

Technical Memorandum

DATE: August 20, 2026

TO: Massachusetts Department of Transportation and the Boston Region MPO Board

FROM: Abigail Cutrumbes Heerema, Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization

RE: Chapter 90 Program: MPO Relevance and Design Projects

The Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) staff has reviewed how municipalities in the Boston region are using funding from the Commonwealth's Chapter 90 Program and found that outreach could be beneficial to inform project proponents that Chapter 90 funding can be used to advance the design of projects programmed in the MPO's Transportation Improvement Program (TIP).

1 Objectives and Background

1.1 Project Objectives

In early 2025, MPO staff studied the utilization of the Chapter 90 Program in the Boston region. The objectives of the project were to

1. better understand how the Chapter 90 Program helped municipalities reach their transportation needs,
2. investigate any overlapping opportunities and challenges between the TIP and the Chapter 90 process for municipalities,
3. understand the extent to which the Chapter 90 Program is currently utilized to fund design projects and examine the potential for the MPO to expand awareness of design as a possible Chapter 90 use, and
4. provide decision-makers with information on the program's use in the Boston region.

1.2 About Chapter 90

Chapter 90 is a state-funded, consistent, flexible funding stream for municipalities. In the last decade, the bonded program has generally provided municipalities \$200 million annually to be spent on maintenance and small capital projects, although the funding level was increased in the last two fiscal years. Chapter 90 funding can also be used for purposes such as equipment purchases, project design, or engineering services, but the most common use is maintaining road conditions through simple repaving and more complex reconstruction.

1.3 Methodology

MPO staff requested balance sheets for all 97 municipalities in the region from MassDOT district offices. Using the project titles from the balance sheets, staff categorized the projects into seven categories: repaving, reconstruction/reclamation, engineering services, equipment purchases, sidewalks, design, and other. Staff also noted the uncommitted balances for each municipality and categorized these as very low, low, average, high, and very high.¹ Finally, staff conducted interviews with eight municipal Departments of Public Works to obtain qualitative information about the program's mechanics and challenges encountered with municipal projects and project delivery in general.

2 MPO Relevance and Recommendation

2.1 Relevant Project Findings

Currently, one of the biggest challenges associated with the MPO's capital program, the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP), is the ability for project proponents to progress through the design process in a predictable, timely way. Part of the reason for this is that project proponents often do not have the funding (or capacity) to initiate or continue the design process. Since project design is an eligible use of Chapter 90 dollars, municipalities can use these allocations to help initiate the design process and meet the requirements for consideration for TIP funding.

Design projects generally represent a very small proportion of the projects funded using Chapter 90 allocations. Of the 1,007 projects categorized, only 24 had titles that indicated they were specifically design projects, representing 2.38 percent of the total number of projects. This small percentage is most easily explained by the fact that, with scarce resources, most municipalities are not able to divert resources from necessary maintenance work to the design of new capital projects. Many municipalities rely solely on Chapter 90 funds for their road maintenance programs.

Still, some municipalities have not only used Chapter 90 for project design, but have used it specifically to fund the design of TIP projects. Two of the 24 design projects were explicitly described as designs for TIP projects: Needham's Highland Avenue project and Wrentham's Wrentham Common project. These two

¹ The balance sheets for each municipality represent a snapshot of a municipality's balance on the day they are prepared. This balance could change at any time when reimbursement requests are processed or supplemental funds are added to the program.

municipalities also had some of the highest levels of banked Chapter 90 funds, which could indicate that municipalities with “very high” balances (categorized as more than two years’ of a municipality’s Chapter 90 allocation) have more flexibility to use Chapter 90 funding for design.²

2.2 Recommendation for MPO Outreach Efforts

Because municipalities may not be aware that design is an eligible use of Chapter 90 funding, the MPO should include in its capital program outreach that Chapter 90 can be used to complete the pre-25 percent design submission needed for programming on the TIP.

As well as this, MPO staff should include Chapter 90 as a potential source for matching funds for its new design funding pilot program. In FFY 2025, the MPO began a pilot program for design funding that requires a 20 percent local match. Typically, a municipality is allowed to use state funding sources for federal match requirements, so a municipality could use Chapter 90 as the match requirement for the design pilot. This may be a more appealing option for a municipality that is unable or unwilling to dedicate greater municipal funding towards a pre-25 percent design for TIP projects.

² Not every municipality with a high balance has the ability to use it for design; many times, municipalities will “bank” funding to pay for a more expensive maintenance project or piece of equipment.

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