

# ADVANCING TRANSPORTATION EQUITY



District 8  
December 2019



# 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 (here forward “organizations”) working with and representing underserved communities in Minnesota.

Beginning in 2017, MnDOT launched district-specific efforts to engage communities through conversations to inform equitable transportation planning and practice. MnDOT coordinated in-person conversations between staff and officials with community organizations, first in District 2 in 2017 and then in District 8 in 2018. 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. This initiative to advance equity continues with conversations in 2019 in Districts 1, 4, and 6.

The conversations in District 8—and the other districts—included a wide range of topics selected to enhance MnDOT’s understanding of the role transportation plays in people’s lives and the opportunities or consequences people face based on available transportation modes. In addition to its continued work internally and with districts to implement changes based on the findings, MnDOT intends to share its District 8 findings with partners from this initiative to help inform their work.

## Methods for the study

For the District 8 community conversations, MnDOT engaged in interviews with representatives from 30 organizations with strong ties to key communities identified in a regional demographic analysis. MnDOT engaged with the following types of communities:

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

Teams of two interviewers visited the 30 organizations in person and asked questions using a semi-structured interview guide, where interviewers followed a common conversational structure but could pursue other relevant topics as they arose.

## Themes and findings

Several themes emerged from the community conversations in District 8, including that transportation does not exist in a vacuum—it affects community life and at the same time is affected by communities in District 8 and their life situations. Further, while transportation provides access to jobs, school, medical appointments, social services, shopping, and social events, inadequate transportation can simultaneously be a roadblock to access and opportunity.

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

## Interconnected



- Transportation in District 8 is deeply connected with other aspects of life in the region. Several characteristics of the region shape District 8's transportation needs and systems. **Population density:** District 8 has relatively low population density, with 10 percent of the state's land area and only 5 percent of its population. This level of density fundamentally shapes transportation needs and the options available. Participants cited privately owned vehicles as the most used and preferred mode of transportation. Existing public transit is limited.

- **Housing affordability:** Housing that is affordable for residents with a low income is often found in more-remote areas of District 8, where residents without cars cannot easily get to work sites, schools, stores, social services, and health

care facilities. In central locations, housing is close to priority destinations and perhaps in areas served by transit, but residents with a low income are often priced out of these neighborhoods.

- **Aging population:** Mirroring statewide trends, one-fifth of District 8's population is now over age 65. As driving habits change with age, people face more difficulties in getting to medical appointments and running errands and find themselves more dependent on others to complete these tasks. Health care access stands out as an important challenge in particular for older adults.
- **Accessibility:** More than 1 in 10 people in the district have one or more disabilities, which can affect transportation needs and available modes. These Minnesotans may have difficulties operating standard vehicles, getting to transit stops, and using sidewalks and paths not adequately designed or maintained for easy access by those with physical limitations.
- **Poverty:** District 8 residents with low incomes may find the costs of owning and maintaining a vehicle beyond their reach, but they face very limited transportation options and restricted access to destinations if they do not have private vehicles.
- **Increasing diversity:** The district is becoming more racially and ethnically diverse, with people of color and American Indians increasing as a share of the population to more than 10 percent in recent years. District 8 has a growing immigrant population, including residents from Latin America, Somalia and other African countries, and Southeast Asia. Newcomers to the area can experience language and other barriers that limit their access to transit and ability to obtain a driver's license or own a car. These barriers may stem from wary attitudes toward government that constrain effective engagement and representation, and, for immigrants in particular, challenges with the English language and a lack of familiarity with local transportation systems and modes.



## Catalyst & Constraint

Accessible transportation can be an economic catalyst for both individual residents of District 8 and local institutions. Conversely, the absence of affordable or accessible transportation options can constrain both individual opportunity and regional growth.

- **Individual access:** Transportation can define the health systems, community institutions, and economic opportunities residents can access. In this way, transportation enables—or hinders—individual mobility as residents consider which jobs, services, and institutions they will be able to reach based on their transportation options.
- **Institutional reach:** In parallel, transportation influences the ability of local health providers, community institutions, and companies to reach potential patients, constituents, and employees. As a result, transportation expands—or limits—the reach of institutions and the populations they can serve, and affects both individual institutions and the region’s broader health system, economy, and civic life.



## Roadblock

The District 8 community conversations also identified several specific ways in which government and personal decisions about transportation can create roadblocks to equity and access for individuals and communities in District 8.

- **Transit mismatches:** Various transit agencies offer bus transportation, dial-a-ride service, and pickups along set routes. However, participants often commented on limitations of public transit including inadequate hours of operation, infrequent service, long wait and travel times, and scheduled routes that miss some key destinations.
- **Perceptions of bicycling and walking:** Walking and bicycling for transportation is limited due to real and perceived barriers including winter weather and lack of maintenance, use of bike and trail infrastructure for recreational purposes only, location of infrastructure that is available, and stigma that walking and bicycling for transportation is a “last resort” for those who cannot drive.
- **Land use planning:** The places people need to go most for employment, daily errands, and community and cultural activities are not always centrally located or near existing transit routes.

# Recommendations

Managers and staff from District 8 and MnDOT’s Central Office reviewed these findings from the equity conversations and developed potential strategies to address challenges and advance equity.

Results from this meeting and observations from MAD consultants resulted in the following recommendations for MnDOT to deepen engagement, expand transportation services, and partner to build relationships in District 8:



## Deepen

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1. Create a District 8 **public engagement strategy**.
2. Create a marketing and outreach campaign to reach communities of **non-native English speakers**.



## Expand

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3. Collaborate with local government partners to develop and, where necessary, update **bicycle and pedestrian plans**.
4. Work with partners to expand access to and availability of **transit options** in District 8.



## Partner

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5. **Establish and build relationships** with groups, agencies, and organizations not traditionally engaged in transportation conversations.

These recommendations are discussed further in later sections of this report.