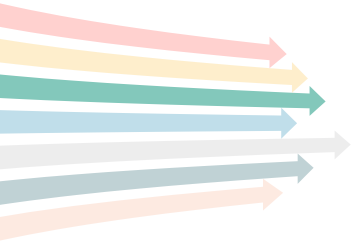




3

ATTRACTING AND RETAINING TALENT



3.1 BACKGROUND

What is Talent Attraction and Retention?

This chapter outlines the strategies and initiatives designed to attract and retain skilled professionals within the metropolitan area. It focuses on fostering an environment that supports personal and professional growth, promotes satisfaction and well-being, and builds a strong sense of community. These efforts aim to encourage individuals to build their lives and careers locally, strengthening the region’s long-term economic and social vitality.

In an urban context, attracting and retaining talent is closely tied to enhancing quality of life. This involves developing lively, inclusive neighborhoods with diverse amenities—such as parks, cultural institutions,

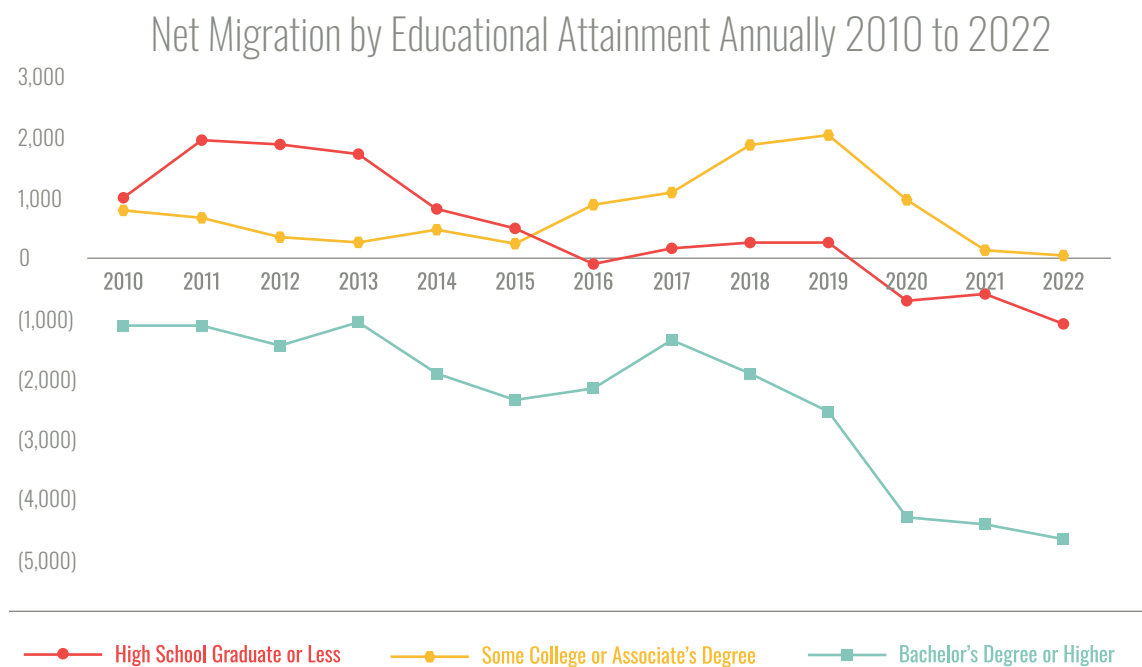
recreational facilities, and nightlife—alongside access to affordable housing, reliable transportation, quality healthcare, and educational opportunities. These efforts are deeply rooted in accessibility and build upon key themes introduced in Chapter 2.

What we build and where we build it has an enormous impact on our quality of life and what options we have for getting around. Land use, a general term for what we do with the space we have, is intimately connected to transportation. In order to make the region attractive to skilled professionals, our land use and transportation decisions must focus on providing the kind of environments where people want to live.

Why Talent Attraction and Retention?

Brain drain, or net-outmigration of persons with a bachelor’s degree or more, has persisted since 2010.

FIGURE 3.1: Net Migration by Education Level



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2010 - 2022 5-Year Estimates. Prepared by UNO CPAR

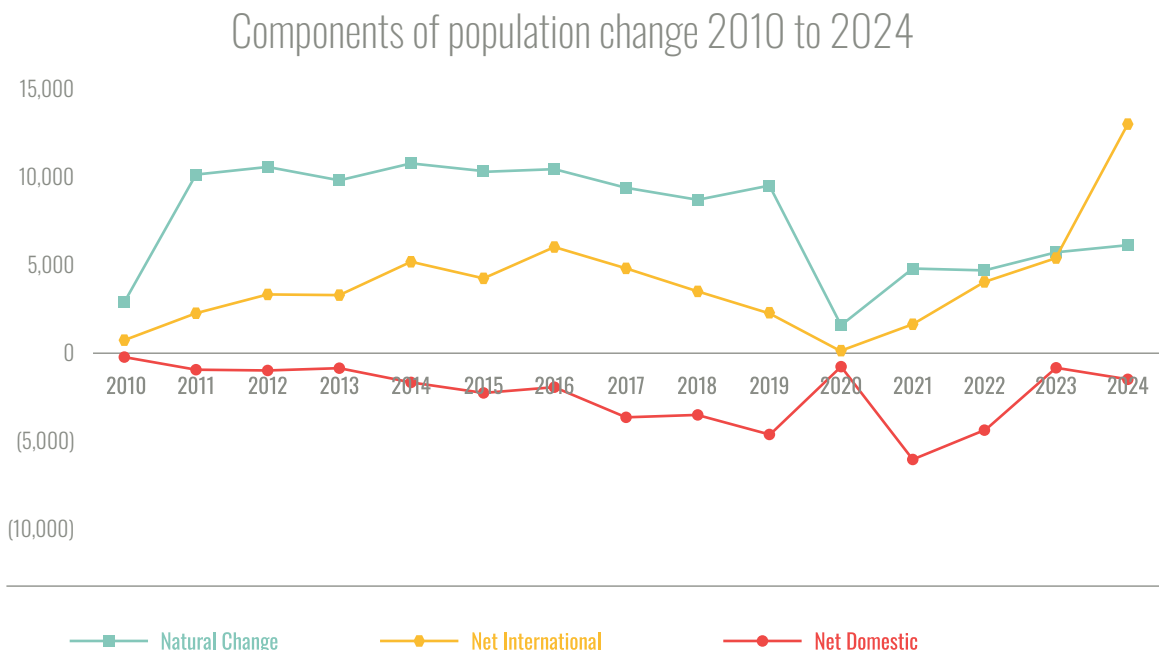
The Omaha metro area continues to experience a “brain drain”—a persistent net loss of residents with college degrees. According to recent analyses, Nebraska lost an average of more than 3,600 working-age adults with a bachelor’s degree or higher each year between 2019 and 2023, nearly double the annual loss from the previous five-year period (Nebraska Coordinating Commission for Postsecondary Education [CCPE], 2025). In 2022 alone, the state experienced a net outmigration of more than 4,600 college-educated residents (UNO Center for Public Affairs Research, 2023; Nebraska Coordinating Commission for Postsecondary Education, 2025). This trend reflects growing concerns about the region’s ability to retain skilled talent, particularly among young professionals.

For the Greater Omaha region to reach its potential, increased efforts to attract and retain young people are essential to enhancing both economic compet-

itiveness and quality of life. Surveys of Omaha-area young professionals consistently identify reliable public transportation, affordable housing near employment centers, and vibrant, walkable neighborhoods as key factors in their decision to stay or leave the region (UNO, 2024; Stoddard, 2025). As companies compete nationally for a limited talent pool, they are increasingly prioritizing locations that offer lifestyle amenities, transportation access, and a strong sense of place.

Heartland 2050 lays out a vision of vibrant, walkable, and compact neighborhoods within the Omaha-Council Bluffs Metropolitan Area. Strong neighborhoods create a strong and vibrant economy by enabling a higher quality of life at a lower cost. This vision of vibrant nodes centered around educational institutions and activity centers connected by transportation corridors is a key strategy to fostering the quality of life that residents in the region have prioritized.

FIGURE 3.2: Nebraska Population Change 2010 - 2024



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Estimates

Residents of the metro area place high value on a strong sense of community and they want the region to be an inclusive place where there are more opportunities for residents to be actively involved in work and community life. It will be our challenge to grow the region in ways that reverse trends and make meaningful strides towards eliminating poverty and ensuring residents in disadvantaged neighborhoods enjoy the quality of life found in many other areas across our metro.

In order to maintain and grow its population base, the region will need to attract substantially more people to the area. To accomplish this, the region must act strategically and make the kinds of investments in infrastructure, services, and amenities that serve to make the region more attractive to those who are considering relocating to the region. In addition to quality jobs, young people are increasingly attracted to more walkable, vibrant, and affordable neighborhoods. They also make choices to live in neighborhoods served by convenient transportation options, including transit, where they are close to work and opportunities for recreation, culture, and entertainment.

Other amenities include walking and biking trails, along with mixed-use developments in traditionally auto-oriented areas including Legacy, Heartwood Preserve and Avenue One.

Communities with vibrant, walkable neighborhoods with transportation options beyond the automobile are popular throughout the country, especially among young adults and empty nesters. Recent developments show the market for pedestrian-oriented places is strong, and that these areas will continue to drive our region's growth in the future. Blackstone and Midtown Crossing in Midtown Omaha, River's Edge in Council Bluffs, City Centre in La Vista and the Bungalows at Prairie Queen in Papillion illustrate the potential for fostering these kinds of walkable environments. Recent planning activities and discussions along corridors such as the FIRST AVE in Council Bluffs, a former railroad corridor adjacent to a major arterial road, the Fort Crook Road in Bellevue, and 24th Street In Omaha are laying the groundwork for future development to support these walkable lifestyles as well.

Building a Transit System for Regional Growth

Talent attraction and retention are commonly measured through migration trends, educational attainment data, and workforce stability—particularly among individuals with two or more years of post-secondary education. These indicators help assess whether the region is drawing in new talent and retaining its existing skilled workforce.

To evaluate the region's performance throughout the life of this plan, MAPA will track a combination of two types of performance measures: 1) federally required and 2) regionally defined (developed in collaboration with local stakeholders). The metrics listed below either directly measure progress on talent attraction and retention, or the region's potential desirability from a transportation standpoint. See Appendix E for

a full listing of performance measures.

- Population of post secondary educated persons within the region
- Percent of the person-miles traveled on the Interstate that are reliable
- Percent of the person-miles traveled on the non-Interstate NHS that are reliable
- Annual hours of peak hour excessive delay per capita
- Linear miles of bike lanes, cycle tracks, and separated bike lanes
- Population within 1/4 mile of frequent transit service
- The number of people impacted by transit amenities, and
- Transit ridership impacts



Attraction, Retention, and Safety

A region's ability to attract and retain talent is directly linked to how safe people feel living, working, and moving throughout their community. Safety is foundational—not only for quality of life, but also for economic development and workforce stability. Workers are more likely to settle in places where their daily environments support health, comfort, and peace of mind.

MAPA's Comprehensive Safety Action Plan (CSAP), adopted in April 2025, identifies safety as a core component of access for all users of the transportation system. Implementing strategies that reduce severe crashes, improve pedestrian and bicyclist infrastructure, and enhance transit safety can help ensure that residents of all ages and backgrounds feel secure as they navigate the region. These improvements tend to benefit those who face greater transportation barriers, including vulnerable road users (VRUs) and underserved communities—many of whom represent untapped or emerging segments of the regional workforce.

Designing a transportation system around human needs not only helps create vibrant spaces that attract people, but also improves safety. Smart

Growth America, a non-profit organization focused on building more livable, connected communities, found that 70% of transportation projects that make space for all modes of travel and are designed in a human-centric way (i.e. placemaking) see a reduction in crashes.

Creating a safer transportation system can have many benefits. Parents are better supported by communities where children can walk or bike to school safely. Employers have less to worry about where workers can reliably get to job sites without risk of injury. As you will see in the next section, people want to live in places with more transportation options like walking, biking, and transit. If a mode is perceived as unsafe, it is not an option. Safety improvements send a clear signal: this is a place where individuals and families can put down roots with confidence.

By aligning safety investments with economic and workforce development goals, the region can foster more connected, livable neighborhoods that are attractive not just to existing residents, but to the next generation of talent.



3.2 THE BASELINE - WHERE WE ARE TODAY

Latent Demand for Alternative Transportation

Case Study-University of Nebraska Medical Center/Nebraska

Implementing an active transportation program was a no brainer for one of Omaha's largest employers. In the fall of 2014, UNMC/Nebraska Medicine was low on parking with an initial 88% of employees and students driving alone to work. Wanting to avoid building expensive and land-intensive parking garages, the medical center surveyed employees for the potential to create a shift to multiple modes of transportation. TravelSmart, an active commuting program, was implemented to engage employees and continue growth without adding parking. TravelSmart participants receive free transit passes, free parking for carpoolers, secure indoor bicycle parking, and access to a free emergency ride home. Participants who choose to give up their parking passes (typically those who use an alternative mode at least three days a week) have access to daily parking. From 2014 to 2017, the percentage of employees actively commuting rose from 12% to 22%. Several hundred carpools have been set up and they are on pace to have more than 60,000 transit trips made this

year. The transit program has been popular among employees, as they account for 89% of all transit commutes with the remaining 11% of transit trips from students. Importantly, the organization has been able to avoid adding parking, and along with a variety of other factors, the organization's engagement score continues to increase. In 2018 MAPA awarded Nebraska Medicine its Regional Service award for the innovative TravelSmart Program.



Connecting Talent to Work - Local Survey Results

In partnership with Verdis Group, a local sustainability firm, MAPA investigated the potential for Transportation Demand Management (TDM) programs within the region with two rounds of the "Getting to Work" survey (2021, and 2023). Approximately 6,100 survey responses of employees across 23 organizations were also asked about their current commute, and what their preferred commute would look like if their employer supported alternative transportation options through programs such as a carpool matching program, free transit passes or bike share, or an emergency ride home program.

Overall, the report demonstrated that people are interested in alternative modes of commuting, but need structures and programs that both remove barriers and encourage them to do so. A Commute Mode Split (as shown in the figures below) is the percentage of rides to and from work using various means of transportation. The Gap represents the potential percentage difference in drive-alone trips between the current mode split and potential mode split.

FIGURE 3.3: 2021 Getting to Work Survey (4,099 respondents)

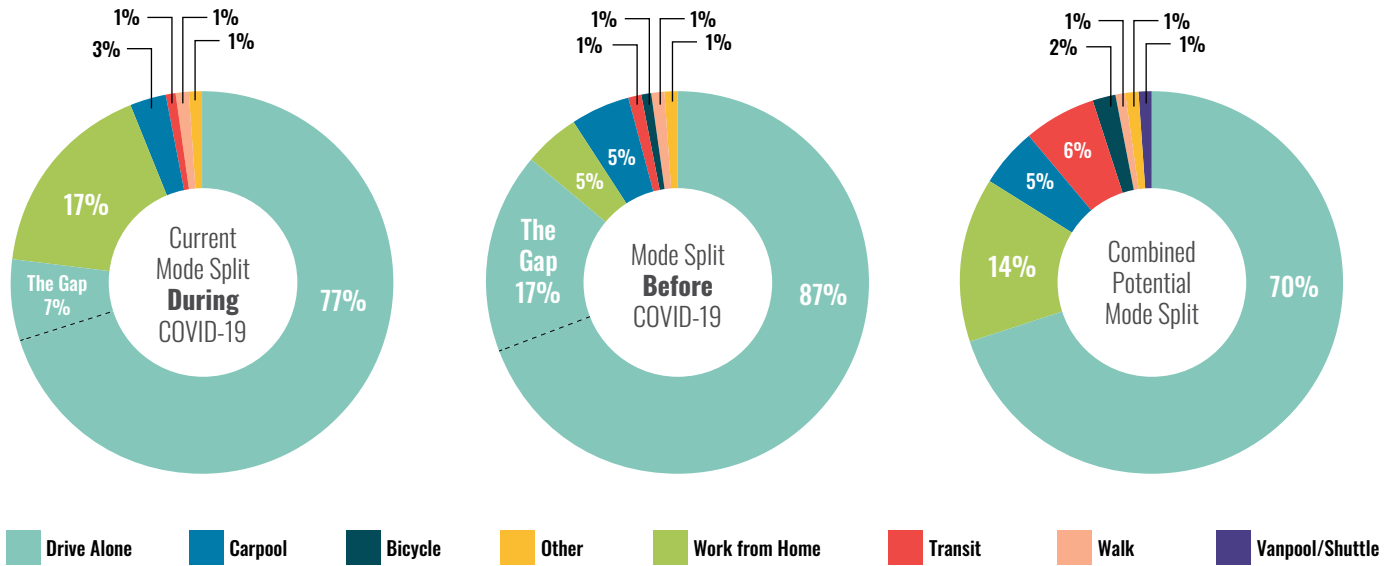
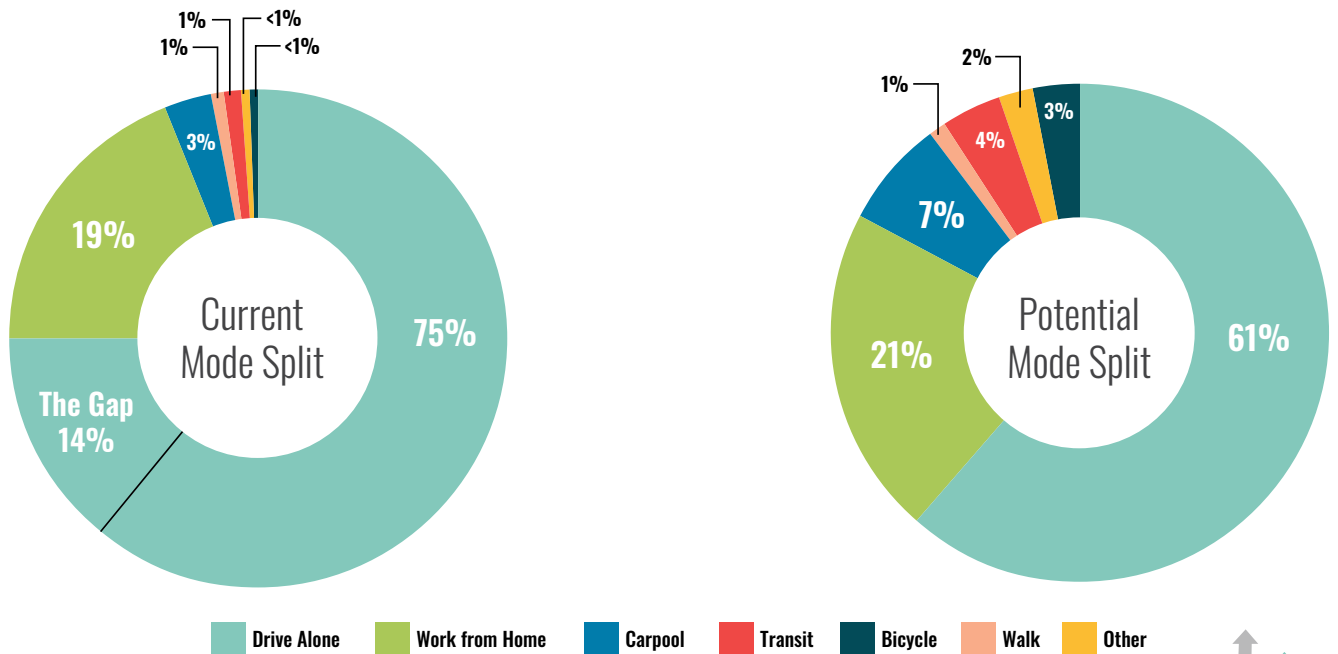


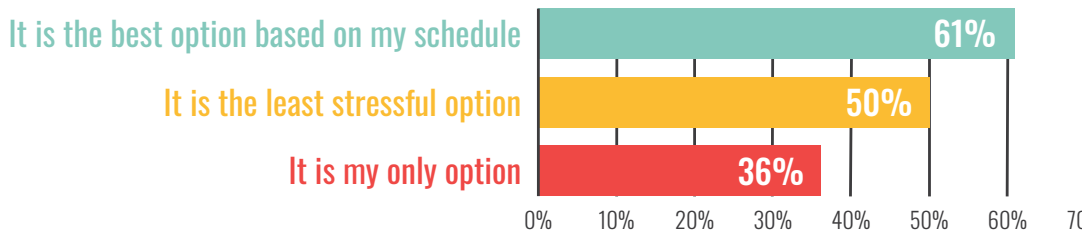
FIGURE 3.4: 2023 Getting to Work Survey (2,100 respondents)



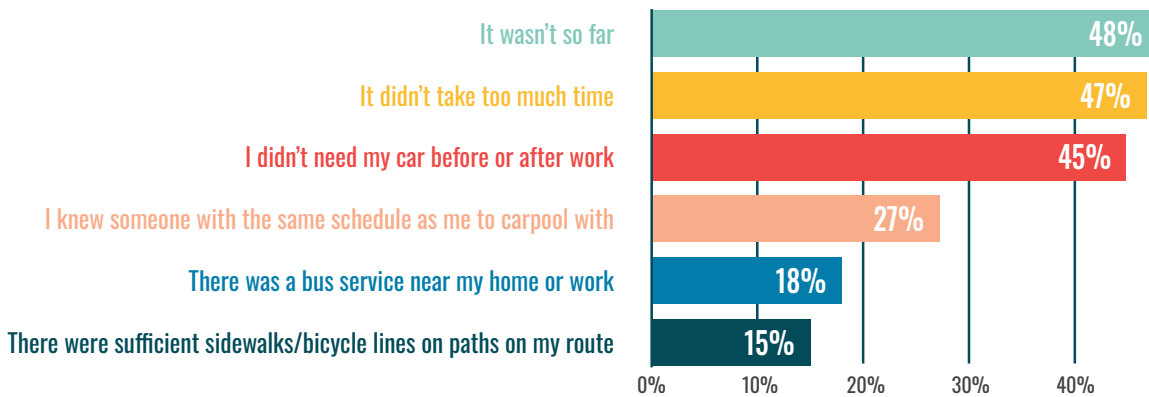
Based on survey results, 14-17% of current one-way drive-alone car trips may be avoided by strategically deploying support programs at places of work in the metro area. Extrapolated to the entire employee population of all 23 organizations surveyed, this reduces 7,448 one-way trips each day. On average, the population surveyed commutes 12-13 miles to work one way. By offsetting 14-17% of trips, 1.4 million gallons of gasoline would be saved each year, removing the need for approximately 3,700 parking stalls.

In addition to better understanding these perspectives, the survey provided data points about key reasons to drive alone and current barriers to active commuting. Several of these reasons / barriers (such as flexibility in scheduling, and finding someone to carpool with) are areas in which employers can play a key role in reducing single-occupancy vehicle trips. Others (such as bus service and sidewalks or bike lanes) indicate a need for regional infrastructure investment in alternative modes of transportation to make these transportation options more attainable.

Top Three Reasons Why Surveyed Employees Drive Alone to Work:



Barriers: I would actively commute to work if...



The COVID-19 pandemic introduced numerous situations and alterations to the ways and means in which persons work and commute in the Omaha-Council Bluffs Metropolitan Area, and around the world. The pandemic led large numbers of workers to begin "work from home" or alternatively work from their normal office circumstances, as evidenced in

the mode share of work from home growing from 4% prior to the pandemic, to 17-19% post pandemic. These changes could likely affect commuting and working patterns moving forward as virtual meetings and working from home continue to become more prevalent in the economy.

Public Transportation

Metro Transit

As noted in Chapter 2, Metro Transit launched the region's first Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) corridor—Omaha Rapid Bus Transit (ORBT)—in November 2020. BRT is a new option for residents that offers enhancements not found on other bus routes:



- Frequent transit service, with buses arriving every 10 minutes in the peak-periods,
- Dedicated, sheltered stations with level boarding for passengers and bikes,
- Transit signal priority that helps the reliability of the service,
- Dedicated lanes east of Turner Park to keep the buses moving even in traffic, and
- Off-board ticketing to speed up the boarding process.

These features make ORBT a more attractive transportation option as they help the route feel more like a rail line - fast and reliable. In November 2024, ORBT reached a milestone of two million rides provided since 2020, showing that the route continues to attract riders and support the goals of the Metropolitan Transportation Plan.

Since the launch of ORBT, Metro Transit has added contactless payments and real time bus tracking via smart-phone apps to make navigating the system easier. These features are now available for all routes with further plans for improvement with signage at stops for more heavily used routes.

More information about ORBT can be found at rideorbit.com



Omaha Streetcar

In 2022, the City of Omaha announced the construction of a modern streetcar as part of a Total Mobility System for the urban core. The proposed route is three miles long and will travel along Farnam and Harney Streets from 10th Street to 42nd Street and along 10th Street between Harney and Cass Streets. Its purpose, according to the City, is to facilitate redevelopment in the urban core and reduce the need for more parking.

“...more people can navigate downtown and midtown without bringing more cars, and it sparks the kind of development that can transform our city into the bustling, innovative, vibrant place we know it can be.”

FIGURE 3.5: Omaha Streetcar Route



Construction of the streetcar began in 2025 with completion anticipated in 2028.

Council Bluffs First Avenue Development

The City of Council Bluffs is advancing a vision to transform the First Avenue corridor into a multimodal spine linking neighborhoods, regional destinations, and Downtown Omaha. The first phase of this effort is already visible with the opening of the 1st Avenue Trail—a high-quality, multi-use path that runs along a former rail alignment. This trail not only enhances local mobility but also contributes to the Great American Rail-Trail, strengthening Council Bluffs' position within a national active transportation network.

Space has been intentionally reserved along the corridor to accommodate future public transit service, setting the stage for long-term mode shift and redevelopment opportunities. Through the Council Bluffs Linkages Study, the city is exploring how to build on these early investments by evaluating land use, connectivity, and economic development strategies that can support a vibrant, multimodal corridor anchored by 1st Avenue.

FIGURE 3.6: Example Cross Section of the 1st Avenue Corridor in Council Bluffs



Bellevue Fort Crook Road Redevelopment

In 2022, the City of Bellevue adopted the Fort Crook Road 2040 Plan, a vision for what one of Bellevue's major corridors could become if intentional redevelopment is pursued. Placemaking is a major driver for this redevelopment, as evidenced by the opening of the plan:

It's Tuesday morning as you wave to your neighbor while walking from your brand-new apartment to the corner coffee shop. After grabbing your latte and exchanging pleasantries with another neighbor, you walk a short block to the BRT station. Within minutes, you catch the north-bound bus heading to Downtown Omaha. Utilizing its own designated transitway, the BRT vehicle reaches its transfer point with the Omaha streetcar within a few short minutes, giving you barely enough time to read the digital version of the paper. There, you make the transfer to the streetcar and ride the final leg to your new research job at the University of Nebraska Medical Center. No car, no looking for parking, and no worries. This is the future of the Fort Crook Road corridor!

The plan focuses on three main elements:

- A Total Mobility System,
- Green Infrastructure, and
- Transit Oriented Development

Public and active transportation enhancements are vital for Bellevue to realize the type of development shown in the plan. Stepping towards developing these transportation modes, the City engaged MAPA to help produce the ongoing Fort Crook Road Corridor Transit & Environmental Feasibility Study. With the help of Metro Transit, Bellevue is investigating what it will take to prepare the corridor for increasing levels of public transportation alongside new development.

Active Mobility Gaps

While active transportation is included as a goal in local plans, there are many areas of the region where getting around without a vehicle is difficult. MAPA created the Regional Bike-Ped Plan to assess key active transportation corridors in the region, identifying a network of roadways that are generally good for cycling today. Improving these roads with traffic calming and destination signage ("wayfinding") would create a substantial bikeway network off of major roadways.

Many sidewalk gaps exist in the MAPA region today—both in neighborhoods and along major roadways. In

order to understand the location of sidewalks throughout the Omaha-Council Bluffs region, MAPA identified the location of sidewalks on functionally classified roadways (collectors or above). Figure 7 calls out areas with known gaps in this network. These gaps are very important to consider with regard to the types of facilities and attractions that drive pedestrian activity. Additionally, closing gaps in the sidewalk network is fundamental to making walking a viable option for people's daily lives.

FIGURE 3.7: Sidewalk Gaps in the Region

