

# ADVANCING TRANSPORTATION EQUITY



District 3  
June 2023



# Executive summary

As part of its 20-year 2017 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 COVID-19 pandemic, MnDOT conducted community conversations in District 7 through remote meeting technology. MnDOT continued to use remote meeting technology in 2022 in District 3, concluding the Greater Minnesota regions for the community conversations project. These conversations help MnDOT develop a deeper understanding of the people who live in the different districts and their transportation needs, 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 3 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 3 findings with partners from this initiative to help inform their work.

## Methods for the study

In District 3, MnDOT engaged with representatives of 24 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 3, participants emphasized that access to services and other needs are often affected by factors such as income, race and ethnicity, age, and ability.

- **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. In parts of the district, such as Saint Cloud, immigrants and refugees may make up a significant proportion of the population; however, limited or lacking access to transportation creates barriers to access opportunities and needed services.
- **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:** People with disabilities in the region rely on public transit, volunteer drivers programs, and other transportation services. For people with disabilities, transportation barriers often include limited availability of transportation services and ADA compliance issues such as lack of accessibility ramps, audible signals, and curb cuts. Where transit and transportation services are available, inability to access vehicles independently is also a challenge.
- **Zero-vehicle households:** Community members without a vehicle include older adults, people with low incomes, students, people experiencing homelessness, and BIPOC community members. For zero-vehicle households, barriers include limited hours and service areas of transit and lack of rapid transportation between the region and the Twin Cities.
- **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 3. 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.

## 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 what they need to be successful 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 3 community conversations, an equitable transportation system is critical for community members to access jobs, health and medical needs, housing, and social and recreational activities.

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

- Improve access and funding for public transit.
- Increase connections within the district, between the region and the Twin Cities metro area, and continuity of transit services within the district.
- Improve city planning and zoning to increase multimodal connection to popular destinations.

# Recommendations

Management and staff from MnDOT Central Office (CO) and District 3 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. Integrate equity across MnDOT and D3 policies, programs, and processes to reduce inequities across the transportation systems.**
- 2. Expand and broaden public engagement strategies for deeper, connected engagement with key communities identified in the equity community conversations.**
- 3. Improve transit access in District 3 in partnership with transit providers and the Regional Transportation Coordinating Councils (RTCC).**
- 4. MnDOT and D3 staff should continue to work with local partners to improve safety and accessibility for people who walk, bike, or roll to their destinations.**

These recommendations are discussed in more detail beginning on page 38 of the full report.