

Chapter 1: Planning for Action

The last five years have been an active period for planning in Bloomington-Normal and McLean County, with the development of conceptually cutting-edge comprehensive plans for Bloomington and Normal, with heightened attention to sustainability not just in environmental terms, but also fiscal and social sustainability. The new municipal comprehensive plans now show the way forward in transportation planning, both in how the topic is treated within the City and Town planning process, but also in the degree to which we recognize that the transportation system in all its complexity is fundamentally important to our future as a community, to our economic resilience and to the sustainability of our region into and beyond the middle of the 21st century.

A Plan for Us

The world of transportation and its role in the world generally have altered immensely in the five short years since the 2012 adoption of the last Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) for Bloomington-Normal. As a result, this edition of the metropolitan transportation plan diverges in content from earlier plans. Recent changes in planning transportation infrastructure, as well as how that infrastructure is funded, demonstrate that we need inventive and imaginative thinking about this vital element of our community and economy. Over the next five years, Bloomington, Normal and McLean County must establish a path towards keeping our transportation system functional, resilient and sustainable. Identifying the most relevant goals and effective actions to reach these ends is the central focus of this metropolitan transportation plan.

Reading the Transportation Plan

The Long-Range Transportation Plan is not usually read cover-to-cover, as readers turn to the sections that most interest them.

Those who do review the full text may notice repeated references to some themes and facts.

This is done to aid the occasional reader, to ensure that in their focus they are aware of the larger issues and priorities that inform the plan as a whole.

This plan also considers the expanding influence of new technologies on how the transportation system functions. In addition to relatively mundane advances that allow for more efficient or accurate transportation management, such as vehicle tracking, automated passenger counts, pedestrian and bicycle user counts done with remote cameras, transit scheduling and real-time location applications (and many more), we now have or will soon have access to transportation technologies that only a few years ago seemed like science fiction. As some of these innovations become active components of the transportation system, policymakers will face the competing interests of the tried and true versus the new and unpredictable. As we have adapted to the swift evolution of information and communications technology in recent years, what today are reliable standards for transportation infrastructure may evaporate as new and perhaps now unforeseen replacements take hold.¹

¹ Some readers may recall the speed with which audio recordings on compact discs (CDs) swept aside audio cassettes and vinyl records in the early 1980s, the dawn of digital music. Now the shift in dominant technologies promises new kinds of cars, trains and eventually commercial aircraft. This is further discussed in Chapter 5.

Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO)

An MPO is a regional transportation policy-making organization composed of representatives from local government and transportation implementers. MPO's ensure that existing and future expenditures for transportation projects and programs are based on a comprehensive, cooperative, and continuing (3C) planning process at a regional level. Federal funding for transportation projects and programs are channeled through this planning process. The McLean County Regional Planning Commission (MCRPC) is the designated MPO for the Bloomington-Normal urbanized area. Current members include the City of Bloomington, Town of Normal, McLean County, Connect Transit and the Airport Authority, along with IDOT, the Federal Highway Administration, and the Federal Transit Administration.

There is one notable departure from the standard format of a long range transportation plan in this document. Usually these plans examine two to three potential scenarios for the future of the transportation system and its components. As MCRPC has done in the past, and as is common practice, these scenarios can be differentiated by assuming different rates of cost change over the period of the plan. For example, the 2012 LRTP for the Bloomington-Normal metropolitan planning area presented two scenarios, differing in the rates of inflation and project cost change, at 4% and 5%.

In this plan, the participating agencies chose to construct the most reasonable scenario possible based on what we know in the present moment. In addition to the general assumptions presented in Chapter 4 of this report, each of the jurisdictions defined its best determination of future conditions and needs. In keeping with the plan's first goal, maintaining the transportation system as sustainably as possible, each jurisdiction designed its roster of planned future projects

towards that end. Each participant also defined its own hypothesis regarding inflation and cost changes over time, although generally the participants arrived at a rate of 3% for this purpose.

The reasonable scenario is our best estimate of the likely conditions over the next five years and beyond, and more cautiously over the following 22 years to reach the plan horizon. It is based on the accumulated expertise and experience of all the MPO planning partners, including engineers and planners from the City of Bloomington, the Town of Normal, McLean County, IDOT District 5 and MCRPC, and of staff at Connect Transit, SHOW BUS and the Central Illinois Regional Airport. It further relies on the guidance of IDOT's Office of Planning and Programming, and the Illinois Division of the Federal Highway Administration.

The New Normal...and Bloomington

Following a series of unsettling national and world events in the early decades of the 21st century, "the new normal" became common jargon for volatility in economic and social conditions and institutions, such as the 2008-2010 global recession. In the aftermath of that multi-layered economic collapse, and its local effect on the housing market, Bloomington, Normal and McLean County all moved towards a consistent but constricted approach to public investment in transportation. In the persistent economic uncertainty that followed, concerns for basic fiscal stability and specifically the stability of government financial standing and its consequences were voiced by elected officials, community groups, business and residents alike. Combined with the accelerating budget crisis in Illinois and its profound effect on municipal and

county funding and economic prospects, caution became the watchword in policy and investment.

Additional challenges arose in a notable and persistent decline in new development activity in the community, to some extent a product of the recession and disruption of the housing market nationwide, but also a consequence of substantial local workforce reductions by the area's largest employer, and the complete cessation of operations at another major employer.

Amidst these events, the local governments recognized that the development policies of the late 20th century could no longer support a truly sustainable community, in both fiscal and environmental terms. This realization became a central focus of the 2014 Bloomington comprehensive plan, *Bring It On, Bloomington!*, and the 2017 Normal comprehensive plan, expected to go to the Normal Planning Commission and the Town Council by the end of 2017.

As the City and Town confront different challenges and circumstances, their comprehensive planning work has been distinctive in many respects, but have produced common concerns and initiatives. Both have recalibrated expectations for future land use and development areas. The plans overturn decades of formal and de facto development policy that enabled the widespread sprawl development that accompanied the growth in population that began in the 1970s and persisted until the 2008 recession and beyond. This change in development philosophy is the product of the growing awareness of the long-term costs associated with non-contiguous low-density residential development as practiced for 35 years. While the community enjoyed its frequent ranking as the fastest-growing Downstate urban area, the long-term impact of development policy was lost in the economic boom atmosphere.

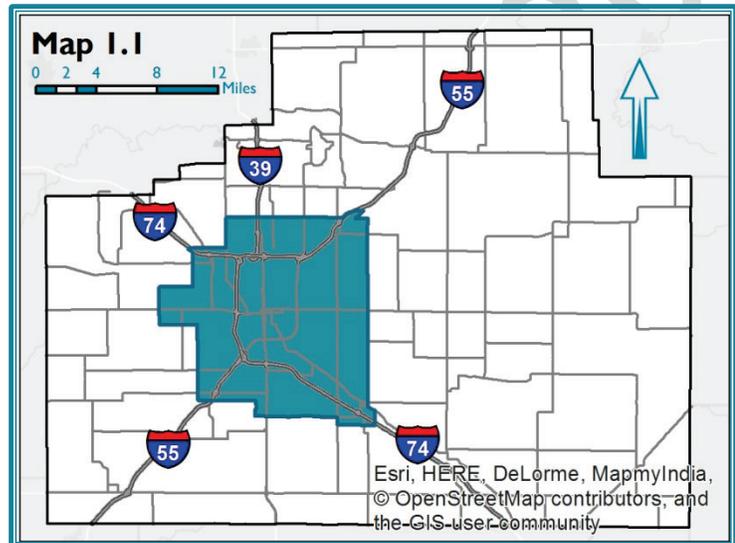
Disadvantages of this development approach emerged during the recession and the slow recovery that followed. As the mid-decade work began on the Bloomington and Normal comprehensive plans, statistical analysis of the fiscal impact of infrastructure for outlying or slow-developing residential areas crystalized the issues for many policymakers and residents, and led to renewed attention to sustainable development for all types of land use. This produced a new schematic of priority tiers for development, emphasizing infill and expansion first in areas with municipal services and in some instances transportation access. Both the municipal plans have adopted the priority tiers, with initial focus on infill development, and with future priorities evaluated according to contiguous areas already served by all or some municipal services. (See Appendices A and B for more discussion of these concepts.)

Advocacy for Transportation Action

This plan follows the requirements for metropolitan transportation plans, but also includes a new area of emphasis: advocacy on behalf of the urban area in support of all types of transportation, as a specific obligation of MCRPC and participating local governments and agencies. This applies to efforts to find secure and sustained funding for preservation of all elements of the transportation system, and in support of providing the community with the maximum level of mobility and access possible. This aspiration rests on the foundation of both municipal plans, which emphasize compact development and the preservation of the current municipal boundaries.

In the last decade, Bloomington-Normal transportation has benefited from the advocacy of the One Voice effort sponsored by the Economic Development Council. Within the broad cross-section of community projects introduced to our Federal legislative team, transportation needs have been well represented. Support for Uptown Station, high-speed rail, improvements for Connect Transit, completion of the Hamilton Road corridor in south Bloomington, opportunities for transit, walking, bicycling and CIRA, and the county-spanning Route 66 Historic Bike Trail have all been promoted through One Voice, and have received funding support as a result. Every transportation user in the community has benefited from these efforts.

Substantial new challenges to the transportation system require even more direct and targeted advocacy, for the County overall but specifically for the primary population center represented by the metropolitan planning area outlined in **Map I.1**. As discussed below, we now face policy and funding uncertainties at both the Federal and State levels. Once reliable streams of funding are challenged not only by budget issues, but also by shifts in policy that fundamentally alter assumptions about the sustainability of the local and regional transportation network. The discussion on transportation at the national level is now dominated by a drive for privatization of facilities and funding, paired with proposals that restrictions should be put on longstanding sources of Federal funding, such as the Highway Trust Fund.²



Taken together, these initiatives pose a real threat to local efforts to maintain and enhance the transportation system, and ensuring that it is responsive to changes anticipated over the next decade and beyond. All of these possible outcomes are outside local control. Responsibly confronting the challenges implicit in the changed transportation climate requires that this community address transportation needs with flexibility, creativity and the readiness to craft resources from new sources and methods. We must be prepared to move outside the typical channels of transportation funding and planning. We must also adopt and adhere to policies which remove barriers from sustainable transportation development when needed, and vital maintenance when new development is not needed.

² The Highway Trust Fund was established in 1956 as the primary Federal funding source for highway construction, including the nascent Interstate system, and later expanded to fund mass transit. The HTF is financed by federal fuel taxes. Due to shortfalls in the Fund in recent years, supplemental funding from general revenue has been required. Changes in driving behavior and the rise of alternative fuel vehicles contribute to the Highway Trust Fund's unsustainability. Congress has not yet formulated a sustainable alternative funding model.

Declining Federal Transportation Funding

Over the past 20 years funding grants from various U.S. Department of Transportation programs have aided the local governments in completing locally and regionally important projects. Although the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act included notable levels of funding for transportation infrastructure and a framework for quick action to boost employment as well as infrastructure repair, ARRA provided a relatively narrow window for using these funds, and a requirement that eligible projects be “shovel-ready.” Consequently, local and State governments applied the ARRA funds to less complex projects for which little advance preparation was needed; this provided a level of infrastructure improvement, but not the degree of economic development intended.

Since ARRA, long-standing Federal transportation programs that once were stable funding sources, have changed in both procedural and funding characteristics. For example, the Surface Transportation Program (STP) has provided significant funding for large scale projects throughout Bloomington-Normal and beyond over the last 20 years. The urban funding component (STU) has been used for:

- Multiple phases of Hamilton Road engineering and construction;
- A joint project of McLean County and Bloomington on White Oak Road and its intersection with Martin Luther King Jr. Drive;
- Transportation elements of the Uptown Normal redevelopment project;
- Bridge rehabilitation on Vernon Avenue, and
- The corridor study phase for the potential East Side Highway.

STU funding has also contributed to a number of smaller projects. Rural STP (STR) funding has been used for several McLean County projects partially contained in the metropolitan planning area (MPA) as well as for projects located entirely outside the MPA. IDOT has used the State share of STP (STS) to fund projects on the Interstate system surrounding our urbanized area, as well as elsewhere in McLean County.

Until recently the STP-U program operated as a formula grant based on population, in which a set sum was allocated annually to a given geographical area (such as the MCRPC metropolitan planning area [See Map 1.1]) to fund work on certain types of streets and highways. The program is now being configured as a block grant rather than a formula program, with as yet untested consequences. As the annual allocation was not sufficient to fund large-scale projects, the participating governments had incentives to cooperate in applying local funds to projects, in some cases joint projects of some or all of the participants. When formula funds become competitive grants, incentives for cooperation are sometimes set aside in favor of a competitive edge. The impact of these changes on the local transportation process will be carefully monitored.

Planning for Climate Change

Despite years of dispute and subsequent failures to plan for the transportation impacts arising from global climate change, recognition of the accelerating shifts in climate conditions has

widened and deepened. as shown by the near-universal adoption of the Paris Accord, created within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. U.S. policy on climate change generally, and the Agreement specifically, is in a period of uncertainty³, in light of the U.S. decision to withdraw from the agreement.⁴ Following this policy change, local and State governments are joining multinational partnerships of governments at multiple levels, private scientific and economic organizations, global organizations such as the United Nations and the World Health Organization, and citizens.

Multiple events during the development of this plan in 2017 have illuminated the necessity of considering climate change impact in local and regional priorities and decision-making. Although Central Illinois is not likely to be directly affected by wildfires and hurricanes, we can and have experienced drought, intensified weather events such as extreme rainfall and tornados, flooding and extended heatwaves. Whether local or across the country, the scale of damage to lives and property and the enormous cost of these events is now a national issue. As previously seen with Hurricane Katrina, and in 2017 with massive hurricanes that struck Texas, Florida and U.S. territories in the eastern Caribbean, and widespread fires and flooding across the western United States, disaster does not recognize State boundaries. [Moreover, the increasing volatility of climate conditions reduces our ability to reliably forecast the scope of impacts.](#)⁵ We stand at the beginning of a new era, full of uncertainty and pressures we cannot yet accurately predict.

³ On June 1, 2017 the Trump Administration announced that the United States would withdraw from the Paris Accord, and on June 12, 2017 it was announced that the U.S. would not join a G7 pact to reaffirm the commitments made through the Accord. Suggestions that the U.S. might recommit to the Accord following a renegotiation of the terms have been rejected by European and Asian participants. In September 2017 there were suggestions from Administration figures that this position was being reassessed.

⁴ Article 28 of the Paris Agreement allows any party to notice its withdrawal three years from the date on which the Agreement entered into force for that party. The earliest date on which the U.S. can formally provide notice of its withdrawal would be November 4, 2019. If pursued, withdrawal would become effective no sooner than one year later, one day after the 2020 U.S. general election.

⁵ [In October 2017 the Category 3 Hurricane Ophelia became the easternmost hurricane formed in the North Atlantic, attaining maximum strength south of the Azores at 34.8N 26.6W with sustained 115 mph winds. As an extratropical cyclone, Ophelia was 220 miles south-west of County Cork \(49.2N 13.3W, latitude equivalent to Gander International Airport, NL\), with sustained hurricane force winds. Ophelia's wind field brought Saharan particulates into London, and caused multiple deaths and significant damage across Ireland and the United Kingdom, with an early damage estimate for the Republic of Ireland of €1 billion. \(Irish Sun, 10/17/2017\).](#)