



To: Daniel Farnsworth, Metro COG
From: Alta Planning + Design
Date: November 10, 2021
Re: Fargo-Moorhead Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan Update - Process Evaluation Findings and Recommendations

Background

During October 2021, Alta staff conducted interviews with four sets of public agency staff in the Fargo-Moorhead area. Staff members' roles varied, but each relates to active transportation. Participating staff hold positions in city and county planning and engineering departments, parks and recreation, and state departments of transportation. The focus of the interviews was to better understand the resources and processes currently in place across city, county, and state government that facilitate and inhibit better active transportation planning, design, construction, and policymaking. Interviews were semi-structured: interviewers had pre-formulated questions for each interviewee, but conversations were relatively open-ended to allow interviewees to speak to their individual experiences and perspectives. Overarching themes and inferences from across interviews are presented below, followed by specific observations and findings from each interview. The interviews will inform the plan update's recommendations. They will help move recommendations toward implementation by outlining existing challenges and how to reduce these challenges in the future.

Overarching Themes and Major Findings

Participants noted that **decision makers frequently value and prioritize other types of community investments compared to active transportation**. Bike lanes, sidewalks, and trails are seen as a lower priority compared to promoting development and expanding utilities, for example. Planning and engineering staff noted that they are aware of major gaps in active transportation networks. Interviewees discussed that other staff and elected officials frequently question why their communities should construct active transportation infrastructure. As such, there is a **desire for this plan to demonstrate the benefits of promoting bicycling and walking, especially economic benefits**. When a resident, colleague, or elected official asks why a project is proposed, participants want to be able to show a plan with clear recommendations and a logical prioritization process.

Participants discussed **strong interdisciplinary coordination between planners and engineers in the region**, especially when moving a plan from adoption to implementation and when seeking funding. Collaboration can enhance the project delivery process. Participants also noted a strong history of collaboration between levels of government in the region. Collaboration between agencies was described as important because regional coordination allows for each agency to "play from the same sheet of music," as one participant described.

Respondents noted that a **walk audit or bike tour with elected officials** could help them gain a deeper understanding of the need for biking and walking improvements in the region. However, participants discussed that elected officials would need an incentive to attend the audits. Education for elected officials and staff could extend to teaching about average costs of transportation projects that center on the needs of walking and bicycling. Participants shared a story in which elected officials opposed a street reconstruction with expanded active transportation infrastructure because of the reconstruction cost. Educating elected officials about costs and benefits of urban and suburban roadway retrofit projects could lead to greater understanding about ways to provide for people walking and biking.

Another theme across respondents was **concern surrounding limited local and state funds for walking and biking and the importance of grant funds**. The Legacy Fund in Minnesota is a major source of funding for Moorhead and surrounding communities in Minnesota. However, North Dakota does not have a similar funding mechanism. The state has \$15 million reserved for such projects. This leads to competition between urban areas because this money must be divided throughout the state. Grant funding is very important to Minnesotan and North Dakotan communities in the study area as an additional funding source. Grants augment communities' limited local funds. The plan should support grant applications by including key information about high priority projects, high level cost estimates, and an estimated number of people served by proposed projects.¹ This last statistic is important because decision makers in the region and potential funders select proposals that have a low average cost per user.

Participants noted projects that are influencing the region and that should be considered during the plan update process. The first is the **flood diversion project**. This project would construct levees to control flooding, resulting in land available for development where it was previously infeasible. This is a major project that will have large future impacts on the Fargo-Moorhead region. The project also includes a recreation plan for the west side of the region, where the flood diversion project will have the most impact. Second, interview participants noted excitement around downtown redevelopment and infill development. These types of projects are sometimes supported by the North Dakota Governor's Main Street initiative. **Land use planning to limit sprawl should continue before and after the flood diversion project**. Compact land use patterns support walking and biking, whereas sprawl limits the likelihood that large segments of the population will walk and bike for everyday trips.

¹ The plan's scope does not specifically include this metric. Further discussion is needed to determine how this desired statistic may fit into the plan update process.

Staff Interviews

Planning Staff Interview

Alta staff spoke with planning staff in the region to better understand their roles related to plan implementation. The interview discussed elements of the 2016 plan that have informed their work, barriers to achieving better walking and biking, and a discussion of what a successful plan would look like. Representatives from communities with fewer than 5,000 people and representatives from communities with more than 5,000 people attended the discussion.

Planners discussed how they work closely with their colleagues in engineering departments to implement plans after they are completed. Planning staff have used previous plan updates to find which projects to advocate for funding. When it comes to funding, interview participants noted that the plan should clearly note project cost estimates and suggested phasing. Projects with an estimated cost of \$200,000 - \$250,000 were described as 'most palatable' for pursuing Transportation Alternatives grants. This allows communities to provide a local match while maximizing federal funds within this program. Smaller communities, such as those with fewer than 5,000 residents, may feel they only have capacity to tackle 1-2 projects every few years. This means that identifying priority projects is especially important to help communities know how to focus their efforts.

When asked about barriers to improving walking and biking, communities mentioned the following: presence of sprawl in some communities, lack of political will, and funding constraints and reliance on grant funding. West Fargo and communities on the west side of the study area have more sprawling development patterns. This is a challenge because they must meet their residents' needs for services over a large area. Adding infrastructure to these areas is seen as essential. However, biking and walking projects are not considered to be the same level of importance. At the same time, communities are interested in infill development projects and downtown revitalization efforts. The presence of sprawl can undermine efforts to improve walking and biking. This plan update should consider land use so that transportation systems meet plan goals of encouraging active transportation.

Mustering political will to support active transportation is sometimes a challenge within communities interviewed for this plan update. Planning staff shared that after working to win a grant, they need to ask their city's commission or council to fund the local match portion of the grant. At this point, staff described that some elected officials ask if the grant is worth spending the money on a local match. Elected officials may fear that with a growing community and a need to raise property taxes and hire more staff, residents may be skeptical about spending money on bike paths or other infrastructure. Respondents noted that in this context, biking and walking infrastructure are seen more as a 'want' versus a 'need.' Participants also discussed how at times, one or two commissioners/council members may become vocal about their opposition to planned projects. They state that they do not see anyone biking, do not see value in centering roadway projects on active transportation, and feel that winter weather would prevent people from using the proposed project for more than a few months of the year. This plan update, therefore, can play a role in educating elected officials, staff, and residents about the necessity of active transportation.

Finally, communities rely on the grant funding discussed earlier to implement projects. This approach can lead to an influx of money to pursue transportation enhancements. Grant funding is more politically advantageous because it lessens the strain on communities to fund improvements. However, as stated earlier, planning staff sometimes experience pushback to contributing the local match needed to obtain grant funds.

Engineering Staff Interview

Alta interviewed engineering staff from municipal and county governments. These staff work closely with their peers in planning departments to move projects into implementation phases. Similar to the interview with planning department staff, engineers described their roles related to the plan update, barriers to active transportation, and potential solutions to overcome those barriers.

As discussed during the planning interview, engineering representatives said that communities install about 1-2 projects from the bike and ped plan each year. High priority projects might move up the list and spur a greater number of annual projects (3-4 projects). The 5-year update cycle allows staff to align the plan with the 5-year roadway plan and look ahead to future Transportation Alternatives (TA) grants for constructing recommended projects. When asked about plan features that will especially help with this work, staff mentioned high quality maps, and highlighted key statistics that are easy for staff to add to TA grant applications. As discussed in each interview, staff are interested in the estimated number of people who would be positively impacted by a project. They also discussed the importance of a strong approach to prioritization.

Like other interviews, the flood diversion project was a key discussion topic. Participants noted that the future of the region may look drastically different because of the flood diversion project. For example, West Fargo is currently pursuing infill projects to connect the north and south sides of the community in advance of the diversion project and its potential sharp increase in development. Participants discussed a desire to invest in older parts of communities / downtown areas before the diversion's construction. After the diversion, they are anticipating more interest in expanding development to new parcels opened up by the diversion, rather than a continued push for infill development.

Additional findings from this interview are summarized as follows:

- County staff discussed how they have successfully changed their agency's norms related to active transportation infrastructure. Agency staff add new, paved shoulders to every county highway project. These are viewed as necessary safety upgrades for people bicycling and have broad support in the agency. Smaller communities have supported the 50/50 cost share for these facilities' construction.
- Politicians in the region frequently ask why their community should spend money for biking and walking infrastructure. It becomes especially important for them to understand benefits of walking and biking when their sign-off is needed for projects with significant engineering challenges, including more complex infill projects. The higher cost estimate for these projects is more daunting compared to the less complex projects that commissioners and council members are used to reviewing.

- Maintenance is a challenge on older paths. Engineering staff consider when to reconstruct the path instead of maintaining the existing surface. In addition to challenges identifying funding sources, these types of projects are sometimes more politically difficult compared to building new paths elsewhere.

Parks and Recreation Staff Interview

Alta staff spoke with parks and recreation professionals from West Fargo, Moorhead, and Fargo. Staff have varied roles related to active transportation in the region. They coordinate with developers, plan for enhanced connectivity, and also hold responsibilities unrelated to active transportation. Park boards in each state are administered differently. In North Dakota, the park board is composed of 5 duly-elected board members and the park board sets its own mills and taxes. The park boards in North Dakota typically work closely with local engineering staff. In Minnesota, the park board is an advisory board to city council. Minnesota has a statutory requirement that says the park board is a department of the city. Therefore, the local planning department leads decisions and bike and pedestrian infrastructure 'competes' against all other potential items in the city's budget. Joint projects that require collaboration between park boards on either side of the state line include the flood diversion project, lift bridges, and future long-distance trails (e.g., Bluestem Trail, Heartland Trail).

Similar to other interviews, participants noted that funding is often the biggest barrier to installing biking and walking projects. As noted in the preceding paragraph, differences in state level funding also play a role in funding constraints.

Interview participants discussed the importance of design standards in moving active transportation projects from planning through design and construction. Participants view the City of Fargo as a leader in the region in terms of design standards. Fargo also installs infrastructure before development occurs, which interview participants viewed as a successful strategy. Installing infrastructure later in the development process often leads to 'watering down' development requirements and other difficulties. Nonetheless, staff discussed building strong partnerships with developers in the area.

When asked about technical assistance resources to help advance active transportation project delivery, respondents noted a need for regional-level statistics and trends. This is congruent with other interviews. In addition, participants noted an interest in a deeper understanding of 10-minute walksheds, including national best practice for walkable neighborhoods and access improvements in the region.

Both participants discussed opportunities to add infrastructure elements such as street trees, benches, and lighting within their projects. For example, furnishings every quarter-mile are written into grant applications. Interpretive signage, art, solar powered audio recordings, benches, and bus stops are also discussed in new projects. The type of infrastructure added largely depends on the scale of the park and the type of corridor. Restrooms and other features are planned for 'recreation nodes' at parking lots of future trails near the diversion. However, levees constrain the types of furnishings that are possible to add along trails.



State Partners Staff Interview

Alta staff interviewed two state-level partners. One representative was from MnDOT and the other was from NDDOT. When asked about their hope for future active transportation in the area, participants said they would like safe and equitable transportation for everyone because of the corridor planning work occurring in the region. This past calendar year has been especially difficult in terms of safety; fatalities across all modes have increased sharply. This inspires the participants to proactively think about safety in their day-to-day work. As such, this plan update should center safety. They also noted a desire for construction to start on the Heartland Trail extension and for work commuting by bike to become a norm in the region.

Staff described their professional roles as helping to make active transportation connections through urban areas during a roadway construction project. Participants also bring multiple agencies together to think about what the community wants and how to fund these improvements. This is challenging due to the fiscal constraints discussed elsewhere in this memo. However, the presence of a local bike and pedestrian plan helps communities gain active transportation infrastructure. This is because local plans must list planned active transportation improvements for them to receive DOT support during roadway projects.

With regards to the 2016 plan update, staff noted that the gap analysis was most helpful in their day-to-day work. They also stated that this plan update needs to be specific, clear, should include a similar gap analysis, and should describe safety benefits throughout the plan document. There is also an opportunity for the plan update to consider destinations and demand more deeply than previous plan updates. New data points and data analysis methods will help accomplish this goal; the previous plan relied on limited count data to inform decisions, but planners now have more access to more and varied data sources. Additional desires for the plan update include identifying the types of users for whom infrastructure improvements are planned. Facilities found in the region today support people with varying comfort levels for walking and biking, however, future infrastructure should support a broader segment of the regional population. This goal can be supported by identifying opportunities for multimodal connections, such as the intersection of bike lanes with transit routes.

Overall, staff said that right-of-way, money, and physical barriers are the largest issues for active transportation planning in the region. When discussing opportunities for improvements, staff mentioned the need for dedicated funding to review equity needs. Although the last plan included an equity goal, the current plan update should include more data to support funding related to equity needs. The plan can also show the economic value of infrastructure for communities, reasons why businesses benefit from active transportation, and opportunities for businesses to



show their support for the plan's recommendations.² Finally, the plan should enhance the region's existing assets, including Streets Alive!, local colleges and universities, bike share, and existing areas or buildings with high walkability scores.

² The plan's scope does not specifically include these metrics. Further discussion is needed to determine how this desire may fit into the plan update process.