



2020 Census: Urban Area Boundary Adjustments

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Part 1: Background and Process

This section includes information explaining Census-defined urban areas, release of urban area boundary data, and the process WisDOT uses for adjusting those urban area boundaries.

Urban Areas are defined by the US Census as individual municipalities or groups of nearby municipalities with a total population of 5,000 or higher. In the past, *urbanized area* was the term for urban areas with populations of 50,000 or higher; all Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) were urbanized areas. With the 2020 Census, the *urbanized area* category has been discontinued. Large urban areas, with populations of 50,000 and higher, are **MPOs**. All other urban areas, with populations of 5,000 to 49,999, are just **urban areas**. MPOs with populations of 200,000 and higher are federally designated as Transportation Management Areas (TMAs).

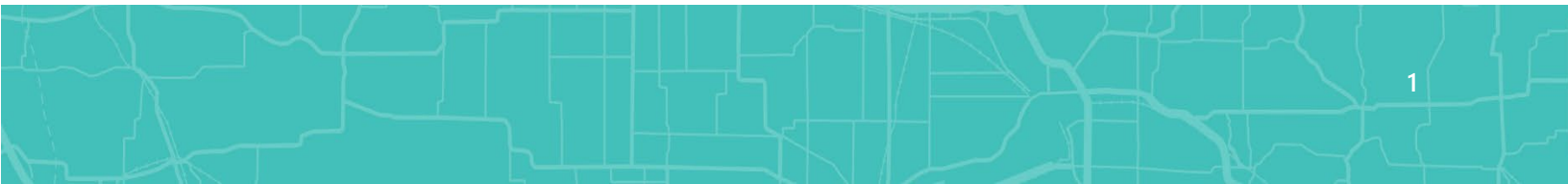
A. Census-Defined Urban Boundaries and Adjusted Urban Area Boundaries

The Urban Area Boundary (UAB) is important because the location of the boundary affects roadway eligibility for federal Surface Transportation Block Grant (STBG) funding. WisDOT’s funding program for federal STBG funding is the State Transportation Program (STP). It divides STBG funds into STP-Urban and STP-Rural. The UAB is also a factor for Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) Highway Performance Monitoring System (HPMS) reporting.

Areas *within* the UAB are considered to be **Urban**. All functionally classified, non-local roads within an urban area are eligible for STP-Urban funding. Areas *outside* the UAB are considered to be **Rural**. Functionally classified roads (Major Collectors and higher) outside the UAB are eligible for STP-Rural funding. When a rural county highway continues across the UAB into an urban area; that urban portion is eligible for STBG/STP-Urban rather than STBG/STP-Rural funding. See [WisDOT’s Local Program website](#) for additional information.

Also, the approval process is different for urban and rural areas. Approval for changes in an urban area are carried out by the municipal board or elected official; approval in rural areas is under jurisdiction of the county board.

Functional Classification is a way to define and categorize the various roles that streets and highways play in serving the state’s varied transportation needs. Arterial, Collector, and Local classifications categorize roads based on the amount and types of traffic the roads carry, characteristics of the roadways, land uses in the vicinity of the roadways, and the development and population density of the surrounding area.





The criteria used by the US Census Bureau for defining urban areas do not align well with transportation planning needs. Census-defined urban areas often do not correspond to known geographic or municipal boundaries and can be irregularly shaped. For this reason, FHWA allows states to adjust the Census-defined urban boundaries in creating the official urban boundary for planning and funding purposes.

Adjustment of these boundaries allows states and MPOs to smooth out the irregularities, ensure administrative continuity, and encompass fringe areas with residential, commercial, industrial, recreational, and/or national defense significance. Adjusting Census-defined Urban boundaries facilitates planning and programming by creating urban boundaries more appropriate for these purposes. The Adjusted UAB becomes the official Urban Area Boundary after it has been approved by FHWA.

WisDOT’s deadline for approval of adjusted Urban Area Boundaries is June 30, 2024. This provides a window of approximately 18 months to complete all review, adjustment, and approval of all UA boundaries, including bi-state MPOs. While FHWA has extended their deadline to April 2025, WisDOT will keep the June 2024 deadline. For any adjusted Urban Area Boundaries not approved by the 2025 deadline, the official urban area boundary will default to the Census-defined urban boundary. This outcome is not an acceptable option; WisDOT will review and work with local officials to adjust and approve every Urban Area Boundary in the state.

The Urban Area Boundary (UAB) should not be confused with the municipal or corporate boundary of a city, village, or town. These **CVT boundaries** are used for some transportation planning purposes but they do not affect eligibility for federal STBG funding.

B. Initial Preparation

Prior to the release of Census 2020 Urban Area Boundary data in December 2022—WisDOT-BPED met with DTSD Region Planners to discuss the overall boundary update and approval process, including communication with local governments, and timeline for completion. Early in 2023, BPED and the Region staff will hold individual meetings with MPO staff and where appropriate, RPC staff, to discuss the boundary adjustment process and answer any questions before the process gets underway. This advance discussion will hopefully minimize numerous iterations of boundary adjustments and back-and-forth communication during the process.

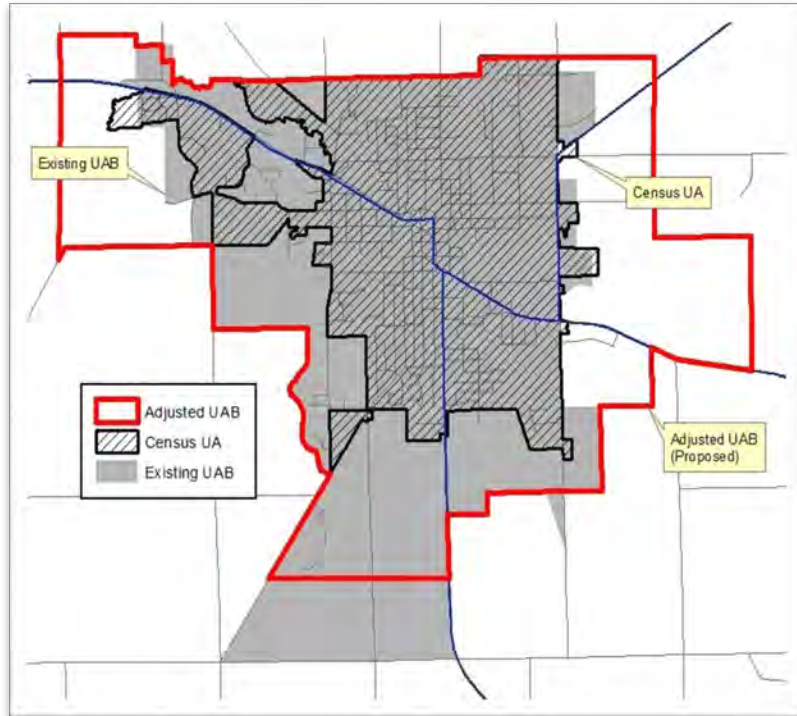
C. Current Urban Area Boundary and Census-Defined Boundary Overlay Map

BPED will begin the Urban Area Boundary review and adjustment process. Using Geographic Information Systems (GIS), BPED will overlay the 2020 Census-defined urban boundary on the existing UA boundary, with the changes highlighted. BPED will then coordinate with the MPOs, other Urban Areas, and respective WisDOT Region staff to create the initial proposed boundary adjustments for each Urban Area.

D. Proposed Urban Area Boundary Adjustments

For the MPOs, BPED will send the initial overlay map to the MPO contact(s), who will then draft the initial adjusted UA boundary map and send it to Region staff, BPED staff, and FHWA staff for review.

For all other urban areas, in addition to the overlay map, BPED will also develop the initial proposed boundary adjustments. and send that map to Region staff and FHWA before to reach concurrence on adjustments. BPED will then send the adjusted UA boundary map to local officials for review and approval. BPED and Region staff will concur on the final proposed adjusted boundary map. For additional information on this process, see WisDOT’s [Functional Classification and Boundary Approval Policy](#).



MPOs: The MPO Director or appropriate staff will coordinate review and approval by their Technical Advisory and/or Policy Board. BPED will coordinate with the WisDOT MPO Liaison, Region Planner, and FHWA throughout the boundary adjustment development and approval processes.

Other urban areas: WisDOT Region staff will coordinate communication with the urban areas in their respective region. They will initiate contact with the Municipal Clerk or other elected official (e.g., city planner, public works director, mayor, etc.) to explain the process and timeline for completion. This local official will coordinate the boundary map review and approval by the local board, transportation committee, or designated Urban Area committee.

Region staff will coordinate with BPED as needed during the local review and approval process to address any questions or concerns that arise.

Newly-Defined Urban Areas: If there are any “new” census-defined urban areas—populated places that did not meet the criteria for urban definition in 2010—they will switch from being rural places to urban places. Thus, their STBG/STP funding eligibility will change from rural to urban. As a result, the pool of potential funding recipients will change, and with it, the project prioritization factors used to consider and submit projects for STBG/STP funding.



For these newly defined Urban Areas, it is recommended that the Region staff meet with local official(s) (including BPED staff, if desired) to introduce them to the Urban Area concept and what it means for the community—primarily a change in federal funding source and consequent ramifications—as well as an overview of the process and timeline. WisDOT will use the same criteria and analysis for adjusting newly-designated urban area boundaries as are used for pre-existing urban areas. A pre-meeting may be beneficial for any other existing urban areas, too. Region staff will likely make this determination, but BPED also may come across a situation that might benefit from a pre-boundary adjustment meeting with the municipality.

Bi-state MPOs: WisDOT will propose adjustments for the Wisconsin portion of the MPO, through coordination with the DTSD Region Planner and MPO Director or delegated MPO staff person who, in turn, will coordinate closely with the neighboring state on the urban area boundary adjustments in that state. The bi-state MPOs in Wisconsin are:

- Duluth-Superior MPO (MN)
- La Crosse-La Crescent MPO (MN)
- Dubuque MPO (IA)
- Beloit-South Beloit MPO (IL)
- Round Lake Beach TMA (SEWRPC and CMAP (IL) MPOs)
- Metropolitan Council TMA (MN)

E. Review and Approval by MPO/UA Officials

For the MPOs, the MPO policy board reviews the proposed boundary adjustments, can ask questions and suggest changes to WisDOT, and upon concurrence with WisDOT, votes to approve the proposed UA boundary.

For the other urban areas, the municipal clerk—or other local elected official—receives the proposed UA Boundary map and presents it to the appropriate governing body (municipal board/committee) for review and approval. See WisDOT's [Functional Classification and Boundary Approval Policy](#).

If there are questions, or recommendations for changes to the proposed map, the local official should contact the Region Planner who then contacts BPED to discuss them and concur on any changes. BPED will send the revised map back to the Region Planner to send (or present to) the MPO/Local officials. This iterative process continues until all parties concur on the final proposed UA boundary map. The MPO/Local officials approve the proposed UA map and send documentation of approval to the Region Planner who forwards it to BPED.

BPED finalizes the proposed UA map and prepares documentation for internal approval.



F. Governor/WisDOT Secretary Approval

Federal Law (23 USC 101) states that State and local officials are responsible for approval of urban area boundaries. In Wisconsin, the Governor delegates state approval authority for adjusted Urban Area Boundaries to the State Transportation Secretary. WisDOT will send the proposed UA Boundary map to the WisDOT Secretary for approval/signature. Record of the approval is included with the proposed map.

First in the approval process, the MPOs and other urban areas will pass a resolution approving the adjusted UA boundary and send it to WisDOT-BPED. In the event that passage of a formal resolution is not possible in timely manner, passage of a motion to approve the changes and documented in the meeting minutes, is acceptable. Next, BPED will forward the adjusted boundary map to the WisDOT Secretary for written approval. Finally, BPED will send the map, along with both approval documents, in a submittal packet to FHWA-Wisconsin.

The Census-defined Urban Area—not the adjusted Urban Area—is used to determine the population of the Urban Area. This is a factor for urban areas just under the 50,000 population threshold for MPO designation or the 200,000 threshold for TMA designation.

G. FHWA Approval

Upon receipt of the adjusted UA Boundary map and approval documentation from BPED, FHWA will send a letter to WisDOT approving the adjusted boundary map.

H. Final UA Boundary Maps

Once FHWA as approved the adjusted UA boundary, it becomes official, Urban Area Boundary. Upon receipt of the final approval from FHWA-Wisconsin, BPED will add the approval dates to the final UAB maps and post them on its [website](#). The description of urban areas and UA boundaries on the website will be updated to align with the new urban definitions created from the 2020 Census. Finally, WisDOT will send a copy of the approved UAB map to FHWA and to the respective MPO.

An **outline** of key steps in the UA boundary adjustment process is included at the end of this document.

I. Metropolitan Planning Area (MPA) Boundaries

Federal Regulations governing Metropolitan Planning Area Boundaries are found in 23 CFR 450.312. Whereas the UA boundary typically defines the area of potential growth of the community over 10 years, the MPA boundary typically extends beyond that to encompass the area of expected urbanization of the metropolitan planning area 20 years into the future.

Transportation projects that fall within the MPA boundary are included in the MPO's Transportation Improvement Program (TIP).

The area between the approved Urban Area (UA) boundary and the Metropolitan Planning Area (MPA) boundary is considered **rural** for functional classification and funding purposes.

The MPA boundary is used by the federal government as the delineation between jurisdictions of adjoining MPOs.

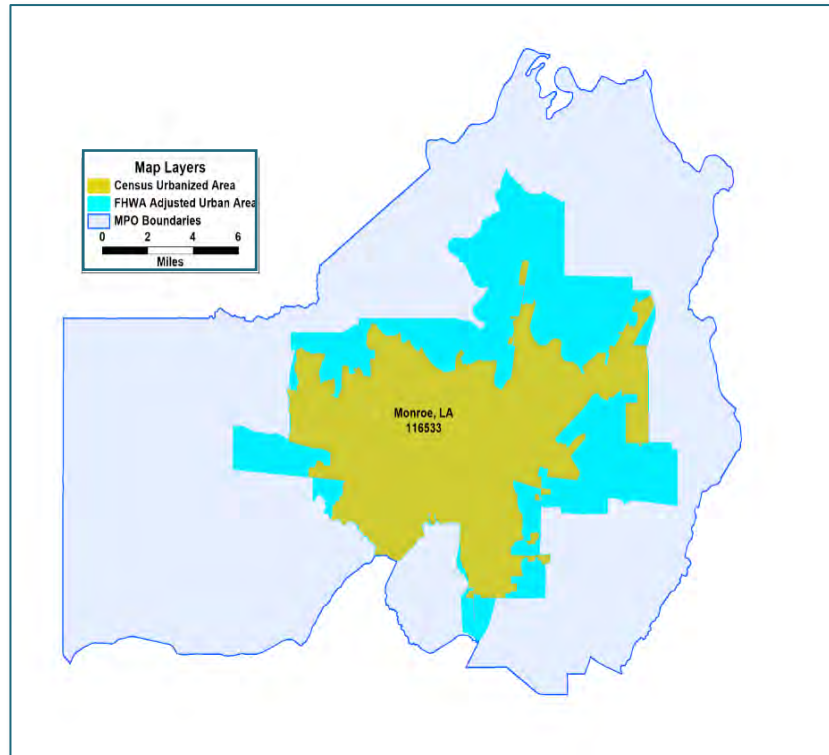
GUIDANCE DOCUMENT

The MPA boundary must include the entire area encompassed by the adjusted UAB. The MPA boundary usually extends beyond the UAB but can coincide with it, depending on the land use, transportation network, and anticipated growth and development in the areas adjacent to or very near the UA (as shown in the example to the right).

MPOs typically update and finalize their MPA boundaries after the adjusted UA boundary has been approved, although review and consideration of the MPA boundary may occur simultaneously with the urban area boundary adjustment process described above.

The final MPA boundary decisions belong to the MPO; WisDOT has more of an advisory role with regard to the location of the MPA boundary. However, as with WisDOT approval of the Adjusted Urban Area

Boundary, the MPA boundary/map has to be signed off by Department Secretary (as the designee of the Governor) and submitted to FHWA. FHWA acknowledges receipt of the MPA boundary but does not have approval responsibility and therefore does not sign off on the MPA boundary/map.



This guidance will be reviewed and may be revised after the US Census Bureau has released the urban area data, or after the urban boundary review and adjustment process has begun, to make sure it appropriately addresses any previously unanticipated situations. BPED will clarify the current information and provide additional guidance that may be helpful.



Part 2: Technical Considerations

This section comprises the various technical considerations and recommendations—the “rules”—for making adjustments to the Census-defined Urban Area Boundary (UAB).

- 1. The adjusted boundary must include all of the Census-defined boundary.** The adjusted UAB can be concurrent with, or outside of, the Census-defined boundary but *cannot be inside it*.
- 2. The adjusted boundary must include only one Census-defined Urban Area.** This is a one-to-one relationship. The adjusted UAB cannot include two or more Census-defined Urban Areas.
- 3. The adjusted boundary should encompass one contiguous area.** If the Census-defined boundary has resulted in a non-contiguous, disconnected portion of the urban area, the adjusted boundary can be expanded to include this area, creating a contiguous urban area.
- 4. Include within the adjusted boundary areas expected to be developed in the next 10 years.** Because the urban boundary adjustment process occurs only once every ten years, include areas that are likely to experience growth and development during the upcoming ten year window—areas which might be included in the next census boundary definition.
- 5. Eliminate inaccurate, unreasonable, or vaguely apparent boundaries.** Use physical features (e.g., roads, rivers, parcel/property lines, water bodies/shorelines) to define the urban area. The availability of maps and satellite imagery through Google, Bing, USGS (US Geological Survey), and NAIP (National Agriculture Imagery Program) has made it relatively easy to see physical features, roads, residential and commercial developments, and other land uses in considering prudent boundary adjustments.
- 6. Adjust portions of the Census-defined boundary that do not follow a recognizable feature.** When the Census-defined boundary results in an irregular dip or bump-out that does not follow a physical, land use, or roadway feature, and has no apparent relationship to the urban area, smooth out this portion of the boundary using a clearly-definable feature as previously discussed.
- 7. Include all of an incorporated city or village.** If the Census boundary includes part of an incorporated community, include all of the community to avoid the situation where a city or village has both urban and rural portions. Funding eligibility is a key consideration here; it is recommended to have all roads within an urban community be eligible for STP-Urban funding, rather having some roads eligible for STP-Urban funds and others eligible for STP-Rural funds. However, these decisions should take into account recent annexations and extraterritorial zoning areas, as well as potential rural versus urban funding implications. In some cases, a rural portion could stay separate from the adjusted urban area (remain outside the adjusted boundary), but only with compelling justification.



This rule also applies to unincorporated developed areas—commercial, industrial, residential, institutional, etc.—*near* an urban area. If the Census-defined boundary cuts through one of these developments, it is recommended to adjust the boundary to include the entire developed area.

8. **Include typically urban land uses within the urban area boundary.** These are generators *other than* commercial, industrial, and residential uses. These include transit service routes such as bus lines and passenger terminals, as well as golf courses, airports, athletic fields, and ferry terminals, for example, even though these types of land uses can be located in rural locations, too.
9. **Ensure that the adjusted boundary includes or excludes all roads that run concurrent with the boundary.** Do not create or perpetuate a situation where some 'border roads' are within the urban area and others are outside the urban area, or where a single roadway has one or more segments inside and one or more segments outside the boundary. The UAB should be adjusted to include all border roads. Again, funding eligibility is a consideration. Note: Adjusting the boundary to *exclude* all 'border roads' is only possible in cases where the *Census-defined boundary does not include any portions of those border roads*. As mentioned at the beginning of this section, adjusting the urban area boundary *inside* of the Census-defined boundary is not permitted. Thus, in such cases, the only option is to adjust the UAB outward to include all border roads.
10. **Include an entire interchange either inside or outside the urban area boundary.** Often, interchanges exist on 'border roads' as described above. In such cases, make sure that the UAB is adjusted to include the entire interchange within the boundary, not just some of the ramps or auxiliary lanes. As is the case with roads, it might not be possible to adjust the boundary to *exclude* the entire interchange because the Census-defined urban boundary cannot be adjusted inward. Thus, if the Census-defined boundary cuts through the interchange, the only option is to adjust the boundary outward to include all interchange roads and ramps.
11. **Consider the functional classification of roads near the urban boundary.** Roadway Functional Classification and urban boundary placement are closely related. See WisDOT's [Functional Classification Criteria and Procedures](#) for detailed information. Functional classification review begins after the boundary adjustment process concludes; therefore, it is important to consider existing classified and unclassified roads, as well as planned roadways near the UAB when considering boundary adjustments, especially within the context of land use, spacing, and continuity. Functional classification issues should not be the primary factor in determining if and where to adjust an urban boundary, but rather, considered alongside the boundary adjustment criteria above.



Part 3: Overview of Process Steps*

1. US Census releases Urban Area (UA) Boundary data (shape files)
2. BPED creates initial UA maps showing:
 - Previous adjusted UA boundary
 - Current Census-defined UA boundary
 - Differences between the two boundaries highlighted
- 3a. BPED sends initial individual overlay map to each **MPO** (UA w/population = 50,000+)
 - Coordinate initial proposed boundary adjustments with MPO, Region, and FHWA via virtual meeting(s), as often as needed
 - Inform (cc: on communication) Planning Section MPO Liaisons
 - BPED reaches concurrence with MPO and respective Region and create final proposed adjusted UA boundary map
 - MPO (Transportation Advisory Committee and/or Policy Board) reviews proposed adjusted UA boundaries
 - MPO Policy Board approves adjusted UA boundary map
- 3b. BPED sends draft individual adjusted UA map to the other **UAs** (population = 5,000 to 49,999)
 - Coordinate with Region staff and FHWA on initial proposed boundary adjustments
 - Region sends initial communication to Municipal Clerk (or other official) for UAs in their region
 - For new UAs, Region schedules (virtual) meetings to explain the concept/process
 - Affected City/Village boards, designated Urban Area committee, or elected official(s) review proposed adjusted UA boundaries
 - BPED discusses comments/suggestions from municipality with Region (and respective local officials if warranted) and makes any revisions to draft UA map.
 - Affected City/Village boards or designated Urban Area committee reviews and approves proposed adjusted UA boundaries
4. Upon receipt of approval/concurrence from MPOs and other UAs, BPED sends maps to WisDOT SO (as Governor's designee) for approval
5. Upon receipt of approved maps from WisDOT SO, BPED sends approval packet to FHWA for approval
6. Upon receipt of approval letter from FHWA, BPED creates final UAB maps and posts on WisDOT's internet site
7. Deadline for approval of all adjusted UA Boundary maps is June 30, 2024

* Steps 3a and 3b can occur simultaneously.