

PROGRESS ON EQUITY COMMITMENTS IN THRIVE MSP 2040

Introduction

Thrive MSP 2040, the current development framework for the seven-county Twin Cities region, was adopted by the Metropolitan Council in 2014. The framework identified five desired outcomes - Stewardship, Prosperity, Equity, Livability, Sustainability. Together, they're an expression of the shared vision developed through engagement with regional stakeholders.

Thrive MSP 2040 describes equity as:

Equity connects all residents to opportunity and creates viable housing, transportation, and recreation options for people of all races, ethnicities, incomes, and abilities so that all communities share the opportunities and challenges of growth and change. For our region to reach its full economic potential, all of our residents must be able to access opportunity. Our region is stronger when all people live in communities that provide them access to opportunities for success, prosperity, and quality of life. (p.38)

Throughout [the Outcomes chapter of Thrive MSP 2040](#) (p.16-75 in the complete plan) the Council's core policy authorities are recast as integrated strategies intended to further the five outcomes, and specific commitments are named (each preceded by "the Council will"). Overall, the equity outcome section lays out 31 commitments across four strategies; these specifics are the focus of this report.

Purpose

This document describes progress on the commitments named in the equity outcome section of Thrive MSP 2040. This information was requested by both Metropolitan Council Members and community advocates in 2021. It intentionally maintains the structure and language of the regional development framework.

In addition, this effort aligns with [Thrive MSP 2040 principles](#), which were designed to guide how the Council will implement policies in the framework; accountability is one of the three principles. The accountability section identifies regional data trends – known as [Thrive Indicators](#) - as the primary mechanism for evaluating progress toward the framework's outcomes. However, a representative summary such as this report also has a place in evaluating progress on these commitments.

Scope

This report is not a full accounting of our work toward advancing regional equity since 2014 - nor do we intend it to be. Rather, the scope of this report is firmly limited to the 31 commitments within the equity outcome section of Thrive MSP 2040, which were based on core policy authorities in the areas of housing, transportation, parks, transit-oriented development, and community engagement.

It's important to note what was excluded from this report by design: the other four outcomes of Thrive MSP 2040 are not addressed here. Internal Council efforts are not addressed here. Projects, programs, and/or policies that are currently underway but were not yet complete or officially adopted at the time of this writing (April 2022) are not included here. Equity commitments described in 2040 policy and systems plans – or in subsequent updates – may not be included here (though some are strongly linked to the commitments in the framework and therefore described below). The decision to hem closely to Thrive MSP 2040's equity outcome section means this report only supplements the continued work and conversations that the Council has held in reviewing its work to advance equitable outcomes as we turn toward planning the next (2050) regional development framework.

Lastly, this report does not delve deeply into the breadth or depth of the work on each commitment. Instead, where possible, we have linked to where the work lives “in full” - typically online on metro council.org or metro transit.org. Thus, this document acts as an aggregate of the variety of projects and actions that the Council has taken: several projects contain a significant amount of information themselves. Practically, our work can evolve with changes or updates; this annotated approach creates a longer “shelf life” for this work.

Strategy 1: Using our influence and investments to build a more equitable region

Work to mitigate Areas of Concentrated Poverty and Racially Concentrated Areas of Poverty by better connecting their residents to opportunity and catalyzing neighborhood revitalization.

This commitment highlights one of the larger shifts in our thinking about equity - and equity framing and metrics - since Thrive MSP 2040.

Areas of Concentrated Poverty were re-introduced to the regional conversation through reporting requirements associated with a Sustainable Communities planning grant awarded to the Council by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in 2010. Known as a fair housing and equity assessment (FHEA), our report (titled [Choice, Place, and Opportunity](#)) analyzed the seven-county region's race and income patterns and assessed opportunities areas; HUD prescribed some of this methodology, though some areas allowed for greater community influence.

One requirement analysis was an identification of census tracts with majority shares of people in poverty and residents of color – and where those two subsets intersected. We refined this somewhat: the Council defined Areas of Concentrated Poverty as census tracts with 40%+ of residents with incomes at under 185% of the federal poverty threshold. A subset of Areas of Concentrated Poverty where the majority of residents are people of color (ACP50s) were also identified (referred to in Thrive MSP 2040 as “Racially Concentrated Areas of Poverty” and later changed to ACP50s).

At over 100 pages, the Choice, Place, and Opportunity report contextualized the region's concentrated poverty as an outcome of sustained disinvestment and public policy decisions rooted in systemic racial discrimination. The study also described barriers to housing choice low-income households and people

of color (regardless of income) experience. Lack of housing choice means constraints on the kinds of opportunities residents can access.

Overall, the FHEA process and findings underscored why an equity outcome in the regional development framework was essential. Thrive MSP 2040 committed the Council to annual replication of the concentrated poverty analysis, and – as seen in commitments of this section – prompted regional and local planners and policymakers to consider these geographic areas and metrics in their work.

Meanwhile, community organizations, advocates, and residents - who had expressed concerns about HUD's framing of concentrated poverty and during the FHEA process – were frustrated by how an ACP or ACP50 designation became a proxy for what neighborhoods may want or need (or not need), and how the deficit-based narrative of concentrated poverty could overshadow community assets and strengths. For example, the remedy for chronic disinvestment is not simply investment of any kind but equitable, community-centered investment that addresses unmet needs. The former could result in tangible harm, like displacement; the latter requires meaningful engagement and consideration of community contexts.

In 2019, Council researchers initiated an engagement project called "[Rethinking Areas of Concentrated Poverty](#)" that sought to better understand who was using these measures - and how – and whether the focus on concentrated poverty was proving useful in advancing equity. These conversations revealed that although this work had brought a shared understanding of the region to a broad audience – a critical starting point – the useful application of ACPs and ACP50s were limited. But the harm experienced by these communities was not.

Staff presented recommendations to discontinue use of concentrated poverty metrics, particularly ACP50s, in 2019. We worked with local governments, the Equity Advisory Committee, and other stakeholders to create a holistic data resource that could provide a more nuanced portrait of neighborhoods called [Equity Considerations for Place-based Advocacy and Decisions](#). We continue to offer technical assistance to anyone seeking to transition from concentrated poverty measures to other equity metrics.

For the purposes of this report, we did use ACPs and ACP50s to analyze the commitments where mentioned.

Work with communities to create more income-diverse neighborhoods, including strategically targeted subsidies to develop market-rate housing in areas that lack market-rate options.

In 2017, Local Planning Assistance staff [presented a PlanIt series of workshops](#) in partnership with the Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE) on incorporating equity into local comprehensive plans.

Use Livable Communities Act resources to catalyze private investment in Areas of Concentrated Poverty and Racially Concentrated Areas of Poverty.

Between 2014 and 2021, the LCA program has awarded a total of \$59.1M across its programs to projects within census tracts identified as Areas of Concentrated Poverty (using in the 2010-2014 American Community Survey data). These funds supported nearly 7,900 new housing units and preserved or rehabbed another 1,042 units. Just under half of these housing units (49%) were affordable to households with incomes at or below 60% of the area median income.

Prior to the shift away from ACPs and ACP50s, the Council's Livable Communities Act (LCA) grant programs incorporated concentrated poverty measures into project scoring criteria. A pilot program called Seeding Equitable Environmental Development (SEED) was created in 2015. This program allocated a share of Tax Base Revitalization Account funds that can be used for site investigation or cleanup, and it targeted ACP50s. [The location eligibility areas for SEED grants were recently expanded.](#)

Actively partner in neighborhood revitalization efforts such as Penn Avenue Community Works in North Minneapolis.

Metropolitan Council is a named government partner of [Hennepin County Community Works](#), a place-based, cross-jurisdictional program that addresses areas with declining tax bases through coordinated public investments in corridor-scale infrastructure, natural systems, and redevelopment. Concerning the Penn Avenue Community Works project specifically, Metro Transit has continued to work with this group on transportation and infrastructure planning, as this corridor is part of the C Line bus rapid transit (BRT) route – [see the Penn Ave Penn Avenue Vision and Implementation Framework](#).

Conduct a regional inventory of industrial land that considers the location of industrial land relative to the potential workforce eager to access nearby higher wage job opportunities.

The Regional Industrial Land Inventory study was completed in 2017 and presented to several stakeholder groups (see, for example, [this PlanIt webinar slide deck with key findings](#) and the [productive discussions](#) generated about economic competitiveness and land use).

Work with our partners and stakeholders to identify indicators used to measure how projects, supported with Council resources, advance equity, including helping residents of Areas of Concentrated Poverty and Racially Concentrated Areas of Poverty, lower-income households, or people with disabilities.

This commitment – as written – is largely unrealized but there is other context worth considering:

- The community and stakeholder engagement efforts described throughout this report demonstrate how partnerships, feedback, and co-creation have shaped and informed our work and understanding of if/how that work has advanced regional equity and improved residents' lives.

- [The Equity Advisory Committee](#) - created in 2015 - has engaged deeply with staff on a wide-range of programs and policies. Their input has been invaluable to the Council, including how to assess impacts.

Strategy 2: Creating real choices in where we live, how we travel, and where we recreate for all residents, across race, ethnicity, economic means, and ability

Use its resources, including investments in transit, infrastructure, and redevelopment, to help create and preserve mixed-income neighborhoods and housing choices across the region.

A full analysis of Council investments – and their role in creating/preserving mixed-income neighborhoods (or not) – is beyond the scope of this report. A strong theme across Council project prioritization and investments since 2014 is a shift toward more robust community context and engagement. Consider the following examples – many are discussed further in other equity commitments:

- The Regional Solicitation has included a project selection measure for affordable housing since 2001; this measure has since evolved from rewarding applicants' housing policies to rewarding project-specific elements.
- In 2020, the Council reviewed the LCA scoring criteria tailored criteria to better connect funded housing developments to housing choice in the project area and to serve housing needs of those who currently live in the project area.
- Master plans for regional parks and trails must include an equity analysis that describes nearby population and how they were engaged in planning processes, as well as how the agency responded to and incorporated input from the engagement efforts into the master plan.
- The Council's [Transit-Oriented Development Guide](#) and other online resources emphasize equity and equitable outcomes.

Housing

Encourage preserving existing housing where rehabilitation is a cost-effective strategy to maintaining housing affordability.

Metropolitan Council's primary housing investment tool is the Livable Communities Act (LCA) grant program: across all grants, LCA has supported the preservation or rehabilitation of 1,495 housing units between 2014 and 2021. Most were funded through the Local Housing Incentives Account (LHIA) - an LCA grant program that supports the production and preservation of affordable rental and ownership housing.

Invest in and encourage new affordable housing in higher-income areas of the region, particularly in areas that are well-connected to jobs, opportunity, and transit.

Using data from the census bureau's American Community Survey (ACS), we identified census tracts as 'areas of concentrated affluence.' Looking at LCA investments only in those neighborhoods between 2014 and 2021, the \$14.5M grant funds supported the following:

- 525 new affordable housing units (at or below 60% area median income)
- An estimated 3,260 new jobs
- 66 acres of contamination clean-up

Ensure that local comprehensive plans guide an adequate supply of land to meet each jurisdiction's fair share of housing for low- and moderate-income households.

Guiding land uses with minimum densities high enough to support the development of each jurisdiction's need for new affordable housing is a requirement for 1) consistency with the 2040 Housing Policy Plan and 2) to participate in the Livable Communities Act grant programs. [An analysis of housing elements in local comprehensive plans](#) - including land guided for affordable housing, locally identified housing needs, and locally identified housing tool use – was presented in 2022.

Staff are currently implementing new tracking tools to adding land guided for affordable housing to [Community Pages within the Local Planning Handbook](#) so jurisdictions can more easily access this information in real time and alongside other relevant data, like recent affordable housing production. Council staff have started including this data in staff reports for comprehensive plan amendments.

Develop and provide tools, including competitive rent limits in higher-cost communities, to enable Housing Choice Voucher holders to choose the location that best meets their needs.

Metro Housing and Redevelopment Authority (HRA) administers the state's largest Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher program. Metro HRA has successfully expanded housing choice for low-income households by:

- Creating [Community Choice, a mobility counseling program](#), that supports voucher holders in finding housing in opportunity-rich neighborhoods through counseling, supportive services, and security deposit assistance.
- Adopting [Small Area Fair Market Rents \(SAFMRs\)](#). SAFMRs are rent limits adopted at the zip code level instead of for an entire metropolitan area. This allows for higher rent limits in higher rent areas of the region and lower rent limits in lower rent areas of the region. The goal of SAFMRs is to improve housing choice in all neighborhoods, increase voucher placement success, and provide for budget neutral potential in future years. SAFMRs were implemented in 2020.

Encourage increased resources for affordable housing at the federal, state, regional, and local levels to help close the gap between the region's affordable housing need and the supply.

Metropolitan Council's engagement in federal, state, and local conversations about the region's need for affordable housing are varied and ongoing, and in some cases, emergent.

Since 2014, the Metro HRA has successfully pursued new opportunities through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and state and local partnerships [to expand ways they can support low-income residents in need of rental housing assistance](#), including:

- a mobility counseling program (2015)
- 67 new housing vouchers to expand assistance for people with disabilities experiencing homelessness; a partnership between Metro HRA, Metro Transit's Homeless Action Team and Anoka and Carver counties (2019)
- a 74-voucher six-year mobility demonstration program (2021)
- additional Project Based Vouchers

With growing numbers of residents experiencing homelessness in the region, and in addition to the vouchers the Metro HRA was able to secure, the Council supports and advocates for coordination and additional resources for those experiencing homelessness through formal tables like the Interagency Council on Homelessness, and in partnerships with local governments.

LCA's LHIA grant program has increased its available funding dramatically since 2015. LHIA's annual funding base is \$1.5M and the Council has consistently supplemented this base using interest earnings from LCA program accounts, or General Purposes Levy revenues through the Council's special initiative funding process. Between 2015 and 2019, the average investment over base was just under \$1M. In 2020 and 2021 the Council made historic LHIA amounts available above the base in the amounts of \$4M and \$6.5M, respectively.

Support efforts to expand the supply of affordable housing that is accessible to people with disabilities.

Staff recently presented recommendations to adjust proposal scoring criteria beyond federal and state accessibility requirements for affordable housing in the [Local Housing Incentives Account \(LHIA\) grant program](#) through LCA.

Work with housing partners and local governments to expand the supply of affordable housing available at all income levels, including extremely low-income households earning less than 30% of the area median income (that is, \$24,850 for a family of four in 2014).

The 2040 Housing Policy Plan initiated changes to the Council's annual survey of local governments tracking new affordable housing production in the region by disaggregating affordable units by level of affordability (as a share of area median income). We leverage this more detailed information to draw attention to the low production of 30% AMI units across the region and high demand for such units

(see, for example, this [2021 presentation](#) to Council Members).

In addition, the Local Planning Assistance team developed [plethora of factsheets, webinars, workshops, and other resources](#) to support local governments in building and preserving affordable housing through their Local Planning Handbook and PlanIt programs, and ongoing technical assistance.

The region's jurisdictions are taking note and prioritizing deeply affordable housing, in some cases leveraging COVID-19 pandemic recovery funds. For example, Ramsey County and the city of Saint Paul announced in December 2021 a combined investment \$74 million from federal American Recovery Plan Act (ARPA) funding into a 30% Area Median Income (AMI) Housing Fund initiative to increase the supply of deeply affordable housing by 1,000 units.

Further, recent changes to LCA scoring criteria have been reviewed and tailored to better connect funded housing developments to housing choice in the project area and to serve housing needs of those who currently live in the project area – including 30% AMI units.

Promote regional and local efforts to streamline the process and reduce the costs of developing housing, including affordable housing.

Council staff presented the results of a qualitative research project examining this topic, "[Pre-Application Best Practices in Affordable Housing Development](#)," to the Council's Land Use Advisory Committee in 2016.

In addition, housing staff engaged stakeholders to simplify grant applications for LCA's transit-oriented development and Livable Communities Demonstration Account (LCDA) programs, and refreshed LCA's online resources and trainings.

Support research and other activities related to fair housing, residential lending, and real estate practices to determine if discriminatory practices are occurring and limiting housing choices.

The 2040 Housing Policy Plan established an annual \$100K funding commitment in support of fair housing and related activities. First distributed in 2016, these funds have supported a range of efforts, including:

- Funding for and an ongoing partnership with the [Fair Housing Implementation Council \(FHIC\)](#), an entity of counties, cities, and community development agencies required to affirmatively further fair housing as federal funding administrators and describe their efforts in an Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing Choice
- Nonprofit organizations that support the region's tenants through legal support, education, and research (HOME Line, Housing Link, Housing Justice Center)

- Technical assistance tools for local governments, such as the [Mixed Income Feasibility Calculator](#)
- [Studies and workshops highlighting best practices](#) for creating affordable homeownership opportunities and community land trusts

In addition, the Metropolitan Council requires that local governments awarded Livable Communities Act funding for development projects have locally adopted fair housing policies. To further support local governments in the development and adoption of such policies, we have contracted with the Housing Justice Center to provide three training webinars relevant to the region's jurisdictions regardless of size and staff capacity and continue to offer technical assistance.

Transportation

Metropolitan Council serves region's transportation needs through its authorities as a [federally-designated Metropolitan Planning Organization \(MPO\)](#) and as the operator of [Metro Transit](#), the largest transit system in the state.

Include a measure of households who do not own private automobiles as one of the elements driving the Council's Transit Market Areas and defining the level of bus service neighborhoods expect to receive.

The Transportation Policy Plan (TPP) includes [Regional Transit Design Guidelines and Performance Standards in Appendix G](#). This includes a Transit Market Index that is used to determine Transit Market Areas, which are a tool used to guide transit planning decisions. Automobile availability is one of four measures used in calculating the Transit Market Index (more details about how the index is calculated and the Transit Market Areas are available in the appendix linked above).

Conduct Title VI service equity analyses—a federally prescribed process—to ensure that major changes in transit service do not lead to disparate impacts on low-income resident and communities of color.

The [Federal Transit Administration's Title VI Circular](#) requires that transit providers conduct an equity analysis of major changes in service and fares. Agencies must develop policies that determine 'major' changes in fare and services. The policies must include a public engagement process when major changes are made to assess the impact on low-income and residents of color. [Metro Transit's Title VI Program \(January 2020\)](#) explains the evaluation conducted for major services in Metro Transit (p. 57-75) and the analysis' results and impact (p. 78) and "finds the distribution of state and federal funding for public transportation purposes does not result in disparate impacts to minority populations."

Metro Transit's commitment to equity goes beyond federal compliance, as evident in the work of [the annual service equity evaluation \(SEE\)](#). This assessment considers key metrics relevant to Metro Transit's service and its impact on communities of color and low-income communities. The metrics are

design to explore the equity of service distribution, access, and quality throughout the service area. The 2020 SEE included metrics relevant and responsive to the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on transit, such as crowded buses.

Complete environmental justice analyses that ensure no disproportionately high and adverse impacts of transportation projects to the region's people of color and low-income populations.

Each update to the Transportation Policy Plan (TPP) includes an environmental justice analysis. The [current TPP Equity and Environmental Justice chapter](#) is available online and includes maps to identify population groups, analysis of TPP strategies, comparisons of accessibility changes to jobs and community amenities by mode, and populations in proximity to the regional highway system.

The Regional Solicitation has included equity in the project selection criteria since 2014, with a focus on the benefits a project provides for and mitigation of any negative impacts on equity populations. This criterion has continued to be used with some refinement through the 2020 Regional Solicitation. In November 2019, the Council hosted workshops for potential applicants on engaging underrepresented populations. The socio-economic equity measure asks applicants to address engagement with, benefits for, and impacts on people of color, people with low incomes, people with disabilities, youth, and older adults.

Prioritize transportation investments that connect lower-income areas to job opportunities

[Metro Transit's Network Next](#) is a 20-year plan for expanding and improving the bus network. Transit improvements under consideration include improved local and express routes, integrated shared mobility options, and new arterial bus rapid transit (BRT) lines. The Network Next ABRT prioritization used both a technical and a community evaluation phase. The technical evaluation weighted advancing equity and reducing regional racial priorities as 50% of the points for ranking candidate ABRT corridors. This analysis used criteria of people of color, population living in poverty, low-wage jobs, and proportion of renters for criteria.

Metro Transit's Better Bus Stops is a project to enhance access to opportunities by investing in bus stops. Better Bus Stops is both a capital project – [to make investments in shelters, shelter lighting, heaters and pedestrian access](#) – and a [significant community engagement process](#). The project focuses on high-poverty neighborhoods and communities of color (initially, the program focus was specifically areas of concentrated poverty where more than half of the residents are people of color, ACP50s.) Metro Transit has created an annual capital investment for Better Bus Stops program.

Since November 2015, Transit Link has provided [dial-a-ride transit service for MSP airport employees](#) from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. when there is less fixed-route service available. Airport employers provide a matching fare to riders, who pay the standard Transit Link fare. The service is a joint project with the Council, Ramsey County Workforce Solutions, and the Metropolitan Airports Commission.

During the COVID pandemic, Metro Mobility and Transit Link provided service to health care workers who rely on transit for their commutes when Metro Transit reduced fixed-route service. This temporary program ran from April 2020 through August 2021 and provided more than 362,000 rides to health care workers to enable them to continue to serve patients in a pandemic.

Major transitway projects (Green Line, Blue Line, Gold Line, Purple Line) are initially developed by counties; when transferred to Metropolitan Council, the transit modes and alignments are already determined. However, counties follow federal transit project development and environmental processes that prioritize projects that serve lower-income areas and connections to jobs, schools, and affordable housing.

Provide accessible transit vehicles and facilities and offer Metro Mobility service to supplement regular-route transit service to create transportation choices for people with disabilities.

Metropolitan Council continues to provide Metro Mobility paratransit service with accessible vehicles to help create transportation choices for people with disabilities.

In addition, during the COVID pandemic, Metro Mobility service pivoted to temporarily serve other emerging needs of its customers.

1. The creation of a temporary [Grocery and Goods delivery program](#) helped to reduce barriers related to disabilities or health conditions by allowing Metro Mobility customers to stay safe at home and have their essential goods delivered to them for free. Certified Metro Mobility customers could order groceries and household essentials online from stores with online shopping and local pick up with no fees or fares for delivery to them. More than 3,100 trips were made through October 2021 as part of this program.
2. A temporary food shelf distribution program helped to improve access to food and essential goods for underserved communities during the pandemic. Metro Mobility and Transit Link partnered with more than 35 food shelves in the region to deliver food to underserved people who were experiencing increased food insecurity due to the pandemic, making more than 49,800 deliveries as of October 2021.

A new equity and inclusion training program started in Fall 2021 to define Council expectations for equitable and inclusive service delivery and bring these principles to our front-line workforce. This ongoing program is a partnership between the Council and our contracted provider management teams. The target audience includes contracted drivers, dispatchers, customer service agents, and front-line support staff for Metro Mobility, Transit Link, and contracted fixed route services. The training includes frank discussion about biases, racism, sexism, ageism, ableism, and how these may impact our workforce, our customers, our service, and our social environments.

[Metro Mobility's Premium on Demand service](#) (under the 'Riding Metro Mobility' tab) implemented a customized app and improved service requirements for this service, especially relating to comparable wheelchair-accessible vehicle service.

Engage neighborhood residents in transit planning to understand how to most effectively use transit service and investments to promote access to opportunity.

[Metro Mobility](#) convenes community conversations with customers, stakeholders, and advocates to discuss service regularly. All regional transit providers have regular community conversations to engage with customers in different ways.

[Metro Transit has a dedicated team of community engagement coordinators](#) assigned to transitway project development, service planning efforts, issue resolution, and work regionally to build long-term sustainable relationships with communities. The team's efforts include ensuring communities can influence project choices, building community capacity in understanding how decisions are made, and bringing community desires back for agency consideration. The engagement team uses a variety of methods to reach diverse constituencies; these strategies center meeting communities where they are (versus requiring community members to seek input opportunities). Examples include hosting pop-up events, community event attendance, door knocking, and one-on-one collaboration with individuals and organizations. Recent engagement efforts have focused on understanding community desires for access, issues with the current transit system, and how transit investments can help shape vision for their communities.

METRO Blue Line Extension Anti-Displacement Workgroup

Early engagement for the METRO Blue Line Extension project brought forward community concerns about the potential for current and future displacement related to the planning, construction, and operation of the Blue Line light rail in North Minneapolis, Robbinsdale, Crystal, and Brooklyn Park. [To help generate solutions, the University of Minnesota's Center for Urban and Regional Affairs \(CURA\) was selected to work with community and partner stakeholders to evaluate the potential for displacement.](#) The workgroup will develop actionable policy recommendations and strategies to ensure this important transit investment minimizes displacement in the communities it is intended to benefit, while maximizing opportunities for communities to build wealth in place and realize new potential for inclusive prosperity and vitality.

Parks

Strengthen equitable usage of regional parks and trails by all our region's residents, such as across race, ethnicity, income, and ability

The [regional parks ambassador program](#) is an ongoing effort to help raise awareness of the regional parks and trails by intentionally engaging underrepresented communities to encourage use of the regional parks system and build support for its future.

The [2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan and 2018 update](#) directed staff to create a set-aside, competitive equity grant program designed to explicitly strengthen equitable usage of the Regional Parks System. Working closely with the Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission (MPOSC), the Council's Equity Advisory Committee, the Community Development Committee, and the Regional Parks Implementing Agencies, [the Regional Park System Equity Grant Program launched in 2019](#) with an initial focus on capital projects and total budget of \$300,000. Continued evaluation and stakeholder engagement about the program has resulted in an increased funding availability of \$2.1M and broader use of funds (capital and non-capital projects) [for the 2021 NOFA](#).

The 2018 update to the Regional Parks Policy Plan, the Council committed to engaging in "targeted studies to better understand and provide for the outdoor recreational needs and preferences" of underserved populations, including youth. The [Youth & Parks study](#) - published in 2021 - was an innovative, collaborative research effort between Met Council, youth-serving community organizations, and professional staff at park implementing agencies. The findings and recommendations cover a broad range of issues and preferences of youth and other community members, including learning outdoor skills, the issue of in-park racism and cultural climate of the parks, a broad range of park activities preferred by youth, and time constraints and transportation obstacles in accessing parks.

The [2020 update to the Regional Parks Policy Plan](#) included new equity analysis requirements for master plans (which are required for each regional park, park reserve, regional trail, and special recreation feature in the regional park system). The analysis requires park agencies to show how they

engaged the public in developing park and trail master plans, or amending those plans, as well as the outcomes of the engagement. It ensures that questions of who benefits and who is affected by the development of a regional recreational resource will be included in all regional park and trail master planning efforts. To further support agencies in completing the equity analysis requirement, the Council created [an interactive tool](#) to provide relevant demographic and socioeconomic data near parks and trails as well as [an online equity toolkit](#).

Strategy 3: Investing in a mix of housing affordability along the region's transit corridors

The two commitments related to transit-oriented development were similar; we've addressed them together below:

- *Align its resources and work with other partners to help preserve a mix of housing affordability along the region's transit routes and corridors to help low-income households benefit from transit investments.*
- *Promote transit-oriented development that ensures a mix of housing affordability in transit station areas*

As mentioned earlier, Metropolitan Council's Local Planning Assistance team maintains the [Transit-Oriented Development Guide](#) and other online resources emphasizing equity in TOD planning. [Metro Transit's TOD office also makes planning resources and studies available here.](#) In addition, the Local Planning Assistance team's PlanIt program has offered webinars and provided resources on transit-oriented development to local government staff.

LCA's Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) grant program awarded \$34.9M between 2015 and 2021; these funds supported just over 5,300 new housing units, of which 56% were affordable (< 60% of area median income). [LCA also recently launched new pre-development opportunities through the LCDA and TOD grant programs](#); \$2M in funding is available in 2022 (this total includes a policy development grant program as well). One of the program's goals is to "increase choice in local housing options by adding new housing types and creating affordable housing opportunities. Priority for projects with deep affordability and/or serving a special population."

The Metro Transit's TOD Office teamed up with Hennepin County [to secure FTA TOD Pilot Program Grants](#) for the METRO Blue Line Light Rail Transit (LRT) Extension Project, and Washington County to secure a grant for the METRO Gold Line Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) Project. The purpose of these grants was to [foster transit-oriented development](#) by completing a scope of services centered on advanced station area planning in collaboration with the cities along the alignment and the Project Offices responsible for designing and engineering the transit projects.

Strategy 4: Engaging a full cross-section of the community in decision-making

In 2015, the Metropolitan Council implemented a [Public Engagement Plan](#) that was both called for as a commitment toward addressing equity considerations in Thrive MSP 2040, and to address the promise of engaging a full cross-section of the community in decision-making. The Public Engagement Plan addresses the six commitments detailed under that promise and establishes the long-term process for continuing to address those commitments moving forward. The commitments are as follows:

- *Define consistent expectations of how the Council will engage with the region's residents and constituencies.*
- *Evaluate what types of policy, planning, and operational decisions need what levels of engagement, recognizing that not all decisions need and merit the same intensity of engagement.*
- *Collaborate and consult with members of the community, especially historically underrepresented populations.*
- *Focus on developing lasting relationships with the region's residents and constituencies.*
- *Highlight best practices for engagement in our region.*
- *Work toward making decisions with people, not for people.*

Public Engagement Plan

The Public Engagement Plan is structured around principles and strategies that were co-created with community members following an extensive engagement process with community leaders who advocate for equity in the Twin Cities region. The Public Engagement Plan specifically:

- **Defines expectations for Metropolitan Council engagement** – the Public Engagement Plan defines eight principles for engagement, defined collaboratively with community members, including equity, respect, transparency, relevance, accountability, collaboration, inclusion, cultural competence.
- **Evaluates the level of engagement needed and expected for different efforts** – the Public Engagement Plan clarifies that we plan for people and our planning efforts should highlight the impacts on people and engage people potentially affected by decisions. The plan identifies the over-arching value of collaboration with the people in the region. More specifically, the plan identifies the following strategies (detailed below).
- **Reorients Metropolitan Council engagement around relationships** – the plan both defines the distinction between outreach and engagement and reorients engagement efforts to prioritize relationships rather than transactions.

Engagement Strategies

One of the main expectations presented in the Public Engagement Plan is prioritizing people in decision-making and establishing processes to engage people in Council decision-making processes. In addition to the Public Engagement Plan, the Communications Department developed tools and resources for assessing engagement goals and needs for individual efforts, projects, and large-scale policy development, and creating a plan to address those considerations. Those engagement plans should reflect the main strategies identified in the Public Engagement Plan and summarized below:

1. Conduct intentional engagement planning with community stakeholders. Each plan should include collaborative goal setting and expectations, identify key audiences for engagement and ways to engage them, and create a plan for measuring success. Where possible, employ strategies that build community capacity and invest resources and funding into organizations and businesses that represent historically underrepresented communities.
2. Be more present in communities to build long-term relationships and invest in things valued in community spaces.
3. Leverage existing partnerships to deepen relationships around shared problem-solving.
4. Work with existing Met Council advisory committees, which serve as the primary groups to consult on regional planning efforts.
5. Convene stakeholders and people with necessary expertise to achieve engagement expectations for efforts, where appropriate.
6. Use engagement efforts to evaluate and pilot new and emerging engagement methods.
7. Highlight best practices in the field to enhance Met Council and partner understanding of successful community engagement.
8. Provide guidance for local governments, particularly as technical assistance for regional and local comprehensive planning.
9. Convene discussions around cross-sector regional issues.
10. Use interactive tools where appropriate to reach audiences and enhance participation.

The Public Engagement Plan and the creation of the plan satisfy the initial expectations of the statements in the Equity section of Thrive MSP 2040, though the Public Engagement Plan establishes long-term expectations, which apply to the Metropolitan Council's engagement work going forward.

Since implementation of the Public Engagement Plan, organization-wide and project engagement has reflected the principles identified in the plan, which are responsive to the commitments to collaborate and consult with the community, particularly people historically under-represented in planning efforts, focus on relationships, highlighting best practices, and making decisions with people, as identified in models like the spectrum promoted by the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2).

Community Engagement Examples

A few examples of how this process has worked, particularly related to regional planning and partnership efforts are identified below.

Partnership with organizations to engage critical audiences and promote inclusion

The Met Council has intentionally partnered and built on existing partnerships to deepen community relationships and voices in planning efforts that have regional impact. The first example is partnering directly with the Center for Economic Inclusion to co-create the [Regional Economic Framework](#). That process included consulting with tribal communities and business interests. The second is the partnership between the Metropolitan Council and the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) on the [Rethinking I-94 project](#), which took the opportunity to take a broader view of the impact and importance of this regional transportation corridor, initially constructed within the legacy of the impact interstate highways had in dividing historically Black neighborhoods in the United States and in both Saint Paul and Minneapolis. The Met Council has a long-standing partnership with MnDOT, and with this project, the Met Council provided \$178,000 (through an internal program to support equity efforts) for engagement related to the Rethinking I-94 project, which transportation planning and Communications teams used to pay community organizations in the region to engage community around the impact and future expectations for I-94.

Increasing role of community and diverse voices in regional planning processes

Council planning staff have prioritized engagement with diverse audiences by dedicating funds for planning studies – in both transportation and regional parks – to hire and compensate firms and community organizations that prioritize voices historically underrepresented in planning efforts (people of color, indigenous communities, women, youth, immigrants, people living with disabilities, etc.). In addition, the Community Development division's research team partnered with community leaders and the Met Council's Equity Advisory Committee to rethink and shift regional measures used to understand and plan around equity and establish more equitable outcomes (described on p. 2 above).

Prioritizing customer audiences in transit service

Two efforts in recent years illustrate a proactive, intentional process of prioritizing customer needs and feedback in delivering transit services. The first was a general engagement effort by Metro Transit to assess needs and concerns among transit customers in mid-2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. The work involved a comprehensive survey and follow-up conversations. The transit staff intentionally created opportunities for customers of color to participate, which allowed for a demographic breakdown reflective of the regional overall and elicited more honest and comprehensive feedback to shape future planning. The second example was the intentional engagement process related to transit safety, where the [Met Council partnered with the Citizens League](#) to first engage community, followed by a [Met Council workgroup and workplan](#). More than 1,000 people participated in that process, which was designed and implemented by a group of community members, who were compensated for their time.

Highlighting best practices

As part of the set of resources provided to local governments during the process to update local comprehensive planning, Local Planning Assistance staff partnered with Communications staff to convene staff and [offer advice and guidance on best practices](#) ('Other' tab). In addition, the Communications staff have worked with other engagement and communications professionals in state and local government agencies to highlight best practices.

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