



## RESEARCH SERVICES & LIBRARY

OFFICE OF TRANSPORTATION  
SYSTEM MANAGEMENT

## TECHNICAL SUMMARY

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### PROJECT COST:

\$30,000



In Olympia, Washington, voters approved citywide sidewalk construction linked to park enhancements. Newly constructed sidewalks each feature this impression.

# Strategies for Expanding Multimodal Travel Options in Small Cities and Rural Areas

## What Was the Need?

Alternatives to automobile travel such as walking, biking and transit provide a range of benefits to a community, improving air quality, economic activity and public health. Having multiple travel alternatives is especially important in maintaining mobility for seniors, people with disabilities and lower-income residents.

About half of Minnesota's residents live outside the Twin Cities metro area in rural areas and small cities. Providing travel alternatives is more challenging in these areas due to low population densities, a lack of high-density destinations and land use patterns that contribute to heavy reliance on automobiles.

Despite these challenges, agencies across the country have developed innovative strategies and programs that have successfully expanded multimodal travel alternatives in less populated areas. Research was needed to identify approaches that have the potential to be successful in Minnesota.

## What Was Our Goal?

This project's objective was to identify promising strategies for improving multimodal options in rural areas and small cities in Minnesota.

## What Did We Do?

First, investigators conducted an extensive review of existing state and local programs nationwide that are designed to improve multimodal travel in small cities and rural areas. The review focused on multimodal efforts such as car-sharing programs, carpooling facilitation, innovative transportation partnerships, transit-supportive land use, and trails and pathways. (Publicly funded transit in small cities was excluded from the review.)

The research identified 65 innovative projects and programs in six broad categories:

- Improving transit options (including strategies best suited to exurban, destination or production communities).
- Pedestrian/bicycle improvements.
- Multimodal land use planning.
- Financial incentives for multimodal development.
- Alternative vehicles (such as golf carts and other low-speed vehicles).
- Other strategies not included above.

From this list, the project panel identified six initiatives to be developed into longer case studies.

## What Did We Learn?

The final report is a compendium of innovative strategies that local agencies can draw from to increase multimodal travel options. The six initiatives selected were:

*Understanding what strategies other agencies have successfully used to expand multimodal travel in less populated areas will help local agencies improve mobility with less environmental impact.*

*“This project fills a gap in multimodal research, which tends to focus on large metro areas. The report will be a valuable resource as we discuss ways to improve transit, bike and pedestrian travel options in rural areas and small cities.”*

—Katie Caskey,  
Principal Planner, MnDOT  
Policy Planning Unit

*“Our goal was to find strategies for increasing multimodalism that are innovative but that would also be acceptable and feasible in Minnesota.”*

—Carol Becker,  
Researcher and Lecturer,  
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Photo courtesy of Oregon Department of Transportation

One promising strategy identified in this study was Oregon DOT’s approach to helping communities create multimodal downtown environments in areas where a highway serves as a small town’s Main Street. Here, U.S. 20 runs through downtown Sisters, Oregon.

- **“Parks & Pathways” sidewalk construction program (Olympia, Washington):** Most of the city lacked sidewalks, and the city won voter approval to construct them by linking the project with park enhancements. Opportunities to link multimodal use and recreation exist in Minnesota as well; the recreation community and parents concerned about safe routes to school may be sources of advocacy and support.
- **Intercity bus service (North Dakota):** A network of buses connects small towns in North Dakota to larger regional centers, giving residents access to services not provided in their communities. Rural transit providers in Minnesota could follow this model by concentrating more trips along the state’s interregional corridors and increasing coordination in their schedules.
- **Reimbursement system for senior car trips (Mesa, Arizona):** A nonprofit organization implemented a successful city-level program that reimbursed eligible seniors for car trips provided by friends and neighbors. The program did not scale up well regionally, and it was replaced with a program that uses electronic fare media in taxis. Minnesota agencies could consider the lessons learned in Arizona when discussing transit reimbursement programs.
- **“Main Street as Highway” guidance (Oregon):** The Oregon Department of Transportation added a functional classification to the state highway manual for the portion of a highway that runs through a small town, with design standards accommodating walking, biking and commercial activity. The agency also created a manual to help local governments understand their options for creating a multimodal environment and advocate for their interests with ODOT. MnDOT and its partners could undertake a similar effort.
- **Tying impact fees to development:** Some states fund transportation projects by using special taxing districts or requiring new developments to include impact fees. Several states also have concurrency laws, which require that capacity in the transportation system must exist or be planned before development can occur. While other regions have found benefits, for Minnesota agencies to use these methods, the Legislature would need to amend state statutes.
- **“Complete Streets” program (Clinton, Iowa):** After a major employer left in 1995, the city created a comprehensive long-range plan to redevelop a key industrial area into a walkable, multimodal environment. MnDOT could facilitate similar efforts by strengthening its existing support of the Complete Streets approach, such as by further integrating design elements into the highway planning process.

## What’s Next?

This project provides MnDOT and its partner agencies with an initial look at innovative strategies that could be applied in the state. MnDOT will share the final report with regional planning organizations and county and city agencies to expand awareness of strategies that could be implemented locally.

*This Technical Summary pertains to Report 2014-42, “Rural and Small Urban Multimodal Alternatives for Minnesota,” published November 2014. The full report can be accessed at <http://www.lrrb.org/PDF/201442.pdf>.*