

3. Key Takeaways

This chapter describes the key takeaway points to consider in making sustainable choices for the Duluth-Superior area transportation system

Sustainable Choices 2045



Duluth-Superior Long-Range Transportation Plan

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Key Takeaway Points

The following are the key points considered in *Sustainable Choices 2045*, integrated and summarized from all data sources and analyses used in this plan. The data sources, analyses, results, and more are identified and detailed within numerous chapters and appendices throughout this plan, perhaps most notably in Chapters 4 and 6, and Appendices B, C, E, F, and G.

1. Many Needs and Wants, Limited Resources

Overall, funding the many transportation system needs and increasing costs, in the context of a stagnant population and decreasing tax base, is not attainable using current approaches, and will require more long-term sustainable approaches to be implemented.

2. Stagnant Population Growth

The projected continued stagnant population trend of the past 40+ years presents real potential challenges to our transportation system. The lack of population growth, along with the increase in the aging portion of our population and decline in the percentage of people of working age, will result in a decreased tax base. Thus, there is less money over time to fund the many transportation system needs we face, which are getting more expensive over time.

3. Aging Population

The projected increase in the elderly portion of the MIC area population presents a real challenge to our transportation system. It is expected this will require expanded and/or different transportation options than currently exist. Some of the anticipated needs for an aging population overlap with the stated needs of disabled people, who have provided comments requesting numerous changes to our system (see Appendix D).

4. Cost & Funding Concerns

The following demonstrate the significant concerns associated with costs and funding of transportation system:

4a. Rising Costs/Inflation

- Highway construction costs rose 66% between 2003 and 2016 (Long, Elliott. 2017. *Soaring Construction Costs Threaten Infrastructure Push*. Progressive Policy Institute, Washington DC. 13 pp).

4b. ASCE Infrastructure Report Card

- The American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) *2018 Twin Ports Area's Infrastructure Report Card* graded our roads D+, ports C+, aviation B-, and bridges B-. Except for aviation these grades are very similar to the national grades of D for roads, C+ for ports, D for aviation, and C+ for bridges. The local report card did not grade rail or transit, which at the national level received grades of B and D, respectively.
- The estimated total costs across the country for these needed infrastructure investments is \$2.4 trillion, with a funding gap estimated at \$1.2 trillion. The MIC area obviously has infrastructure improvement needs, and has a similar funding problem—see below.

4c. Large, Expensive Projects

- As detailed in Chapter 6, the MIC area is facing numerous extremely expensive infrastructure projects in the immediate and near future, including the Twin Ports Interchange, I-35 over Thompson Hill, Blatnik Bridge work, and major Bong Bridge work, among others. This does not include the regular costs of maintenance across the system, annual dredging of the shipping channel, and the upgrade and reconstruction of the Soo Locks.

4d. Revenues, Expenditures, & Unfunded Needs

- This plan includes \$3,074,625,000 in total revenues (funding to resurface or reconstruct transportation infrastructure) and \$2,503,633,800 in total expenditures (cost of short, mid, and long term federally eligible projects over the next 25 years). Additionally, \$1,152,055,000 is estimated for operations and maintenance (revenues are partially from general fund budgets and not fully reliant on transportation related taxes). Finally, there is an estimated additional \$199 million in unfunded transportation needs. These are clarified and detailed in Chapter 6.

4e. Fiscal Constraint

- The fiscal analysis in this plan is showing an overall surplus of approximately \$571 million over the 25-year life of the Plan. At the same time one of the plan's main premises is that there is not enough revenue to cover the existing

transportation infrastructure expenses within the MIC area. At first glance, there appears to be a significant contradiction. The summary explanation is two-fold: One, the MIC area has very large and expensive bridge and highway projects that will take place within this 25-year planning horizon but are not fully scoped at this time, thus their associated cost estimates are not yet known. Two, not all publicly funded transportation system costs are federally eligible and considered regionally significant, and thus not all projects in the MIC area are included in this plan's project lists and fiscal analysis.

- A full explanation of how fiscal constraint is demonstrated within this plan is provided in Chapter 6.

5. Low Levels of Traffic Congestion

Current and future Level of Service (LOS) projections from the MIC's travel demand model (TDM) show little traffic congestion and few areas/corridors of concern. There are only a few select locations to consider for expanding infrastructure, which helps promote and fund maintenance of existing infrastructure.

6. Reverse Commuters

Twice as many people commute into the MIC area for work as commute outside it. This fact, along with the residential growth happening in outlying areas, means that the demand for roads and other transportation infrastructure is increasing despite the loss of tax base.

7. Poverty Level

Poverty affects a significant number of people in the MIC area—18% of the population (compared to 11% in Minnesota, 13% in Wisconsin, and 15% nationally). The percentage of poverty as a portion of the population is much greater in the Cities of Duluth and Superior (21%) than in the neighboring municipalities within the MIC area (2-13%), with one exception—the Village of Oliver (20%).

People in poverty are often limited in their options for transportation due to cost or other access barriers, which increases the importance of maintaining multiple options that

are accessible for this population. This plays a real role in decision-making regarding our transportation system.

8. Balance of Multiple Goals

People clearly want all five goals of this plan to be achieved, and in a relatively balanced manner.

Achieving this will require a shift from traditional transportation priorities, including new, broader, more integrative and holistic approaches that include a more diverse group of interests and professionals within project planning and decision-making teams from the beginning.

9. Multi-Modal Choices

Although driving and riding in automobiles and walking are the primary modes used in the MIC area, other modes of travel are also used, desired, and in some cases necessary for people to travel within, through, and to and from the MIC area.

It will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to establish livable and equitable communities that meet the multiple goals of this plan without true multi-modal options.

10. Evidence-Based Decisions

People want and expect decisions about our transportation system to be based on data and evidence, and not on political or other factors.

11. Maintenance of Existing Infrastructure

Maintenance of our existing transportation system is strongly desired, with specific focus and priority on critical infrastructure rather than on the entire system. This includes maintenance of all aspects of our infrastructure (not simply road surfaces), as well as addressing inefficiencies within the system.

12. Environmental Sustainability

Building, maintaining, and operating our transportation system in an environmentally sound and sustainable manner is strongly desired.

13. Public Health Impacts

The design of our transportation system has multiple impacts on public health, including providing active transportation

options, supporting air quality improvements and reducing toxic emissions, and reducing noise and light pollution. Survey respondents supported transportation options that benefit and improve the overall health of the community.

14. Geographic Challenges

Geography within the MIC area, including steep hills and numerous water features, present real and significant challenges and barriers to our transportation system, and to achieving the goals of this plan. And while geography should not be used as an excuse, it does need to be considered in finding viable solutions.

15. Unknown Impacts of Emerging Technologies

There are many significant “unknowns” in regard to our future transportation system: we do not know exactly what or how future trends may change what is common practice today. Connected and autonomous vehicles (CAVs), ride sharing apps, national data that suggest younger adults have different priorities in terms of vehicle ownership, and other trends may alter costs, funding needs, and funding mechanisms.