

Comments on State of Iowa Long-Range Transit Plan

Submitted by:

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Overview

“There is a critical funding shortfall that will worsen over time if action is not taken to identify new or additional sustainable financial resources.”

This one sentence sums up the reality facing transit service throughout Iowa. Although compelling justifications for increased access to transit in Iowa are plentiful, funding is not. Unfortunately, the Iowa Department of Transportation’s (DOT’s) proposed public transit long-range plan identifies the problem but offers no solution. Instead the plan makes recommendations such as the proposal to examine alternative ways of funding public transit without relying on state or federal resources. This is alarming. These recommendations make this plan nothing more than an abdication of both responsibility and interest. If the statewide transit plan does not position transit as a priority that deserves funding, then we have given up before we even get started.

The mission of Iowa DOT’s Public Transit Bureau is to advocate and deliver services that support and promote a safe and comprehensive public transit system in Iowa to enhance access to opportunities and quality of life. While this plan clearly outlines some of the needs across Iowa, it includes few strategies to actually address these needs. This is a real problem that will have real consequences. Underfunded and piecemeal transit service has detrimental impacts across Iowa, hitting Iowans in rural and urban areas alike, impacting access to employment, critical services, health, and quality of life.

Health

Transportation choices affect the health of all Iowans whether they choose to use transit or not. Iowa experiences the seventh-highest rate of adult obesity in the United States.¹ Prioritizing transportation investments that incentivize people to live farther from their destinations with fewer healthy transportation options is a recipe for an even higher rate of obesity, heart disease, and other chronic diseases. No amount of encouragement or public education is able to overcome an environment that makes it nearly impossible to walk, bike, or take transit as part of a daily routine. Every new road, additional lane, and reduced transit route is a major force in making driving the one and only viable means of daily mobility and a central component in unhealthy land use planning and consequently an unhealthy lifestyle.

¹ State of Childhood Obesity, Iowa data, <https://stateofchildhoodobesity.org/states/ia/>, accessed June 27, 2020.

In addition to chronic diseases linked to inactivity, pollution from cars can lead to serious health problems. The transportation sector is responsible for emissions of ground-level ozone, fine particulate matter, and air toxics. These pollutants impact the health of people living near roadways and can cause or aggravate chronic breathing problems and lung diseases and lead to cardiovascular disease, issues with fetal and child development, and premature death.²

Due to all of the detrimental impacts that prioritization of driving has on health, safety, and wellbeing, if these are really priorities for lowans, transit and other transportation options must be prioritized over massive road-widening and new roads.

Demographic Considerations

There is a tendency to think of access to transit as only necessary or possible in urban areas. Access to public transit is also critically necessary for people in rural parts of the state to get to work, school, access healthcare, and reach other critical services. Outside of cities where population density is lower and travel distances are longer, transit services are only more important for those who do not have access to a private vehicle. The DOT's transit plan points out that there are seven Iowa communities of under 50,000 that have transit systems in addition to 16 regional systems that connect the rural areas of our state.³ In addition, the DOT's own analysis of transit dependency statewide identified many rural areas as highly transit-dependent including areas of largely rural Allamakee, Clayton, Dubuque, Hardin, Franklin, Clay, Decatur, and Wayne Counties among others.⁴

Iowa is aging. As Baby Boomers grow older, our median age has been increasing. AARP research shows that Americans outlive their ability to drive a car by an average of 7-10 years.⁵ When there is no alternative, the final decade of an American's life can mean a forced decision between social isolation and loss of agency or being forced into the dangerous decision to keep driving. As more lowans fall into this age range, these conditions only become more harmful. This applies in both rural and urban areas, as 41% of lowans age 65 and over live in rural areas.⁶ To keep Iowa's older adults active, connected, and independent, transit must be a statewide priority. Yet the only direction regarding age in the transit plan or the Iowa In Motion Plan is to find ways to keep people driving as they enter this stage of life.

A recent literature review by the American Lung Association found a large body of research demonstrating that the health impacts of air pollution fall disproportionately on people of color, such as increased risk of death from particulate matter among Hispanic, Asian, and especially Black people compared to white people. Black people also face a higher risk of exposure to air toxics, including from traffic sources. A history of residential segregation has placed these communities in harm's way and continued stress related to racial discrimination means that even higher-income Black people experience more adverse outcomes from exposure than white

² U.S. EPA, *How Mobile Source Pollution Affects your Health*, <https://www.epa.gov/mobile-source-pollution/how-mobile-source-pollution-affects-your-health#particle>, accessed June 17, 2020.

³ Iowa Public Transit Long-Range Plan, Part 2, page 28.

⁴ Iowa Public Transit Long-Range Plan, Part 3, page 14.

⁵ AARP Blog, <https://blog.aarp.org/where-we-stand/driving-toward-the-future>, accessed June 27, 2020.

⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, "Older Population in Rural America", <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2019/10/older-population-in-rural-america.html>, accessed June 27, 2020.

people.⁷ While there are significant populations of people of color within urban areas in Iowa, several rural counties have minority populations of 15-20% of the total population including Clarke, Wapello, Jefferson, Crawford, and Buena Vista Counties.⁸ This means disparate impacts based on race are likely present in both rural and urban settings in Iowa.

Environment

Climate change is the most serious threat to the environment that we currently face. The International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) found in 2018 that we must eliminate greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions entirely by 2050 in order to limit warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius and avoid the worst of the worst impacts from climate change.⁹ Nationally, transportation is the largest contributor to U.S. GHG pollution, responsible for nearly 30% of emissions. In Iowa, the transportation sector is responsible for 15% of greenhouse gas emissions. While lower than the national average, this sector has seen increased emissions over time, with transportation GHG pollution increasing by about 5% between 2009 and 2018.¹⁰ Light-duty cars and trucks are the source of 59% of transportation GHGs while the category containing buses, motorcycles, pipelines, and lubricants makes up only 4% of transportation sector emissions.¹¹

In Iowa, warming has already meant increased heavy rain events and flooding with devastating economic impacts and loss of life, increased humidity and higher summer temperatures leading to adverse health effects, and massive impacts to transportation infrastructure. Any methodology for new transportation investments must consider the dual goals of vastly reducing greenhouse gas emissions while building a system more resilient to the impacts of climate change.

The economic and health impacts of increasing pollution from transportation point to the need to both reduce overall vehicle miles traveled by increasing access to transit and also transition the current fleet of transit vehicles to emissions-free electric buses and other transit vehicles. This transition can also save the system money on the back end as the Plan points out in the Execution Matrix item 3-2, which states, "Decrease fuel costs for transit agencies by adopting electric, hybrid, or flex-fuel efficient vehicles." This provides an opportunity to reduce the budget deficit but will require a commitment to make an up-front investment, which is unfortunately missing from this plan.

Conclusion

The Iowa DOT's long-range transit plan lays out a clear, though myopic and severely underfunded future for transit in Iowa by not providing a path forward to meet the very real needs and mitigate the risks to Iowans' health, wellbeing, and economic prospects. Lack of access to transit and continued increases in pollution from transportation will have especially detrimental impacts on the health of older Iowans and people of color. This publication fails to

⁷ American Lung Association, *Racial Disparities in the Impact of Air Pollution*, updated April 20, 2020, accessed June 17, 2020.

⁸ Iowa Public Transit Long-Range Plan, Chapter 2, page 9.

⁹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/energy-environment/2018/10/08/world-has-only-years-get-climate-change-under-control-un-scientists-say/>, accessed 6.23.20.

¹⁰ Iowa DNR, *2018 Iowa Statewide Greenhouse Gas Emissions Inventory Report*, https://www.iowadnr.gov/Portals/idnr/uploads/air/ghgemissions/Final%202018%20GHG%20REPORT_12.31.19.pdf, page 4, accessed June 17, 2020.

¹¹ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, *Fast Facts on Transportation Greenhouse Gas Emissions*, <https://www.epa.gov/greenvehicles/fast-facts-transportation-greenhouse-gas-emissions>, accessed June 17, 2020.

address these threshold concerns and lacks any path to execution, rendering the “plan” incomplete. Although we recognize the reality that there are competing priorities for transportation funding, we strongly believe that it is time for government agencies and policymakers in Iowa to take a careful look at the truth of what we are facing between now and 2045 from a demographic, health, and environmental perspective and the necessary role of transit in addressing these serious challenges in both urban and rural areas. Our budgets reflect our priorities and some portion of funding must be reallocated from road expansion to clean, convenient transit options that will serve Iowans across the state into the future.