

ADVANCING TRANSPORTATION EQUITY



District 1
October 2020



Executive summary

As part of its 20-year Statewide Multimodal Transportation Plan, the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) seeks to better understand how transportation affects and is affected by equity. Beginning in 2017, MnDOT launched district-specific community conversations to inform equitable transportation planning and practice. Through this initiative, MnDOT has engaged in conversations with a wide variety of groups, agencies, and organizations (referred to in this report collectively as “organizations”) that work with and represent underserved communities in Minnesota.

As of summer 2020, MnDOT had coordinated in-person conversations between its staff and representatives from community organizations in Districts 1, 2, 4, 6, and 8. These community conversations help MnDOT develop a deeper understanding of the people it serves, determine which key communities it needs to learn more about, and identify organizations interested in transportation equity.

The conversations in District 1, as well as the other districts, covered a wide range of topics that enhance MnDOT’s understanding of transportation’s role in people’s lives and the opportunities or barriers people face based on available transportation modes. MnDOT will work internally and at the district level to implement changes based on findings from the transportation equity studies and also intends to share these District 1 findings with partners to help inform their work.

Methods for the study

In District 1, out of the 45 organizations contacted for this initiative, MnDOT engaged in 32 community conversations with representatives from 34 organizations serving or representing key communities. Each organization had strong ties to the key communities identified for this project. MnDOT engaged with communities:

- Currently **underrepresented** in transportation decision-making processes
- Experiencing **known inequities** in transportation access or outcomes
- Facing **unique transportation needs** not addressed well by current approaches

Teams of two interviewers met community representatives in person, asked questions using an interview guide, and asked follow-up questions as appropriate.

Themes and findings

Several themes emerged from the community conversations in District 1, including that transportation is deeply connected with other aspects of life such as employment, health care, social services, housing, and recreational activities. The available modes of transportation in District 1 both create and limit access to jobs, school activities, medical appointments, counseling and other support services, social and cultural events, and shopping at grocery stores and other retail establishments.

The themes from the District 1 transportation equity initiatives are summarized below and discussed further in later sections of the report.



People and community connections

Participants in the conversations often highlighted how transportation access affects the communities they represent and work with. The D1 community conversations identified the following important points about key communities and transportation:

- **People with low incomes:** Without a private vehicle, it is difficult to access jobs, grocery stores, pharmacies, medical appointments, and social and community activities. However, alternative options to owning a vehicle, such as public transit and ride-hailing services, are limited in District 1, especially outside of the Duluth area.
- **Rural residents:** Long distances between destinations in rural areas make travel difficult. Regional transit service for rural areas is limited in terms of places served, frequency of service, and hours of operation.
- **Black, Indigenous, and People of Color:** Participants noted concerns with transportation challenges and inequities, a lack of diversity among transportation decision-makers and at public transportation meetings, and different treatment by transportation providers of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color compared with white people.
- **People with disabilities:** Participants mentioned a range of transportation challenges, including poor access to sidewalks, difficulties with transit travel, and transportation providers unwilling or unable to assist people who use wheelchairs. Most participants who commented about transportation challenges for veterans focused on veterans with disabilities and difficulties they face traveling to jobs and health services.
- **Older adults:** Some older adults with declining vision or other physical limitations need transportation to health care providers, stores, and social activities, and they have limited options for curbside or door-to-door assistance outside of informal arrangements with family and friends.
- **Youth:** Some young people have only limited transportation options and consequently miss programs, events, and social occasions, including activities in school districts where after-school bus service is not available.
- **Women and girls:** Participants noted transportation problems for women and girls. They are less likely to walk or bicycle because they may be afraid for their safety, some are trapped in abusive relationships because they lack access to transportation they need to seek relief and shelter, and some pregnant women in rural areas face challenges getting to hospitals and clinics with obstetric services.



Transportation and infrastructure barriers

The transportation modes available in District 1 create and limit opportunities for members of the key communities.

- **Private vehicles:** Personal vehicles are the preferred or most critical mode of transportation for the key communities, but some people cannot afford to own and operate them. Some depend on personal vehicles owned by family and friends for transportation.
- **Public transit:** Public transit is critical for many community members, and most participants said the current level of transit in District 1 falls short of what is needed to meet needs. Difficulties include limited hours of operation, infrequent service, long wait and travel times, and the fees charged to use transit services.
- **Walking and bicycling:** Many community members walk in order to access basic needs and services, especially during the warmer months. Some bicycle, too. Barriers to both walking and biking include

safety concerns about high vehicle speeds and traffic volumes, winter weather, a lack of infrastructure or inadequate maintenance of existing infrastructure, and physical limitations that rule out walking or biking for some people.

- **Other transportation modes:** Community members use a range of additional transportation options—or might if they had the opportunity. These include taxis and other paid ride-hailing services, informal ridesharing and carpooling, volunteer driver programs, and medical transportation services.
- **Infrastructure barriers:** Some community members face infrastructure challenges that create transportation barriers or hinder travel. Participants cited poor pavement conditions, lack of access from some neighborhoods to major thoroughfares, and temporary challenges stemming from maintenance, repair, and construction projects by MnDOT, cities, and counties.



Public engagement limitations

Most participants offered positive feedback on public engagement efforts by MnDOT and other government entities, but almost all also cited barriers. Participants said some members from the key communities feel unwelcome and unheard at public discussions of transportation issues. Other community members simply do not have time to engage on transportation issues because they are wrestling with challenges more central to their well-being and survival.

Participants offered suggestions for how MnDOT can better engage on transportation with key communities, including:

- Meet people where they are and attend the meetings and events of community groups, instead of holding separate public meetings.
- Engage community members who are interested in projects or issues as champions who can help MnDOT.
- Address transportation, childcare, and other needs for community members who want to participate in public discussions and decisions.
- Make sure people feel validated and acknowledged.
- Serve refreshments to make participants feel appreciated and welcomed.



Equity impacts

Participants offered a variety of perspectives on equity, most commonly framing equity in terms of lowering barriers for people and matching resources to their different levels of need. Many participants discussed how transportation advances equity for members of the key communities—and how a lack of transportation limits equity. Most cited transportation equity as important for access to jobs. Participants also mentioned equitable access to health care, grocery stores, affordable retail establishments, educational opportunities, affordable health care, childcare, and other supportive social services.

Participants offered the following ideas for improving transportation equity:

- Designated lanes and traffic-signal priority for buses as a way to speed up public transit
- Discounted or free bus passes for riders with low incomes, teens, and disabled veterans
- A nonprofit taxicab service that might be able to offer free trips to qualifying riders
- Grocery delivery services for those who cannot easily travel to stores

- Telemedicine services to reduce the need for those with limited transportation options to travel
- Continued good work by MnDOT to secure grants and plan projects that meet community needs

Recommendations

District 1 leaders, District 1 staff, and staff from MnDOT's Central Office reviewed these themes and findings from the community conversations and developed potential strategies to address challenges and advance equity. Their review of themes and findings resulted in the following recommendations for how MnDOT can advance transportation equity:

- 1. MnDOT should continue to work with local partners to improve safety and accessibility for people who walk and bicycle to their destinations.**
- 2. District 1 should continue and expand its in-person and virtual public engagement efforts to involve members of key, underserved communities and to learn about transportation issues and opportunities beyond those tied to planned MnDOT projects.**
- 3. MnDOT should work with transit providers and local officials to make transit travel safer and to increase the involvement of key, underserved communities in transit policy and decisions.**
- 4. MnDOT and District 1 should explore ways to improve transit service in rural areas, in collaboration with Regional Transportation Coordinating Councils (RTCCs).**
- 5. District 1 and MnDOT should enhance efforts to address infrastructure challenges that create transportation barriers, including disruption on routes during maintenance and construction.**

These recommendations are discussed in more detail in the recommendations section of the full District 1 report on Advancing Transportation Equity, [available here](#) in the list of resources and links. That section of the report includes specific strategies the MnDOT team developed to advance each of these five recommendations.