

3.3 STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE ATTRACTION & RETENTION

Building a Transit System for Regional Growth

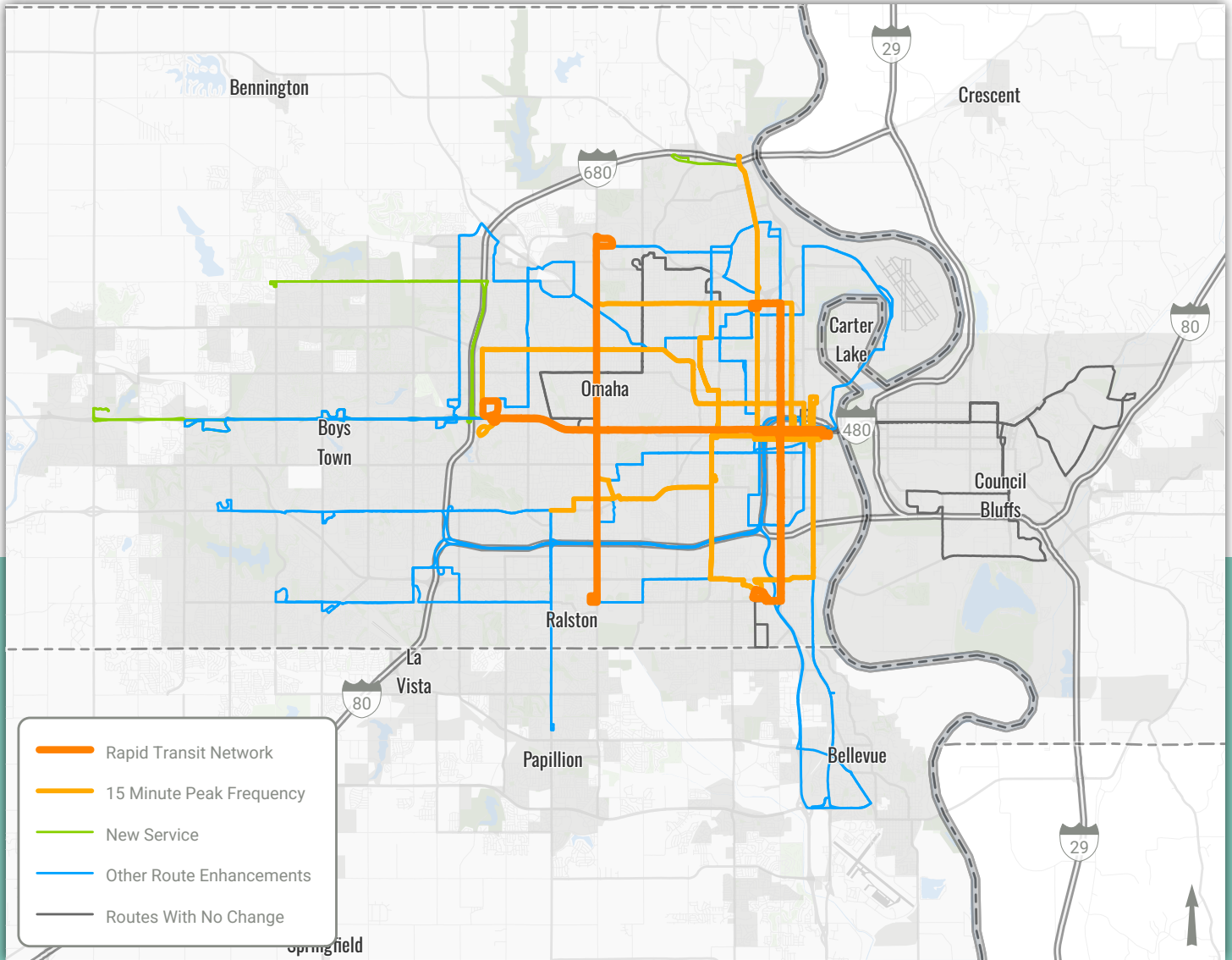
Existing System and the MetroNEXT Regional Growth Framework

The Regional Metropolitan Transit Authority of Omaha, commonly known as Metro Transit, is currently implementing the vision set out in MetroNEXT, its 2022-2030 long-range strategic plan developed through robust community engagement and regional data studies. The plan outlines a phased approach to improving transit coverage, frequency, and accessibility throughout the Omaha-Council Bluffs metro area. While Metro remains the transit authority for the City of Omaha, it also operates contracted service in surrounding communities, including Bellevue, La Vista, Papillion, Ralston, and Council Bluffs. As part of its implementation efforts, Metro is advancing planning

work to enhance service along the 24th Street corridor—supported by a federal RAISE grant. This corridor serves as a critical link between North and South Omaha, connecting historically underserved Areas of Persistent Poverty with major destinations such as educational institutions, employment centers, and downtown Omaha.

As population growth continues outside Omaha city limits, Metro has begun exploring new governance models to support a more unified, regionally responsive transit system.

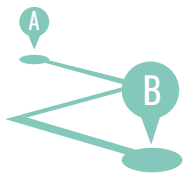
FIGURE 3.8: Transit Routes Within the Region



The Regional Metropolitan Transit Authority Act (LB492), passed by the Nebraska Legislature in 2019, allows local governments in Nebraska to “opt in” to a regional authority structure. This enables expanded funding through local property taxes and facilitates coordinated service delivery across

multiple jurisdictions. Although Metro has transitioned to an elected board under the terms of the act, no communities outside the City of Omaha have elected to join the authority as of 2025. Groundwork laid by MetroNEXT includes evaluating the long-term feasibility and benefits of such a regional transition.

Infill and “TOD”



Quality of connections



Mix of uses



Compact development



Pedestrian scale design

Dodge Street is the metro area’s most heavily traveled arterial and serves as a critical trunk line for east-west connectivity—linking major employment centers, dense residential neighborhoods, universities, hospitals and other health care facilities, retail destinations, and more. It is one of the only continuous corridors that spans the city from east to west, making it a key backbone for regional mobility. Identified in the City of Omaha’s Master Plan as a priority transit corridor, Dodge has long been considered a candidate for high-capacity transit investment. Other key corridors, such as 24th/30th Street and 72nd Street, among others, have also been identified as potential future BRT corridors.

a mix of housing and transportation choices for city residents that are scarce in many markets—allowing people who want to, and people who must live more walkable, less car-dependent lifestyles. When done with intention and foresight, TOD can also increase access to opportunity for lower income households. As a result, TOD is competitive and desirable in the marketplace, with cities across the country seeking to attract talent and businesses into walkable centers and neighborhoods.

Focusing new development along planned transit corridors provides a key opportunity to improve the operations of the transit system through land use decisions. Transit Oriented Development (TOD) naturally generates more riders— increasing financial support for the transit system and helping make it more successful. TOD is also associated with increased private investment, property values, and property tax revenues, which means it provides additional returns for the city and the economy. It also provides

H2050

1/5

of new development

in redevelopment areas.

Development in greenfield areas generally includes large, single-family lots that consume more space and more resources. From the post WWII era until recent years, development in the region has primarily expanded outward as it followed the national trend of lower-density suburbanization aimed at households with children. Greenfield suburban growth is likely to continue as residents are drawn to the benefits of good schools, low crime, newer housing stock, more square footage per dollar, and the desire to be near family and friends. Land use decisions that encourage compact development will utilize the greenfield area that is developed in a more efficient manner that provides greater transportation options.

The Heartland 2050 vision calls for increased compact growth and redevelopment as priorities for our future land consumption. This scenario includes substantial infill and TOD as well as a modest amount of continued outward growth. A future land use scenario that includes these assumptions found that locating one fifth of future development in redevelopment areas will achieve these goals. Another scenario with Targeted Transit Oriented Development (TOD), focused on areas that have high density and access to frequent transit service, and allocated even more of future development to infill and TOD locations. To achieve the goals in this scenario one third of future development would need to be in redevelopment areas.

At the local level zoning changes are laying the groundwork to make progress towards these goals. The City of Omaha updated its zoning ordinances to implement TOD along the ORBT corridor. These zon-

ing changes targeted density and compatible uses at ORBT station locations, and provided new flexibility in the development process. As the city develops its new comprehensive plan, We Make Omaha, this TOD zoning will be further refined and updated. Additionally, the City of Council Bluffs has implemented a Mixed Commercial Residential District along the 1st Avenue Corridor to guide development to future station locations for transit service. Finally, the draft of Papillion's Comprehensive Plan includes a Transit Corridor overlay focused on guiding higher-density to nodes along Capehart—a key area of growth in Papillion and a proposed transit corridor in the Sarpy County Transit Plan.

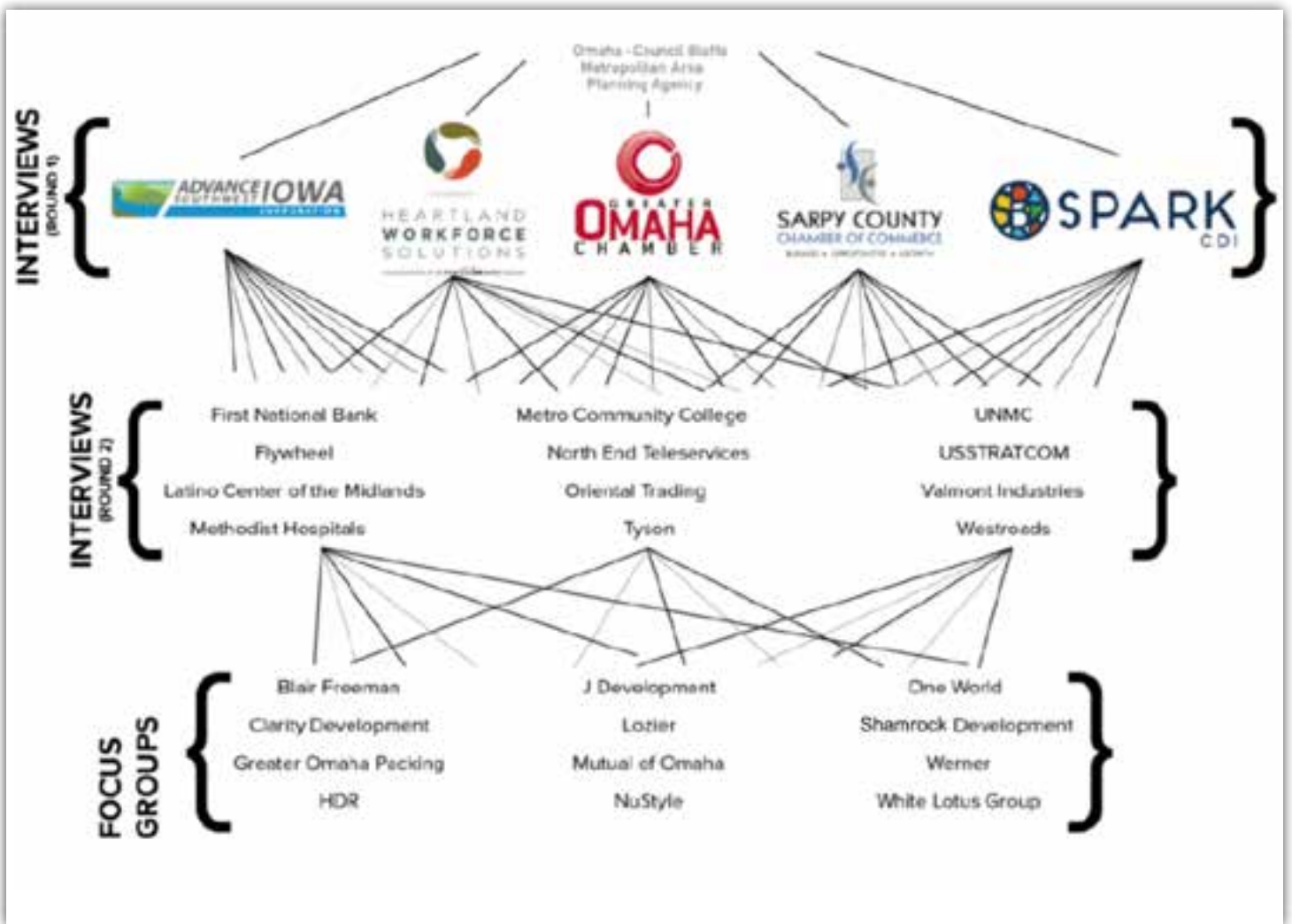
To document the business case for transit in the region, MAPA and the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce developed a Transit Return on Investment Study. The project team conducted a series of interviews with focus groups to incorporate views of large and small employers. These conversations focused primarily on the recognition that continued growth in the Omaha region will require talent retention and attraction to be a top priority. Fast, frequent transit service and TOD provide choices and support urban living, which is increasingly important to attracting new workers and employers to the Omaha-Council Bluffs region. From these interviews and focus groups, a strong message was heard about three ways in which transit is important to area employers:

- Transit Access for Workforce and Customers
- Workforce Recruitment and Retention
- Reducing Business Costs

“Expanding regional transit would add as many as 8,000 new jobs by 2050.”

- MAPA Transit Return on Investment Study





Employer-Based Travel Demand Management

Travel Demand Management (TDM) is a strategy for making the most of existing infrastructure. It is a set of tools to understand how people make their transportation decisions and help people use the infrastructure already in place for transit, ridesharing, walking, biking, and telework. The main benefits of TDM are that it is cost-effective in driving use of existing transportation services and focusing on changing individual behaviors to benefit the system as a whole. Over the last ten years, Travel Demand Management has been an important strategy of MAPA's Little Steps, Big Impact ozone awareness campaign— an effort aimed at reducing transportation emissions

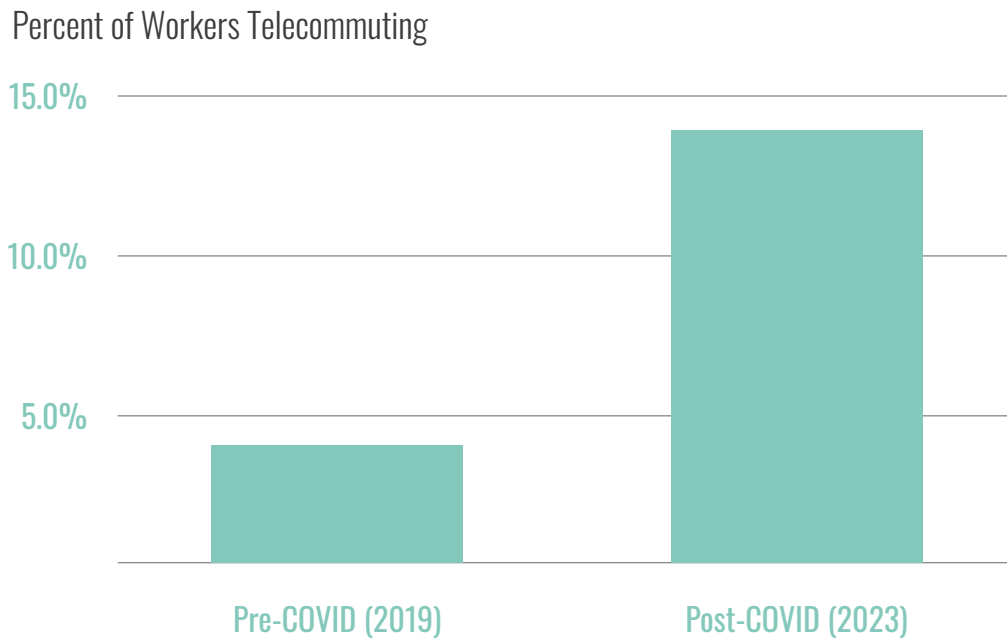
that impact our region's air quality. There are several existing programs, such as the MetroRideshare carpooling platform (hosted by Iowa DOT), and the Nebraska Department of Transportation's vanpool program.

However, coordination with community leaders in recent years has illustrated the important role that employers play in reducing the number of single occupancy vehicle trips, whether through employee parking policies, flexibility regarding workplace schedules, and transportation amenities in the workplace. The COVID-19 pandemic has also shifted perspec-

tives about telework—a key strategy for reducing vehicle miles traveled in other regions. Figure 9 below shows the difference in the percentage of workers telecommuting in 2019 compared to 2023. While the number may change as we move further from the

onset of the pandemic, the persistence of a higher telework rate suggests that the region should keep an eye on the data and consider this shift when planning future infrastructure.

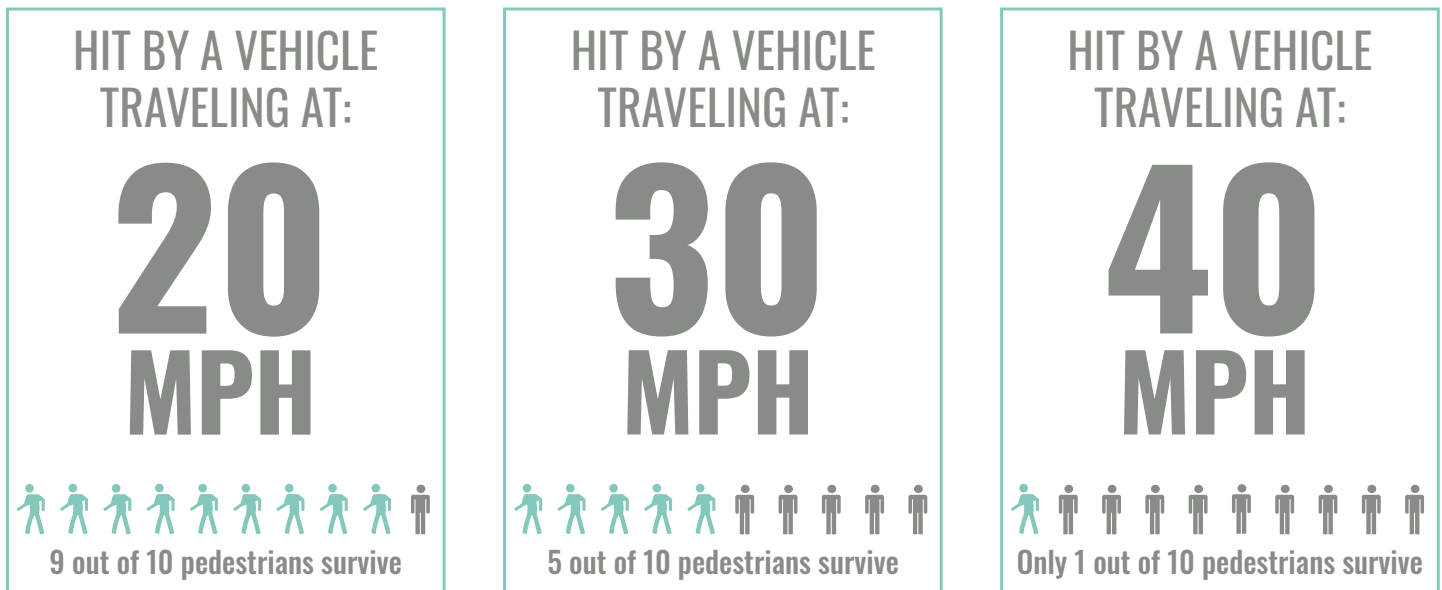
FIGURE 3.9: Pre- and Post-COVID Work from Home Rates (5 Year American Community Survey Data, Workers 16 Years and Over)



Pedestrians First in High Activity Regional Nodes

The mixed-use development included in the Heartland 2050 Vision provides a crucial opportunity to orient the region's future growth in areas that can support walkable lifestyles and more transportation options. Prioritizing walking means more accessible areas for people of ages and abilities, more vibrant street life, and improved safety. In terms of infrastructure, these priorities mean wider sidewalks, amenities for transit riders, and improved crossing

opportunities for pedestrians—including leading pedestrian intervals and mid-block crossings. In such nodes, motor vehicle speeds should be reduced, which enhances the safety and comfort of non-motorized users. In areas with high pedestrian activity, higher vehicle speeds are discouraged to ensure the safety of vulnerable roadway users like pedestrians and cyclists.



Implementing Better Bikeways

As MAPA has worked with local stakeholders and leaders on the implementation of the Regional Bicycle-Pedestrian Plan, three key strategies have emerged to guide the prioritization of future bikeway projects in the region:

- **Break-Down Barriers in the Cycling Network:** Logical gaps in the cycling network need to be addressed, and east-west connectivity needs to be prioritized— particularly connections to the regional trail network.
- **Prioritize Safety and Comfort for Riders:** We need to be building “better bikeways” such as bike boulevards and separated facilities that are more attractive to less-experienced riders. This includes revisiting areas of the original Bike Omaha Network where improvements have been identified.
- **Connecting Neighborhoods Throughout the City:** Expanding the Bike Omaha network to connect new neighborhoods provides opportunities to cycle for more of the city’s residents. Heartland 2050’s Close the Gap Plan stresses the importance of “nodes and corridors”— the places people want to go and the connections between them.

Breaking Down Barriers in the Cycling Network

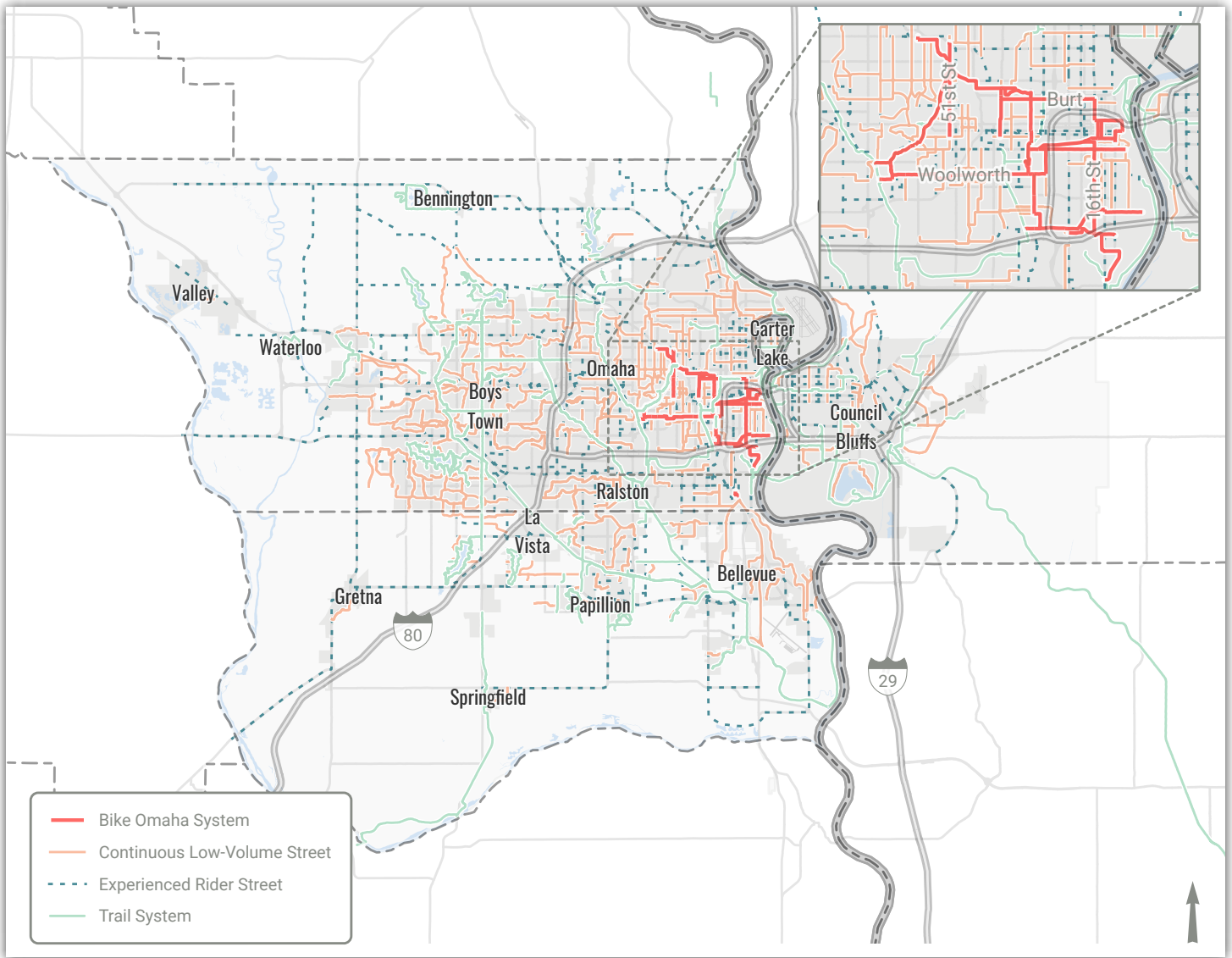
The Omaha region has an extensive network of recreational trails. These paths offer a quality cycling experience – near total separation from vehicular traffic, scenic surroundings, and relatively little topography thanks to their position adjacent to rivers and streams. However, because of their orientation to the region’s water features, their use for serving everyday travel needs is limited by their distance from important activity centers and a lack of lateral connections. MAPA, Live Well Omaha, and

RDG Planning & Design coordinated to create a Metropolitan Area Bicycle Map that shows existing routes through the region based on their current suitability to different types of bicyclists. Figure 10 shows roads identified as part of a regional bike map and their relationship to the region’s trails.

More information can be found at bikemap.mapacog.org.



FIGURE 3.10: Regional Cycling Network



Yet the region's trails, like the water features they parallel, tend to serve north-south movements well but do not make connections from east to west through neighborhoods. Some on-street facilities exist in cities throughout the region, but they are sparse and do not yet form an interconnected network. Additionally, the Cities of Omaha, Council Bluffs, and Bellevue have designated bike routes

with wayfinding signage. These routes utilize some existing facilities such as bike lanes or shared lane markings in specific locations, but also make use of low-volume streets to make key connections as well.

The Heartland Connections Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan was the first comprehensive bicycle and pedestrian plan for the Omaha metropolitan area. The initiative involved a series of workshops with varied

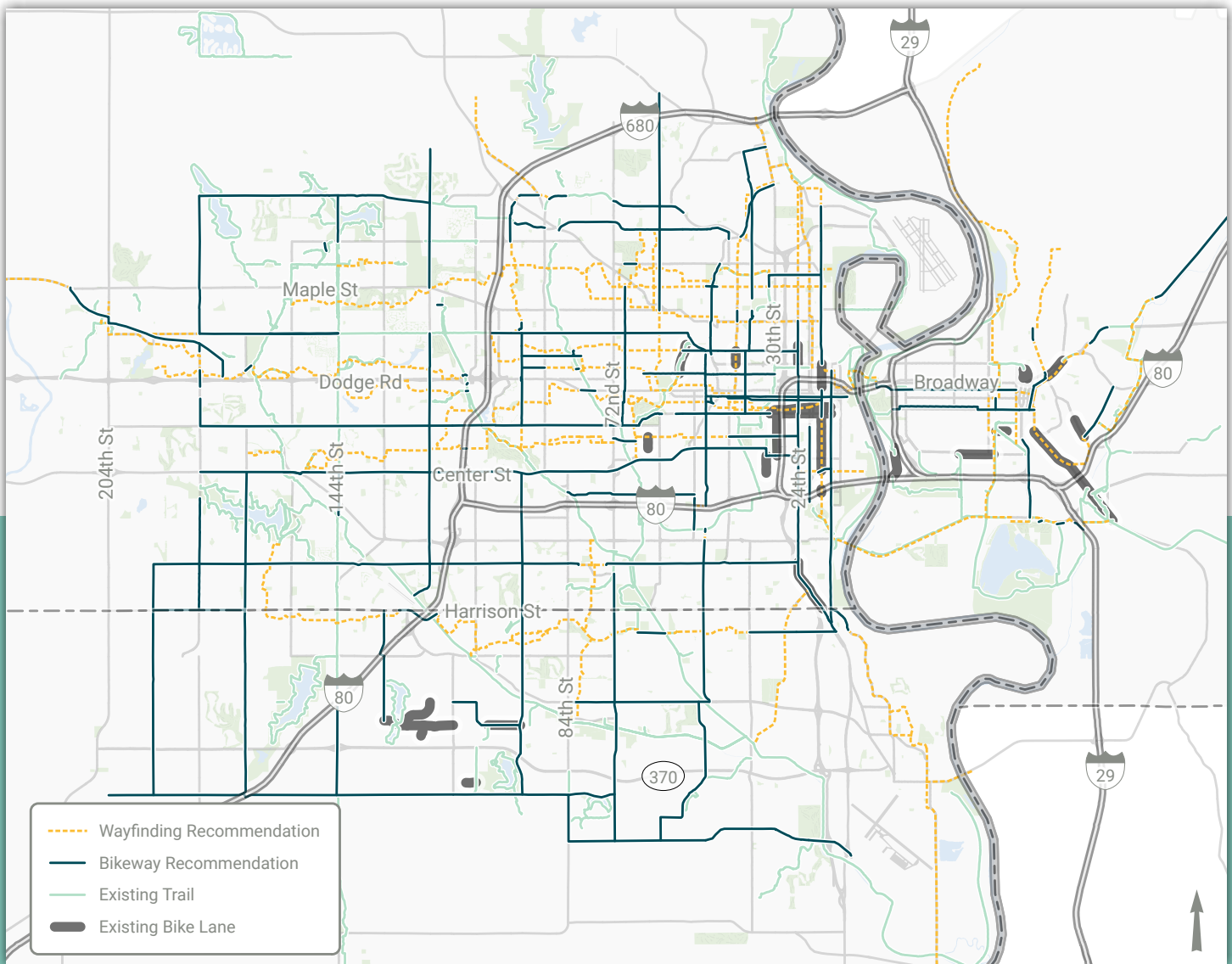


stakeholders representing local governments and other key transportation partners. The plan had two distinct goals:

- Establish a series of recommendations for specified corridors that create a system of bikeways and walkways that provide local and regional connectivity, and
- Develop a set of efforts focused on putting the plan into action.

When evaluating corridors, bikeways are difficult to incorporate into many of the region’s major roadways in the short-term due to high speeds and levels of traffic. MAPA recommends that bikeway facilities be considered when these roadways are reconstructed. MAPA has identified 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. Bikeway and wayfinding recommendations are shown in Figure 11 below.

FIGURE 3.11: Cycling Recommendations



In addition to MAPA’s regional recommendations, the Cities of La Vista and Omaha have now completed Active Mobility Plans. The City of Bellevue will begin work on its own plan in 2026. These plans serve the particular needs of their communities, but also offer regionally significant connections that will develop a more complete network throughout the metro area.

Prioritizing the Safety & Comfort of Cyclists

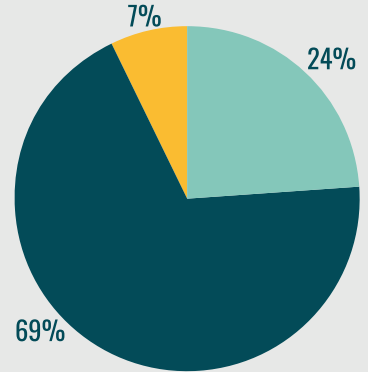
Safety is at the front of people’s minds when they consider riding a bicycle for recreation or transportation. A survey of residents in the Omaha region found that people felt most comfortable on bikeways such as recreational trails. The “Four Types of Transportation Cyclists” helps describe different segments of the population.² Since this graph was first released, it has served as a useful tool for planners and engineers to consider the reasons why people do or don’t like different bike facilities. A brief description of each “Type” of cyclist is included in the list below:

- **Strong & Fearless** – These cyclists will ride in their communities regardless of weather conditions or the availability of cycling infrastructure
- **Enthusied & Confident** – Enthusied & Confident riders are comfortable sharing the road with automobiles, but prefer riding in designated bikeway facilities
- **Interested, but Concerned** – These residents enjoy riding a bike, and are curious about using a bike for transportation. However, they have concerns about their own personal safety due (in large part) to conflicts with motorists. These riders are encouraged to ride if protected or separated facilities exist in their communities
- **No Way, No How** – Not interested in cycling as a transportation mode because of factors such as topography, inability, or lack of personal interest

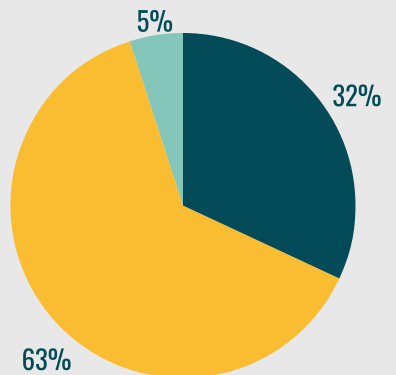
The majority of people are likely to fall within the “Interested, but Concerned” category of cyclists. However, at present, few bikeways (other than recreational trails) are designed with this segment of the population in mind. In order to achieve the active transportation goals of our communities and our region, we should focus our resources on building facilities that encourage residents to take more trips by walking or biking. To make other facilities “more like trails,” communities should incorporate physical separation between cyclists and other vehicles. Strategies such as protected bike lanes, the expansion of the regional trail network, and implementing “bicycle boulevards” on low-volume streets where auto traffic is discouraged are crucial to make progress towards these goals. More information about these strategies can be found in MAPA’s Regional Bicycle Pedestrian Plan: <https://mapacog.org/reports/regional-bicycle-and-pedestrian-plan/>

² This system was developed by Roger Geller, Bicycle-Pedestrian Coordinator for the Portland Bureau of Transportation in 2006.

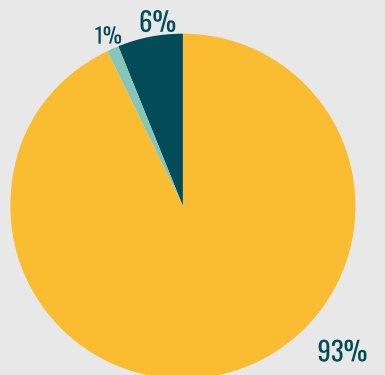
Multi-Use Trails



Bike Lanes



No Bike Lanes



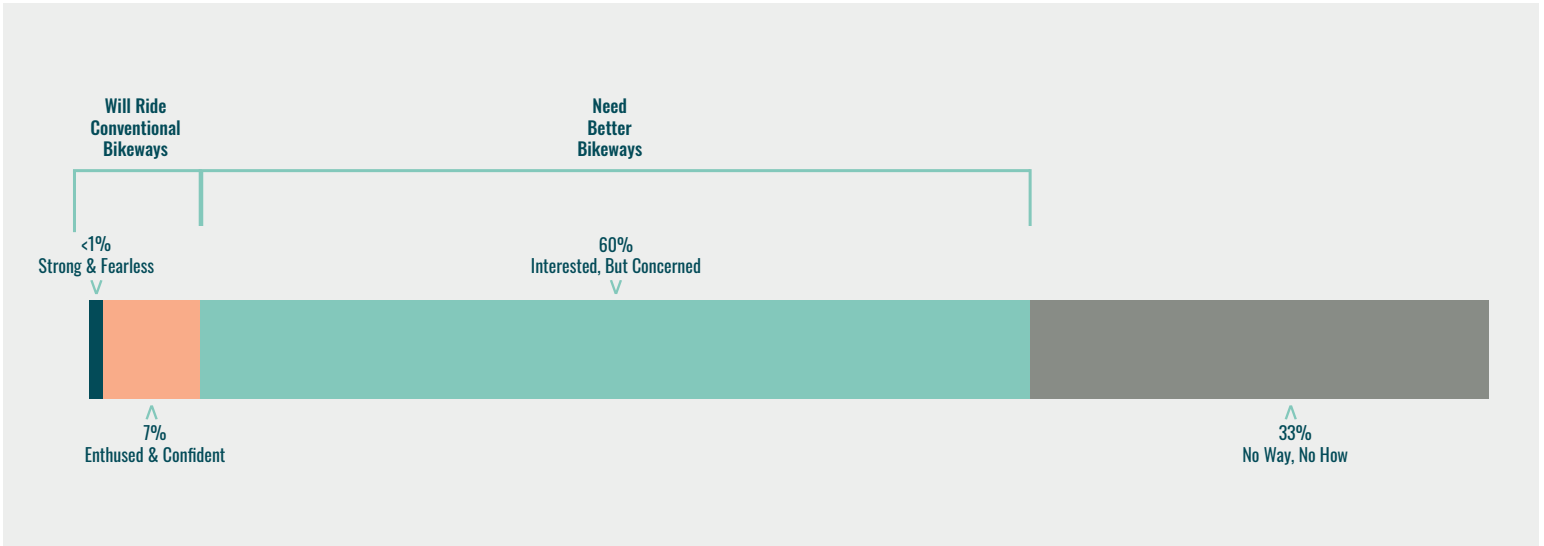
Very Safe

Safe

Not Very Safe

Source: Travel Improvement Study () Survey

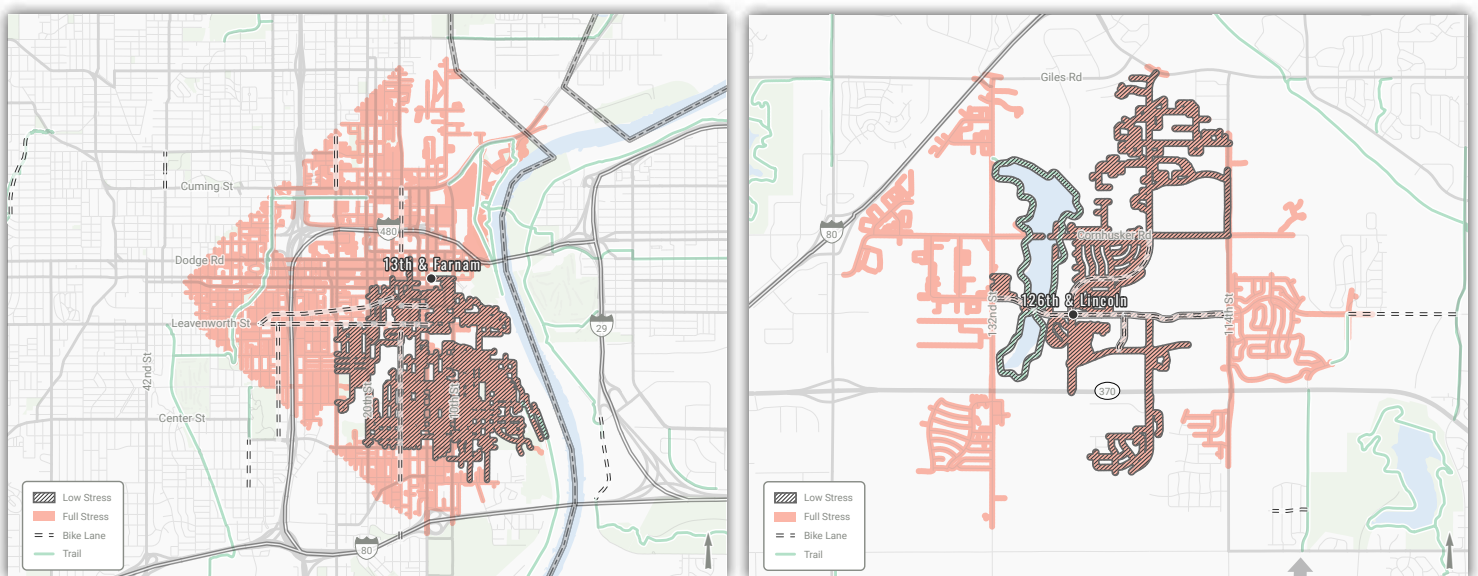




Similar to the approach utilized to create MAPA's Metro Area Bike Map, Level of Traffic Stress (LTS) is a tool that MAPA and the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce have utilized to facilitate more robust conversations about bikeway planning in the region. This type of analysis helps identify which streets are comfortable for most people to ride along, including people that don't bike regularly. Streets with higher traffic speeds and volumes, and/or no dedicated bikeway are more stressful for less experienced

riders. Similarly, streets with lower traffic volumes and/or dedicated facilities are more likely to be utilized by users of all ages and abilities. Using a particular length of trip, MAPA's Level of Traffic Stress analysis can illustrate how far cyclists can go from a particular location, but also which elements of the trip are lower stress. This is an essential tool for the planning process to identify barriers to cycling and prioritize projects.

FIGURE 3.12: Bicycle Level of Traffic Stress, Downtown Omaha and Werner Park Area



Connecting Neighborhoods Throughout the City

Three plans have been developed since the adoption of the original 2050 Long Range Transportation Plan in 2020:

- The Expanded Neighborhood Access to Trails (NEAT) Study,
- The ConnectOmaha: Active Mobility Plan, and
- The La Vista Active Mobility Plan.

NEAT, although a region-wide study, focused on neighborhoods with the goal of identifying short, easy to build projects that will have major impacts. Instead of needing to navigate around buildings, along busy roads, or across natural barriers, the connections identified in the NEAT study will enable residents to

bike or walk safely and easily to our well loved trail network. Sponsored by the Papio-Missouri River Natural Resources District, the NEAT study resulted in projects the NRD can implement in a short period of time. Some of them are already in the works with more that can be implemented during the life of this plan. Additional studies to find more needed connections will follow.

The Omaha and La Vista Active Mobility Plans (AMPs) created blueprints for city-based networks to connect places where people live, work, and play. They identify preferred routes for linking neighborhoods to businesses, mixed-use districts, parks, and other amenities.

Equitable Access to Opportunity

The Omaha-Council Bluffs region faces significant racial and ethnic gaps in income, wages, education, and poverty. The Regional Equitable Growth Profile conducted as part of the Heartland 2050 process showed that the region's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) would have been nearly \$5.86 billion higher in 2020 if there were no racial disparities in income. This figure grew between 2015 and 2020 by nearly \$1 billion—illustrating the need to implement key strategies to close these gaps in income. Traditionally, increasing access to training and jobs serve as important components of fostering more inclusive growth and as a strategy for retaining talent. Transportation is known to be one of the primary obstacles to connecting potential employees to jobs. In 2010, only 32% of households and 45% of jobs were located within one-quarter mile of transit routes.

Addressing job inequality and attracting and retaining the next generation of skilled workers to the region

According to Nebraska's Next Economy, a report commissioned by the State of Nebraska,

“The lack of an adequate system of public transport limits access for these groups, even as employers in the same city face constant workforce shortages. Omaha’s leaders understand the transportation challenge.”

¹An article illustrating these issues in the Omaha region is “Where there’s a will, is there a wage?” in the *Washington Post* by Robert Samuels (July 22, 2018). www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/national/omaha-job-training/



is paramount to the long-term economic success of our region. To meet this goal, advancing equity should be a driving force to strengthen the region's economic growth and competitiveness. This includes prioritizing regional investments in quality education and workforce development, housing, transit, and revitalization in key neighborhoods. Local governments should support emerging business sectors including infrastructure,

transportation, health care, medical research, agriculture and food processing, military, insurance, and finance.

More frequent and reliable transportation improves mobility and connects those seeking employment or job training better, so they can participate more fully in the local economy. Better connections reduce transportation costs for employers, enhancing their stability.

