

ADVANCING TRANSPORTATION EQUITY



District 4
November 2020



Executive summary

As part of its 20-year Statewide Multimodal Transportation Plan, the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) sought to better understand how transportation affects and is affected by equity. MnDOT developed a pilot project to conduct community conversations with various groups, agencies, and organizations (hereafter referred to as “organizations”) working with and representing underserved communities in Minnesota.

Beginning in 2017, MnDOT launched district-specific efforts to engage communities through conversations to inform equitable transportation planning and practice. MnDOT coordinated in-person conversations between its staff and representatives from community organizations, first in District 2 in 2017, then in District 8 in 2018, and then in District 1, District 4, and District 6 in 2019. These community conversations help MnDOT develop a deeper understanding of the people who live in the different districts, determine which key communities MnDOT needs to learn more about, and identify organizations that work with and represent those key communities.

The conversations in District 4—and the other districts—included a wide range of topics selected to enhance MnDOT’s understanding of the role transportation plays in people’s lives and the opportunities or consequences people face based on available transportation modes. In addition to its continued work internally and with districts to implement changes based on the findings, MnDOT intends to share its District 4 findings with partners from this initiative to help inform their work.

Methods for the study

For the District 4 community conversations, MnDOT engaged in 31 conversations with representatives from 34 organizations with strong ties to key communities identified in a regional demographic analysis (54 organizations were contacted in total). MnDOT engaged with the following types of communities:

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

Teams of two interviewers visited with the 34 organizations in person and asked questions using a semi-structured interview guide, where interviewers followed a common conversational structure but could pursue other relevant topics as they arose.

Themes and findings

Several themes emerged from the community conversations in District 4, including that transportation is deeply connected with other aspects of life such as employment, health care, childcare, affordable housing, and recreation. Further, the available modes within the transportation system in District 4 both create and limit access to jobs, school, medical appointments, social services, shopping, and social events.

These themes are summarized below and discussed further in later sections of the report.



People and community connections

Participants in the conversations often highlighted how access to services and amenities affects the communities they represent and work with, such as people with low incomes, people of color, older adults, and people with disabilities.

- **People with low incomes:** Owning a private vehicle is expensive. 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 (e.g., public transit and ride-hailing services) are limited, especially outside of the larger cities in District 4.
- **Black, Indigenous, and people of color:** Participants expressed a lack of trust in government and talked about a lack of diverse representation in government and other local decision-making groups. Additionally, participants discussed language barriers as a transportation challenge for people whose primary language is not English.
- **Older adults:** Older adults may require transportation services to access medical needs, purchase goods, and to attend social activities. However, there are limited transportation options available providing curb-to-curb or door-to-door assistance to access the transit vehicles.
- **People with disabilities:** People with disabilities are among the communities transported the most often by transit providers. However, conversation participants described limited transportation options available with wheelchair access or other mobility accommodations.
- **Access to basic needs and services in rural areas:** Over three-quarters of the conversations included descriptions of the rural nature District 4 and how it affects people's ability to access basic needs and services such as employment and economic opportunities, health care, childcare, and affordable housing, grocery stores, and recreation.



Transportation and infrastructure barriers

Participants shared that the modes available within the transportation system create and limit opportunities for communities in District 4.

- **Private vehicles:** Private vehicles are the preferred or most critical method of transportation for the communities in District 4. Certain community members such as people with low incomes or new immigrants may not own a personal vehicle or have a driver's license so they rely on taxi services and friends and families for rides.
- **Public transit:** Public transit is an important but limited transportation option for older adults, low-income residents, immigrants, people with disabilities, and people without private vehicles. Barriers to using public transit include limited hours of operation, infrequent service, long wait and travel times, and the cost of using transit services.
- **Walking and bicycling:** Walking and bicycling may be critical methods of transportation for certain community members during warmer months, but these are often limited to locations with bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure including connected sidewalks, trail systems, and bicycle programs.
- **Other transportation modes:** Other modes of transportation, including volunteer drivers, formal and informal ride-sharing, ride-hailing, medical transportation services, and veterans' services fill critical gaps for accessing locations when available.



Public engagement limitations

Most commonly, participants said information and opportunities to provide input are not shared directly with organizations or community members. Additionally, frequently used methods of engagement may not be meeting the needs of communities such as immigrants, veterans, and older adults. Participants in several conversations said they would feel more informed if they were directly engaged (e.g., face-to-face, throughout a project's lifecycle) and communications were:

- Offered to communities through formats they are most likely to use (e.g., holding meetings where communities already gather)
- Accessible and meaningful (e.g., using plain language, providing translations, stating the impact on the community)
- Centralized (e.g., through a centralized information hub, or automated alert system)



Equity impacts

When asked what equity means to their organizations, more than half of participants discussed equity in terms of equality of access and equality of opportunities. Other equity definitions shared by participants included a lack of bias, treating everyone as equals, a focus on the highest-need groups, equitable access to the decision-making process, and matching services and resources with needs. A few participants defined equity specifically as the equal provision of services or equal share of resources.

Participants described the importance of transportation in equitable access to employment and job opportunities, critical services such as medical care, and other community amenities. Additionally, a lack of investment in transportation can have a disproportionately negative impact on specific communities, including on people with physical disabilities, people with low incomes, people who do not drive, and people who rely on pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure.

Conversations also highlighted specific opportunities for MnDOT and its partners to advance equity in transportation, including the following suggestions to increase:

- Coordination with human service providers
- Access and funding for public transit
- Access to private vehicle transportation
- Focus on pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure
- Coordination with local governments and transportation partners

Recommendations

The District 4 management team, District 4 staff, and staff from the MnDOT Central Office reviewed these findings from the community conversations and developed potential strategies to address challenges and

advance equity. Results from the review and observations from MAD consultants resulted in the following recommendations for MnDOT:

- 1. MnDOT should work with transit providers, local government planning departments, and transit partners including Regional Transit Coordinating Councils to expand transit services and improve coordination in District 4.**
- 2. District 4 should update its district public engagement strategies based on the equity conversation findings.**
- 3. MnDOT should collaborate with local partners to address key communities' walking and bicycling needs.**
- 4. MnDOT should coordinate with local partners during their planning processes to address land use and economic development needs.**
- 5. MnDOT should continue to measure the impacts of its efforts to increase transportation equity.**
- 6. MnDOT should continue to establish and build relationships with groups, agencies, and organizations not traditionally engaged in transportation conversations**

These recommendations are discussed in more detail in the full report.