

SECTION 1

PLANNING CONTEXT AND FRAMEWORK

PURPOSE AND SCOPE

The purpose of the Alternative Transportation System Plan is to enhance the quality of life in the City of Bloomington through strategic investments over time in multi-modal transportation features that meet the needs of individuals and families living, working, and recreating in Bloomington. The project scope of work focused on defining the key components of the plan at a system planning level, along with establishing baseline facility standards to ensure a quality system.

PROJECT HISTORY AND RATIONALE FOR NEW PLAN

As stated in the City of Bloomington Comprehensive Plan 2000, the City's Bikeway Plan *“was last updated in 1975 and there is no comprehensive pedestrian pathway plan. There is a strong need to prepare a new plan focusing on major connecting routes and smaller scale but equally important neighborhood improvements. Previous plans have provided grand visions with little discussion of implementation or funding.”*

The public process undertaken as part of developing this plan reinforces the importance of a comprehensive and cohesive alternative transportation system in ensuring the long-term health, safety, and wellness of the community. Complementary key points of rationale for completing the plan include:

- Responding to an increasingly vocal concern by citizens and community interests to enhance facilities for pedestrians and bicyclists
- Improving community health and fitness by encouraging active living and fostering safety, accessibility, social capital, and mental health
- Increasing transportation options to reduce reliance on personal automobile-based modes of transportation – e.g., more access to bus and LRT service
- Responding to increasing concerns about the safety of pedestrians and bicyclists in the built environment

REGIONAL CONTEXT AND URBAN FORM

The challenging pedestrian infrastructural condition in Bloomington has much in common with other first-ring suburbs in Hennepin County. The historic development patterns in the Minneapolis area and its suburbs pose inherent constraints to addressing alternative approaches to transportation. Communities often labeled “developing suburbs,” such as Bloomington, Minnetonka, Maple Grove, Eden Prairie, Plymouth and Brooklyn Park, were built out between 1960 and 1990, most often with a decidedly auto-oriented development pattern which often did not include sidewalks, much less greenways and trails.

The following table highlight some of the challenging barriers to a pedestrian infrastructure as documented by Hennepin County in a recent publication.

CHALLENGING BARRIERS TO ESTABLISHING A PEDESTRIAN INFRASTRUCTURE

Source: Hennepin County, with editing for local relevance. Note: This reflects a statement of possible barriers and does not reflect an official County position.

Sidewalk Gaps

Gaps in pedestrian infrastructure, large and small, are quite typical along municipal boundaries. Current county policy states that the cost of pedestrian facilities is currently delegated to the city for any municipality with a population greater than 5,000 inhabitants. Since investment priorities do not commonly occur at city boundaries, closing gaps at the edges of communities will generally remain an issue due to lack of incentive to construct new sidewalks.

Freeway Interchanges

Freeways and other larger arterials pose significant barriers to pedestrian travel. Large commercial tracts generate traffic; retail, hotel, service station and restaurant employees need to walk to work. Travelers too walk to and from restaurants and hotels that are common in these areas and all of these pedestrians must cope with traffic entering and exiting freeways.

Sidewalks are often common only along the bridge structures that actually span the freeway and remain disconnected by a series of on and off ramps that usually do not have pedestrian infrastructure.

Left and Right Turn Lanes

Use of dedicated left and right turn lanes (slip lanes) at intersections is common in Hennepin County, which tends to give priority to cars turning across crosswalks. While these features facilitate vehicle flow, they can deter pedestrians if poorly designed.

Turning Radii and Right Turn Lanes

Right turn lanes with a wide turning radius were observed to allow vehicles to pass through an intersection without significantly reducing their speed. Other than occasionally marked crosswalks, there were no additional cues, signals or design maneuvers found to slow down the driver. This design was observed more often in recently constructed intersections than in older infrastructure. When painted, right turn lane crossings almost without exception are marked at the middle of the turning radius. Here, pedestrians risk crossing while the vehicle is traveling at relatively the same speed and where they are not in the driver's direct line of sight. The right turn thus functions as a separate intersection where the pedestrian is no longer protected by the traffic and pedestrian signals required in the main intersection.

Unsignalized Crossings

Illegal road crossings outside of crosswalks occur frequently, most commonly on roads that have dense commercial land use or a significant distance between bisecting streets. Other common infrastructure patterns that encourage informal crossings are areas that do not provide pedestrian facilities on two sides of the street or do not provide a direct route to a common destination.

Park and Ride Facilities

In Hennepin County, park and ride locations were often found in areas that were very accessible by vehicle but less convenient for walking or bicycles. In Bloomington, this is less of an issue and the proposed system attempts to more effectively address this issue.

In addition to the items listed in the table, a few other barriers are worth highlighting, including:

- Surface street characteristics – no dedicated cycling facilities are currently provided along Bloomington's street network that meet all desirable standards, which discourages use
- Actual street use/speeds – bicyclists using a particular road encounter multiple lanes of traffic, with vehicles often traveling at higher than the posted speed limit
- Limited regional connections – to destinations outside the city, many of which are quite extensive and offer a missed opportunity for local residents
- Lack of end of trip facilities – such as well-placed bicycle parking racks or lockers, showers/changing space for commuters, etc.

As these realities suggest, transitioning Bloomington's infrastructure to be more multi-modal and pedestrian-focused poses some significant challenges that will take time and resources to address. Nonetheless, the thoughtful and incremental implementation of this and complementary plans (i.e., park system plan, etc.) will ensure that alternative transportation options for residents and visitors will continue to grow over time.

DEMOGRAPHICS AND POPULATION CHARACTERISTICS

In 2006, the official population estimates for Bloomington released by the Metropolitan Council were:

- Population: 85, 832
- Housing units: 37,693
- Households: 36,604
- Average people per household: 2.30

Figure 1.1 provides an overview of the 2000 population based on information from the U.S. Census Bureau.

FIGURE 1.1 – CITY OF BLOOMINGTON DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

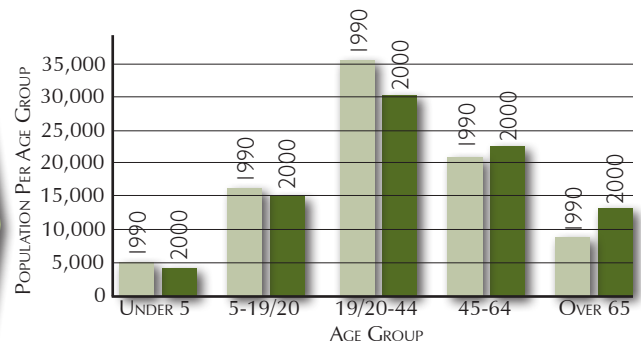
(Source: City of Bloomington website)

2000 Population (U.S. Census)

Total Population	85,172
Female	44,040
Male	41,132
One Race	83,172
White	75,055
Asian or Pacific Islander	4,339
Black	2,917
Other Races	1,068
American Indian, Eskimo and Aleut	296
0-4 Years Old	4,532
5-19 Years Old	14,852
20-44 Years Old	29,994
45-64 Years Old	22,436
65+ Years Old	13,358
Median Age	40.1

1990 Population (U.S. Census)

Total Population	86,335
Female	44,558
Male	41,777
White	81,766
Asian or Pacific Islander	2,669
Black	1,394
Hispanic (can be of any race)	805
Other Races	258
American Indian, Eskimo and Aleut	248
0-4 Years Old	5,309
5-17 Years Old	13,051
18-44 Years Old	38,404
45-64 Years Old	20,689
65+ Years Old	8,882
Median Age	33



Since 1990, Bloomington has grown older, with a 50% increase in the population over 65 years of age, a slight increase in the population 45-64 years of age, and declines in all other age groups. By 2020, 16-17 percent of the population will be 65 years and older and the number of school age children will decrease.

As Figure 1.1 illustrates, and like many communities, Bloomington's population is aging, with the upper two age brackets seeing particular growth. Along with this changing demographic will be a higher propensity of "empty nesters" or households without school age children living in the community.

The city is also becoming more ethnically diverse. Although only around 11% of the population in 2000 was non-white, that percentage has grown significantly, with those of Latino or Hispanic backgrounds experiencing the largest growth (184%). Although the number of family households has decreased, the single parent households with children has increased.

INFLUENCE OF DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE ON RECREATIONAL AND SOCIAL TRENDS

The aging of the population in Bloomington along with evolving recreational and societal trends will markedly affect the demand for public services and facilities. An aging population, for example, will likely result in a reduced demand for neighborhood playlots and athletic complexes. Conversely, interest in passive recreation such as walking along a trail, sitting at a pleasant overlook, taking in the arts, gardening, adult and senior programs, and attending social gatherings in there many public and private forms will rise. In fact, the use of trails is the most popular form of recreation for all age groups.

Along with the changing demographic, all age groups have a growing list of recreational and social choices available to them. This translates into an ever increasing expectation of a high quality experience when an individual of almost any age participates in an activity or social event. Today youth in particular have much more diverse interests than in past generations, often making it much more difficult to engage them in active, outdoor recreational activities.

The changing demographic character of the city coupled with the changing recreational and social trends underscore the need for a well-balanced and flexible system that can respond to evolving, broad-based community needs. The system plan places considerable emphasis on addressing this issue by ensuring that the active and passive recreational and social interests of residents are reasonably accommodated, with a particular focus on the issue of quality.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN SHAPING THE PLAN

The task force, an on-line survey, open houses, stakeholder interviews, and presentations to local boards and commissions provided a variety of opportunities for the community to provide input into the planning process. These insights were valuable in many ways, especially in consideration of various routing options for trails and bikeways. The following summarizes the key points of these interactions in bullet point format.

Perspective on Existing Sidewalk, Trail, and Transit System:

- True system of trails and sidewalks is lacking in Bloomington
- Transportation infrastructure focuses on moving vehicles, not pedestrians or bicyclists, around the city
- Designs are inconsistent for trails and sidewalks and often do not meet expectations of the intended user

Route Considerations – On-Street Facilities for Bicyclists:

- Key characteristics of existing routes actually used by bicyclists include less traffic, fewer stop signs, directness, slower traffic/lower speed limit
- Routes that tend to appeal to bicyclists include Auto Club Road, 110th Street, 106th Street, 86th Street, 82nd Street, East and West Bush Lake Road, and Xerxes Avenue; less used routes include 94th and 92nd Streets

Route Considerations – Pedestrian Level:

- Consensus that trail system is not well-developed and lacks an overall cohesiveness
- Newer trails, such as East Bush Lake Road trail, are developed to a better standard and should be successful
- Trail and sidewalk system need to complement each other and connect to destinations, relate to neighborhoods, and provide access to schools, parks, and libraries
- Direct route to destination is often missing
- Traffic calming, etc., are also important to making the community safer for pedestrians

Key Destinations and Linkages that Need to Be Linked to the System:

- National Wildlife Refuge
- 98th Street/Lyndale Avenue area
- Express bus stops
- Grocery stores
- Parks (especially magnet parks), libraries, and schools
- Major employment areas – such as 84th Street/Normandale Boulevard
- Normandale Community College and NW Health Sciences University
- Mall of America
- Southtown area
- Airport South area
- Transit sites
- Civic Plaza
- Hotels – along I-494 strip
- Health clinics and fitness clubs
- Bloomington Ferry Bridge
- 12th Avenue/I-494 crossing
- Bush Lake Road – East and West to Edina
- France Avenue/Old Shakopee Road area
- Creekside Community Center
- Anderson Lake area
- Xerxes Avenue/I-494 – not great, but popular due to no ramps
- I-35W across river – longer term
- Old Cedar Avenue bridge crossing area

General Comments and Considerations:

- Process was thought to be a great opportunity to change thinking about what a fully integrated transportation system should include
- Once at a destination, the need to be able to get around within it
- Weather-proof system – year round use desired, but have to deal with maintenance and design issues (grades, drainage, width)
- Special needs of elderly need to be considered
- Stoplight timing was a concern with respect to having enough time for pedestrians and bicyclists to safely get across intersections

- Lack of support facilities is a big issue – such as bike racks/lockers at destinations, bike shelters at the select destinations
- Consider the “string of pearls” concept of connecting major commercial nodes together, such as American Boulevard, Old Shakopee Road, France Avenue, etc.
- Safety is a big concern – intersections, separation between vehicles and pedestrians/bicyclists
- Public perception of safety is also an issue – education, right type of facilities, and police enforcement of laws are all necessary to change perception
- Education such as yielding to pedestrians in crosswalks is lacking
- Proper trail width is important – with current trails often too narrow
- The Xcel Energy powerline easement is a good idea for a trail corridor, but crossings need to be carefully reviewed
- American Boulevard is a possibility, but concern whether people would actually use it given vehicle dominance (maybe light rail is a better long-term option)
- Rails to trails – need to look into opportunities
- Ideal of total inclusiveness is important – including universal signage
- Incentives – including getting businesses to contribute to supporting facilities, such as bike racks/lockers and showers
- Cultural change is a possibility – but need to create that environment through good planning, education, promotion, enforcement, and commitment of resources
- Faith community, Chamber of Commerce, health care community, staging events are all possible avenues for education and promotion
- Possibility of ped/bike only crossing of I-494 should be considered
- Although bike lanes and routes are good to have, a significant part of the population prefers off-street trails
- The re-striping of 102nd Street makes it impossible to bike on since traffic was pushed to the outside edges of the street
- Sidewalks are not well maintained (glass and vegetation on sidewalks)
- Big Picture – cost framework is a key consideration – what can the City of Bloomington reasonably do?

Although the list is not an exhaustive reiteration of the issues brought up during the public process, it does capture the key themes and issues that the plan attempts to address.

RAPID HEALTH ASSESSMENT

To aid public involvement in the planning process, the City of Bloomington routinely tests new approaches. For this project, the City tested a new Rapid Health Impact Assessment tool developed by the Design for Health team. Design for Health is a collaboration between the University of Minnesota and Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota. The Health Impact Assessment tool is designed as an interactive workshop that brings together stakeholders to identify and assess health impacts of a project, plan or policy.

As applied here, the aim of the assessment was to review the potential Xcel Energy Corridor Trail (as defined in Section 3) for health benefits and obstacles. Input from this assessment was used to help determine support for including the corridor as part of the alternative transportation system. A summary of findings from the workshop conducted by City of Bloomington staff with the project task force is provided on the next page.



A Rapid Health Impact Assessment (HIA) tool was used to help determine if the Xcel powerline corridor is suitable for use as a trail corridor. It is!

SUMMARY OF HEALTH IMPACT ASSESSMENT FOR XCEL ENERGY CORRIDOR TRAIL

(Source: City of Bloomington)

Warm-up Activity: Task force members were asked to begin the night with answering a question and post their response. The question: “How do you define health?”

Participant responds:

- Not dead
- Health to me means eating right and pursuing an active lifestyle
- The ability to do the things you want to do without limitations
- Health gives you the ability to enjoy life to the fullest extent in whatever way you choose
- State of mental physical, social, mental, and spiritual well-being not merely the absence of disease. (this was a similar response of the participants so the answer was pooled)

Review of Xcel Trail: Staff gave an introduction to the rapid impact assessment, reviewed the agenda for the evening and presented a review of the Xcel trail plan and the geographic area as well as some of the demographics of the area.

Examples of Health Impact:

Safety	Physical Activity
Accessibility	Land Use
Social Capital	Traffic
Social Interaction	Water Quality
Mental Health	Air Quality

What do you think the health impacts of the trail are?

- Creates opportunities for greater neighborhood interaction
- Encourages physical activity
- Makes use of under used property
- Provides a safe corridor for kids who want to ride or walk to school
- Increases social capital
- Potentially reduces stress
- Creates a non-sports facility for adults
- Increases alternative transportation choices
- Model for redevelopment
- Reduces Co2 admissions
- Potential increase in crashes and injury
- Trail accessibility has to be easy
- Health threat from overhead electrical lines
- Visibly pleasing
- Increased property values
- Connects parks and schools
- Connecting the City from the North to the South
- Creates a clear view –open area promotes “safe environment”
- Reduces air pollution
- Potential to decrease crime
- Fear that a trail would increase crime
- Increased mental well-being
- Lighting needed to deter crime (vandalism, damage, etc.)
- Increased usage could possibly deter crime
- Health impacts of high transmission power lines
- Needs to be kept clear for greatest use
- Potential for community amenities along trail gardens
- Dog Park Potential
- Bikers may take greater chances w/cars
- More fun
- Potential parking conflicts
- “Trailhead Potential” at Smith Park

What are the positive aspects of the health impact of the plan?

- Overall health and wellbeing
- Getting outside and enjoying nature
- Increasing the natural places to walk
- Increasing access to places to get physically active

What do you think are barriers and/or conflicts with the Excel trail?

- Budget priorities
- Loss of tax base
- NIMBY’s (Not in my back yard)

Do you think the positives outweigh the barriers of this plan?

Most definitely YES

How many people will the project affect?

Participants of the workshop were asked to think beyond simple numbers to various sectors of the community that surrounds or would utilize or be affected by the potential trail.

- Birdwatchers
- North / South bike commuters
- Drivers
- Youth

- Seniors
- Neighbors / Property owners / Adjacent property
- Schools / teachers
- Walkers / Runners / Rollerblades / Roller Skiers
- Overall cyclists
- Businesses and employees
- Bus / Transit users
- Other communities (Burnsville, Eagan and Richfield)
- Current gardeners
- Business along the northern edge
- Wheelchair users to take advantage of flat terrain
- Bike rental → close proximity to Erik’s Bike Shop
- Runners Group

Are there potential conflicts that may affect the successful implementation of the plan?

- Xcel maintenance vehicles blocking the path
- No initial connection to other trails and corridors
- Poor implementation for multiple users
- Ability to work around cross street issues
- Ability to negotiate a win-win between the City and Xcel
- Concerns of neighbors (loss of their “backyard”
- Money for development and maintenance
- Not in my backyard (strangers and criminals) Competition from developers for use of this property
- Conflicts between multi-users
- FEAR and difficulty with change
- Safety and injury issues
- Building it to substandard conditions
- Poor design
- Feasibility
- Not drawing in community

Are there enhancements that need to be considered?

Safety

- Proper lighting
- Emergency call box
- Trail bike police

Amenities

- Concessions
- Bike rental / yellow bike program
- Benches, water fountains, WC
- Trash cans, dog waste bags
- Rest areas quiet spaces
- Bike racks
- Fitness course
- Restrooms

Landscapes

- Grade separations
- Multi-use segregation
- Plantings to buffer trail and existing homes (native prairie plantings)
- Community gardens

Community Involvement

- Community Coalition
- Community education and involvement on planning
- School involvement
- Overall community outreach
- Community meetings

Traffic

- Traffic calming
- Signage
- Grade separation
- Bike crossings

Other

- Additional funding sources
- Draw heavily on the examples of other community trails
- Link to other trails or corridors
- Outreach to Neighborhood Watch Groups
- Mile marker signage

Priorities

- Use of funding (N-S, East & West end)
- Is Xcel feasible
- Off-road priority
- Is it a connection (if it is a N-S connection)
- Connection of E, W, S, N

Next steps

Incorporate in alternative transportation report

To complement these findings, the Bloomington Advisory Board of Health reviewed the results of the Xcel Energy Corridor Trail health impact assessment and were asked to share any additional comments and thoughts about the project. Thoughts shared include:

- Increased exposure of the area
- Increased physical activity
- Increased risk at the cross streets
- Increased use of the library
- Increased crime
- Lack of privacy with neighborhood
- Concerns with auto safety
- Potential for more senior housing built along the corridor
- Decrease of greenhouse gas
- Several shared concerns about the exposure to the overhead electrical lines
- Concerns that the project would really need to be “done right” to be successful
- Need to increase marketing of the area and educate the community
- A number of those who lived close to the project shared concerns about not wanting this in their neighborhood
- Concerns that community groups and business really needs to be engaged from the beginning of the project
- Concern that the project would open up opportunities for sex offenders to prey on children and others using the area
- Several shared concerns about the cost of the project and where would the finding come from
- The group also questioned who is likely to use such a path and concerns about the connectedness of the project.

Overall, the group agreed that there are health benefits with this project, however also voicing several concerns that the initial task force workshop findings had not seen as issues.

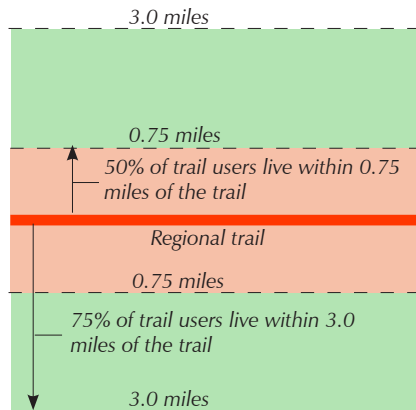
Overall, the use of this tool proved valuable in shaping the discussion and providing another set of findings in support of the alternative transportation plan described in this document.

COMPLEMENTARY REGIONAL STUDIES

In addition to findings from the public process, a variety of state and regional trends are influencing planning outcomes, as the following considers. Recent findings by the Metropolitan Council, MN DNR, and other agencies suggests that future growth in participation in many areas of outdoor recreation is not as assured as was the case a decade or two ago. In numerous activities, research indicates that participation rates are expected to actually decline as Minnesotans shift their activity patterns based on evolving interests, age, and access to newer forms of recreation. Other key findings pertinent to this plan include:

- Growing disconnection with nature, which impacts personal development, societal well-being, stewardship of natural areas; also contributes to nature-deficit disorder in youth
- Barriers to getting outdoors include time, family obligations, work responsibilities, lack of money, weather, bugs (uncontrollable environment), lack of outdoor skills and equipment, lack of information and knowledge, and concerns about personal safety
- More ethnically diverse population with more widely varying expectations
- Obesity/health issues on the rise, with lifestyle choices a key factor
- Greater diversity in recreation opportunities available to all age groups

FIGURE 1.2 – TRAVEL DISTANCES FOR TRAILS



- Funding issues – less Local Governmental Aid (LGA) and other public dollars for acquisition and capital improvements; suggests greater need for non-traditional approaches
- Technology is competing for people’s discretionary time and creating more sedentary time
- Energy costs are rising and limiting people’s willingness to travel very far for recreation
- Climate change is impacting our natural resources and weather

Over the past decade a number of regional studies have been conducted to determine recreational trends associated with the regional park system. These studies looked at residents’ desires for a variety of recreational opportunities and their perspectives on current facilities and future needs. The main generalizations from these studies that have application to Bloomington include:

- Walking around the neighborhood or in large natural parks remains the top activity, with over 85% of respondents being interested in this activity
- Individual sports are becoming more and more preferred over organized ones, at least at the adult level
- People value parks and trails even if they do not regularly use them
- There is an especially strong desire to set aside land for nature areas/ open space, bike paths, and general use trails

In terms of actual users of trails, recent research by the Metropolitan Council suggests that the majority of trail users live within three miles of the trail they are using, as Figure 1.2 illustrates. This suggests that the majority of trail use within the city will be from residents, not people driving to the area from outside the region.

CONCLUSIONS

The input received from residents during the public process, along with other information provided in this section, greatly influenced planning outcomes and points of emphasis in the plan. In spite of varying opinions on needs and issues, it is important to underscore that all residents that participated in the planning process consider a more robust alternative transportation system to be a very important quality of life factor.

To be of value to the community, the system plan emphasizes the following key points:

- The system must be balanced, diverse, and flexible enough to adjust to ever-changing needs of the community
- Quality is as or more important than quantity for encouraging use of alternative transportation features and facilities

REALITY CHECK – PLAN MUST BE IN SYNC WITH TRUE DEMAND

As is justified, this plan is shaped around the ideal that by providing a high quality alternative transportation system the public will respond and use it in ever increasing numbers. Section 2 – Visions and Values and Section 3 – Alternative Transportation System Plan are shaped around that ideal. Section 4 – Implementation and Operations, speaks to the importance of pragmatism and balanced implementation, in which this plan is incrementally implemented over time. This is not only due to the realities of resource limitations, but also because of the importance of monitoring the success of initiatives over time. This approach ensures that investments made prove of value to the community, relative to other ways in which value can be added to the public realm.

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