
April 26, 2023

Re: Urban Area boundary adjustment

To: Urban Area Partners

Introduction

The purpose of this memo is to provide criteria and guidance for revising and updating the Urban Area boundaries within the State of Iowa. The Urban Area boundary is necessary for statistical reporting, distinguishing between urban and rural functional classification, and determining eligibility for funding.

Following each Decennial Census, Federal law requires cooperation among the States and a “responsible local official or their designee” to update the Urban Area boundaries to meet Federal-Aid highway program requirements consistent with State and local planning.

On December 29, 2022, the United States Census Bureau announced the list of Urban Areas based on the 2020 Decennial Census. The official announcement occurred via the Federal Register, with the notice providing lists of Urban Areas and their respective 2020 Census populations. On January 18, 2023, the 2020 Census Shapefiles with population and household numbers were also released. These files will be used in the Urban Area boundary adjustment.

Urban Areas – Criteria, Definitions, and Details

The following information is from the notice from the Census Bureau to the Federal Register on March 24, 2022, ([Link](#)), which highlights the final criteria and definitions used in the identification of Urban Areas.

1. Select Final 2020 Urban Area Criteria:

- a. Identification of Initial Urban Area Cores – Aggregation of census blocks with a housing unit density of 425. Use of land cover data to identify territory with a high degree of imperviousness.
- b. Minimum Qualifying Threshold – An area will qualify as urban if it contains at least 2,000 housing units or has a population of at least 5,000.
- c. Types of Urban Areas – Urban areas will no longer be distinguished as either an “urbanized area” or an “urban cluster.” All qualifying areas will be designated “urban areas.”
- d. Inclusion of Noncontiguous Territory via Hops and Jumps – Maximum hop distance 0.5 miles, maximum jump distance 1.5 miles, and no hops after jumps. Intervening, low-density blocks are not included in the urban area [non-contiguous parts of the Urban Area are now possible].

2. Select Definitions:

- a. Census Block: A geographic area bounded by visible and/or invisible features shown on a map prepared by the Census Bureau. A census block is the smallest geographic entity for which the Census Bureau tabulates decennial census data.

- b. Census Tract: A small, relatively permanent statistical geographic subdivision of a county or county equivalent defined for the tabulation and publication of Census Bureau data. The primary goal of the census tract program is to provide a set of nationally consistent small, statistical geographic units, with stable boundaries that facilitate analysis of data across time.
- c. Contiguous – A geographic term referring to two or more areas that share either a common boundary or at least one common point.
- d. Noncontiguous – A geographic term referring to two or more areas that do not share a common boundary or a common point along their boundaries, such that the areas are separated by intervening territory.
- e. Urban Area – A statistical geographic entity consisting of a densely settled core created from census blocks and contiguous qualifying territory that together have at least 2,000 housing units or 5,000 persons.

The Urban Area boundary adjustment will involve all Urban Areas with a population of 5,000 or greater. This amounts to 66 urban areas, which are named after the most populated urban area within the high-density nucleus of the area.

The 2020 Census also designated five communities as Urban Areas, but only based on having 2,000 households or more: Cherokee, Harlan, Manchester, Shenandoah, and Vinton. These communities get the designation of “Urban Area”, but as they do not meet the definition of that term as per U.S. Code, their boundaries cannot be adjusted. The U.S. Code definition (23 U.S.C. 101(a)(35)) reads “URBAN AREA -The term “urban area” means an urbanized area or, in the case of an urbanized area encompassing more than one State, that part of the urbanized area in each such State, or urban place as designated by the Bureau of the Census having a population of 5,000 or more and not within any urbanized area, within boundaries to be fixed by responsible State and local officials in cooperation with each other, subject to approval by the Secretary. Such boundaries shall encompass, at a minimum, the entire urban place designated by the Bureau of the Census...”

The Urban Area boundaries are considered preliminary and only final once signed and dated by the FHWA Iowa Division.

Local Agency Role

Local agencies will partner with their District Transportation Planner to conduct a review, facilitate adjustments, and adopt the adjusted Urban Areas. The details of how a local agency will conduct these activities is listed below in this document. Each local agency will designate a “responsible local official or their designee” to represent and sign-off on the final adjusted boundary on behalf of the governmental body.

1. Metropolitan Planning Organizations will appoint a person from the MPO Policy Board.
2. Urban Areas that are not Metropolitan Planning Organizations will appoint a person from the principal city. Examples of such individuals can include the principal city’s Mayor or City Clerk.

District Transportation Planner Role

The District Transportation Planner will provide DOT materials and resources to aid in the adjustment of the boundary, including the submission of the draft boundary to an online Geographic Information System interface.

The Iowa DOT would like all Urban Area boundaries entered in the online GIS tool by September 3, 2023. Meeting this deadline helps Systems Planning Bureau staff to review, finalize, and compile all urban areas for the December 29, 2023, deadline.

Guidance Materials

The following information will help guide participants through the Urban Area boundary adjustment.

This guidance includes the following:

1. A set of guidance criteria to follow when making adjustments.
2. Links to online resources and major FHWA timeline events.

Guidance Criteria for Establishing or Revising Urban Area Boundaries

1. Urban Area boundaries can consist of unconnected zones encompassing one or more contiguous municipalities or other urban areas. Rural or non-developed areas connecting the urban areas are no longer required, and “islands” of urban areas are allowed. In 2010, islands were not allowed, but were connected with boundaries encompassing roadways and strip development.
2. An Urban Area boundary may include any adjacent area that has or is developing urban characteristics. “Urban” characteristics include the following features: residential, commercial, and industrial development; streets or highways, possibly with sidewalks and curbs; street lighting; sanitary and storm drainage facilities; transit service; police and fire protection. All of these characteristics do not necessarily have to be present, but sufficient evidence must be available to show that the area has or is developing urban characteristics. Parks, stadiums, airports and other transportation terminals, schools, and other similar uses shall be considered as urban in character and may be included within the Urban Area boundary if adjacent to the urban area.
3. Strip development along a single roadway will not in and of itself be sufficient for inclusion in an Urban Area boundary.
4. Two or more incorporated places, of which at least one is 5,000 or more in population, which are linked together by adjoining boundaries or intervening urban development meeting the required population density shall be considered as a single federal-aid urban area.
5. Urban Area boundaries shall be as simple and direct as possible and so delineated that they can be in the field from data shown on maps. If boundaries are proposed outside the Census

boundary or corporate limits, they should follow geographical features such as township lines, streams, railroads, streets, or census geography.

6. Wherever the Urban Area boundary follows a highway, road, or street, that road shall be entirely within the boundary.

7. Boundaries should be located to smooth out irregularities, maintain administrative continuity of peripheral routes, and encompass fringe areas having residential, commercial, industrial, and/or national defense significance. Careful consideration should be given to the selection of boundary locations that will include logical control points for transportation linkages such as interchanges, major crossroads, etc., so that the inclusion of such areas will not unduly distort the urban area as would otherwise be selected. Boundaries should not, however, be modified to accommodate a single project.

8. Urban Area boundary determinations should consider the service areas of transit operations. Such considerations are particularly important if boundaries are to determine eligibility of capital projects.

9. In cases where a single Urban Area extends across state borders, the contiguous states are encouraged to agree on the proposed boundary locations at the state line and avoid irregularities.

10. Special conditions not otherwise covered will be considered on an individual basis.

11. If you have any questions about the process or boundaries, please contact UAB.SystemsPlanning@iowadot.us.

The adjusted boundary may require Federal Functional Classification changes, such as rural minor collector to urban collector. The Systems Planning Bureau will make these changes as required and submit them to the FHWA for approval. Any additional changes will need to follow the usual process.

Additional Guidance

1. Census Issues FAQ - [Link](#)
2. Census Issues Schedule - [Link](#)
3. Federal Register - [Link](#)
4. FHWA "Highway Functional Classification Concepts, Criteria and Procedures, 2013 Edition." Section 6 starting on page 55 of the pdf discusses Urban boundaries - [Link](#)
5. Federal-Aid Policy Guide - [Link](#)

A Selection of FHWA Schedule Activities

March 24, 2022 - The Census Bureau published a Federal Register notice with the final criteria for defining urban areas based on the results of the 2020 Decennial Census (87 FR 16706).

December 29, 2022 - The Census Bureau published a Federal Register notice announcing the qualifying urban areas based on the results of the 2020 Decennial Census.

January 18, 2023 - FHWA published geographic shapefiles for the 2020 urban areas on HPGIS with population and housing unit data.

Spring/Summer 2023 - USDOT (FHWA and FTA) will publish a Federal Register notice designating Transportation Management Areas (TMAs) for urban areas with populations more than 200,000, as determined by the Census Bureau and the results of the 2020 Decennial Census.

Before October 1, 2023 (Before the first full Federal fiscal year after the Census Bureau published the urban areas based on the results of the 2020 Decennial Census) - States should revisit their intra-State distribution formulas for metropolitan planning (PL) funds allocations to MPOs to ensure that the new Census 2020 population figures are being used and that any new MPOs are part of the calculation.

Before the next regularly scheduled metropolitan transportation plan update, after October 1, 2023, or within 4 years of the designation of the new urban area boundary, whichever occurs first - Existing MPOs should expand their Metropolitan Planning Areas (MPAs) to include all territory in urban areas with populations more than 50,000 as determined by the Census Bureau and the results of the 2020 Decennial Census (if necessary).

December 29, 2023 (1 year after the Census Bureau published the urban areas based on the results of the 2020 Decennial Census) - Adjustments to urban area boundaries should be approved by the State transportation agency and FHWA Division Office.

December 29, 2025 – Changes to highway functional classification associated with the Census-defined urban area boundaries (or the FHWA-approved urban area boundaries if adjustments are made) should be approved by the State transportation agency and FHWA Division Office.

If you have further questions on this matter, please contact me at 319-286-4907 or by email at sam.shea@iowadot.us.

Sincerely,



Sam J. Shea
Transportation Planner, District 6