (LUTS) leads the overall review of transportation plans and programs for the Laredo Metropolitan Area by virtue of its designation as the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) for the area.

LEGISLATION

With the passing of the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1962, Congress made urban transportation planning a condition for receipt of federal funds for highway projects in urban areas with a population of 50,000 or more. This new legislation encouraged a continuing, comprehensive transportation planning process carried on cooperatively by the states and local communities. Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPO) were designated by the governor in each state to carry out this legislative requirement. As a result the Laredo Urban Transportation Study was created as the MPO, to provide for a continuing, comprehensive transportation planning process for the Laredo urbanized area as mandated by the Act.

The Laredo MPO derives its authority from Title 23, United States Code Section 134. The MPO is governed by a Policy Committee established in accordance with by-laws adopted June, 1994 and revised in June 1997, June 2000, and September 24 2007. It is the Policy Committee's responsibility to review and make decisions regarding the transportation planning efforts in the Laredo metropolitan area. Transportation planning activities are undertaken by the planning staff of LUTS (acting as the MPO) and by the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT). The Committee is chaired by the Mayor of the City of Laredo and includes as voting members: the mayor, three Laredo City Council persons, the Webb County Judge, two County Commissioners, the TxDOT Laredo District Engineer, and the Director of the Transportation Planning Department. Ex-officio, non voting members include the State Senator for District 21, State Representative for District 42 and State Representative for District 31.

Under the direction of the Policy Committee, transportation planning efforts for the Laredo metropolitan area are managed by the Technical Committee. This committee has the responsibility of professional and technical review of work programs, policy recommendations and transportation planning activities. The Technical Committee is comprised of 22 members representing the city, county, state, school districts and the private sector. The Committee is chaired by the Laredo City Planning Director (also the MPO Planning Director).

There are three major pieces of federal legislation that define metropolitan transportation planning. The Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) of 1991 recognizes the economic and cultural diversity of metropolitan areas, and the need to provide metropolitan areas with more control over transportation in their own areas. ISTEA emphasizes the efficient use and preservation of the existing transportation infrastructure, the inclusion of private citizens and stakeholders in the planning process, the synergistic relationship between all modes of transportation, and transportation's linkage with the environment. The Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21) was passed into law in 1998. The Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act (SAFETEA-LU) succeeded TEA-21 in 2005.

SAFETEA-LU reaffirms all that ISTEA and TEA-21 set out to accomplish. This includes public involvement, linking land use to transportation planning, a multimodal approach in developing transportation solutions, the need for increased mobility and transportation's key role in economic growth. In addition, SAFETEA-LU includes several new requirements. MPOs are



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now encouraged to consult with other agencies that influence other types of planning activities such as economic development and environmental protection as well as issues related to airport operations and freight movement. MPOs must now prepare a general discussion of potential environmental threats as well as potential mitigation activities and locations. Public outreach is an important element of SAFETEA-LU as with ISTEA and TEA-21. Representatives of the disabled, as well as users of pedestrian walkways and bicycle facilities are specifically singled out for inclusion in the public participation process. In recognition of the effect of the economy on multi-year projects, MPOs are now required to apply an inflation factor to costs for the later years of projects.

In areas that do not meet federal clean air requirements, legislation related to clean air also affects metropolitan transportation planning efforts. Since Laredo is in compliance with current clean air requirements this legislation does not apply.

STUDY AREA

Laredo is located in Webb County in southwestern Texas, on the border between Mexico and the United States. It is separated from Nuevo Laredo, Mexico by the Rio Grande. The study area for the MTP includes all areas located within the MPO's planning boundary (**Figure 1-1**). The MPO boundary was expanded in 2004 to include additional areas of Webb County expected to become urbanized in the next 25 years. The MPO planning region includes all of the City of Laredo, plus the City of Rio Bravo and other areas in Webb County. This area is approximately 291 square miles. Based on the 2000 Census the population of the study area is approximately 186,120.

BENEFITS OF TRANSPORTATION PLANNING

Transportation planning is the process used by municipalities and other governmental entities to provide for the development of an efficient and appropriate transportation system to meet existing and future travel needs. The primary purpose is to ensure the orderly and progressive development of the urban and rural street system to serve the mobility and access needs of the public. Transportation planning is interrelated with other components of the urban planning and development process. Therefore, coordination with other agencies that affect transportation and economic development is an important part of the development process for the Metropolitan Transportation Plan.

The Metropolitan Transportation Plan is a 25 year transportation planning document that provides a framework for addressing the area's transportation needs. The MTP is the MPO's adopted plan for guiding transportation system improvements, including the existing and planned extension of major highways. The transportation system is comprised of existing and planned freeways/expressways, arterials, collectors and local streets, which could require wider or new rights-of-way for needed improvements. Other elements of the transportation system include pedestrian walkways, bicycle facilities, bridges, rail facilities, and intermodal connectors. One objective of the MTP is to ensure the preservation of adequate right-of-way (ROW) on appropriate alignments and of sufficient width to allow the orderly and efficient expansion and improvement of the transportation system to serve existing and future transportation needs.



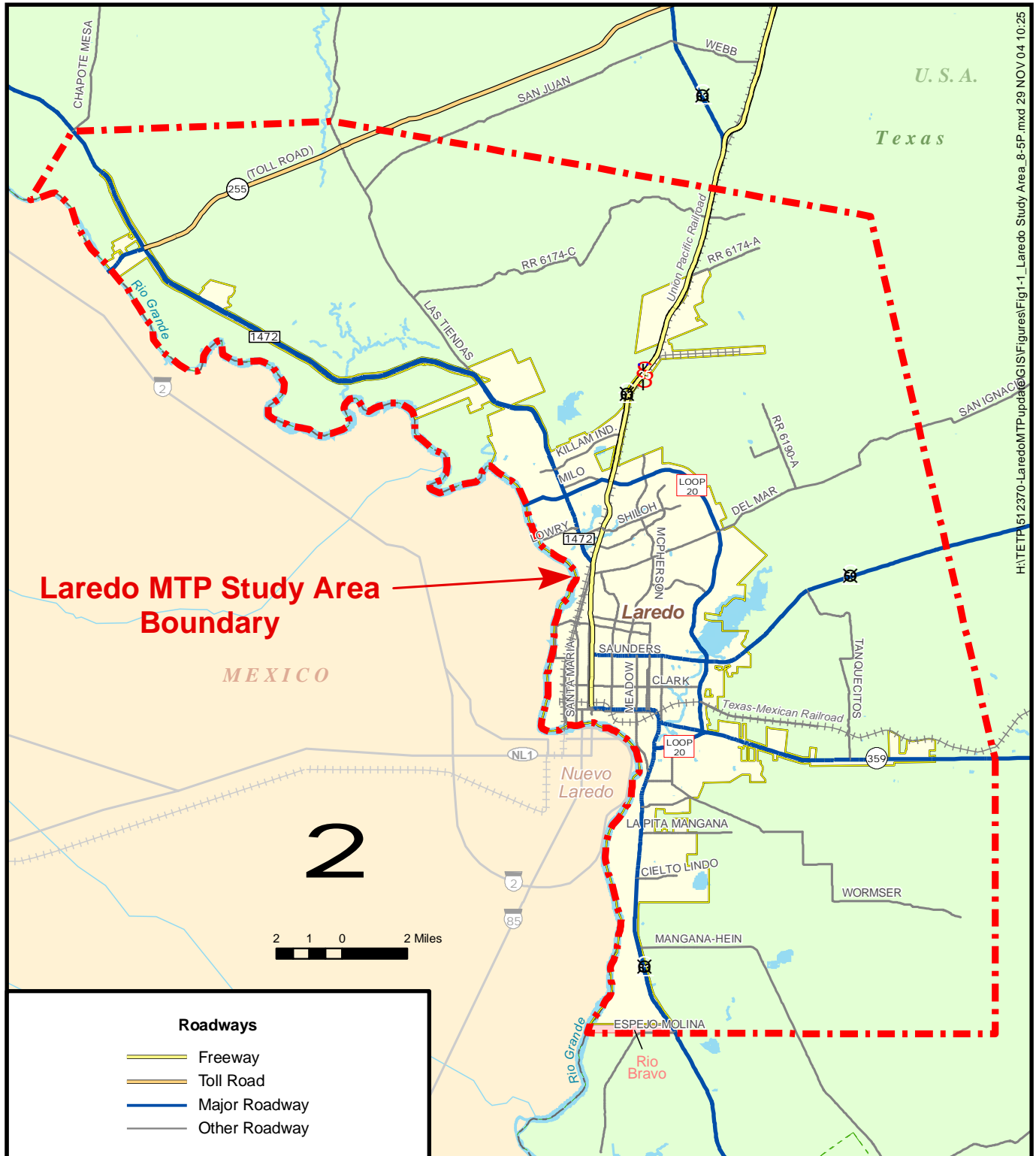
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The benefits provided by effective transportation planning are realized by achieving the following objectives:

- Maximizing mobility while minimizing the negative impacts of street widening and construction on neighborhood areas and the overall community by recognizing where future improvements may be needed and incorporating thoroughfare needs;
- Preservation of adequate rights-of-way for future long-range transportation improvements;
- Making efficient use of available resources by designating and recognizing the major streets that will likely require improvements;
- Minimizing the amount of land required for street and highway purposes;
- Identifying the functional role that each street should be designed to serve in order to promote and maintain the stability of traffic and land use patterns;
- Informing citizens of the streets that are intended to be developed as arterial and collector streets, so that private land use decisions can anticipate which streets will become major traffic facilities in the future;
- Facilitating connections between different modes;
- Minimizing conflicts between agencies that affect transportation and transportation related issues such as environmental protection;
- Facilitating economic development;
- Providing information on thoroughfare improvement needs, which can be used to determine priorities and schedules in the City's Capital Improvement Program (CIP); and,
- Providing an implementation program to prioritize improvements and identify funding sources.

Figure 1-1 Laredo MTP Study Area





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GOALS

Goals developed for the MTP are the result of a collaborative effort between the Policy Committee, Technical Committee, and the Laredo Public. Goals reflect a collective vision that defines important transportation issues for the Laredo Metropolitan Area. These goals provide the framework for the MTP and include:

Operational Goals:

- Deploy intelligent transportation systems;
- Evaluate intra-city commercial truck traffic;
- Provide for sufficient air transportation;
- Upgrade existing transportation facilities;
- Provide for grade separations at intersections of key arterial roads over existing rail lines;
- Incorporate full accessibility in all new street designs;
- Accommodate bicycle routes in new street designs or segregated facilities;
- Establish a plan for public transportation to meet rider needs; and,
- Implement accessible public mass transit service.

Policy Goals:

- Promote multi-modal transportation projects;
- Increase the safety and efficiency of the transportation system;
- Provide safe and efficient mobility throughout the community;
- Optimize available local, State and Federal funding sources;
- Protect and Enhance the quality of life of the Laredo area; and,
- Encourage transportation alternatives that reduce the impact on the environment.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Public involvement was an important component of the Plan and included several activities to involve public agencies and stakeholders throughout the plan development process. Public involvement activities centered on obtaining meaningful input from key stakeholders concerning transportation issues in the area. The MPO Technical Committee guided the overall plan development and provided technical expertise throughout the process.

Meetings

Three meetings were held with the MPO Technical committee, which is responsible for reviewing the overall study progress. These meeting were held at key milestones allowing the committee to evaluate data forecasts and alternative evaluation criteria, initiate the evaluation



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of alternatives, review the evaluation of alternatives, prioritize improvements, develop the financial implementation plan and review the draft plan.

LUTS Public Involvement Process

In compliance with Federal regulations, a Public Involvement Process (PIP) was developed by the LUTS. The Public Involvement Process provides every opportunity and encouragement for the involvement of citizens in the transportation planning process. The purpose of the Public Involvement Process is to:

- Provide early and continuing public involvement opportunities throughout the transportation planning and programming process;
- Provide timely information concerning transportation issues and processes to area residents, affected public agencies, representatives of transportation agency employees, private providers of transportation, other interested parties and segments of the community affected by transportation plans, programs, and projects;
- Seek out and consider the needs of those traditionally underserved by existing transportation systems, such as low-income and minority households;
- Provide adequate public notice of public involvement activities and time for public review and comment at key decision points, including the approval of plans and programs;
- Demonstrate explicit consideration and response to public input received during the planning and program development process.

The adoption of the Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP) required a public review and comment period of 45 days prior to final action by the Policy Committee. A project nomination form was published in a newspaper of general circulation and was made available through the Internet 90 days prior to final action by the Policy Committee. Presentations on the proposed MTP were made to the Laredo City Council and Webb County Commissioners Court prior to the public review and comment period. Additionally, written comments and project nomination forms received during the public review and comment period regarding the draft MTP were incorporated into the final document. **Table 1-1** identifies the meetings held as part of the MTP process. A summary of all public comments received by the MPO is included in **Appendix A**.

Pursuant to adoption of the final rule for metropolitan transportation planning, LUTS has adopted a new Public Participation Plan whose guidelines were used in the adoption of the most recent amendment to the MTP.



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**Table 1-1
Meetings**

Laredo Metropolitan Transportation Plan Update

Agency	Date	Purpose	Advertised in Newspaper	Televised	Noticed as per Texas Open Meetings Act
MPO Policy Committee	Sept. 9, 2004	Present and adopt the project selection criteria	✓	✓	✓
Laredo City Council	Oct. 25, 2004	Present draft plan and receive comments	✓	✓	✓
Webb County Commissioners Court	Oct. 25, 2004	Present draft plan and receive comments	✓	✓	✓
MPO Policy Committee	Oct. 29, 2004	Present draft plan and initiate public comment period	✓	✓	✓
MPO Policy Committee	Dec. 17, 2004	Adopt plan	✓	✓	✓