

Outcomes Measurement Program

Just as the preceding sections articulate a regional vision through five goals, the following chapters of Imagine 2050 align regional policy and systems plans with the vision, values, and goals of this guide through objectives, policies, and actions. The extent to which our region makes progress towards the “desired end states” described in these pages over the next decade is the essential question of the Outcomes Measurement Program.

Overview

Measurement is fundamental to building accountability between government agencies, the partners they work with, and populations they serve. From monitoring and evaluation plans that assess the success of specific programs or interventions, to theory of change models that document complicated pathways to change, approaches to measurement vary, depending on the subject.

Several evaluation methods have been used to meaningfully assess the outcomes of state, regional, and local comprehensive plans: some frameworks focus explicitly on plan content and quality, while other methods closely track the implementation strategies enacted following plan adoption.¹ This program is most closely aligned with an outcomes-based approach—meaning key trends are monitored to determine whether desired outcomes, or progress towards said outcomes, are observed over time without attribution to specific policy mechanisms. Imagine 2050, “drives toward the regional vision with a focus on residents of the region, increased partnerships in the region, and integrated planning approaches.” With nearly 100 policies and 690 actions described across regional policy and systems plans, an outcomes-based approach is the best strategy for understanding progress over the next decade.

The Imagine 2050 Outcomes Measurement Program builds on commitments to monitor key trends related to the implementation of adopted regional development guides, 2030 Regional Development Guides (2004) and Thrive MSP 2040 (2014). The 2050 program improves on past efforts in several important ways, however:

- Rather than relying on a limited number of high-level indicators, the program will leverage an array of data points that describe outcomes for regional populations as well as changes within and across regional systems.
- Though community development research staff lead this program, staff across policy areas were directly engaged in program design and measure development. This collaboration resulted in measures that maintain close connections to 2050 policy direction, and it raised awareness about this work and its possibilities internally. The program will continue to grow this base of support through a community of practice, technical assistance, and trend interpretation sessions.

¹ Sciara, Gian-Claudia. “Measuring land use performance: from policy to plan to outcome.” *Transportation, Land Use, and Environmental Planning*, edited by Elizabeth Deakin, Elsevier, 2020, pp. 105-125.

- A large collection of measures will require new information infrastructure, including database platform management, data collection tools, and online reporting dashboards. Between recent technology investments and growing staff expertise in data integration, data science, and data visualization, Metropolitan Council is better equipped to create the sustainable systems needed to support a program like this now, and in the future.

Commitments

To implement the Imagine 2050 Outcomes Measurement Program, the Met Council makes the following commitments:

- We commit to centering a diversity of knowledge and expertise, including from those who live the experiences being measured.
- We commit to applying Imagine 2050's adopted equity framework to this program. Here, that means 1) evaluation of all program measures for disaggregation spatially or by demographic group and calling attention to varying trends, including disparities and inequities; and 2) listening to marginalized communities' interpretation of trends and lifting up those narratives.
- This program values and reflects multiple pathways to progress towards the regional vision, goals, and policy outcomes described in Imagine 2050. When tensions arise between trends or interpretations of them, we will prioritize respectful dialogue over achieving consensus.
- This program relies on mutual cooperation and collaboration within and across Met Council's divisions, and between Met Council and our local partners. We commit to balancing the benefits and burdens of new data collection and data sharing, and to making decisions about data contributions transparent.

Program structure

The Imagine 2050 Outcomes Measurement Program is an outcomes-focused monitoring effort designed to inform dialogues about the region's progress toward realizing the vision, goals, and policy outcomes of the adopted regional development guide. To further clarify the scope of the program, the following describes what this program is not:

- A comprehensive evaluation of a specific policy, program, investment, or action. The trends depicted in program measures may invite additional studies, audits, or program evaluation.
- A replacement for current statutory requirements at the federal or state level, legislative or compliance-related reporting, and/or other Met Council projects that incorporate similar data points. The interplay between program measures and information reported elsewhere are one of several considerations weighed in the development or maintenance of these data.

The structure of the Imagine 2050 Outcomes Measurement Program was developed through internal collaboration and external engagement, as well as an assessment of the strengths and limitations of past efforts and strategies employed by regional planning agency peers. We have

distilled these learnings into three guiding principles: iteration, adaptability, and meaning.

Guiding principles

Iterative

Though this amendment includes a robust list of measures for monitoring progress toward regional goals and policy outcomes, past efforts clearly demonstrate that we simply cannot anticipate how relevant topics, data sources or availability, and methods may change over a decade. We embrace an iterative approach to outcomes measurement that leverages collaborative and transparent processes to generate consistency and support continuous improvement.

Adaptable

To become and remain relevant, the program's deliverables and engagement strategies endeavor to connect with a wide array of regional audiences. Just as the iterative principle supports fresh, relevant program measures, adaptability means we commit to a practice of understanding what stakeholders want and need from this work and pivoting accordingly.

Meaningful

To foster productive dialogues and truly live Met Council's core value of accountability, program measures must be meaningful to regional audiences and to the intended outcomes of Imagine 2050. Intentional measurement design, common units, and plain language descriptions of trends and what they mean will be standard practice. We will continue to advocate for measures that monitor outputs to evolve into outcomes-based measures and clarify or reshape measures that are not well-understood or do not enhance our understanding of progress and change.

Program measures

A key component of effective outcomes measurement is a conceptual framework that outlines influence and roles.² The Imagine 2050 Outcomes Measurement Program has developed three types of program measures based on who holds the authorities and responsibility to initiate change.

Measure types

Regional indicators

Regional indicators describe high-level trends about the Twin Cities metro or region. Regional indicators can provide context on whether—and to what extent—our region's trends are similar to other places and offer a sense of scale and persistence. These measures reflect the impacts of intersecting “macro” systems and require collective and sustained action to counter or advance. For that reason, it may be difficult to understand what drives change in regional indicator trends without additional analysis or data. Where possible, regional indicators are compared with trends in peer regions.

² Global Evaluation Initiative. (2025). National M&E policies. <https://www.betterevaluation.org/methods-approaches/methods/national-me-policies>

Regional measures

These measures describe how Met Council's local partners advance Imagine 2050 goals, objectives, and policies. They may capture work among local governments, regional parks implementing agencies, community organizations, or other organizations or agencies within the region. Regional measures acknowledge that the regional values, visions, and goals described in Imagine 2050 cannot be achieved alone. These measures are often derived from primary data collection efforts led by Met Council, through surveys, plan reviews, and other research methods. The development of these data, as well as their findings, further our understanding of systems change within the region.

Met Council measures

As a large organization with a diverse portfolio of work and roles within the region, Met Council measures highlight how our own grant and investment programs, services and operations, engagement practices, convening and coordinating of partners (among other actions) advance the regional goals and policy direction established in Imagine 2050. Incorporating Met Council measures in the 2050 program not only facilitates internal alignment and a clearer communication of our role, they also demonstrate how the Met Council leads by example.

A group of program measures form “slates.” For example, each of the five regional goals have a measurement slate that consists of regional indicators, regional measures, and Met Council measures. While some measures speak to multiple regional goals, policy areas, or both, grouping measures into slates ensure a range of information is considered (not just one data point) and supports a more holistic understanding of trends, change, and progress.

Measure changes

Though we cannot provide an exhaustive list of reasons a program measure may be added, removed, or modified over the next decade, we can draw on past experience for examples:

- Proposed measures must relate to the regional vision, goals, and outcomes describe in Imagine 2050 and its subsequent amendments to be considered for this program
- Measure data are no longer available, reliable, or no longer use a consistent, comparable methodology suitable for trend analysis
- A significant economic, environmental, social, or cultural event changes the priorities of regional policy direction
- Measures are modified to more clearly identify the drivers or dynamics of change, or enhance the meaning of the measure
- New information becomes available that supports more accurate, timely, or relevant measures

The Imagine 2050 Outcomes Measurement Program will iteratively edit program measures to advance the goals and commitments of the program. Additions, removals, or substantive changes to measures will be documented in annual reporting and will not require future amendments to Imagine 2050.

An initial slate of proposed program measures is detailed in Appendix C.