

3. Key Takeaways & Comments

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

Duluth-Superior Long-Range Transportation Plan



Sustainable Choices 2050

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Key Takeaway Points

The following are the key points considered in *Sustainable Choices 2050*. They come from both summaries of all data sources and analyses used in this plan, as well as key points heard through public surveys and stakeholder group meetings held during plan development. The data sources are detailed within numerous chapters and appendices throughout this plan.

1. Many Needs and Wants, Limited Resources

The Duluth-Superior area has a significant amount of large and/or aging transportation-related infrastructure. Overall, funding the many transportation system needs, especially given continuously increasing costs within the context of a generally stagnant population and decreasing tax base, is not attainable using current approaches and will require more long-term sustainable approaches to be implemented. The unknown but anticipated continued costs due to climate change impacts on the MIC area's transportation infrastructure add to this challenge. Changes in approach and mindset are likely, including improved regional asset management and prioritization of transportation system needs.

2. Integrated System-Wide Approach

In considering all the needs, wants, aspirations, concerns, and issues associated with the Duluth-Superior area transportation network, it is clear that many, if not most of the key takeaways are connected and intertwined. As such, simply trying to address each on its own will not produce the desired vision for the MIC area transportation network. To truly implement the vision, an integrated, holistic, system-wide approach is required. While this is not easy, it should be carried out to the extent possible.

3. Investment Priorities

The investment priorities of *Sustainable Choices 2050* are to realize the plan's vision by implementing the goals and objectives identified in Chapter 2, which are integrated into the performance-based planning process and the plan's priority projects, as described in Chapter 4. These priority projects are to be the highest investment priorities within the region's transportation system.

4. Balance of Multiple Goals

Past surveys clearly indicated people want all five goals of this plan to be achieved in a relatively balanced manner. While nothing indicates this desire has changed, comments received during the development of this plan do demonstrate a more intense call for safety to be prioritized.

Achieving this will require a continued 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.

5. Equity & Accessibility

Comments from stakeholder focus groups and survey responses suggest a community desire for a more equitable transportation network that ensures affordable and accessible transportation options for all people. People desire a network that enables them to move from one place to another efficiently and safely no matter their economic status, age, health, or physical condition.

6. Multi-Modal Choices

Although driving and riding in automobiles is the primary mode used in the MIC area (97% of survey respondents use an automobile), 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 prioritizing true multi-modal options as legitimate transportation routes. The following are related suggestions received:

- Create safer, people-focused corridors that better accommodate pedestrians and bikes.
- Specifically allocate more budget for non-car infrastructure.
- Reallocate right-of-way width for non-motorized travel.

7. Sidewalk/Pedestrian/Bikeway Connectivity

It has been a common request to continue to improve connectivity for modes other than vehicles. There are gaps in sidewalks throughout neighborhoods. Similarly, there are gaps in bikeways that prevent continuous riding on dedicated bikeways.

8. Public Transportation

The Duluth Transit Authority (DTA) implemented the Better Bus Blueprint in 2022 with the goal of creating a better experience for current and future bus riders. Despite the improvements that were made, we heard many comments expressing concerns about the safety and reliability of transit service, requests for more frequent and expanded bus service, and interest in more amenities to encourage ridership and to counteract the negative stigma that persists about public transportation.

However, a persistent issue for the DTA is that it has been difficult to hire enough bus drivers to fully realize the Better Bus Blueprint improvements. Limited housing within the Duluth-Superior area, especially affordable housing options, was cited as one reason for the difficulty in hiring drivers.

Additional concerns about sidewalk condition, connectivity, and maintenance (especially concerning lack of snow/ice removal) are issues not limited to or necessarily caused by the DTA, but that people repeatedly stated make bus travel difficult, especially for those with ambulatory difficulties.

STRIDE, a paratransit dial-a-ride transportation service for qualified individuals with disabilities and managed by the DTA, is another public transportation option in the MIC area.

Comments received noted that the drivers are friendly and helpful, but that the service needs better consistency, reliability, and use of technology, such as real-time tracking for riders. We heard that the service has left riders stuck at home or elsewhere on short notice (or with no warning), an especially difficult situation for people who have a disability.

9. Historically Stagnant Population Growth

The MIC area's 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 the decline in the percentage of people of working age, results in a decreased tax base. Thus, there is generally less money over time to fund the many transportation system needs we face, which are getting more expensive over time. It is estimated this trend would be the case should historic population and aging trends continue.

That said, the last one-year data available for the development of this plan indicated a slight increase in population across much of the MIC area from 2020 to 2021. It is likely this slight increase is due to (1) the rise of remote work during the COVID pandemic enabling people to move to the Duluth-Superior area (an area many like to vacation to) and still be employed and/or (2) the fact that Duluth has recently been labeled nationally as a “climate refuge” city meaning people are moving here from other parts of the country more directly and harshly impacted by climate change. As a one-year observation, it is too early to know if this increase in population is the start of a trend or simply an aberration. This is a trend to follow in the future that is influenced and complicated by a known, problematic housing shortage in the Duluth-Superior area.

10. Aging Population

The MIC’s population trend shows an increase in the proportion of older adults (same as the national trend) and a smaller proportion of people aged 18 and younger (fewer than the national trend). The projected increase in the proportion of older adults within 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, with an anticipated increased demand for more accessible transportation options. Some of the anticipated needs for an aging population overlap with the needs of others, including disabled people and children.

11. 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 the maintenance of existing infrastructure.

12. Commuters

More than twice as many people commute into the MIC area for work as commute outside it. The total number continues to increase since the 2045 MTP. This indicates the demand for roads and other transportation infrastructure is increasing despite the loss of tax base.

Data also shows an increase in the number of employees living within the MIC area with work addresses outside of the MIC

area. This supports the likely rise of remote work during the COVID pandemic enabling people to move to the Duluth-Superior area while keeping their jobs elsewhere, as noted in #9 above.

Finally, data shows an increase in the number and percentage of employees traveling more than 25 miles to their jobs since 2015. This could support either of the above.

13. Poverty & Low Income

The federally defined poverty threshold ranges from an annual income of \$13,788 for a family of one to \$52,386 for a family of nine or more (US Census Bureau, 2022). The MIC defines “low-income” as a household whose income is less than or equal to twice the poverty level. Little has changed over the past several decades regarding poverty and low-income populations in the MIC area, with 6.4% of households at the poverty level and 18.6% low-income. While the percentage of MIC area households at poverty and low income levels are below national averages (9.1% in poverty, 23.5% low income), they are above Minnesota and Wisconsin percentages. This is most prevalent in the Cities of Superior (10.4% poverty, 25.7% low income) and Duluth (7.2% poverty, 19.9% low income).

People in poverty or of low income are often limited in their options for transportation due to cost or other access barriers, which increases the importance of maintaining an equitable transportation network that offers multiple safe and accessible transportation options for all people, regardless of income. This plays a real role in our transportation system decision-making.

14. Ambulatory Difficulty

More than 8000 people (5.6% of the MIC area population) have an ambulatory difficulty, meaning they have serious difficulty walking or climbing stairs. The transportation needs of these people need to be considered within our overall network in order to implement the vision of this plan and to provide an equitable and accessible system for all.

15. Evidence-Based Decisions

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

16. Safety

Safety was frequently identified as a significant concern, especially for bicyclists, pedestrians, and those with ambulatory difficulties. The prioritization of cars and a lack of direct pedestrian and/or cycling routes associated with the design of many roadways make them uninviting and unsafe for non-motorized users. The general lack of network connectivity and maintenance in numerous areas adds to safety concerns, especially for children and those with ambulatory difficulty. Snow and ice-covered pedestrian and bicycle lanes and paths exacerbate these concerns. Several roadway corridors and crossings identified for safety concerns noted above are within the priority project list of this plan, including 6th Avenue East/Central Entrance and West Superior Street, among others.

17. Maintenance of Existing Infrastructure

Maintenance of our existing transportation system is strongly desired, with a specific focus 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 (such as right-sizing or road diets). A specific point heard repeatedly is to prioritize and greatly improve maintenance of sidewalks and bike lanes/paths. This has two forms. One is the physical condition of the surface including uneven surface, significant cracks, and crumbling pavement. The other is consistent removal of snow and ice from these surfaces, on par with vehicle surfaces, to enable year-round multimodal options for travel.

18. Environmental Sustainability

Building, maintaining, and operating our transportation system in an environmentally sound and sustainable manner is desired. A wide range of comments support this, including reducing vehicle miles traveled and prioritizing pedestrian and bicycle options to reduce emissions, implementing greenway systems for both environmental and health benefits, and improving electric vehicle (EV) charging options. Further, it is likely that achieving environmental sustainability will be increasingly important to help lessen the impacts of climate change on the transportation system.

19. Public Health Impacts

The design of our transportation system can have multiple positive impacts on public health, including providing active transportation options, supporting air quality improvements, reducing toxic emissions, and reducing noise and light pollution. Survey respondents (both in the past and for the development of this plan) support transportation options that benefit and improve the overall health of the community.

20. Policy Development

It is clear that policy changes are needed to fully meet the vision, goals, and objectives of this plan. Simply implementing infrastructure and/or maintenance projects will not be sufficient. Two existing policy examples helpful to the MIC area transportation system are the St Louis County Transportation Fund leading directly to improved roadway condition and the City of Duluth specific tax for pothole and street repairs. Policy recommendations expressed during the development of this plan include:

- Prioritize long-term budgeting for transportation planning beyond typical short-term budget cycles.
- Establish a transportation commission.
- Prioritize vulnerable users of the transportation system.
- Prioritize improving pedestrian and bike experiences, especially in areas identified as short trip generators.

21. Geographic Challenges

Geography within the MIC area, including steep hills and numerous water features, presents 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.

22. Unknown Impacts of Emerging Technologies & Trends

There are many “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 (CVs, AVs), ride-sharing apps, real-time transit apps, micromobility options, on-demand and shared mobility services, national data that suggest younger

adults have different priorities in terms of vehicle ownership, and other trends may significantly alter costs, funding needs, and funding mechanisms.

23. Cost & Funding Concerns

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

Rising Costs

Sustainable Choices 2045 noted 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). This data came from the US DOT Federal Highway Administration's National Highway Construction Cost Index (NHCCI). Updated NHCCI data (see Figure 3.1) show the increase in highway construction costs continues to rise, and increasingly so. The increase in costs between 2016 and 2022 rose approximately 73%, including a 50% increase between 2020 and 2022 alone. Overall the increase in costs across the entire timeframe (2003-2022) was approximately 179%. These data demonstrate a significant obstacle in maintaining and improving the MIC area transportation network, and why making sustainable choices in the future is important, if not vital to being able to implement the vision of this plan.

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-. This report has not been updated since then; however, the ASCE report cards for the States of Minnesota and Wisconsin were updated in 2022 and 2020, respectively, and the scores for roads, ports, aviation, and bridges were similar to those in the 2018 Twin Ports report.

Thus, it remains clear that the quality and condition of transportation infrastructure in and adjacent to the MIC area are in need of improvements. The continually rising costs noted above complicate this problem. Both state ASCE reports call for increased funding through multiple approaches, most requiring policy initiatives at both the state and federal levels. This plan supports such policy development. Additionally, the State of Minnesota ASCE report calls for local jurisdictions and

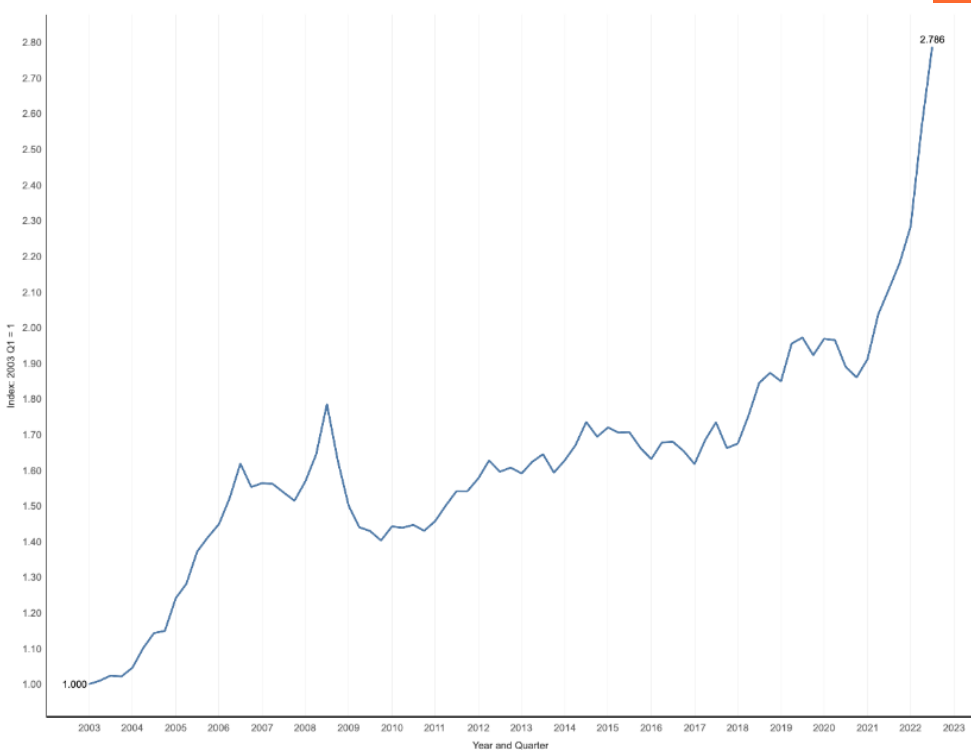
agencies to adopt asset management approaches similar to those implemented by MnDOT to aid in prioritizing needs and making better funding decisions., a recommendation supported in this plan (see section 7 of chapter 10, Coordinated Regional Asset Management).

Fiscal Constraint

The fiscal analysis in this plan shows fiscal constraint. Yet 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. The summary explanation for this apparent contradiction is two-fold: one, the MIC area will continue to have very large and expensive infrastructure projects that are anticipated to 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.

Figure 3.1. Increase of Highway Construction Costs Over Time— National Highway Construction Cost Index (NHCCI), 2003-2023



(Source, Fig. 3.1: US Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration)