

ADVANCING TRANSPORTATION EQUITY



District 7
December 2021



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.

Starting with District 2 in 2017, MnDOT launched district-specific efforts to engage communities through conversations to inform equitable transportation planning and practice. MnDOT continued to coordinate in-person conversations between its staff and representatives from community organizations in District 8 in 2018, and then in District 1, District 4, and District 6 in 2019. In 2020, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, MnDOT conducted community conversations in District 7 through remote meeting technology. 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.

Similar to previous districts, the conversations in District 7 included a wide range of topics that has contributed to improving 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 7 findings with partners from this initiative to help inform their work.

Methods for the study

In District 7, MnDOT engaged with representatives of 26 organizations with strong ties to key communities identified through a demographic analysis of the region. These organizations represented 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 met with the organizations via Microsoft Teams and asked questions using a semi-structured interview guide, in which interviewers followed a common conversational structure but could pursue other relevant topics as they arose.

Themes and findings



People and community connections

In District 7, participants emphasized that access to services and other needs are often affected by factors such as income, race and ethnicity, age, and ability.

- **COVID-19 pandemic:** The District 7 transportation equity community conversations occurred shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic began, which created many disruptions and challenges in transportation, including reduced hours and social distancing requirements that limited transit operation hours, availability of formal and informal ridesharing options, and availability of access to broadband internet, creating barriers to accessing online services (e.g., telehealth services). These pandemic-related transportation limitations contributed to loss of opportunities to participate in social and recreational needs, and increased demand for mental health services.
- **People with low incomes:** Personal vehicle ownership and maintenance is often expensive for many people with low incomes. Given the distances needed to travel and inability to rely on transit due to limited hours and service areas, accessing employment, shopping, medical and health needs, and social and recreational activities is challenging for people with low incomes.
- **Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and immigrants:** Community members may often face multiple barriers due to income, citizenship status, and ability to speak English. These community members have experienced historical discriminatory practices and treatment leading to distrust of government, and language barriers may prevent effective engagement at the local level.
- **Older adults:** Older adults, especially those aging in place, require adequate transportation access for a broad array of services, including health and medical services, and social and recreational needs, often relying on friends and family for transportation needs.
- **People with disabilities:** For people with disabilities, transportation barriers often include limited availability of ADA-compliant transit service, as well as infrastructure challenges such as lack of accessibility ramps, audible signals, and curb cuts, which can limit independent mobility. Where transit is available, inability to access vehicles independently is also a challenge.
- **Veterans:** Veterans in the district face multiple barriers, including low incomes and limited access to affordable housing and health and medical services, especially lack of easy access to mental health services.
- **Women and girls:** Specifically for vulnerable women and girls, such as those experiencing homelessness or domestic violence and those who have been formerly incarcerated or victims of sex trafficking, there are limited trusted sources of transportation available. When in a crisis situation, women and girls often cannot rely on public transit due to limited hours of operation and service areas.
- **Access to basic needs and services in rural areas:** Most participants discussed how access to critical needs and services are affected by the rural nature of the district, specifically highlighting how the concentration of health and medical services, employment, and affordable housing in specific parts of the region (such as larger cities) limit people's ability to access these services and needs without a personal vehicle.



Transportation and infrastructure barriers

Participants discussed how the modes of transportation available create and limit opportunities for key communities in District 7. A common theme in the conversations is that often destinations with critical services and needs are inaccessible without a personal vehicle.

- **Personal vehicles:** Personal vehicles are the necessary mode of transportation in the district due to the distances needed to travel and limited hours and service area of transit. People with low incomes or immigrants and refugees may not own a car or have a driver's license, or be familiar with driving, leading to reliance on friends and family for transportation.
- **Public transit:** Public transit, while important for many key communities including older adults, people with disabilities, and people with low incomes, have limited hours of operation in parts of the district, including infrequent service, and can be expensive and inefficient due to long travel and wait times.
- **Walking and bicycling:** There are barriers to walking and bicycling due to limited infrastructure, including missing, incomplete, and poorly maintained sidewalks, and safe and accessible pathways to popular destinations.
- **Other transportation modes:** Volunteer driver's program, formal and informal ridesharing, and medical transportation fill gaps but are limited and more so due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.



Public engagement limitations

While participants in conversations identified successful engagement efforts in the district, they also emphasized that frequently used engagement efforts may not be as effective with certain communities, such as BIPOC, immigrants and refugees, Veterans, and people with disabilities. Historical experiences of discrimination and unfair treatment coupled with a perception that their input is not valued are barriers particularly significant to communities of color. Suggestions for improvement include:

- Continuing ongoing efforts to improve rapport with communities, including events to hear directly from community members.
- Partnership with local community organizers, liaisons, and community leaders.
- Holding events at places where community members frequent, making it more accessible for members to participate.



Equity impacts

When asked what equity means to their organization, participants offered a variety of perspectives, most commonly defining equity as equal access and opportunity or ensuring people have positive outcomes regardless of abilities and background. Several also discussed equity in terms of targeting or focusing efforts on those who have been historically excluded and have disproportionate needs.

For many participants in the District 7 community conversations, an equitable transportation system is critical for community members to access jobs, health and medical needs, housing, and social and recreational activities. A few participants also highlighted that transportation is critical for community members to provide input and be represented in decision-making.

Participants identified specific opportunities for MnDOT and its partners to advance equity in transportation, including:

- Improve access and funding for public transit.
- Increase connections between smaller and larger cities.
- Improve access and funding for pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure in the district.
- Improve city planning and zoning to increase multi-modal connection to popular destinations.

Recommendations

Management and staff from MnDOT Central Office (CO) and District 7 participated in a series of working meetings to review the findings from the community conversations and developed potential strategies to advance transportation equity. Results from the series of meetings led to the following recommendations for MnDOT:

- 1. Improve transit access in District 7 in partnership with CO, Office of Transit and Active Transportation (OTAT), transit providers, and the Regional Transportation Coordinating Councils (RTCC), or other representatives of transit providers.**
- 2. Continue to identify and strengthen strategies for engagement with key communities identified in the equity community conversations.**
- 3. Continue to work with local partners to improve safety and accessibility for people who walk and bicycle to their destinations.**

These recommendations are discussed in more detail in the recommendations section beginning on page 44 of the full report. That section of the report includes specific strategies the MnDOT team developed in advance of each of these recommendations.