Executive Summary

APO
SAINT CLOUD | AREA PLANNING ORGANIZATION

LOOKING AHEAD 2050

Understanding Today, Imagining Tomorrow

The Saint Cloud Area Planning Organization's Metropolitan Transportation Plan

Transportation may not be one of those topics that is top of mind for most people. But it is a necessary component of daily life. Whether you walk, bike, roll, use public transit, or drive (or a combination of all those modes), access to a safe and efficient transportation network is critical. Without adequate transportation, people would not be able to readily access work, school, medical facilities, or grocery stores. Businesses would not be able to attract and retain workers or even access materials and goods to provide necessary services to a community. Simply put, transportation is essential.

Downtown Saint Joseph. Photo courtesy of Saint Cloud APO.

As important as transportation is to daily life, so is ensuring equitable access to it for residents both now and in the future. This is where transportation planning comes into play. The transportation planning process requires a thorough evaluation of the current transportation system (both its strengths and weaknesses), an understanding of the long-term vision and goals for an area, and careful and responsible consideration of various future infrastructure and/or policy solutions.

While many of the cities and counties within and directly surrounding the Saint Cloud metropolitan area spend considerable time, money, and effort planning for and constructing infrastructure or developing policies within their jurisdiction, coordination among neighboring communities may not be the number one focus of these efforts. However, the transportation network does not stop at a city or county boundary.

This is where regional organizations like the Saint Cloud Area Planning Organization (APO) step in. The APO is a regional body designed to foster discussion and transportation planning efforts across city and county lines. One of major roles the APO plays in the transportation planning process is developing a regional, long-range, multimodal, surface transportation plan. Known as a Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP), this document outlines a shared, community-based vision for how the surface transportation network should function and the necessary steps each partner organization (on the city, county, state, and/or federal level) can take to ensure this vision becomes a reality.

The most recent update to the APO's MTP is Looking Ahead 2050. This document, developed and approved by the APO's Policy Board in fall 2024, should be consulted on any major transportation infrastructure project and/or policy

developed within the Saint Cloud metropolitan area. Looking Ahead 2050 should serve as a resource for local, state, and federal partners on the priorities for residents within Central Minnesota.

How to Read this Plan

Looking Ahead 2050 is broken down into 10 chapters – as well as accompanying appendices. As the plan progresses, each chapter builds upon the previous sections, detailing the current story of our region, the hopes for the future, and the strategies we will employ to make our vision a future reality.

Kicking off the plan with Chapter 1, this introductory section establishes the rules and regulations behind the development of this long-range, multimodal, surface transportation plan. Because this document is required by the federal government, this section details the guidance provided by the U.S. Department of Transportation to ensure the APO complies with all requirements spelled out in the U.S. Code of Federal Regulations. This section also introduces the Saint Cloud APO by providing an overview of this regional planning body and the responsibilities the APO, its members, agency/jurisdictional partners, and its staff have in undertaking a continuing, comprehensive, and cooperative transportation planning process. Most importantly, this section addresses the APO's effort to include the community in this process and the organization's commitment to ensuring the vision and priorities identified in this plan are those desired by the people who live and work in the region.

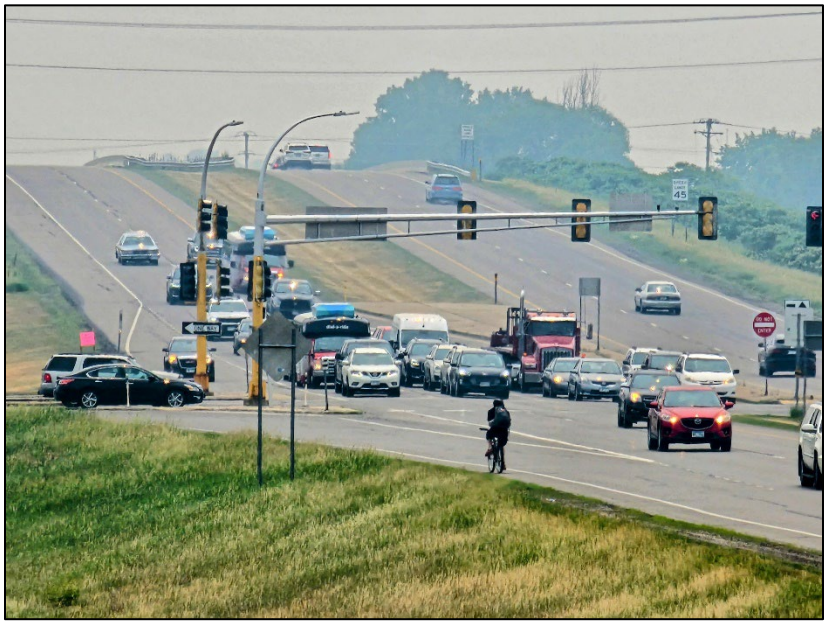
We cannot successfully decide where we want to go without first knowing where we are. To establish our "starting point," Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive overview of the Saint Cloud metropolitan area. The existing conditions section is designed to introduce the reader to the area. Considered a "snapshot in time" (the year 2020), this data-heavy section dives deep into the characteristics of the region including who lives in the planning area as well as where and when people are traveling. This section cannot be complete without a focused discussion on the existing surface transportation network. From roadways to transit and active transportation (walking/biking), Chapter 2 outlines several key components of the infrastructure network such as overall condition; safety; reliability; and ridership and service routes (in the case of transit). Taken together, these factors all influence the way people and goods move throughout our communities.

Saint Cloud Metro Bus fixed route vehicle picking up riders in Saint Cloud. Photo courtesy of Saint Cloud APO.

Additional consideration is provided to those forms of transportation within the region but are not as directly influenced by planning activities that would be conducted by the APO. Included in this section of Chapter 2 is a brief review of alternative modes of transportation including private transportation companies (like Uber, Lyft, or taxi services), as well as school buses, rural transit providers, the airport, and commuter rail services.

Finally, Chapter 2 concludes with a regional discussion on the important role the surface transportation system (and access to multiple forms of transportation) plays in the local economy.

While Chapter 2 focuses heavily on the impact people have on the region, Chapter 3 addresses the natural environment. Like the previous section, the environmental conditions chapter provides a comprehensive overview of critical resources that set our region apart. By looking at the current quality of the region's air, water, wildlife/habitats, and soil, we can gain a better understanding of the impacts people (and the transportation networks developed by people) have on nature.



MN 15 at the intersection with Veterans Drive/Eighth Street N/CSAH 4 in Saint Cloud during a poor air quality day.
Photo courtesy of Saint Cloud APO.

It has been heavily documented that the transportation sector in general has had unintended and harmful consequences to the environment. This chapter wraps up with a discussion on the region's changing climate patterns and the need for transportation planners to consider the impacts climate change will have not just to the environment and the transportation system, but to the people that live and work here as well.

Thanks in part to Chapters 2 and 3, we have a good idea of our starting point. Now, where do we want to go? The 2050 Regional Vision chapter reflects on the data provided in the previous two sections. However, this information is taken a step further. During the initial stages of this planning process, the APO conducted extensive community outreach asking residents to not only reflect on their current transportation issues but also share their hopes and desires for the future. Through this community visioning process, the following themes were adopted:

- **System and Environmental Stewardship:** Protecting and preserving our existing infrastructure and environmental assets.
- **Multimodal Connections:** Providing a safe and equitable multimodal transportation network affordable for people of all ages and abilities to travel using their preferred modal choice.
- **Congestion Management:** Mindfully planning, developing, and operating an innovative transportation network to minimize unnecessary travel delays.
- **Transportation Safety:** Reducing fatalities and serious injuries by planning, designing, and building safe infrastructure and improving driving behavior.
- **Interregional Connections:** Supporting an economically vibrant region through developing and

preserving vital connections to other state, national, and global centers of commerce.

- **Technological Advancements:** Understanding and planning for future innovative transportation technologies and encouraging their presence and incorporation into the region's existing transportation network.

It's one thing to have these goals in mind. But it is another task entirely to ensure continued effort is made to achieve them. Chapter 4 includes several objectives and strategies the APO, its members, agency/jurisdictional partners, and its staff will undertake to help the region reach its desired destination. This section also outlines various metrics APO staff will track over time as a way to document and/or monitor progress.

Assisting the APO, its members, agency/jurisdictional partners, and its staff in gaining a better grasp on the future needs of the local transportation system is the regional travel demand model. This computer software is first programmed to reflect current travel patterns across the region's roadway network (this is known as our Base Year Model). Once calibrated correctly, the model can be adjusted to reflect several scenarios. First, what would happen to our roadway network if the area cities and counties (as well as the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT)) chose not to build any additional roadways despite projected future growth – both in population and community development?

The 2050 No-Build Model helps address this question. Using the travel demand model, we can account for locations across the Saint Cloud area that are anticipated to see a growth in housing (i.e. population) as well documenting the anticipated locations for growth areas in retail, office, and industrial development (i.e., destinations).

Commercial development under construction along MN 15 in Sartell. Photo courtesy of Saint Cloud APO.

From there, the model will forecast which routes people are more likely to use to get from point A to point B. With the addition of more people and more destinations, certain roadways already experiencing congestion in 2020 will only experience a worsening of congestion by 2050. In addition, new areas of traffic delay are being identified as well. These details and more can be found in Chapter 5.

Clearly, doing nothing to our existing roadway system would not be the ideal option. The region's forecasted roadway network will need significant investment to address all the issues predicted by the 2050 No-Build Model. However, fixing those problems comes at a price. Transportation infrastructure is expensive to construct and can cost even more to maintain. Understanding the budgetary constraints of the APO's member jurisdictions/agencies when it comes to transportation spending is critical. Because without the adequate funding to "fix" these congestion issues, we

cannot hope to reasonably accomplish our regional vision. Chapter 6 provides an overview of transportation funding sources available from federal, state, and local governments to construct and maintain roadway infrastructure. To address the issues identified in the 2050 No-Build Model, we need to understand the anticipated revenue the APO's member agencies/jurisdictions can reasonably expect to receive throughout the duration of this plan. Once we have a reasonable budget for roadway infrastructure improvements, we can turn our attention to identifying future projects.

Using community feedback/suggestions for improvements, along with existing data, future development considerations, and anticipated agency/jurisdiction budgets, we can officially move into imagining our desired future network. The Transportation Infrastructure Investment section (Chapter 7) outlines the proposed improvements (that can be built within anticipated budgets) desired to be completed by 2050.

Crews working on reconstructing River Avenue N in Sauk Rapids. Photo courtesy of Saint Cloud APO.

In total, 39 capacity expansion projects – those either adding additional travel lanes or building new roadways – and 79 system preservation projects – roadway reconstructions – were identified across the Saint Cloud area. Together, it is anticipated these improvements will result in a region-wide investment of approximately $692.538 million in year of expenditure dollars. Finally, Chapter 7 concludes with another travel demand model scenario – the 2050 Build Model – factoring in future growth/development as well as the 39 capacity expansion projects.

Since the early 1990s, local officials have desired a roadway corridor that would allow traffic to go around the core metro area instead of directly through it. Known as the urban beltline, this roadway, if constructed, would provide the traveling public with an alternate way to travel in and around the region, ideally relieving congestion on major through routes such as Minnesota Highway 23 and Minnesota Highway 15. Chapter 8: The Urban Beltline Corridor explores the possibility of constructing this concept, including a look at the not-yet-constructed sections of the corridor and the anticipated construction cost estimates (these estimates do not include tasks like purchasing right-of-way or other engineering/environmental work done prior to construction). An additional travel demand model run scenario reviews the potential impact of a completed beltline corridor alongside the completion of the capacity expansion projects identified in Chapter 7 (2050 Build + Beltline Model).

Technology has transformed the way we interact with our world and our surroundings. And the transportation sector is not immune to those advances. Chapter 9 provides a cursory look at the emerging technology changing the transportation sector. From the growing adoption of electric vehicles and electric bikes (e-bikes) to the promising growth

in connected and/or automated vehicles, the transportation sector is evolving. And it is imperative that at the local level, our region is aware of these changes and prepared to adapt and/or adopt these new technologies in order to stay competitive.

Thus far we have envisioned our 2050 future through one lens, infrastructure. And while construction is an important component, responsible planning and policy direction also plays a critical role in helping the region achieve its desired outcomes. The Implementation section outlines future short-term planning efforts the APO (specifically) can do to build upon the work laid out throughout this document to ensure continued progress is being made in reaching our end goals.

Bringing the Plan to Life

While required to be completed by the APO, this plan isn't just designed to be an "APO-only" plan. Looking Ahead 2050 is intended to serve as a guide to the future that those living, working, and investing in our region are committed to achieving. This plan is authored by the APO, but it is informed and directed by data and shaped by the communities the APO represents. Throughout the duration of this planning horizon, the APO, its members, agency/jurisdictional partners, and its staff will work to bring forth the vision and priorities listed within this document to ensure that we all, together, can confidently Look Ahead to 2050.

Saint Cloud APO staff presenting information on the draft APO Metropolitan Transportation Plan Looking Ahead 2050 to members of the Saint Cloud Area Association of Realtors.
Photo courtesy of Saint Cloud APO.