

ADVANCING TRANSPORTATION EQUITY



District 7
December 2021



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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 beginning on page 44 of the full report.

Origins of the equity effort

In January 2017, the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) released its updated, 20-year Statewide Multimodal Transportation Plan (SMTP).¹ During the process of updating the plan, MnDOT sought input from stakeholders and the public about what to include in the plan. Participants in those conversations said MnDOT needs to advance equity, citing a range of disparities related to race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and physical abilities. In response, MnDOT listed two activities to advance equity in its SMTP 2017–2020 Work Plan:

- Study how transportation affects equity and identify transportation strategies and approaches that will meaningfully reduce disparities.
- Pilot tools and strategies to better incorporate equity into project-level decision-making.

To help advance equity in work planning, MnDOT chose to conduct community conversations designed to provide a qualitative, experience-based perspective of how transportation affects equity. MnDOT coordinated in-person conversations between its staff and representatives with community organizations, first in District 2 in 2017 and then in District 8 in 2018. In 2019, the conversations continued in District 1, District 4, and District 6. In 2020, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, MnDOT conducted the conversations in District 7 through remote meetings. These community conversations have gathered information about equity concerns from a variety of groups and organizations, built relationships for MnDOT, and provided a pathway for continued engagement and initiatives to address equity issues.

MnDOT contracted with Management Analysis and Development (MAD)² for assistance with these community conversations, specifically to:

- Build MnDOT’s capacity to conduct conversations.
- Coordinate in-person conversations with organizations that serve communities in MnDOT’s District 7.
- Analyze the data gathered from conversations.
- Report interview findings and recommendations.

Methodology

The project primarily consisted of in-depth interviews with groups, state and local government agencies, organizations, and community leaders—all generally referred to collectively in this report as “organizations”—that work with and represent key communities of interest for the District 7 transportation equity community conversations.

The main purposes of the interviews were to:

¹ Minnesota Department of Transportation, “Statewide Multimodal Transportation Plan,” January 2017, <http://www.minnesotago.org/final-plans/smtp-final-plan>.

² MAD is the State of Minnesota’s in-house consulting group that provides neutral, third-party management consultant services to public sector agencies. For more information, please visit <http://www.mn.gov/mmb/mad>.

- Better understand the organizations’ perspectives about how the transportation system, services, and decision-making processes help or hinder the lives of people in south central Minnesota.
- Build relationships with organizations whose work aligns, directly or indirectly, with equity and transportation.
- Identify actions to address transportation inequities.

Key communities selection method

MnDOT conducted an analysis of the 13 counties in District 7, examining the current demographics and trends in the district, and focusing on populations with known inequities.³ MnDOT used the analysis to further identify and prioritize which key communities to include in the conversations.⁴ They include:

- Communities currently underrepresented in transportation decision-making processes.
- Communities experiencing known inequities in transportation access or outcomes.
- Communities with unique transportation needs not well served by current and usual approaches.

MnDOT District 7, CO staff, and other partners identified potential organizations to serve as interviewees. The groups, agencies, and organizations selected work with and represent the project’s key communities. MnDOT identified additional organizations by asking interviewees for suggestions on others to interview.

MAD contacted the organizations by phone and email, asked them to participate in the project, and scheduled interviews. Interviews were conducted from December 2020 through April 2021.

Interview teams

All MnDOT interview teams included at least two people. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted via videoconference or remote meeting technology. The interview teams⁵ met with representatives via Microsoft Teams and asked questions using the semi-structured interview guide described in the section below on data collection and analysis. Most interviews were attended by interviewers from MnDOT District 7, and some teams included a combination of MnDOT District 7 staff, CO staff who work on statewide planning and public engagement, and consultants from MAD.

In November 2020, MAD conducted an interview training session for participating MnDOT staff. The training was conducted via Microsoft Teams. The training goals included:

- Explaining the purpose and process for the interviews.
- Providing qualitative research instructions, including note-taking guidelines.
- Distributing project and interview materials.
- Practicing interviewing.

³ Refer to Appendix C: District 7 demographic profile on page 50.

⁴ Refer to Appendix D: Key communities for interviews on page 57.

⁵ Refer to Appendix B: Project team and interviewers on page 49.

- Explaining the interview scheduling process.

Data collection and analysis

MnDOT and MAD developed a semi-structured interview guide,⁶ meaning interviewers followed the guide but could pursue other relevant topics as they arose.

Interview topics included:

- The travel experience of key communities for day-to-day activities, such as work, school, medical appointments, social and recreational activities, shopping for goods and services, and accessing human services.
- Transportation barriers community members experience and opportunities to meet their needs.
- Safety concerns for the communities.
- Opportunities and challenges for the communities when engaging with government.
- The perspectives of the organizations on both equity and how transportation can advance equity.

MAD collected interview notes and conducted preliminary analysis to identify potential themes. When categorizing the notes, MAD used a first stage of coding to test the themes from its preliminary analysis and then added new codes as additional themes arose organically from the full set of interview notes.⁷ MAD confirmed the accuracy of both preliminary and organic themes by monitoring how many times an interviewee made comments that fit in a theme and in how many interviews the topic came up. MAD then reviewed and recoded the data as necessary to ensure consistency in coding for the main themes and additional subcodes. MAD used these themes and their subcodes to develop findings.

Implementation planning workshops

MnDOT Central Office staff, District 7 Project Management Team, and members of the interview teams participated in a series of remote meetings starting in July 2021 to hear about the findings and consider possible improvements and actions. Specifically, participants did the following:

- Reviewed findings from the D7 community conversations.
- Determined what level of influence MnDOT has over the issues behind those different findings.
- Rated the findings based on MnDOT's level of influence.
- Brainstormed about what District 7 and CO staff might do going forward with regard to the findings that MnDOT can influence.

⁶ Refer to Appendix E: Transportation equity interview guide on page 60.

⁷ MAD analysts coded data according to theme. If data could not reasonably fit a theme, they were coded as Miscellaneous or analysts created a new code to fit the new theme.

At the end of the meeting, participants voted on which of their brainstormed solutions they thought MnDOT should prioritize. Their high-priority solutions informed the recommendations found in this report.⁸

Participants met again in August 2021 to validate recommendations from this report, align them with ongoing MnDOT plans and initiatives, and further assess the opportunity for realistic action. In September 2021 the group reconvened to develop specific action items around the recommendations, identifying who at MnDOT should take what steps and when to advance the recommendations. MAD consultants helped the district create an action plan document summarizing the information for District 7.

Organizations interviewed

Response rate

MnDOT invited 39 organizations to participate in a conversation and 26 agreed, for a response rate of 67%. Of the 13 organizations that were not interviewed, 11 did not respond to interview requests during the data collection period and two declined the invitation.

Types of organizations

Table 1 lists the types of organizations interviewed. Most organizations interviewed were nonprofit organizations.

Table 1. Types of organizations participating in interviews

Organization type	Number interviewed
Nonprofit	15
Transit agency	5
Local government	4
Public schools	2
Total	26

Counties represented

Figure 1 counts how many of the 26 organizations interviewed have a presence in each of the 13 counties in District 7. Most organizations interviewed worked with or represented key communities in several counties, so

⁸Refer to the recommendations section on page 44. For the full list of ideas suggested by participants from MnDOT’s District 7 and its Central Office, refer to Appendix F: Findings and potential solutions from the implementation planning meeting on page 61.

the counts by county in Figure 1 exceed the total of 26 for organizations interviewed. The counties served by the most organizations were Blue Earth (15), Nicollet (11), and Brown, Le Sueur, Martin, and Nobles (each at 8).

Figure 1. Number of organizations interviewed based on the District 7 counties where they are active



Key communities represented

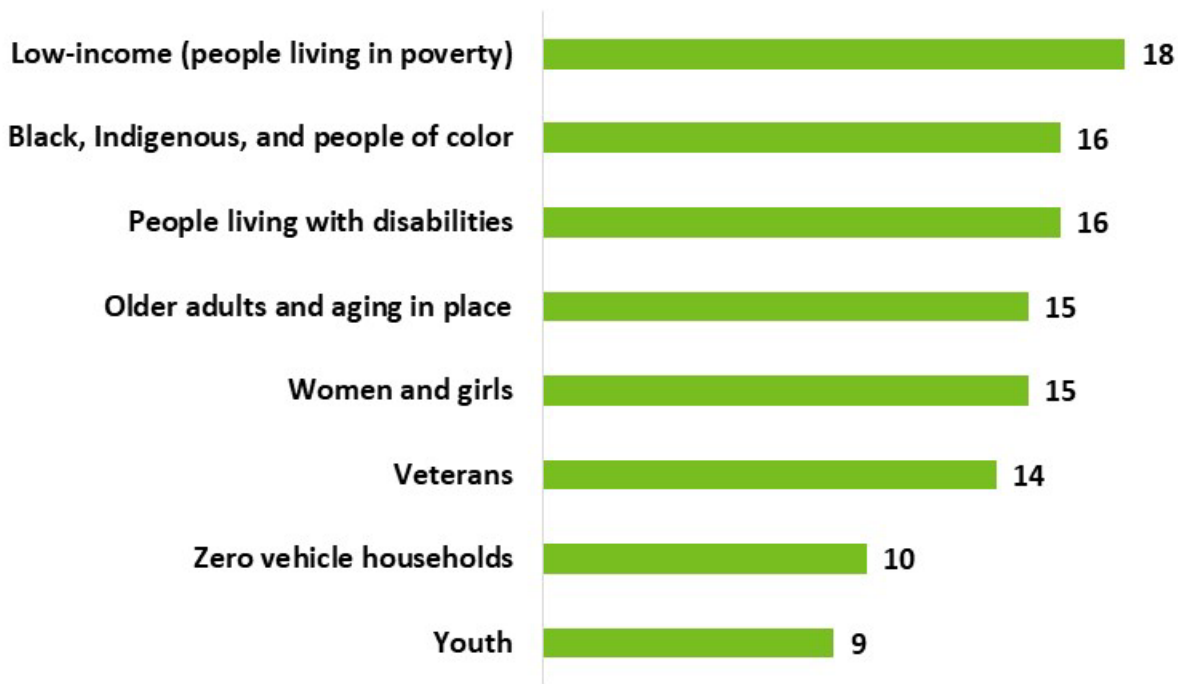
Figure 2 illustrates the key communities and the number of the interviewed organizations that represent or served them. Key communities are groups that are:

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

Key communities are not mutually exclusive. A person can belong to one or many of the key communities identified.

All of the key communities identified at the onset of the initiative were represented by at least one of the interviewed organizations. Many of the organizations worked with more than one key community, so the number of organizations in Figure 2 exceeds the number of organizations interviewed. Organizations serving and made up of people with low incomes, BIPOC, people living with disabilities, older adults, and women and girls were highly represented, followed by organizations serving Veterans, zero-vehicle households, and youth.

Figure 2. Number of organizations interviewed based on the key communities they serve



Note: Counts by key communities exceed the total of 26 organizations interviewed because many of the organizations serve more than one community.

Findings

Several themes emerged from the community conversations in District 7, with participants often highlighting that transportation is deeply connected with other aspects of life such as employment, healthcare, childcare, affordable housing, and recreation. Further, while transportation provides access to jobs, school, medical appointments, social services, shopping, and social events, the available modes within the transportation system create and limit opportunities for communities in District 7.

This section summarizes the findings from the community conversations in District 7, organized into the following four categories:

- **People and communities** examines how transportation interacts with many other factors of life, including where people live and work, and their income, race, ethnicity, age, and abilities.
- **Transportation and infrastructure** looks at the modes available within the transportation system and how those modes create or limit opportunities.
- **Public engagement** focuses on how government and transportation partners can interact with Minnesotans to create a more equitable transportation system.
- **Equity** provides perspectives on equity from conversations—how to define equity, how it relates to transportation, and strategies interviewees suggested to improve equity.

Because many topics from the community conversations are interrelated, they may appear in more than one category.

How to interpret the findings

Some discussions were with one individual associated with one organization, while other discussions included multiple people from several organizations or multiple people from one organization but serving multiple roles. In order to be clear and accurate, MAD consultants used the following terms:

- **Participant** refers to an individual.
- **Organization** refers to a specific organization.
- **Conversation** is a general term used to describe the interviews.

In addition to using proportions such as one-fourth or two-thirds, this report uses the terms below to describe how many participants, organizations, or conversations talked about a topic:

- **A few** is generally two or three.
- **Several** is generally more than a few, but less than one-fourth.
- **Most** is more than half, but less than two-thirds.
- **Nearly all** is greater than 90%.

People and communities

District 7, located in the southwest region of the state, is made up of 13 counties: Blue Earth, Brown, Cottonwood, Faribault, Jackson, Le Sueur, Martin, Nicollet, Nobles, Rock, Sibley, Waseca, and Watonwan. Nearly 5% of Minnesota’s total population or 284,524 people, live in this district, with about a quarter of the district’s population located in Blue Earth County (66,322 people). Around half of the district’s population lives in Blue Earth, Le Sueur, and Nicollet Counties. Seven cities have more than 9,000 people residing in each with Mankato (located in Blue Earth County) being the largest city by population with 41,701 people.⁹ Blue Earth and Nicollet Counties are part of the federally designated Mankato/North Mankato Area Planning Organization (MAPO) with a population of about 61,807 people.¹⁰

“Getting to work can be a big issue for those who don’t have access to cars, and are often in cheaper housing, which is often rural. We have pockets of poverty in the region, for example, Watonwan County has a high percentage of children on free and reduced lunches. We also have more than 5,200 households without a vehicle, and 3,300 of those are outside of Blue Earth County. The Mankato housing market is expensive and affordable housing flies off the market as soon as it is listed, so some people live outside Mankato where it is more affordable.”

⁹ For more information about key demographic factors in the district refer to Appendix C: Demographic profile on page 50.

¹⁰ For more information about MAPO refer to <https://mnmapo.org/mapo101/>.

Participants in the conversations often discussed how access to services and amenities affects communities they represent, such as people with low incomes, BIPOC, people with disabilities, and older adults. According to participants, because the district is largely rural, traveling to access critical needs and services, as well as for recreational purposes, is difficult, time-consuming, and expensive. Another common theme across the conversations was that transportation in District 7 is deeply connected with other aspects of life such as employment, healthcare, affordable housing, education, childcare, and recreation. The following sections highlight the topics most often discussed in the community conversations. Unless otherwise noted, all data are from the 2018 US Census five-year estimates.

COVID-19 pandemic

“COVID-19 has been tough on a lot of them [people with disabilities]. Because of the group settings, some had spent the last year confined to their room with minimal social interaction, not even seeing family. Some still had jobs through the pandemic, but they had to move out of the home to minimize the risk of exposure to the others. It has been very difficult.”

The District 7 transportation equity community conversations occurred shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic began. The pandemic created many disruptions and challenges in the district and across the state, including:

- Shift to remote work for some workers.
- Closure of in-person learning and shift to remote learning.
- Strict social distancing requirements including limiting number of passengers on transit services.
- Loss of employment, hiring freezes, and closure of some childcare settings.
- Pause on planned expansion of services such as transit services.
- Loss of opportunities to engage in social and recreational activities, and an increase in social isolation.

While a majority of the participants discussed barriers for specific communities more broadly, several participants discussed specific transportation challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Accessible transit and transportation services that connect people to jobs and places for critical services were limited due to reduced hours or social distancing requirements.
- Availability of informal and formal ridesharing options, including Volunteer Driver Programs, was more limited due to the pandemic, in part due to social distancing requirements, but also due to lack of drivers who were willing and able to transport others.
- Limited availability of reliable internet in some parts of the district prevented people from accessing services that had been shifted online (such as telehealth services).
- Limited access to in-home services for people with limited mobility (such as people with disabilities or older adults) due to the pandemic, especially when a person has COVID-19, resulting in that person needing to go to a hospital or nursing home.
- Increase in mental health needs including for school-age children who experienced loss of opportunities to socialize and participate in extracurricular activities.
- Limited availability of transportation to access COVID-19-related care and treatment, including travel to access vaccination.

People with low incomes

“Poverty and lack of transportation options are interconnected... Sometimes the affordable housing is located in outlying communities that require more transportation. If you have to drive 30 miles to go to work, 30 miles to go to the grocery store, your situation is no longer affordable.”

According to the 2018 US Census five-year estimates, in District 7, the median household income is \$57,368 (in 2018 inflation-adjusted dollars), which is lower than the statewide median income of \$68,411. Le Sueur County has the highest median household income (\$67,451) while Watonwan County has the lowest (\$51,097). About 12% of people in the district live below the federal poverty line, with the highest proportion of people in poverty living in Blue Earth County (17%). Median household incomes varied by race and ethnicity as well, with Black or African American households reporting \$26,052—about \$33,000 less than white only households, and Hispanic or Latinx households reporting \$40,168—about \$19,000 less than white only households in 2018.

More than two-thirds of participants in conversations discussed challenges for people with low incomes in the district, often highlighting that people with low incomes may be older adults, people living with disabilities, people with mental health needs, BIPOC, or refugees or immigrants. Given the distances needed to travel in the district, having a personal vehicle is critical to timely and easy access to employment, education, healthcare, and social and recreational activities. Most commonly, participants said that for people with low incomes the cost of owning and maintaining a personal vehicle is a barrier for accessing their day-to-day needs. As one participant said, “There is a reliance of car ownership in the region to accommodate the day-to-day needs of the populations. Having a reliable car that can make the hour-long trip for shopping is important. For people that cannot drive, there are not very many affordable services that provide a good alternative such as rideshares.”

As an alternative, people with low incomes often rely on public transit where available, and rides from family and friends and medical, health, and social service providers. Several participants said that existing options such as public transit, rideshares, and taxis are often limited and costly for people with low incomes. A few participants emphasized that with the COVID-19 pandemic, some transit services reduced or removed fares for transit, which help people with low incomes. Participants described the public transit available as limited in hours and areas of service, which makes it difficult to rely on. One participant also described the added constraint of taking a long time to run errands when relying on the public transit system.

Other specific challenges for people with low incomes include:

- Distances to travel between affordable housing to jobs and other critical services (such as mental health, chemical dependency, and other healthcare services), and limited or lack of transportation options between these destinations.
- Limited pedestrian and bicycling infrastructure connecting people with low incomes to popular destinations or infrastructure barriers that create unsafe conditions to walk and bicycle.
- The cost and limited availability of formal ridesharing transportation options such as Uber and Lyft.

Black, Indigenous, and people of color including immigrants

“[People] of color are nervous about calling the police. How can they be safe if they are afraid of the police? People of color learn about systems of government from people before. Another Black client

was treated poorly by clinic and felt like they were treated unfairly because of race. They did not feel calling the help line would be beneficial.”

According to the 2018 US Census five-year estimates, about 8% of District 7 identifies with racial groups that are not white. Those who identify as Black or African American are the largest group, consisting of 2% of the residents, followed by Asians (1.8%). Since 2010 the share of the District 7 population that identified as groups that are not white increased by 23%. Those who identified as Black or African American increased the most (36%), and those who identified as two or more races increased 10%. Seven percent of District 7 residents identify as Hispanic or Latinx¹¹, with the largest proportions in Nobles and Watonwan Counties (both at 25%). There are no tribal nations within the borders of District 7, though residents who identify as Native or Alaska Native make up about 1% of the population, with the largest populations residing in Blue Earth and Nicollet Counties.

Participants in two-thirds of conversations discussed challenges for Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color, including immigrants, refugees, and those who may not speak English as their primary language. Fear of police violence and distrust in government prevents Black community members from engaging with the government. People from these communities often face discriminatory and unfair treatment, adding to distrust of government and service providers.

Participants said that, in some parts of the district, immigrants and refugees may make up a significant proportion of the population; however, existing services do not meet the needs of these communities. Safety concerns, driven by immigration and citizenship status, can prevent undocumented members of the community from engaging with local governments or accessing services. Refugees and immigrants have also experienced trauma in the past, which can affect their ability to engage with government and access services. Language barriers can prevent people who do not speak English as their primary language from accessing services, being able to navigate systems easily, and providing input to solve local problems. As one participant said,

“It’s easier if you speak English. Some communities of color that don’t speak English might have their own leaders who share and discuss information within their community, but I don’t know if that carries over to city or county matters. Also, a large subset of our population is undocumented, and they will do everything in their power to avoid interacting with the government.”

A few organizations that participated in conversations highlighted that they often engage with community leaders or provide information in multiple languages to overcome some of these barriers. Others also said that often members of communities of color may not understand systems, including how to use the transit system, and visual aids can help increase their knowledge and skills in using transit services.

As discussed earlier, BIPOC may also experience lower incomes compared with their white counterparts. Participants in conversations often discussed that affordable housing in the region is located on the outskirts of cities or town, which requires these community members to travel long distances. This can be especially true for

¹¹ The Latinx is widely used as a gender-neutral or nonbinary term inclusive of all genders as an alternative to Latino or Latina. For the purposes of the MnDOT transportation equity study, Latinx will be used throughout the document. For more information, refer to <https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/bias-free-language/racial-ethnic-minorities>

immigrants or refugees, who are often employed in large agriculture or manufacturing companies. Participants also said transit services are limited or lacking to connect these locations to places of employment or popular destinations. One participant said of transportation barriers, “Housing affordability [is a factor]. In the urban core, there is good transit service, but further out, where the housing is more affordable, is lower density and transit isn’t feasible. Third-shift workers need service outside of transit hours. Many new immigrants aren’t familiar with transit systems.”

Participants also said that for immigrants and refugees, lack of familiarity with driving and barriers to getting a driver’s license or learning how to drive can create transportation challenges. Participants mentioned the cost of driver’s education and lack of access to a car to get behind-the-wheel training as specific barriers in getting a driver’s license. These organizations said immigrants and refugees rely on social connections to access transportation, often ridesharing with other community members to get groceries, take children to school, and attend recreational activities.

Older adults

“Isolation in rural areas for seniors started way before the [COVID-19] pandemic. The pandemic highlighted needs. Non-medical appointments are a major concern. Seniors need help getting groceries, visiting their kids, even those that are in the hospital. Insurance like Medical Assistance does not pay for non-medical rides.”

Seventeen percent of the residents in District 7 are 65 and older, which is higher than the statewide share of 14%, according to the 2018 US Census five-year estimates. Older adults (i.e., ages 50 and above) comprise 44% of rural Minnesotans, compared with 32% of urban Minnesotans.^{12 13} Additionally, in 2015, nearly 29% of adults 65 and older in District 7 lived alone.¹⁴

More than half of the conversations identified challenges for older adults in the community in accessing critical services and needs such as healthcare, purchasing goods and services, and socializing and recreation.

Like the statewide trend, many older adults in the district prefer to age in place and require access to critical services and needs near their residence. Limited transportation access can increase social isolation for older adults, cutting off critical access to social and recreational activities, even before the COVID-19 pandemic. As one participant described, “Golden age senior citizens end up socially homebound. There are once or twice a month activities from 5 to 9 p.m. with no public transportation available at all. Volunteers and neighbors make sure that people get to the facilities. But 90% don’t have mode of transportation or they need volunteers to

¹² For more information, see “Greater Minnesota: Refined and Revisited.” Minnesota State Demographic Center, 2017. https://mn.gov/admin/assets/greater-mn-refined-and-revisited-msdc-jan2017_tcm36-273216.pdf.

¹³ To define rural and urban settings, the State Demographic Center report, “Greater Minnesota: Refined and Revisited used an assignment scheme known as Rural Urban Commuting Areas (RUCAs) to classify census tracts based on population size, density, and daily commuting. For more details, see pages 6–12 of the report.

¹⁴ Data from Minnesota Department of Human Services: <https://mn.gov/dhs/partners-and-providers/news-initiatives-reports-workgroups/aging/aging-2030/data-profiles/>

make it work.” Limited access to broadband internet and knowledge of technology hinders their ability to access services and stay connected with others remotely.

Several participants described specific transportation challenges for older adults, especially those with limited mobility or those who cannot drive anymore. Participants said available transit is limited in hours and service areas, often with no access to services outside of the region for specialized health and medical appointments. The cost of transportation, including transit, is not feasible for older adults living on fixed incomes. Participants said resources such as Medical Assistance often do not cover transportation for non-medical purposes.

Participants said walking and bicycling are limited for older adults, and limited or poorly maintained sidewalks and trails and low lighting at night are barriers to using these modes. A participant said, “The trails are not age appropriate—inappropriate grading, lack of benches, poor lighting, wooded areas create an unsafe feeling for older adults. [We] recommend making walk paths for everyone, including wheelchairs. This would help other people too, including moms with strollers and people with disabilities.”

People living with disabilities

“There is a lack of accessible buildings, decent sidewalks, places that are safe. I have seen people in wheelchairs trying to cross four lane highways and saw someone in a wheelchair get stuck in the snow trying to cross the street.”

Half of the participants in conversations discussed barriers for people with disabilities in the district. Similar to the statewide proportion, about 11% of residents in District 7 have a disability, according to the 2018 US Census five-year estimates. Many of the transit providers in the district offer free or reduced fares for people with disabilities and operate buses and provide services for people with limited mobility that are compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Transit providers who participated in conversations highlighted that people with disabilities are among the community members they transport the most often.

People with disabilities often rely on public transit, volunteer driver programs, medical transportation, and Veterans organizations to access services or attend recreational and social needs; however, in some parts of the region the availability of these services may not meet their needs, especially for those who need transportation that can accommodate wheelchairs. Participants said many of the smaller cities in the district often do not have ADA accommodations, including accessibility ramps, automatic doors, audible signals, or curb cuts, limiting independent mobility for people with disabilities.

A few participants also described infrastructure limitations that can create barriers for people with limited vision or mobility. A participant said, “The traffic is fast and people walking are separated by the curb [at the Mankato/North Mankato bridge]. We work with many people that have some vision issues, including low-vision or lack of depth perception. With these issues, you cannot really see where the sidewalk ends, and the driving lanes begin and could easily trip over the edge.”

Other specific transportation challenges discussed by participants include:

- Transit services often cannot assist people with limited mobility in getting on and off the bus, or with carrying items.

- Poor sidewalk or trail maintenance, especially in the winter, limits safe access for people who use wheelchairs.
- Lack of accessible (i.e., ADA compliant) pathways to cross busy intersections and gaps in sidewalk network.

Participants also described a staffing shortage of care providers as barriers for people with disabilities, especially those in group home settings. One participant described, “For those in group home settings, transportation can sometimes be challenging because of staffing. They may have a vehicle at the home, but often it may not be available because a staff person may have to stay while another drives.” Another participant said that current rules prevent personal care attendants from driving clients using their own personal vehicles, while family and friends can.

A few participants also said people with disabilities often lack resources to engage meaningfully in decision-making or providing input, including limited access to technology that could facilitate more online engagement.

Veterans

“There is a lack of public transportation—especially in public transportation for some vets to get rides to within a few blocks of where they need to go, and when they need to go. The public transportation does not go to the Walmart Distribution Center for an example of a large employer where drop off is a mile away. A lot of vets work an overnight shift and there is no public transportation during those times.”

A few participants also discussed challenges specifically for Veterans in the district. About 6% of the District 7 residents over the age of 18 are military Veterans, with the largest proportion of Veterans in the district living in Blue Earth County (20%).

Veterans services organizations in the district offer limited transportation to attend medical appointments. For example, the Minnesota Association of County Veteran Service Officers (MACVSO) provides Veterans in District 7 with free transportation to access medical services.¹⁵ According to Veterans services organizations that participated in conversations, many Veterans rely on personal vehicles due to challenges with relying on the transit system. Veterans who do not have their own personal vehicle often rely on friends and family for transportation.

A few participants described other challenges for Veterans including mental health needs, difficulty in getting and maintaining jobs, and access to affordable housing. According to these participants, lack of reliable transportation often creates challenges for Veterans to access these needs and services. While some Veterans may bicycle or walk, lack of bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure can be a challenge. When describing the lack of infrastructure to support bicycling and walking, a participant said, “Many vets build into their travel time to get to work, time to ride a bike or walk, etc. Some travel an hour just to get around town to get to work. Easy to get to the grocery store, but then hard to get groceries home without a car.”

¹⁵ For more information, refer to <https://www.macvso.org/about.html>.

Women and girls

A few participants discussed transportation challenges for vulnerable women and girls in the district, specifically those who are experiencing homelessness, have been formerly incarcerated, are experiencing domestic violence, and are victims of sex trafficking. A few organizations in the district provide shelter and support toward achieving housing stability specifically for vulnerable women and girls.

According to participants, women and girls often experience multiple barriers, including poverty, lack of affordable housing and lack of childcare, which affects and is affected by lack of affordable transportation options. Participants said vulnerable women and girls, especially those in crisis, such as needing to leave unsafe situations, often do not use available public transportation due to the limited hours of operation and service areas. One participant described,

“Mankato is easier than the rural areas. Mankato has more busing system, but the routes do not really go where people need to go, and the hours of operation are not available for them. There is a bus stop about a block or so away from the [organization] facility. People feel that the bus system is created for university needs, not really for the rural community, so this hurts their ability to keep their job and be successful. Shopping locations are on the other side of town compared to the location of the shelter, so grocery shopping is inconvenient.”

According to participants, the women and girls in crisis they serve often rely on service providers or advocates to give them rides to access critical needs and services. As one participant explained, in a crisis, “survivors prefer the advocates over random strangers picking them up. The unknown and uncertainty makes our clients uncomfortable.”

A few participants also discussed challenges for women generally, including the childcare shortage in the district. Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Greater Minnesota has been experiencing a childcare shortage—between 2000 and 2019, Greater Minnesota experienced a net loss of childcare capacity of 20,000 spaces, while the population in most places in Greater Minnesota grew during that period.¹⁶ Additionally, in many regions across the state, childcare availability is concentrated in larger cities, which for many families means long distances to travel to drop off children before traveling to get to their jobs. Participants also emphasized that in the absence of a personal vehicle, traveling with children can be time-consuming and cost-prohibitive, and transit services in smaller cities may not be able to accommodate strollers.

Access to critical needs and services in rural areas

Health and human services

“If they need to get to a specialty clinic in another city (e.g., Sioux Falls), that can be a problem as there aren’t volunteers to take people to these appointments. Sometimes just trying to get transportation from

¹⁶ Center for Rural Policy and Development, 2021. “Childcare in rural Minnesota after 2020.” Accessed at <https://www.ruralmn.org/child-care-in-rural-minnesota-after-2020/>.

some of the small rural communities to Worthington is a challenge. We sometimes must think outside the box to get people to their appointments.”

Most participants discussed transportation as a necessity to access health and human services in the district. Participants described the need to travel for specialized medical treatment or appointments, including to the Twin Cities metro area or Rochester. Without a personal vehicle, community members often rely on various service providers, including medical transportation, public transit, volunteer driver programs, and emergency medical transportation services.

A few transit providers also said most often transit users rely on transit to attend medical appointments, sometimes to travel within the region due to limited access to healthcare providers such as dentists. There is also a gap in existing services to provide transportation services to those who need to travel home after medical procedures. Another challenge identified by participants was the location of hospitals and healthcare centers, which are hard to access without a personal vehicle.

A few participants also emphasized the limited availability of mental health service providers in the district, resulting in community members needing to travel farther to access services. Additionally, mental health appointments are often not considered medical appointments, resulting in limited availability of affordable transportation options.

“Per capita, South Central Minnesota lacks availability of mental health professionals, which is a big need here. Getting people without vehicular access to appointments is a challenge. There is skyrocketing demand for mental health services through telehealth, but it’s a struggle to keep up. Case workers sometimes end up driving clients to appointments. Especially with COVID-19—telehealth helps, but it’s harder for marginalized communities to access it. Internet is not always available, or it may not be reliable. People may miss medical appointments or delay care because they cannot get to their provider.”

Community members, especially older adults, immigrants, and refugees often also rely on friends and family or service providers to coordinate transportation, or to provide rides for medical appointments. According to one participant, “Often what I hear from the Somali community in St. Peter, there is a very significant effort for elders in the community to reach out to a young person to coordinate their transportation needs. That’s pretty consistent across the spectrum, I’ve heard the elderly are looking for transportation across the board.”

County health and human services often discussed the limited availability of transportation for most vulnerable community members to access resources and services available through their offices. As one county human services representative described,

“We get a lot of calls requesting help with transportation, getting to medical appointments, work, etc. If they are on medical assistance, there is a way to arrange transportation to the appointment. The challenge is there are not a lot of choices. If people have UCare, Blue Plus, etc., they have to call their health provider to set up transportation to their medical appointments. We used to have some volunteers, but not as much anymore. If the family is on cash assistance, they can get help getting to work through the workforce center. If they use a taxi it has to be within the operating hours of the taxi. If they are on cash assistance, they can sometimes get gas vouchers or car repair vouchers, but

funds are limited. Any help with getting around has to be on a specific program or a medical appointment.”

Employment and economic development

“There is a disconnect in that our regional economy is based on agricultural and industrial sectors, but our Dial-a-Ride services operate on a 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. schedule, whereas agriculture and industrial involve shift work. Transit doesn’t match up with shift work very well. Hours outside 9 to 5 are not covered.”

More than two-thirds of participants discussed the importance of transportation to access employment and economic development. Sixty-nine percent of the working age population 16 years and older is in the labor force, with Blue Earth County having the highest participation rate (72%). Food manufacturing is the largest sector with more than 12,000 jobs in 2019.¹⁷ While the majority of these jobs are occupied by white workers, a significant proportion of manufacturing jobs employ BIPOC in the region.¹⁸

A few participants highlighted that the available transit in rural areas does not meet the needs for employment purposes in more general terms, explaining that existing services are not practical for commuting to a place of employment, given the infrequent routes and limited hours of operation. One participant said given the limited hours of operation, commuting to work by transit would require very flexible employers. Another participant said, “Transportation is a huge part of getting and keeping a job. Need to make sure that our bus services are meeting employment needs, especially for people who don’t have access to private transportation.”

Most frequently participants discussed the lack of transportation options, especially transit for workers employed in the agriculture and industrial sectors, especially those who need to attend second- or third-shift jobs at manufacturing facilities, which require travel in the evening or late at night. As transit services available in the region are limited to Monday to Friday business hours, these workers cannot rely on transit to get to their places of employment.¹⁹ personal vehicle. One participant also said some workers are living in hotels close to processing plants or factories due to both lack of affordable housing and accessible transportation. A few transit providers also explained that there have been efforts in the past to provide transit services to workers to get to their shifts but identifying a practical route to pick them up did not work out. Several participants said larger employers including manufacturing and agricultural sectors in the region often provide their own transportation for workers to get to their jobs. However, without a personal vehicle, workers face barriers in accessing other needs and services, such as grocery shopping and attending to healthcare needs.

Additionally, employment opportunities available in the region may be farther away from where affordable housing is available, and transit services may not be available to connect workers to their places of

¹⁷ For more about manufacturing employment in the region, refer to:
https://mn.gov/deed/assets/2019_Southwest_MFG_Profile_tcm1045-288728.pdf.

¹⁸ For more about employment diversity in the region, refer to:
https://mn.gov/deed/assets/041018_sw_disparities_tcm1045-341197.pdf.

¹⁹ For more details, refer to the Transit section on page 29.

employment.²⁰ Often the distances are not practical or feasible for workers to walk or bicycle, especially in winter weather. As one participant described,

“There is a housing shortage. Smaller rural communities with processing plants don’t have enough. Small towns are not geared up for that. Nor is Windom. Small towns can’t keep up with this demand. People are flipping houses and trying to make them affordable for their own community. The plant in Windom went all the way to Mankato before they could find enough housing for their workers. It is definitely a struggle. St. James was approached but couldn’t do it.”

A few participants also discussed how the layout of cities can separate workers from their jobs. Participants said that in cities, large employers may be located on the outer edges with limited and infrequent transit options. They may also be separated by busy roads or completely inaccessible on foot. As one participant described, “A lot of this gets back to the layout of the community itself. Windom is an example in that it is bisected by two state highways, the town itself kind of spreads along those highways, and its largest employer is out at the far edge. This makes non-motorized access a real challenge.”

A few participants also highlighted other transportation barriers to employment, including:

- Lack of transit stops near places of employment (e.g., transit stop near Walmart Distribution Center is one mile away).
- Lack of trails or sidewalks connecting workers who want to walk or bicycle to their places of employment.
- Rough pavement and condition of roads that make bicycling and walking impractical and unsafe.

A few participants also described a general lack of transportation to access economic development, particularly due to land use and layout of some cities. Grocery stores, retail, schools, and hospitals may be located in areas separated by busy highways or roads, making it difficult to access without a personal vehicle, or making walking or bicycling unsafe and challenging. Additionally, central commercial and shopping are often located in larger cities in the district, and there are limited transportation options available for community members from smaller cities to access these locations. A few participants said smaller cities in the district often lack grocery stores and other shopping as well, requiring community members to travel farther.

Affordable housing

“A notable issue that communities are facing in the region is access to housing that meets the needs of income, ownership preference, and availability. Detached, owner-occupied housing is the desired development type for local governments, and it is often challenging to build more affordable, multi-family housing due in large part to associated stigmas. Often, the affordable housing units that do exist prioritize older adults with fixed incomes. Younger generations also favor renting more than previous generations, but options are very limited for renting—even at market rates.”

More than two-thirds of participants discussed the limited availability of affordable housing in the district. According to the Housing and Transportation (H+T) Affordability Index, residents in 8 out of 13 counties spend at

²⁰ For more details about affordable housing, refer to page 25.

minimum half of their household income on housing and transportation combined, with Cottonwood and Nicollet Counties' residents spending the largest proportion (both 53% of income).²¹ Several counties in the region have the highest population of renter households in the state, including Blue Earth County, which has the highest percentage of renter households at 38% (comparable to Hennepin County in the Twin Cities metro area).²² Faribault and Waseca Counties are among the 10 counties in the state with the largest decline in renter incomes between 2000 and 2019—meaning rental costs increased while renter income decreased.²³

Participants most often discussed that affordable housing is often located farther way from large employers and locations people must access for critical services and needs. One participant said, "Housing and resources are not likely in the same community so you must travel between communities to meet all your needs." A few participants said a higher demand for housing in Mankato has increased the cost of available housing, making it difficult for people with low incomes, those with fixed incomes, and refugees and immigrants to live closer to services and amenities. According to participants, this is particularly challenging around other small and large cities also. Another participant described, "There is also a lack of affordable housing in Worthington so that is significant. There is a trade-off between paying more to live in the city where services are located versus living in a rural area that is cheaper but where people must have transportation to get to the city." A few participants also observed that this can be particularly challenging for smaller cities with manufacturing and processing plants, with demand for affordable housing often exceeding the available stock of housing.

Participants said the distance to travel between affordable housing and places of employment, or locations to access critical services, is difficult without a personal vehicle. Another challenge participants raised is the limited or nonexistent transit services between smaller cities, where affordable housing is located, and cities or regional hubs, making it difficult for community members to rely on transit.

One organization that provides housing stability support said the clients most commonly they support are women and children, especially those experiencing homelessness and domestic violence, and often the shelters and housing available are at maximum capacity. They also observed that the end of the COVID-19 pandemic eviction moratorium will likely increase the demand for affordable housing, further adding to the housing stability challenges in the district.

²¹ The Housing and Transportation (H+T) affordability provides a view of affordability of a geographic location in the United States that includes both the cost of housing and the cost of transportation, which is often the second largest household expenditure. For more information, refer to <https://htaindex.cnt.org/>

²² Blue Earth County has several colleges and universities likely increasing the proportion of student occupied renter households. While available data does not allow for identifying student occupied households, according to the 2018 US Census 5-year estimates, 69% of renter-occupied households consisted of non-family households, and 32% non-family households not living alone consisted of people ages 15 to 34.

²³ For more information about rental costs and complete rankings, refer to "State of the State Housing 2019: Biennial Report of the Minnesota Housing Partnerships."

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/18CjvChElZuA6LwxFOHZsOyWA9AabJar/view>

Transportation and infrastructure

Most critical method of transportation

More than two-thirds of participants in community conversations said the most critical or preferred method of transportation in the region is personal vehicles.

According to participants, the rural nature of the region and the distances people need to travel, limited and infrequent transit services, and feasibility of bicycling and walking during winter months results in community members relying on their own personal vehicles or informal ridesharing provided by family, friends, and service providers. For example, according to a participant from a nonprofit organization, their staff will often provide transportation for their clients to attend job interviews. Another participant from a nonprofit organization explained that often people in crisis (such as women and children leaving domestic violence) rely on their staff or advocates for transportation over public transportation or those offered by taxi or formal ridesharing services, in part because they do not feel safe taking public transportation or such transportation may not always be available when they need to leave an unsafe situation.

Participants emphasized that public transportation connectivity, including between small and large cities and within cities, is limited, and personal vehicles are often the quickest mode of transportation to get from place to place. As one participant emphasized, not having access to a reliable car can often lead to spending a lot of time using transit to attend to basic or day-to-day needs.²⁴ Participants said even larger cities such as Mankato tend to be hard to navigate without a personal vehicle, as commonly frequented places such as grocery stores, schools, and healthcare centers are spread out and may not be easily accessible by transit, bicycling, or walking. Other participants said the terrain may be challenging to navigate by bicycling or walking due to steep hills and winter weather. According to participants, the reliance on personal vehicles may be exacerbated in some smaller cities as transit and taxi services may not even exist. According to one participant, children in smaller cities may not have access to after-school activities if their families cannot drive or do not have access to a vehicle.

Nearly two-thirds of participants said that for many community members, transit or bus services is the most critical or preferred mode of transportation, especially traveling to destinations within larger cities in the region, including Mankato. Participants highlighted that often students, people with disabilities, people with mental health issues, and those who do not have their own personal vehicle or driver's license rely on public transit where available. Participants said some smaller cities, such as St. Peter, are challenging to navigate through public transit, and it is even harder to travel between cities using public transit. As one participant outlined, "The bus system is the most important. In Mankato it works okay with downtown and [Minnesota State University] destinations. But outlying areas is harder. St. Peter is harder. Transportation to and from St. Peter to Mankato is harder. And then getting around Mankato and then back." Another participant from Mankato said public transit is relatively easy for students to rely on, with frequent trips to destinations for students and bicycle racks

²⁴ For more about mobility and time poverty, refer to <https://www.caee.utexas.edu/prof/bhat/ABSTRACTS/ZeroTripMakersTimePoverty.pdf>.

available on the bus. However, it may not always be easy for families with young children to use public transit, and buses may not be able to accommodate strollers.

Nearly half of the participants said walking is a critical mode of transportation for community members. Most participants said some cities, including Mankato and Worthington, are walkable, with several destinations easy to reach for pedestrians. Most commonly, participants said those who do not have personal vehicles or are not familiar with public transit most frequently walk to access basic needs and services. A few participants said some parts of these cities can be hard to navigate walking, and there are challenges of walking in Minnesota winter weather.

Less frequently, participants also said ridesharing, taxis, and bicycles are critical modes of transportation.

Personal vehicles

“For those with cars, most of the time everything is easily accessible anywhere.”

Personal vehicles are the most-used transportation mode in District 7, according to most conversation participants. Approximately 95% of households in the district have at least one vehicle, with a majority (71%) having two or more vehicles.²⁵

Given the distances needed to travel for work and other needs, often between cities in the district, and limited transit hours and service areas, participants said a personal vehicle is necessary. Affordable housing is often found in smaller cities in the district, but jobs are in larger cities like Mankato. Grocery stores have moved away from downtowns and are now on the edges of communities if they have a grocery store at all. Without access to a personal vehicle, one participant noted, getting groceries, picking up prescriptions, and participating in other activities can take hours on transit or be very expensive if people take a taxi or use a ridesharing service.

“The personal vehicle is the most critical in terms of access to services and employment.”

According to one interview participant, commuting for work if you do not have a reliable car is challenging. A few conversation participants mentioned that some of the larger employers in the district, like JBS Foods in Worthington, have started using vans or buses to get their employees to work. According to estimates from the US Census Bureau, 80% of employed Minnesotans with low incomes drive cars, trucks, or vans to work, or they carpool with others.²⁶

Barriers to vehicle ownership and driving

Despite personal vehicles being the most critical or preferred mode of transportation in the district, most conversation participants said there are significant barriers to owning a vehicle, especially for people with low

²⁵ Demographic data, including the District 7 Demographic Profile in Appendix C (page 50), is from the American Community Survey unless otherwise noted.

²⁶ Management Analysis and Development calculations using five-year US Census journey-to-work data from the American Community Survey, 2017, for persons with incomes below 150% of the poverty level.

incomes and refugees and immigrants. The barriers include cost of ownership, safety, weather, and problems people have getting or keeping a driver's license.

Ownership costs

Several conversation participants noted that vehicle ownership is expensive. Community members "cannot afford to pay for insurance, car payments, gas, or all the other costs associated with owning a vehicle," said one participant. The average 2018 purchase price nationwide for three-year-old used models was \$7,500 for subcompact cars and \$13,700 for all types of personal vehicles.²⁷ Used vehicles have only gotten more expensive in the past year. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics reported in September 2021 that used vehicle prices increased nearly 32% between August 2020 and August 2021.²⁸

"Some clients have their own vehicle. They are ten steps ahead with their own cars."

Lack of a reliable vehicle can be a problem not only for the individual who owns the car, but for others in their network. One interview participant said that in many cases, "If someone's car breaks down, they do not have people they can call to help them, because the people in their network are usually in the same income situation."

There are some organizations, such as nonprofits and community action programs, in the district that can provide financial assistance to people who have cars and need help paying for repairs or gas. One participant noted that people can sometimes get gas vouchers or vouchers for car repair, but those funds are limited. Another interview participant said immigrants in particular face struggles with car ownership, as they historically have been lower wage earners, such as shift and seasonal workers. Finding and being able to afford a personal vehicle is a challenge.

Driver's license issues

A few participants talked about the difficulty some people in the district have in getting a driver's license. Many of the individuals having trouble are adults. It is difficult for them to find someone to help them learn to drive or do their behind-the-wheel training. Driver's education classes are expensive. One interview participant said they see individuals get a permit, but never their driver's license due to expenses and barriers discussed above. Immigrants and refugees have particular trouble with getting a license, according to one participant.

"People coming from refugee camps did not drive. Undocumented people have huge challenge[s] applying for [a] driver's license. Many people drive without an official license."

²⁷ Edmunds. "Used Vehicle Outlook 2019," p. 2. <https://static.ed.edmunds-media.com/unversioned/img/industry-center/insights/2019-used-vehicle-outlook-report-final.pdf>.

²⁸ US Bureau of Labor Statistics. "Consumer Price Index August 2021," September 14, 2021, accessed September 17, 2021, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/cpi.nr0.htm>.

Public transit

About transit

Nearly all participants commented on public transit, with many noting its importance to the communities they serve. Participants said public transit is an important, but limited, transportation option for older adults, immigrants, people with disabilities, people with low incomes, and those who do not have personal vehicles. Nearly all organizations that participated in interviews said that while public transit exists in the district, there are many limitations and barriers to using it. Most services operate demand-response services (also known as dial-a-ride), often requiring 24-hour advance scheduling. Transit users schedule pickups and drop-offs in advance by phone or online.

Eleven government entities and nonprofit organizations or private companies offer transit services throughout the 13 counties in the district.²⁹ While majority of the services available are demand-response (or dial-a ride) a few cities operate fixed routes or deviated route options.

- **Community Transit** is a service operated by United Community Action Partnership. It primarily offers dial-a-ride service in Cottonwood, Jackson, Lincoln, Lyon, Murray, Pipestone, Redwood, and Rock Counties. Scheduled routes are available in Marshall and Redwood Falls, and the organization offers door-to-door and curb-to-curb options.
- **Heartland Express Transit** operates transportation services in New Ulm, Sleepy Eye, Evan, Cobden, Springfield, Comfrey, and Hanska. Scheduled and deviated routes between New Ulm and Springfield are offered twice a day, as well as demand response services on weekdays and Sundays. Heartland Express operates in Brown County.
- **Land to Air Transit** operates daily express service between Mankato and Minneapolis, with stops in district communities on 169, including St. Peter and Le Sueur.
- **Mankato Transit** provides fixed schedule and route services in Mankato and North Mankato, with seven weekday and two Saturday routes, plus eight lines affiliated with Minnesota State University, Mankato.
- **Minnesota River Valley Transit** provides transportation services in the cities of St. Peter, Le Sueur, and Kasota. It operates as a dial-a-ride service only in St. Peter, but in Le Sueur, there are a few scheduled stops. Minnesota River Valley Transit operates in Nicollet and Le Sueur Counties.
- **Peoples Express** operates out of Wadena and offers specialized transportation to people living with disabilities or who have health issues in 28 counties, including Cottonwood, Jackson, Nobles, and Rock Counties in District 7. Both local and longer-distance travel options are covered, with options of travel around Minnesota and into Iowa and the Dakotas.
- **Prairie Lakes Transit** offers three routes, two in Fairmont and one in Blue Earth. Riders can request deviation from the routes of up to one-quarter mile, with an advance request and extra fee. Prairie Lakes also operates a demand response (dial-a-ride) option in rural portions of Faribault and Martin Counties, which requires advance reservation.
- **SMART Transit** provides service in Waseca, as well as Albert Lea, Austin, and Owatonna. SMART has scheduled routes in these communities, deviated routes, and dial-a-ride options. SMART Transit operates in Waseca, Steele, Mower and Freeborn Counties.

²⁹ See MnDOT's interactive web tool for transit data in Minnesota:

<http://mndot.maps.arcgis.com/apps/Minimalist/index.html?appid=2e3d00cf13924ce290386f195c0892e1>

- **Take Me There Public Transportation** provides dial-a-ride service in Butterfield, Darfur, La Salle, Lewisville, Madelia, Odin, Ormsby, and St. James in Watonwan County, as well as some routes that extend outside the county into Mankato and Fairmont.
- **True Transit/VINE Faith in Action** offers dial-a-ride services during normal business hours for Blue Earth, Nicollet and Le Sueur Counties.

Public transit limitations and barriers

When describing public transit limitations and barriers, participants said the limited hours of operations and routes and a lack of coordination between providers makes it challenging to use transit to access critical services and meet the needs of the community. A few also discussed other barriers such as the system being hard to use, limited understanding of the system and how to use transit, and a cumbersome process for coordinating transit.

A few participating organizations said there are areas where the available transit does not meet the needs of the community members. These participants said smaller cities especially where affordable housing is available, lack transit services that meet the needs of the communities they serve, such as families with low incomes or immigrants and refugee communities. A few participants also said there are service “dead zones” within larger cities where transit is infrequent or lacking, and does not meet the needs of those communities, including North Mankato and the east side of Mankato.

Limited hours of operation

“Services that are available are Monday to Friday during the day. Anything evenings or weekends do not have needs met. Early morning medical appointments are also a struggle. Does not serve people who do shift work well at all.”

Nearly all organizations commented on the limited hours of operation for regional transit systems. The public transit available in District 7 provides services during business hours Monday through Friday. Organizations working in Mankato commented that the services available generally go to popular destinations such as healthcare centers, grocery stores, schools, and other critical locations. However, the limited hours of operation are a barrier for community members to access services and activities outside of those hours. In smaller cities such as Worthington, public transit only operates during business hours on weekdays, leaving community members without any public transit options on the weekends.

Employment and shift work: Most often, participants in interviews said community members who are employed in shift work cannot rely on transit to access their places of employment because transit is not available late in the evening or early morning. As one participant said, “Transportation is a huge part of getting and keeping a job. Need to make sure that our bus services are meeting employment needs, especially for people who don’t have access to private transportation.”

After-school and social activities: A few participants also highlighted that available transit may provide opportunity for community members to attend to needs during business hours, but that limits their ability to engage in social activities including after-school activities, which can often occur in the evening or on weekends. The limited hours of operation are also a barrier for adult students as transit hours do not always align with their class schedule. As one participant said, “Religious, social, and sporting activities are hard to get to for people.

There is no weekend service on public transportation and the taxi service during the pandemic did not have weekend hours.”

Travel time and transit scheduling

“If you are using the bus, it ends up taking a lot of time out of your day, when traveling to get groceries or even to get to work, considering all the places it will have to stop before even reaching your desired destination. Parents have to find extra childcare to just get to and from work. It can be two hours to get where you need to go, and two hours back. If you make minimum wage, you are working one whole hour just to cover the bus fare.”

Most conversation participants also discussed travel routes, time, and scheduling required to use public transit. Where public transit is available with routes through popular destinations, it can still be inefficient as the limited operating hours require long travel time. Several participants described how it can take hours on public transit to go to destinations that would typically be a shorter travel time if they traveled by a personal vehicle. Outside of central hubs in the larger cities, public transit routes are infrequent, and community members may need to wait longer for the next transit provider. Additionally, the nearest transit stop can be located far away, requiring travel by foot or other means, which may not always be feasible or efficient for community members. According to one participant, “I think transportation routes do try to prioritize critical needs services—healthcare systems, grocery stores and similar places, so I guess I can’t think of anything that would make it particularly hard to get to. It’s maybe not location, but timing. A route might dictate when you can get there but does that match up with when appointments are available or your work schedule?”

A few participants also discussed challenges in scheduling and arranging transit. Many of the services available require scheduling ahead, typically a few days in advance. Participants in conversations discussed how this can be particularly challenging for last-minute or short-notice needs, such as going to a doctor’s appointment or in a crisis. As one participant said, “True Transit is good and cost effective, but it takes days to schedule a ride. For short-notice doctor appointment or medical need, it is difficult to schedule sometimes. It needs to be planned out ahead of time. The burden is on the person to figure out how to navigate the extra step to the actual destination. For [community members] without phones or other technology, it is challenging.”

Additionally, community members often have to coordinate between providers when traveling between cities in the region and to the Twin Cities metro area, and service hours may not always align, which adds travel time, making using transit inefficient.

Knowledge and perceptions about transit

“People may not know how to get transit or transportation. They might not know who to call, or even how to call for a ride. Language can be a barrier with this too when some don’t know how to speak or read English, and in some cases may not be able to read the language they speak.”

Another common theme participants highlighted in conversations was about existing perceptions and knowledge about transit that can discourage or create barriers to use it. Participants in two-thirds of the conversations said transit services are not well known in the region and community members are not familiar with how to use them, which discourages community members from accessing available transit services. Participants in conversations said this can range from how to schedule transit, where to access the nearest transit stop, and where to exit the service to get to their destination. The system can be complicated, with some

transit services requiring advance applications (e.g., mobility transit in Mankato), adding more barriers for those who need to use these services.

According to participants, communities who do not speak English as their primary language, those who are newcomers to the region such as immigrants, or those with mental health needs struggle with the complexity of navigating the system, discouraging them from using available services.

A few participants also said negative perceptions about transit, including perceptions of safety of public transit, discourage people from accessing available services. While participants discussed safety concerns about public transit in more general terms, a few participants said people in crisis situations, such as women and children leaving domestic violence and those with mental health needs, do not always feel safe using public transit.

Several participants suggested solutions for increasing knowledge and awareness about available public transit, including more outreach and engagement to improve understanding of available transit. Others suggested more targeted outreach to immigrant communities and diversifying the languages of outreach materials to those commonly spoken in the region, such as Spanish and Somali.

Cost of transit

About a third of organizations discussed cost of transit services in the region as a barrier. According to interviewees, those who do not have their own personal vehicles, older adults, and immigrants and refugees have the added burden of expensive transit services. During the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, fares for some transit services were reduced or were free, which helped, according to a few participants. However, for communities who have low incomes, the fare for a typical transit ride can be expensive and not feasible.

Accessibility

About a third of participants discussed accessibility issues, most commonly faced by people with mobility issues such as people with disabilities and older adults. The broader challenges identified earlier, such as hours of operation and travel time and logistics, are exacerbated for people who use wheelchairs or mobility support. Lack of door-to-door service is an additional accessibility barrier for people with mobility concerns.

Language accessibility: About a third of participants discussed barriers for those who do not speak English as their primary language in accessing transit services. While a few participants suggested more targeted outreach to communities in languages primarily spoken by them, a few others suggested efforts should be geared toward making transit more culturally sensitive and accessible to those communities, such as prioritizing the needs of communities who are immigrants or refugees and hiring bus drivers who speak languages other than English.

Location accessibility: A few participants said some parts of Mankato have transit “dead zones,” resulting in less accessible transit services. According to a participant, people have to walk long distances to get to the nearest transit stop in North Mankato due to less frequent route options in the area.

Other barriers

Less commonly, a few participants discussed the following as barriers and limitations of public transit, including:

- Poor road conditions in some areas such as near manufactured homes or on privately owned roads that public transit may refuse to serve.

- Using transit while traveling with children, including inability to bring strollers on buses.
- Winter weather and taking transit.

Solutions

Participants in conversations also offered suggestions for addressing barriers to transit use, including:

- Increase engagement efforts to improve knowledge and perceptions about transit.
- Expand service hours, including on the weekends, and align with community programs and needs.
- Reduce cost of transit, including free transit options or transit vouchers for those who need them.
- Assess transit service locations such as bus stops and better align with community needs.
- Hiring bus drivers who speak languages other than English.
- Support new transit users through navigators who can provide information on navigating the system.
- Improve transit connections between smaller communities and larger cities in the district and from the district to the Twin Cities metro area.
- Increase coordination between providers to improve efficiencies.

Walking

Most conversations included content about pedestrians. Around half of the organizations mentioned walking as a critical or preferred mode of transportation. While walking is a critical mode of transportation for many key community members in the district, several participants said walking is more of a recreational activity than something done to get to work, appointments, or shopping. Several participants said their communities had good trails and sidewalk networks, but others said both were lacking in their communities.

The St. James medical facility on the south-central part of the community. There are no sidewalks for the last [quarter] mile to get there. There are two main entrances on Highway 4 and the other is an emergency gravel road. Basically, anyone going there you have to use some type of motorized transportation.

Several participants also talked about land use as it relates to walking. For example, affordable housing is often on the opposite side of town from services and shopping, which can make those critical needs difficult to access for pedestrians. A few participants talked about Safe Routes to School programs, which have improved pedestrian safety around schools.

Barriers to walking

Safety

Most interview participants talked about barriers to walking, and most said safety was a significant concern in their community. Several participants said there are dangerous intersections and pedestrian crossings in their communities, often in areas where services and shopping are concentrated. They noted new schools are often built on the outskirts of town, where land is cheaper. However, this forces students to cross busy streets or highways. A few interview participants talked about a lack of signage and lighting, with lighting being a cause of concern for safety in general, including for older adults or people with disabilities trying to navigate poorly maintained sidewalks. Speeding and distracted drivers were also safety concerns in a few conversations.

“The one I hear a lot is related to speeding—people driving really fast on small community, residential streets. In housing developments, in tight-quarter areas. Also having narrow shoulders with people walking on them—what do you do when you want to get over into the oncoming lane to give the walker/biker space, but there is an oncoming vehicle?”

Winter weather

Several interview participants said winter weather is a barrier to walking in their communities. Sidewalks are not shoveled or salted promptly, or at all in some cases, according to interview participants. This creates dangerous conditions for any pedestrian, but especially for older adults and people with disabilities. A few interview participants said they have seen people in wheelchairs tip over on snowy or icy sidewalks or get stuck trying to cross a snow-covered street. Additionally, some areas of the district are prone to flooding, which also creates dangerous conditions and forces pedestrians and others to go out of their way to get to destinations.

Infrastructure problems

Missing, incomplete, and poorly maintained pedestrian infrastructure is a barrier to walking in some District 7 communities, according to several interview participants. These issues create challenges for pedestrians trying to navigate their communities. According to several interview participants, some cities with busy highways running through them lack adequate crossings.

In fact, several participants pointed to a lack of crosswalks in general as a barrier, while others noted specific busy streets and highways lacking crosswalks. While a few participants reported less walking in rural areas, a few cited a need for pedestrian infrastructure in rural areas for those who do walk.

“Lots of development in the community recently, especially in the east side of Mankato that is not pedestrian friendly. New elementary school that people can’t walk to. There are trails and sidewalks but lots of big intersections and roads that are barriers to people walking or bicycling.”

Physical limitations

Several participants said age and mobility issues can be barriers to walking in their communities. Older adults, children, and those with physical limitations can be difficulty walking long distances and navigating the terrain, such as steep hills in some cities in the district. Several interview participants said accessibility is a problem in their communities and felt there was a lack of ADA-compliant pedestrian ramps. Additionally, sidewalks in poor condition are difficult for people in wheelchairs to navigate, even in ideal weather conditions.

“Lack of age-friendly sidewalks and paths for people. Not all are designed for people of all abilities. Grades might be too steep, there are no benches for people to take breaks at for example.”

Perceptions of walking

Several interview participants said the communities they serve and the broader communities in which they operate might have good walking paths and trails, but those don’t necessarily connect to sidewalks in their communities. Affordable housing is often located in areas that are not pedestrian-friendly, which makes getting around more difficult for the people who live in those areas.

“It’s not just food and work. It’s extracurricular activities, and other things. We have a low-income population area in North Mankato that’s separated from the school by Riverfront Drive. There’s no pedestrian infrastructure to cross the road, so it’s very dangerous for students to access the school even though it’s just a half-mile away.”

Bicycling

Several organizations mentioned bicycling as a preferred method of transportation for the communities they serve in District 7. While there are communities in the district that have made improvements and investments in bicycle infrastructure, most of the participants who talked about bicycle infrastructure said there is a lack of it in their community. A few participants noted individuals use a bicycle for commuting, and a few said there are individuals who bicycle year-round. However, most said bicycling in the district is a recreational activity. Participants in several conversations noted recreational trails in and around their communities, but they also talked about a lack of bicycle lanes within cities in the district, and a lack of connection between the trails.

Barriers to bicycling

Lack of infrastructure

“Bike lanes seem like an afterthought. I’ve seen in my neighborhood that people will park their cars in bike lanes, and some bike lanes don’t provide enough space for both vehicles and bikes.”

Many interview participants noted a lack of infrastructure as a major barrier to bicycling in their communities. While several participants pointed to some parts of Mankato, North Mankato, Fairmont, Windom, and Jackson as having at least some good bicycle trails, they also noted these communities could do better with connections between trails and popular destinations or businesses. Other communities have few or no recreational trails. For those individuals who bicycle for shopping and other essential needs, bicycle storage and parking are often difficult to find, which can lead to bicycles being stolen. Communities also lack bicycle lanes, and the few participants who mentioned communities that do have bicycle lanes said those lanes are often too narrow, people don’t know how to use them, and drivers are unaware of how they are supposed to work.

“Trails are nice but they need to get grandma to the grocery store.”

Safety

“These roundabouts work great for cars and helping the flow of traffic but to get through them, especially as more vulnerable users, it is frightening.”

Safety is also a significant barrier for bicycling in District 7 communities. Many interview participants mentioned roundabouts, highway crossings, and areas with heavy traffic as safety concerns for people bicycling in their communities. Others noted a lack of signage and poor lighting as safety concerns in some areas of the district. A few participants who work with people with disabilities and older or vulnerable adults said they may have tricycles that take up more space, which makes already narrow bicycle lanes feel less safe and may force those individuals to take different routes.

Other barriers

Several interview participants said winter weather is a barrier to bicycling in their communities. Bicycle trails are not always cleared of snow in a timely manner, which pushes cyclists onto streets and roads in poor winter driving condition. Some communities do not enforce snow emergencies and removal of cars from city streets, which exacerbates the problem. In some communities, flooding can also be an issue for cyclists.

Distance and topography can be a barrier in the district, as well. Getting to cities from rural areas can be difficult, and even getting from one part of Mankato to another can be too much distance to cover for some cyclists. Mankato, North Mankato, and St. Peter are quite hilly, which makes getting from the river valley to the top of the hills difficult. For individuals with children, or those who are trying to get groceries or other shopping done on a bicycle, distance to travel adds to the difficulty of bicycling in the district.

Perceptions of bicycling

Several participants talked about perceptions of bicycling in their communities. One participant said they see children bicycling often, but not adults. They suggested bicycling education for adults. Another interview participant said bicycling is not viewed as a legitimate form of transportation, but rather as a recreational activity. They went on to say this could lead to those who do rely on bicycles year-round to not having their voices heard in discussions about investing and maintaining bicycling infrastructure in the district.

A few interview participants talked about new immigrants, and those who came from refugee camps specifically, as being particularly concerned with the safety of bicycling, especially alone.

Animosity between drivers and cyclists is also an issue for some communities in the district. It ranges from drivers not understanding how bicycle lanes are used to an attitude of “it is mine and I will do what I want, if you are smaller than me you will just have to get out of my way,” according to one interview participant.

Other transportation modes

Nearly all conversation participants talked about other types of transportation community members use, or would use, if available. Unlike the transportation options discussed earlier, these are not the most critical or preferred. However, they are still important to many people living in District 7, and necessary for some of those in the identified communities, such as medical transportation for people living with disabilities and Veterans services drivers.

Paid ridesharing services

More than three-quarters of conversation participants discussed paid ridesharing services such as taxis, Lyft, and Uber. The most significant barriers to using paid ridesharing services, according to conversation participants, are cost and availability.

Several participants mentioned the positive impacts of taxis and ridesharing services as a more flexible alternative to transit. However, paid ridesharing services can be very expensive among those with lower incomes. One conversation participant said it can cost \$50 to get to Mankato from their community via taxi. If a parent is transporting children who need a car seat, they have to make multiple trips, which adds to the taxi cost. One participant said their organization pays for ridesharing services with grant money, but drivers may

back out or cancel rides, leaving their clients stranded. Uber and Lyft do not accept Medical Assistance or waivers for rides, and taxi services in the district only do accept waivers or Medical Assistance occasionally.

“They spend a lot of money on rideshare and taxis. Some clients lived in a hotel just barely scrimping by. They paid for an expensive taxi ride to get in paperwork. They could not email or fax it out. They spent \$100 in transportation that day to run errands. The hotel was on north end of Highway 169 without a bus.”

Several interview participants also noted paid ridesharing services are not always available. Taxi services are only available in some communities, and many of those only operate for part of the day. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, at least one district community saw their taxi service stop weekend operations. It has since started back up, but hours are still limited. The app-based ridesharing services Uber and Lyft are only available in larger cities in the district.

“Mankato has an Uber, but if you live in a surrounding community, it probably will not work that great—even if you find a ride in, you are not guaranteed a driver would be willing to take you back.”

Informal ridesharing and carpooling

More than half of conversation participants talked about informal ridesharing and carpooling in the district. People who do not have their own personal vehicle or cannot access or afford paid ridesharing services often opt for informal ridesharing or carpooling to get around. Those unfamiliar with the transit system might also opt for informal ridesharing. These individuals might get a ride with family, friends, neighbors, or through another network, such as their faith community.

“Even though people might not have a vehicle, people are able to call upon someone to get a ride. They might call on a family member or use transit.”

A few participants said their staff will sometimes give clients rides when there are no other options. But staff may not be available to provide a ride whenever a client needs it. Some will only provide rides for specific activities, like a client needing to get to a job interview, and not to help them run personal errands.

“Some staff provide transportation with their own personal vehicles for their clients for project goals like a job interview, but not for groceries.”

Informal ridesharing or carpooling can be unavailable for some people—particularly the elderly, according to a few conversation participants. Older adults tend to be spread out around communities, unlike residents with a low income who might live in areas where affordable housing is concentrated, or in an area of town where a population of immigrants or refugees might tend to live.

“Elderly—not very much walking or biking among this group. Informal networks for rides are sometimes lacking. The elderly may not have family nearby (or at all) to help them. These people need our help the most.”

Volunteer driver programs

More than one-third of conversation participants discussed formal volunteer driver programs. These programs are usually operated by nonprofit organizations or local governments and serve community members who have limited transportation options.

A few organizations that operate volunteer driver programs or use volunteer drivers said they are having more difficulty getting drivers for their programs. One interview participant said the insurance industry is classifying volunteer drivers the way they do Uber and Lyft drivers, which means their auto insurance rates are going up. A few other participants noted the pool of volunteer drivers is shrinking, as volunteer drivers are often retirees. They age out of the program but will return as users.

Even when volunteer drivers are available, they often operate on a limited schedule. Services are generally available Monday through Friday during normal business hours, Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. One interview participant noted that early-morning medical appointments are difficult to schedule with volunteer drivers, as are things like shift work or any transportation during the evenings or weekends. This is again due in large part to the retirees who serve as volunteer drivers not wanting to work those hours.

Medical transportation

About one-third of participants mentioned medical transportation services, such as those funded by the state's Medical Assistance and MinnesotaCare programs, to provide non-emergency transportation as part of the health plan coverage for Minnesotans with low incomes. A few participants noted the complexity of trying to arrange medical transportation for the communities they serve. Rides must be arranged well in advance, and riders may or may not be able to bring someone along with them. One participant said some healthcare plans have supplemental assistance included that covers rides to non-medical trips, but there is a challenge finding transportation options.

A few participants also discussed medical transportation provided by the US Department of Veterans Affairs to get Veterans to their medical appointments. Veterans services organizations also may provide medical transportation to their clients.

Public engagement

In about one-third of conversations, participants said they feel informed about transportation projects and discussed positive public engagement strategies they have seen in the district. Several mentioned specific projects with MnDOT in their communities where MnDOT did a particularly good job of engaging their community and getting buy-in on projects. For example, a project in the St. James area engaged both English- and Spanish-speaking community members through translated materials, interpreters at public meetings, and the use of technology to explain complex topics to the public. A few participants mentioned how helpful it is to have an outside project or event to use as a catalyst for engagement, such as New Ulm's Heart of New Ulm project, which spurred the creation of community advisory committees for a few issues. As one participant said, "Sometimes you need an outside force to jumpstart before it becomes self-sustaining."

Most commonly, participants said communication methods such as sharing information in newspapers and on TV, through word of mouth, social media, and leveraging existing community relationships (e.g., churches and community gatherings) can be effective. The effectiveness of the method of communication varies with the audience; older white community members rely heavily on the newspaper and TV news, while word of mouth and receiving information from trusted sources (e.g., churches, community gatherings) is more important to BIPOC and immigrant and refugee communities.

A few participants noted an increase in public engagement with the people they serve during the COVID-19 pandemic. With activities moving to remote meeting platforms, community members who have schedule conflicts or difficulty finding transportation to meetings have had new opportunities to participate in engagement efforts using online platforms.

Outreach and engagement challenges

Participants in just more than half of the conversations talked about challenges in public engagement in the district. Participants in these conversations said the communities they serve may be hesitant to engage with government organizations or may not know they are able to participate in public meetings and other events. A few participants also said some community members, including immigrants, refugees, and BIPOC, often do not feel their opinions matter, or are fearful of engaging with the government. As one participant said,

“[I’m] not sure if people feel that their input is well received. New American families don’t make it to listening sessions or think that agencies are interested in hearing from them. Organizations like VINE or Minnesota Council on Churches or YWCA or Good Council Learning Center (Loyola School) or Lincoln Community Center can help to make connections to communities. Having a trusted community member present at engagement events is critical to participation from people in immigrant communities.”

Additionally, language barriers and time and schedule conflicts can also negatively affect engagement. One participant said, “There’s really an ask for action—sometimes people don’t always want to engage if they don’t think it’ll lead to something. When they can give feedback or input on something that will affect people and they’ll see a result.”

A few participants said the communities they serve find it difficult to participate in engagement opportunities through the traditional venues because of time and schedule coordination.

“Members of the community who have wealth and freedom in their schedule tend to voice opinions. The same people often have the financial ability to influence things. They are the ones that are the most heard. Our clients who live in poverty or who have the most barriers are not heard, in large decisions, or in local government.”

Ways to improve outreach and engagement

“We’re thinking here about all types of government—state, county, local, regional. We have an organization that had created a lot of public engagement for transportation. They have done an amazing job being inclusive with their typical, mainstream audience. For others, like refugees,

immigrants, young people, there is a need to bring these people to the table. This perspective needs to be more balanced.”

More than half of conversation participants offered their ideas for improving outreach and engagement in general, and with the communities they serve. A few said the transportation equity conversations were a good start toward increasing engagement. Organizations or government entities may not have to engage with the community directly at first but using trusted community leaders or liaisons could be a good way to get a foot in the door, according to a few participants. But other participants said they hoped MnDOT would take these conversations directly to “people with lived experience.” They would like to see MnDOT and other agencies talk to their clients directly, preferably through skilled facilitators who can provide room for participants to engage and provide input in a meaningful way.

Several participants emphasized the importance of partnering with community liaisons, organizers, or organizations that are trusted by the community members to expand public engagement. According to participants, leveraging these resources can be particularly helpful in making connections with communities, as some community members may not always trust government agencies. Partnering with existing, trusted sources is also helpful, as these individuals and organizations understand the issues important to the community. As one participant said, “[Local] organizations can help to make connections to communities. Having a trusted community member present at engagement events is critical to participation from people in immigrant communities.” Another participant said,

“Whatever population you are trying to get information from, you need to get input from leaders in the community. Like with policing, there were people from parts of the community that were part of the planning and organization process. Inclusion in the planning worked very well. It made a really meaningful group because it brought people together that were actually affected by it.”

A few participants suggested holding events and activities where community members gather, including places of worship, in order to make it easier for community members to access events. According to one participant, “You have to meet people where they are. We’ve had good luck going to neighborhood park pop-up events. You have to make an effort to make it comfortable for people to come. It’s been suggested that we provide food. You need key contacts within populations to help guide our engagement approach.”

A few participants also emphasized the need for ongoing engagement to get information out and to build rapport with communities, including through multiple communication methods. According to one participant, “Need informers to remember that communication is not a ‘one and done’ process. Need to connect in a lot of different ways via different methods including social media, flyers, one-on-one conversations.”

Participants also highlighted continuing the more conventional information-sharing approaches, such as use of traditional and social media, newsletters, and listening sessions, and sharing information in multiple languages spoken in the district. One participant also said it was important to share results of projects such as this study with the community.

Equity

Definition of equity

“The ability for all to have access to equal programming and services regardless of race, gender, income and other factors. Also means there is a targeted, intentional approach to address barriers where they are, and understand where there is historical trauma and practices that have made it harder for some groups to participate. It doesn’t necessarily mean everyone is going to get the same treatment. Sometimes you have to treat groups differently to provide the same level of services.”

When asked what equity means to their organization, participants offered a variety of perspectives. Most participants discussed equity in terms of equal access and opportunity. A few defined equity in terms of ensuring people have positive outcomes, regardless of abilities and background. A participant explained, “It’s easy to think of equality and fairness, but that’s too simplistic because people start off differently and have different levels of access to their needs like education and food. Understanding that people are making different decisions in their own lives but we all really deserve the same fundamental things like taking care of our kids and being safe.” Others discussed equity as a focus on those who have been historically left out or focusing on those who have disproportionate needs. In describing how their organization incorporates equity into their work, one participant said the organization reviews policies and decision-making through an equity framework to examine how their processes have been set up to benefit certain groups and how they can change that to make sure people who have not been benefitting will be able to do so. A few also discussed equity in terms of breaking down barriers and redistributing power. Other definitions shared by participants included fairness and impartiality and ensuring inclusive access to all members in a community.

Equity and transportation

“Transportation is more than how people get from one place to another. It’s also about how people connect with their community and access all parts of their lives, including, for example, work and school, but also grocery stores and other retail establishments, religious and cultural activities, social events, health care, and social services. Even social activities—we rely on transportation for that.”

Most participants in conversations discussed how transportation affects and is affected by equity. Many participants emphasized that transportation enables access to critical needs and services such as employment, mental and physical healthcare, food, housing, childcare, education, and social and recreational activities. Participants said often in the absence of equitable access to transportation, specific communities such as older adults, people with disabilities, and people with low incomes cannot access the opportunities available, which can also lead to further isolation. A few participants also highlighted that transportation is critical for community members to provide input and be represented in decision-making. As one participant described, “Transportation can advance opportunities for members of the community by creating more stakeholders in the decision-making processes. Representation of different community perspectives is often missing when it comes to decision-makers or traditional stakeholders.”

Opportunities to advance equity

Nearly half of participants in conversations discussed specific opportunities for MnDOT and its partners to advance equity in transportation. Participants identified the following solutions:

- **Improve access and funding for public transit**, including more evening and weekend transportation options to meet the needs of people with different schedules, increased awareness of available services, and a focus on reducing fares for transit services.
- **Increase connections between smaller and larger cities**, including high-speed transportation between the region and the Twin Cities metro area, so that people can have more coordinated connection between affordable housing and critical services and opportunities (e.g., specialized healthcare and employment).
- **Improve access and funding for pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure in the district**, including flexibility in the MnDOT workplan to allow use of Safe Routes to School funding in communities that do not have a state highway.
- **Improve city planning and zoning to increase multi-modal connection to popular destinations**, including more input from communities that have been historically excluded in identifying accessible locations for critical needs and services.

Recommendations

Management and staff from MnDOT Central Office (CO) and District 7 participated in an online implementation planning workshop on Friday, July 26, 2021, to review findings from the transportation equity community conversations. Prior to the meeting, attendees used an online survey to identify which of those findings fall within the agency's sphere for influence and action.³⁰ At that July 26 session, meeting participants generated possible solutions and recommendations in small groups, and then the larger group voted on which ones should be the highest priorities for the agency. These suggested solutions were further refined and expanded to generate the following recommendations.

1. Improve transit access in District 7 in partnership with Central Office, Office of Transit and Active Transportation (OTAT), transit providers, and the Regional Transportation Coordinating Councils (RTCC), or other representatives of transit providers.

Findings from the community conversations indicate existing transit services and hours do not meet the needs of many communities in the district. Low population density in many parts of the district makes it difficult to provide comprehensive transit services. In partnership with the RTCCs and transit providers, MnDOT should work to improve transit access in the region. MnDOT, other state agencies, and local governments are establishing RTCCs in Greater Minnesota to better coordinate transit services for many of the key communities included in this study and to improve coordination between providers and other stakeholders. Participants in the implementation planning workshops shared the following ideas for improving transit access:

- Continue to support the RTCCs, including identifying the host agency for Region Nine (in District 7), and continue to coordinate through the RTCCs to improve transit access and simplify transit scheduling and arrangement.
- Evaluate transit access in all communities in District 7 to identify gaps and barriers to transit, including populated areas in Mankato, and set community access goals using criteria established in the current Greater Minnesota Transit Investment Plan.
- Increase transit funding and ensure statewide goals around transit access are meeting people's needs.
- Partner with transit providers to expand transit hours focusing on the areas with the lowest access, and support transit providers to improve communication and collaboration with key communities identified in the equity community conversations.
- Explore other opportunities to fill transit gaps such as use of small automated vehicles in areas with low transit access, or ridesharing services through private sector or public-private partnerships.
- Strengthen district and CO transit partnership to improve collaboration, coordination, and knowledge sharing.

This recommendation and the solutions generated by staff are primarily the responsibility of District 7 and OTAT, depending on specific suggestion and context. However, there may be work that requires engaging with the RTCCs and transit providers when needed.

³⁰ For the survey, MAD listed out findings grouped together by type and asked attendees to "Select the challenges or barriers you think MnDOT (D7 or CO) can reasonably influence."

2. Continue to identify and strengthen strategies for engagement with key communities identified in the equity community conversations.

Two-thirds of participants in community conversations in District 7 said they did not feel informed about transportation projects. Several participants also said commonly used methods of engagement, such as public meetings, media outlets, and social media may not always be effective. Community members may be hesitant to engage with government organizations or may not always know if or how they can participate in events. A few participants also said some community members, including immigrants and refugees and BIPOC, often do not feel their opinions matter, are fearful of engaging with the government, and may experience language barriers that can prevent inclusive participation.

Ideas from the District 7 implementation planning workshop for strengthening MnDOT public engagement and building trust with key communities included the following:

- Through partnerships, relationships and staff experience, identify and build a list of culturally specific communication methods and tools. Using more culturally specific media (e.g., Spanish radio or Hmong newsletter) can improve getting information out to community members, as well as addressing language barriers to information sharing and engagement. MnDOT should also consider developing tools and resources in multiple languages to improve outreach to community members who do not speak English as their primary language.
- Identify and attend community events to share information and engage with key communities on MnDOT transportation issues, including improving understanding about available transit options. Participants in community conversations also emphasized the importance of meeting community members where they are instead of asking them to come to separate meetings or events. MnDOT should also consider maintaining public engagement staffing to ensure MnDOT presence at a variety of events.
- Continue to partner with regional development organizations (Region Nine Development Commission and Southwest Regional Development Commission), local community organizations, leaders, and liaisons, including cities and counties, or arts organizations. Building partnerships with local community leaders and liaisons can help identify creative strategies for engaging effectively with community members and can build on existing relationships that are trusted by members of the community.
- Continue to build internal District 7 staff capacity to engage effectively. Leveraging internal staff capacity to share information with communities they belong to can get more information out about MnDOT engagement activities and events.
- Continue to provide opportunities to participate remotely such as through hybrid or online meetings so that those with busy schedules and those without access to transportation can participate in such engagement activities.

This recommendation and the solutions are primarily the responsibility of District 7, including the planning, project management, construction, and public engagement teams. The teams are better positioned to lead some of these initiatives with support from District 7 public engagement for resources, tools, and approaches. MnDOT's CO public engagement can also provide guidance on developing strategies where needed.

3. Continue to work with local partners to improve safety and accessibility for people who walk and bicycle to their destinations.

Most community conversations touched on walking and bicycling, with participants emphasizing safety concerns, winter weather barriers, and the need for bicycle lanes and complete, interconnected, and accessible

sidewalk networks. Participants in community conversations highlighted safety issues for walkers and bicyclists related to dangerous intersections, distracted drivers, high traffic volume, winter weather, and a lack of infrastructure. District 7 already works closely with local partners on bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure and will continue to do so. MnDOT CO could help the district with scoping projects, including providing resources, improving communications, and clarifying the types of support CO can provide to the district, particularly in the scoping phase. Specifically, OTAT should provide resources to communities in the planning phase, prior to the district starting the project scoping process so there are pedestrian and bicycling plans already in place. CO could also work with the district to identify high-priority safety improvement projects.

MnDOT staff at the implementation planning meeting came up with the following ideas to improve walking and bicycling:

- Provide technical or planning assistance to local partners and engage with key communities to develop robust, publicly supported walking and bicycling plans ahead of MnDOT projects. Specific tactics can include:
 - OTAT and D7 can engage with key communities to learn where there are important intersections and sidewalk networks that work best in their community, including where crossings make the most sense to them. Applying an equity lens to these conversations could help ensure the sidewalk networks best serve key communities' needs.
 - District 7 can encourage key communities and local partners to apply for MnDOT's new Active Transportation Program for planning support.³¹
- Continue to build or permit the local construction of bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure that improve network connectivity, including providing direct connections to adjacent properties (such as businesses and popular destinations). Specific tactics could include:
 - Work with the Office of Land Management to explore and potentially adopt a simplified or streamlined statewide process for connecting destinations to pedestrian and bike trails in MnDOT right-of-way where Controlled Access exists and where such connections are appropriate..
 - Continue establishing formal agreements with local governments that clearly identify the timing and types of maintenance they must perform on sidewalks and trails in state highway right-of-way.
- Improve bicycling and walking education in the communities, including in schools, as it improves comfort and safety for people walking or bicycling. Specific tactics for D7 and OTAT to explore can include:
 - Engage school districts and other local partners through MnDOT's Safe Routes to School program to fund bicycle fleets.
 - Identify additional opportunities to partner with other state and local agencies, especially the Minnesota Department of Health, and the Statewide Health Improvement Partnership (SHIP), to expand initiatives that improve walking and bicycling.
 - Expand use of, and continue to enhance, the Minnesota Walk! Bike! Fun! ³² curriculum.
 - Pursue shared micromobility (i.e., transportation over short distances via lightweight, usually single-person vehicles such as bicycles or scooters) options as a potential means to address intra-city connections for some community members. These emerging electric mobility devices,

³¹ For more about MnDOT's Active Transportation grants and funding, refer to <https://www.dot.state.mn.us/bike/grants-funding.html>.

³² For more about the Walk! Bike! Fun! initiative, refer to <https://www.walkbikefun.org/>.

including e-bikes and e-scooters, have the potential to enhance connectivity to routed buses, and reduce dependency on private, public, and nonprofit transportation providers. Seek opportunities to support accessible, affordable, and safe micromobility options by providing policy guidance to local units of government and education on safe operation.

This recommendation and suggested solutions are primarily the responsibility of District 7 with support from OTAT to identify resources, provide technical assistance, and engage with local partners as needed. The lead party for the items will depend on the specific project and context.

Appendix A: List of organizations interviewed

Individuals from the following 26 organizations and groups participated in 26 different conversations.

- CADA, Inc. (Committee Against Domestic Abuse)
- Des Moines Valley Health and Human Services
- Feeding Our Communities Partners
- Human Services of Faribault & Martin Counties
- LEEP (Leisure Education for Exceptional People)
- Mankato Community Education
- Mankato Transit
- Mankato/ North Mankato Area Planning Organization
- Minnesota Assistance Council for Veterans
- Minnesota Association of County Veterans Service Officers/Brown County Veterans Services
- Minnesota River Area Agency on Aging
- Minnesota River Valley Transit
- Minnesota Southwest Crisis Center (Worthington)
- MRCI (Mankato Rehabilitation Center, Inc)
- Nobles County Community Services
- Partners for Housing
- Prairie Lakes Transit
- Region Nine Development Commission
- SHIP Brown, Le Sueur, Waseca, and Nicollet Counties
- South Central Community Based Initiative
- Southwest Adult Basic Education
- Southwest Center for Independent Living
- Southwest Regional Development Commission
- True Transit
- Uniting Cultures/Uniendo Culturas
- VINE Faith in Action

Appendix B: Project team and interviewers

The following people were involved in elements of the planning, design, data collection, analysis, and implementation planning for the District 7 community conversations to advance transportation equity:

MnDOT District 7 staff:

- Ronda Allis
- Rebecca Arndt
- Lisa Bigham
- Anthony DeSantiago
- Peter Engelmeyer
- Chase Fester
- Peter Harff
- Robert Jones
- Andrew Lawver
- Nicklaus Ollrich
- Greg Ous
- Samuel Parker
- Angela Piltaver
- Matthew Rottermond
- Angelica Tejada
- Mathew Thibert
- Anne Wolff
- Matthew Young
- Carrie Zempel

MnDOT Central Office staff:

- Olivia Dorow Hovland
- Hally Turner
- Abdullahi Abdulle
- Melinda Estey
- Katherine Matusinec
- Megan Muckenhirn
- Tina Neary
- Jake Rueter
- Scott Shaffer

MAD Senior Management Consultants:

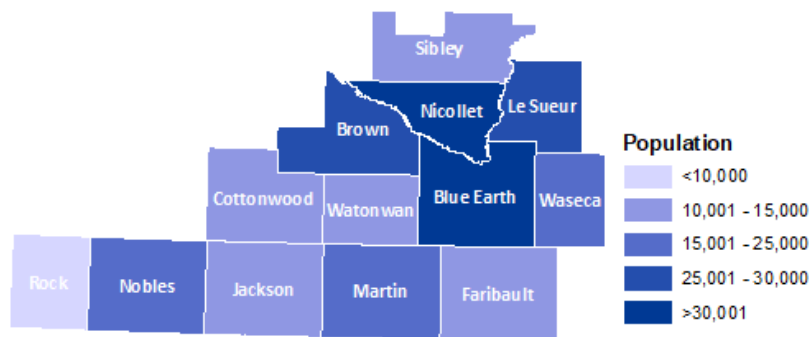
- Jessica Burke
- Mariyam Naadha
- Abra Pollock

Appendix C: District 7 demographic profile

Overview

Located in the south-central region of the state, the Minnesota Department of Transportation's (MnDOT) District 7 is made up of 13 counties: Blue Earth, Brown, Cottonwood, Faribault, Jackson, Le Sueur, Martin, Nicollet, Nobles, Rock, Sibley, Waseca, and Watonwan. This report summarizes key demographic characteristics of District 7. Unless otherwise noted, the figures in this document are derived from the 2018 US Census five-year estimates.

Figure 3. Map of District 7 counties and populations



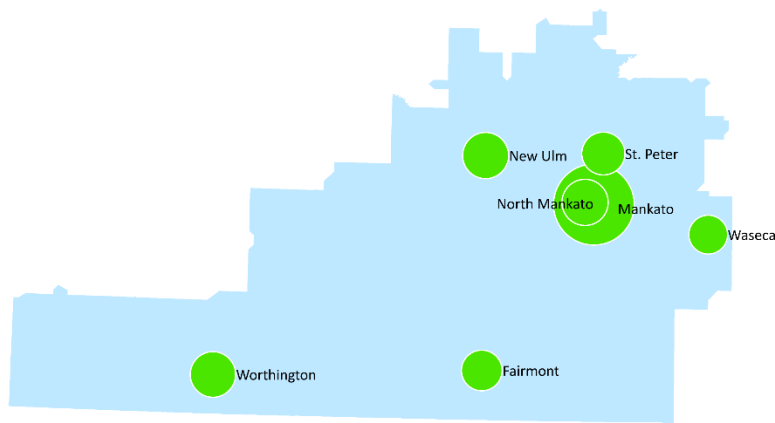
- **Total district population:** 284,524 people (about 5% of Minnesota's population).
- **Total households:** 113,790, with an average of 2.4 persons per household (same as the statewide average).
- **Largest county by population:** Blue Earth County (66,322 people).
- **Largest city by population:** Mankato (in Blue Earth, Nicollet, and Le Sueur Counties), with 41,701 people. Mankato is part of the larger Mankato-North Mankato metropolitan statistical area, which has a population over 100,000.

Since 2010, District 7's population has stayed roughly the same, only increasing by about 1%. Four of the 13 counties gained population, with Blue Earth County gaining the most (5%). The population decreased in nine of the counties—Brown, Cottonwood, Faribault, Jackson, Martin, Rock, Sibley, Waseca, and Watonwan. By comparison, the State of Minnesota grew by 5% overall during the same eight-year period.

Table 1. Population by county

Geography	2010	2018	Percent change since 2010
District 7	282,773	284,524	1%
Blue Earth	62,719	66,322	5%
Brown	26,030	25,211	-3%
Cottonwood	11,712	11,372	-3%
Faribault	14,819	13,896	-7%
Jackson	10,403	10,047	-4%
Le Sueur	27,719	27,983	1%
Martin	20,865	19,964	-5%
Nicollet	32,271	33,783	4%
Nobles	21,030	21,839	4%
Rock	9,606	9,413	-2%
Sibley	15,219	14,912	-2%
Waseca	19,168	18,809	-2%
Watonwan	11,212	10,973	-2%
State of Minnesota	5,241,914	5,527,358	5%

Figure 4. Map of the largest cities in District 7



About half of the district’s population (45%) lives in Blue Earth, Le Sueur, and Nicollet Counties. Those counties contain the cities of Mankato and North Mankato, which have a combined population of 55,405. Mankato alone is more than three times the size of the next largest cities in District 7; North Mankato, New Ulm, and Worthington each have a population around 13,000. The table below lists the cities in District 7 with 5,000 or more people.

Table 2. Cities in District 7 with a population over 5,000

City (County)	Population	Households
Mankato (Blue Earth, Le Sueur, and Nicollet Counties)	41,701	16,247
North Mankato (Blue Earth and Nicollet Counties)	13,704	5,765
New Ulm (Brown County)	13,248	5,706
Worthington (Nobles County)	13,148	4,530
St. Peter (Nicollet County)	11,784	3,804
Fairmont (Martin County)	10,191	4,649
Waseca (Waseca County)	9,056	3,651
New Prague (Le Sueur County)	8,056	3,007

Population characteristics

Race and ethnicity

- Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC):** About 8% of District 7 residents are Black, Indigenous, and other people of color. Black or African American is the largest non-white racial group (2%) followed by Asian (1.8%).
 - American Indians or Alaska Natives:** District 7 does not have any tribal nations within its borders. Residents who identify as Native American or Alaska Native make up less than 1% of the population in the district, with the largest populations in the most populous counties (Blue Earth and Nicollet).
- Trends for BIPOC communities:** Since 2010, the non-white district population increased by 23%. Statewide, the non-white population increased by 24% during the same period. The racial group that increased the most was Black or African American residents, rising 36% (from 3,628 to 5,685 people). The number of residents who identify with two or more races increased by 10% (from 4,113 to 4,564 people).
- Hispanic or Latino ethnicity:** Seven percent of all District 7 residents identify as Hispanic or Latino, with the largest proportions in Nobles and Watonwan Counties (both at about 25%).
- Birthplace:** Ninety-five percent of the district’s residents were born in the United States and 74% were born in Minnesota. Across the entire state, 92% of residents were born in the United States and 74% were born in Minnesota. For foreign-born, naturalized US citizens in District 7, Asia was the most common region of origin, followed by Latin America, Africa, and Europe. Latin America was the most common region of origin for foreign-born non-US citizens. These trends are similar for foreign-born residents statewide as well.

- **English proficiency:** Three percent of the people in District 7 speak English less than very well. Statewide, the estimate is 5%. After English, Spanish is the most common language spoken at home, followed by Asian and Pacific Island languages and Germanic languages. Less common languages include Arabic, Chinese, Somali, and Russian.

Age

- **Youth:** Twenty-three percent of the district’s residents are under age 18, which is the same as the statewide average. Nobles County has the highest proportion, at 27%.
- **Seniors:** The percentage of people age 65 and older in the district is 17%, with Cottonwood, Faribault, and Martin all having the highest proportion (22% or more). Statewide, 14% of the population is aged 65 and older. Blue Earth County has the lowest proportion of people age 65 and older at 13%, slightly lower than the statewide proportion.

Disability

- **People with a disability:** About 11% of residents in District 7 have a disability.³³ The largest proportion of residents with a disability are in Cottonwood and Martin Counties (each about 14%), while the smallest proportion is in Blue Earth County (10%). Statewide, 11% of the population has a disability.

Veterans

- **Veteran population:** About 6% of District 7 residents over the age of 18 are military Veterans. Faribault and Martin Counties have the largest proportion of Veterans (8% each), and Nobles and Nicollet counties have the smallest (5% each). Twenty percent of the district’s disabled veteran population lives in Blue Earth County.

Educational attainment

Table 3 below compares the highest educational attainment for the population age 25 and older in District 7 to Minnesota as a whole.

Table 3. Highest educational attainment for population age 25 and older

Highest educational attainment	District 7	Minnesota
Less than high school diploma	9%	6%
High school graduate (includes equivalency)	33%	24%
Some college, no degree	22%	20%
Associate’s degree	12%	12%
Bachelor’s degree	17%	25%

³³ The American Community Survey asks respondents to answer questions covering six disability types: hearing difficulty, vision difficulty, cognitive difficulty, ambulatory difficulty, self-care difficulty, and independent living difficulty. Respondents who report any one of the six disability types are considered to have a disability. See more at <https://www.census.gov/topics/health/disability/guidance/data-collection-acs.html>.

Highest educational attainment	District 7	Minnesota
Graduate or professional degree	7%	13%

- **Highest level of education:** Ninety-one percent of District 7 residents have at least a high school diploma or equivalent, which is lower than the statewide proportion (94%). Additionally, the share of residents with an associate’s degree or higher (36%) is lower than the statewide share (50%).
- **Students:** Currently, 8% of residents are enrolled in college or graduate school. The largest concentration of college and graduate students is in Blue Earth County.³⁴

Income and labor force

- **Median household income:** The median household income in the district is \$57,959 (in 2018 inflation-adjusted dollars), which is lower than the statewide median household income of \$68,411. Le Sueur County has the highest median household income (\$67,451), while Watonwan County has the lowest (\$51,097).
- **People in poverty:** About 12% of people in District 7 live below the federal poverty level.³⁵ This is higher than the statewide percentage (9%). Blue Earth County has the largest proportion of people in poverty (17%), and Brown and Sibley counties have the smallest (7%).
- **Labor force participation rate:** Sixty-nine percent of the working-age population 16 years and older is in the labor force, which is about the same as the state’s rate (70%). Blue Earth County has the highest participation rate (72%), and Cottonwood County has the lowest (63%).
- **Labor force projections:** Overall the working-age population 16 years and older is projected to decline by 3% over the next ten years.³⁶ The 55 to 64 age group is projected to decline the most (31%), while the 75 and older age group is projected to have the largest increase (29%). The next largest increase is projected for the 65 to 74 age group (12%).

Table 4. District 7 labor force projections

Age Group	% change (2020 to 2030)			
	2020	2025	2030	2030
District 7	157,376	155,807	153,292	-3%
16 to 24	30,332	29,718	28,419	-7%
25 to 34	29,983	31,454	32,237	7%
35 to 44	29,892	30,099	29,307	-2%
45 to 54	26,859	26,438	27,946	4%
55 to 64	29,240	25,387	22,326	-31%

³⁴ Blue Earth County is home to Minnesota State University, Bethany Lutheran College and South Central College.

³⁵ According to the Census Bureau, a family and every individual in it are considered to be in poverty if the family’s total income is less than the dollar value of the appropriate dollar value threshold. Poverty thresholds are dollar amounts used to determine poverty status, and the Census Bureau assigns each person or family one out of 48 possible poverty thresholds. The set of dollar value thresholds vary by family size and composition. For more information, refer to <https://www.census.gov/topics/income-poverty/poverty/guidance/poverty-measures.html>

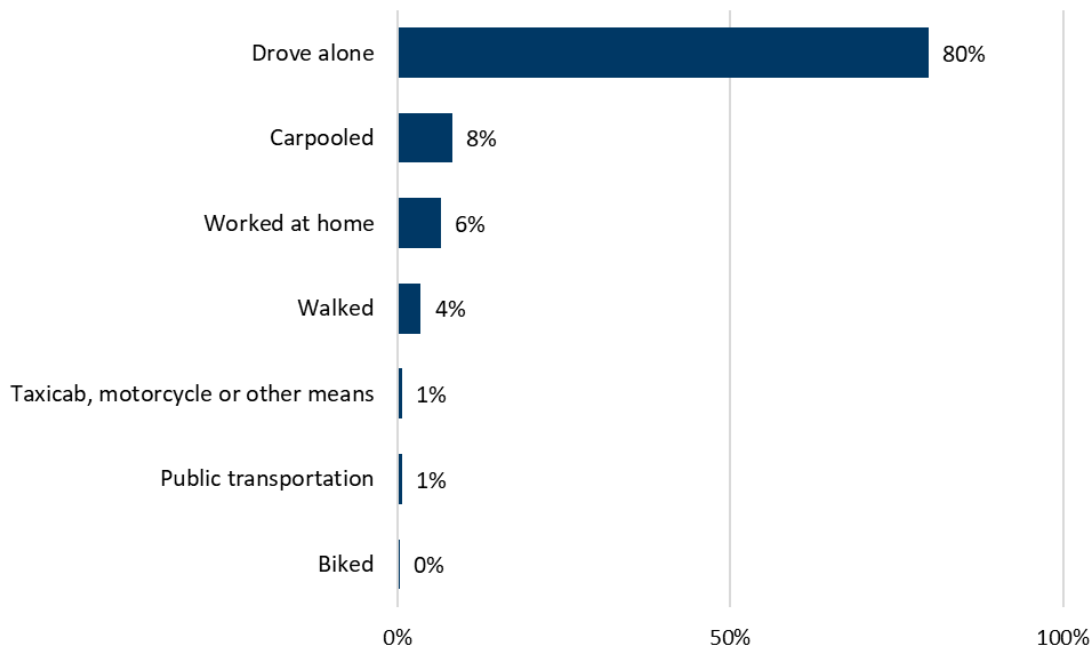
³⁶ Minnesota State Demographer’s Office: <https://mn.gov/admin/demography/data-by-topic/labor-force/>

Age Group				% change (2020 to
	2020	2025	2030	2030)
65 to 74	9,448	10,818	10,773	12%
75+	1,622	1,893	2,284	29%

Means of travel

- Households and vehicles:** Approximately 5% of households (6,200 households) have no vehicles, which is close to the statewide average of 7%. For households with vehicles, 29% (31,288 households) have one vehicle and 71% (76,302 households) have two or more.

Figure 5. Means of travel to work



- Traveling to work:** More than three-quarters (80%) of workers aged 16 and older drive alone to work, which is close to the level for the state as a whole (78%). Nobles County has the largest proportion of workers who carpool (17%). Public transportation riders and bicyclists are among the smallest proportions of workers across the district (less than 1%).
- Commute times:** About 49% of workers age 16 and older who do not work from home have a commute time of less than 15 minutes, while 21% have commutes of 30 minutes or more. Blue Earth County has the largest proportion of workers commuting less than 15 minutes (47%), and Sibley County has the largest proportion commuting 30 minutes or more (38%).

Table 5. County-by-county comparison for selected demographic data

County	Total population	Non-white population (%)	% under 18	% 65 and older	% with a disability	Median household income	Persons in poverty (%)	Zero-vehicle households (%)
Blue Earth	66,322	9%	20%	13%	10%	\$55,861	17%	7%
Brown	25,211	4%	22%	20%	10%	\$57,728	7%	5%
Cottonwood	11,372	10%	24%	22%	14%	\$53,354	12%	5%
Faribault	13,896	3%	22%	23%	12%	\$52,286	11%	5%
Jackson	10,047	6%	22%	21%	11%	\$57,010	8%	3%
Le Sueur	27,983	4%	24%	17%	11%	\$67,451	9%	4%
Martin	19,964	4%	22%	22%	14%	\$53,915	13%	5%
Nicollet	33,783	8%	22%	15%	12%	\$65,027	9%	7%
Nobles	21,839	21%	27%	16%	12%	\$54,149	14%	8%
Rock	9,413	4%	25%	20%	11%	\$59,890	9%	3%
Sibley	14,912	4%	24%	18%	10%	\$62,761	7%	4%
Waseca	18,809	7%	24%	17%	11%	\$55,612	9%	5%
Watonwan	10,973	15%	24%	19%	13%	\$51,097	13%	4%
Minnesota	5,241, 914	17%	23%	15%	11%	\$68,411	9%	7%

Appendix D: Key communities for conversations

Management Analysis and Development (MAD) developed the following in late 2020 to help guide the District 7 community conversations for the transportation equity study.

This document summarizes key communities within MnDOT District 7 for potential inclusion in the Advancing Transportation Equity project. **The goal of this document was to provide a starting point for interviewee identification.** The interview populations were identified based on the current demographics and trends³⁷ in the district and include populations with known inequities. Additional background and analysis about each community is included in the following paragraphs.

It is important to recognize that these groups are not discrete. Transportation concerns often overlap between groups and an interviewee may represent multiple groups. Additionally, an individual may belong to more than one of the communities identified and may experience overlapping inequities.

Overview of District 7

District 7, located in the southwest region of the state, is made up of 13 counties: Blue Earth, Brown, Cottonwood, Faribault, Jackson, Le Sueur, Martin, Nicollet, Nobles, Rock, Sibley, Waseca, and Watonwan, representing nearly 10% of Minnesota’s total land area. Nearly 5% of the Minnesota’s total population live in this district, with nearly a quarter of the district’s population located in Blue Earth County (66,322 people). Nearly half of the district’s population live in Blue Earth, Le Sueur, and Nicollet Counties. Eight cities have more than 5,000 people residing in each with Mankato (located in Blue Earth County) being the largest city by population with 41,701 people.

Black Indigenous and people of color

Historical bias and structural and systemic inequities in policies and practices have contributed to employment, wealth, and education inequities for people who identify as Black, Indigenous, or people of color living in Minnesota. Specific to transportation, historical inequities include access, safety, and lower participation in decision-making for projects and future planning.

About 8% of District 7 identifies with racial groups that are not white. Those who identify as Black or African American are the largest group, consisting of 2% of the residents, followed by Asians (1.8%).

Since 2010 the share of the District 7 population that identified with groups that are not white increased by 23%. Those who identified as Black or African American increased the most (36%), and those who identified with

³⁷ The demographics and trends were derived from the 2017 US Census five-year estimates and the Minnesota State Demographic Center.

two or more races increased 10%. Additionally, 7% of District 7 residents identify as Hispanic or Latinx, with the largest proportions in Nobles and Watonwan Counties (both at 25%). There are no tribal nations within the borders of District 7, though residents who identify as Native or Alaska Native make up about 1% of the population, with the largest populations residing in Blue Earth and Nicollet Counties.

Three percent of the people in District 7 speak English less than very well. Statewide, the estimate is 5%. After English, Spanish is the most common language spoken at home, followed by Asian and Pacific Island languages and Germanic languages. Less common languages include Arabic, Chinese, Russian, and Somali.

Older adults, especially those aging in place

Seventeen percent of the residents in District 7 are 65 and older, which is higher than the statewide share of 14%, with Cottonwood, Faribault, and Martin all having the highest proportion (22%). Statewide, 14% of the population is aged 65 and older.

Additionally, in 2015, nearly 29% of adults 65 and older in District 7 lived alone.³⁸ Transportation concerns for these groups include needing to access services and care providers, especially in the context of aging in place, and should be taken in consideration as part of this project.

People with low incomes or living in poverty

The primary transportation equity concern for low-income households is the ability to access jobs, services, and other opportunities, especially if cost of transportation (to owning and maintaining a vehicle and using alternative transportation) is a barrier for people.

In District 7, the median household income is \$57,959 (in 2018 inflation-adjusted dollars), which is lower than the statewide median income of \$74,593. Le Sueur County has the highest median household income (\$67,451) while Watonwan County has the lowest (\$51,097). Median household incomes varied by race and ethnicity as well, with Black or African American households reporting \$26,052—about \$33,000 less than white only households, and Hispanic or Latinx households reporting \$40,168—about \$19,000 less than white only households in 2018. About 12% of people in the district live below the federal poverty line, with the highest proportion of people in poverty living in Blue Earth County (17%).

People living with disabilities

Similar to the statewide proportion, about 11% of residents in District 7 have a disability. The largest proportion of residents with a disability are in Cottonwood and Martin Counties (both about 14%), while the smallest proportion is in Blue Earth County (10%). Improving understanding of people's lived experience in navigating transportation in the district will contribute to improving access for people with disabilities or people with limited mobility.

³⁸ Data from Minnesota Department of Human Services: <https://mn.gov/dhs/partners-and-providers/news-initiatives-reports-workgroups/aging/aging-2030/data-profiles/>

Veterans

About 6% of District 7 residents over the age of 18 are military Veterans. Faribault and Martin Counties have the largest proportion of Veterans (8% each), and Nobles and Nicollet Counties have the smallest (5% each). Twenty percent of the district's disabled veteran population lives in Blue Earth County. The impact of transportation access on ability for Veterans to access Veterans services in District 7 should also be considered as part of this project.

Women and girls

Women of all ages make up 50% of District 7's population. This is similar to the State of Minnesota overall. A common transportation concern for women is safety, such as walking to and waiting for public transit, especially at night. Other transportation issues include consideration of travel needs and patterns due to the importance of women's role in child-rearing and household management, women's share in the aging population, and cultural differences among cultural or ethnic groups (such as BIPOC communities and immigrants and refugees). Women who experience poverty, homelessness, domestic violence, and sex-based violence also have unique transportation challenges. These aspects should be considered as part of this project.

Zero-vehicle households

Approximately 5% of households (6,200 households) in District 7 have no vehicles, which is close to the statewide average of 7%. For households with vehicles, 29% (31,288 households) have one vehicle and 71% (76,302 households) have two or more. The availability and frequency of transit service, in addition to bicycling and walking options, are important when considering the transportation needs of zero-vehicle households.

Appendix E: Advancing Transportation Equity interview guide

Interviewers used the following questions to guide their conversations and were instructed to use probes to further explore topic areas.

1. Briefly, what challenges does the community encounter, broadly speaking, including those beyond transportation?
2. Tell me about the ability of community members to carry out some of the day-to-day activities I just mentioned.
3. Which transportation modes [or options] are most often used by the community you serve, for example personal vehicles, transit, bicycling, walking, private transportation services?
4. What barriers, if any, does the community encounter in accessing those modes [or options] of transportation?
5. What locations, if any, are particularly difficult for community members to get to and why?
6. Beyond transportation modes [or options], MnDOT is interested in transportation routes and infrastructure. In their neighborhoods or regions, do members of the community face infrastructure challenges that create transportation barriers or hinder travel?
7. How well is public transportation/transit in this area meeting the needs of the community?
8. How well are non-motorized modes [or options] of transportation meeting your community's needs?
9. What safety concerns, if any, does the community have about transportation?
10. Can you share with us what equity means to your organization?
11. How can transportation advance opportunities for members of the community?
12. What ways have members of the community engaged with the government on issues important to them? We're thinking here about all types of government—state, county, local, regional.
13. What examples do you have, if any, of when the government has meaningfully engaged with the community that your organization works with, particularly on transportation issues?
14. Can you recall a recent transportation project or program that impacted the community your work with? If so, what was it?
15. How well informed do you feel about transportation projects that are relevant to the community your organization works with?
16. Who else should we be talking to regarding transportation equity in south central Minnesota?

Appendix F: Findings and potential solutions from the implementation planning workshop 1

MnDOT Central Office and District 7 management team and staff participated in a remote implementation planning workshop on July 16, 2021 to review the study's findings. Prior to the meeting, MAD invited meeting attendees from District 7 and MnDOT's Central Office to complete a survey that asked respondents to select which findings are within the agency's sphere of influence. The meeting participants generated potential solutions in small groups (listed in the next section), and then the larger group voted on which of these solutions should be the highest priorities for the agency. **Proposed solutions that received participant votes appear in bold**, with the number of votes listed afterward in parentheses.

Findings: Public transit

- Nearly all participants said public transit is an important, but limited, transportation option for older adults, immigrants, people with disabilities, people with low incomes, and those who do not have personal vehicles.
- Nearly all organizations who participated in interviews said that while transit exists in the district, there are many limitations and barriers to using public transit including:
 - Limited hours of operation.
 - Long wait and travel times.
 - Barriers to scheduling and arranging transit.
 - Unfamiliarity with using transit and negative perceptions about transit.
 - Cost of using transit services.

Potential solutions:

- **Consider expanding transit hours, including evening hours. This can be addressed in the MnDOT access plans and partner transit plans. Evaluate that all communities in D7 have access to transit services, such as in more populated areas like Mankato. (6 votes)**
- **Continue to lean in on the work started by Regional Transit Coordinating Council planning process. The RTCCs can play role in simplifying scheduling and transit arrangement. (5 votes)**
- **Be more diligent about our statewide goals (tied to funding conversations) that our transit services should meet people's needs, including better hours of operations. Work better with transit providers. (4 votes)**
- Improve transit accessibility so transit can meet the needs of people with mobility challenges, people with strollers, need to connect to other modes of transportation. Consider locations of pick ups and drop offs as well as how far or close people are to destinations, walking, bicycling and other transportation options when dropped off.

- Help service providers communicate and market the available transit services in the community so people are aware of what transit looks like and whether they can use or it meets their needs. Explore ridesharing services to fill transit service gaps-- private sector or public private partnerships.

Findings: Public engagement

- Participants in more than two-thirds of conversations said they do not feel well informed about transportation projects relevant to their communities.
- About one-third of participants said they feel well-informed and identified positive public engagement strategies they have seen in the district.
 - Several discussed MnDOT-specific projects, including a project in St. James where both English- and Spanish-speaking community members were engaged using translated materials, interpreters at public meetings, and use of technology to explain complex topics.
- A few participants observed that there has been an increase in engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic—more online meetings and activities have provided an opportunity for those who have busy schedules and those without transportation to participate in these activities.
- Common communication methods that are effective include:
 - Sharing information in newspapers and on TV news.
 - Sharing information through word of mouth.
 - Sharing information on social media.
 - Leveraging existing community relationships such as churches and community gatherings.

Possible solutions:

- **Build a list of culturally-specific communication methods and tools, for example, Spanish radio stations, Hmong newsletters, etc. (7 votes)**
- **Be present where community is gathering. This could be accomplished by capitalizing on events that are available throughout the district that MnDOT can attend. Maintaining public engagement and affairs staffing would be necessary to staff these events. (3 votes)**
- **Partner with arts organizations. They often have new, fun, and engaging ways to connect with community members. (2 votes)**
- **Build employers as engagement partners. This can be accomplished by posting information in facilities, and sharing information about upcoming events, either virtually or in person. (1 vote)**
- Consider providing more tools and assistance for multilingual outreach. The district needs more tools and assistance around limited English proficiency outreach. While interpreters are available for individual moments, there is a need to build MnDOT's capacity to establish and maintain ongoing relationships.
- Invest in a centralized customer relationship management (CRM) database, as there is a need to have a central location to track relationships and connections.
- Build relationships with community leaders, by being present on an ongoing basis and not just with a project has started.
- Consider partnering with cities and counties on community specific engagement strategies. City councils, for example, may have ideas or existing strategies for connecting with their communities.
- Consider requiring community outreach and engagement as a task in position descriptions. District staff living in different communities could help cover events. There is a question as to whether Central Office or unions would allow this, however.

- Partner with community-based organizations. District staff can get on existing meeting or event agendas. This option requires research and outreach.

Findings: Walking

Most participants in conversations discussed walking, with participants most commonly saying walking is more recreational than a mode of transportation for accessing critical services and needs. Several participants said in some communities there are good trails and sidewalk networks, but a few others said these were lacking in their communities. Several participants also said that because some cities are spread out, with critical services located farther away from affordable housing, walking is not always feasible.

Possible solutions:

- **Engage with key communities to learn where there are important intersections and sidewalk networks that work best in their community, including where crossings make the most sense to them. (7 votes)**
- **Improve communications between the district and CO when scoping projects. CO clarify what types of support it can offer to D7 staff to help with scoping projects. (4 votes)**
- When projects are in the scoping phase, consider applying an equity lens to ensure sidewalk networks serve the needs of key communities.
- Examine policies surrounding distribution of awards or funds to achieve equity among cities with fewer financial resources (e.g., Transportation Alternatives, SRTS, Active Transportation Plans).
- Reevaluate cost participation and cooperative agreement policies to make them more equitable for smaller cities.

Findings: Bicycling

Participants mentioned there have been limited improvements and investments in bicycle infrastructure in the district, with some communities that lack proper bicycle infrastructure such as trails and bicycle lanes. Many participants, however, discussed the lack of infrastructure as a barrier to bicycling in their communities. In communities where bicycle trails were available (participants mentioned Mankato, North Mankato, Fairmont, Windom, and Jackson), participants said the connection between trails and popular destinations and businesses could be improved. Participants said bicycle lanes are also lacking, and where they do exist, the lanes are often too narrow, and bicyclists and drivers may not always know how to use them. For accessing critical needs and services, such as shopping, there is limited bicycle storage and parking, resulting in bicycles being stolen.

Possible solutions:

- **Consider expanding the Safe Routes to Schools program. It is currently too limiting to keep it within a one-mile radius of schools. Funding could be expanded, or different programs could be leveraged to help communities enhance their infrastructure. (5 votes)**
- **Improve bicycle infrastructure and programs, such as improving bicycle lanes, and reconstructing or resurfacing trunk highways. Examine how MnDOT can stop trunk highways from being a barrier, and how to incorporate bicycle infrastructure to projects. Accessible trails and electronic bicycle programs could increase access, as well as demand for additional bicycle infrastructure. (5 votes)**

- **Consider offering support, (potentially in the form of safety plan consultants) to aid counties in creating bicycle plans. Some counties in the district have well-established bicycle plans, such as Watonwan County, while others are struggling. (3 votes)**
- **Work with the Minnesota Statewide Health Improvement Partnership (SHIP) to increase funding for bicycling programs, and to expand bicycle education in schools, which can help improve comfort and safety. (2 votes)**
- **Review Statewide Master Maintenance Contract to determine who is best equipped to handle maintenance efforts. Some activities would be handled by local officials, others by MnDOT. (1 vote)**
- The Mankato trail system lacks connections to businesses. Consider increasing partnership, local input, and private business input to achieve these increased connections. MnDOT and local partners could work together to maintain facilities and critical connections, as well as expand bicycle storage.

Appendix G: Additional suggested organizations

The table below lists the organizations and people that participants suggested for additional conversations. These contacts are an opportunity for District 7 staff to expand on the findings from the community conversations and explore additional areas of interest that arise from the findings and recommendations.

Table 2. Additional suggested organizations with city

Organization	City
Age Friendly Minnesota	Minnesota
CCTV	Unknown
Crisis Center	Unknown
Generations Home Care Services	Gibbon
Heartland Express	New Ulm
Land to Air Express	Mankato
Lead for Minnesota	Waseca
League of Women Voters	St. Peter
Nobles County Integration Collaborative	Worthington
Peoples Express	Wadena (covers Cottonwood, Jackson, Nobles, and Rock)
Southern Minnesota Regional Legal Services	Mankato, Worthington
Take Me There Public Transportation	St. James
University of Minnesota Extension	Willmar

Organization	City
Voices for Rural Resilience	Unknown