

## Southwest Missouri Council of Governments

The Southwest Missouri Council of Governments (SMCOG) in Springfield, Missouri, worked with partners to create the Webster County, Missouri Transit and Active Transportation Plan. The plan identifies goals and strategies to make affordable and equitable access to transportation attainable for the target populations in Webster County, located within SMCOG's 10-county service area.

SMCOG was honored for its outstanding public engagement. The Webster County Public Transit and Active Transportation Plan received a 2025 National Association of Development Organizations (NADO) Excellence in Regional Transportation Award in July 2025.

### Project Goal:

Develop a Transit and Active Transportation Plan for Webster County that identifies gaps and barriers in the current transportation system. Localize the 2023 Public Transit-Human Services Transportation Coordination Plan (PTHSTCP) developed by SMCOG, which identified improving affordability of transportation services for low-income, older adult and disabled individuals as the number one priority for the 10-county region.

### Population Served:

- People of all ages facing mobility challenges: Older adults and underserved populations, the Amish population and people with physical disabilities, impairments or cognitive or intellectual disabilities that create a barrier to travel.
- Low income: 100% Federal Poverty Level, covering 16% of Webster County residents and 10% of residents aged 60 years or older.

### Transportation Barriers:

- Webster County covers 594 square miles in the Ozarks Highlands, a very rural and primarily agricultural area with limited access to local medical and transit services.
- OATS Transit, the county's only rural transportation provider with shared rides for individuals, has service gaps, limited hours, full buses and lack of rides to certain areas.
- The county has the largest Amish population in Missouri; horse-and-buggy transit can create challenges in urgent travel scenarios and safety concerns.
- Long distances (30 miles) to medical care, including specialists and emergency care.
- Lack of accessible active transportation options like ADA-compliant sidewalks and greenway or recreational trails.

### Community Needs:

- Affordable transportation for older adults, people with disabilities and people with low incomes.
- Increased service to medical, entertainment and shopping destinations (identified by Southwest Missourians as the top transit user need).
- Community input to determine locally-prioritized transportation needs.

### Community Engagement Efforts:

- SMCOG staff compiled past plans, studies and surveys around transportation in Webster County to inform the development of a transportation needs survey.

- SMCOG tapped Transportation Planning Committee members as local outreach leads to promote surveys and public meetings.
- Outreach included social media, press releases and flyers.
- Surveys were shared in accessible form—online or on paper—at multiple locations, with 600 paper surveys distributed through drivers and clinics; 220 survey responses were collected.
- 10 public meetings attracted 150 people.
- SMCOG hosted small groups in trusted venues like senior centers, clinics and libraries and at food distribution events and engaged with residents directly.
- Big map exercises, dot exercises and sticky note boards engaged participants; plain language handouts increased comprehension.
- One partner offered free ride service for residents to attend the public meetings.
- SMCOG attempted to reach out to Amish elders in the region through the Webster County Health Unit but were not able to schedule a meeting.

### **Multi-sector Collaborative Partnerships:**

SMCOG formed a Transportation Planning Committee with 28 representatives from local organizations and governments, including three cities, county commissioners, sheriff's office, health care providers, organizations supporting older adults and people with disabilities, a community action agency that helps people achieve self-sufficiency, plus the economic development council.

### **Funding and Sustainability:**

The county has several infrastructure projects underway to give residents with and without disabilities easier access to emergency services, schools and grocery stores.

Webster County sponsored a U.S. Highway 60 Corridor study published in 2020 to obtain assistance through the U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Rail Administration's Safety Improvements Program. The study has been an ongoing collaboration to secure safer access to major highways for transportation to elevated medical needs.

Webster County seeks out funding from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, State Emergency Management Agency, Federal Highway Administration, Missouri Department of Conservation and other sources to maintain and improve roadways and bridges, which offer vital access points to all county residents, especially those with limited transportation resources. The county is working on three bridge replacements in conjunction with the Federal Highway Administration.

The City of Marshfield in Webster County worked with SMCOG to develop a transportation plan for their community and has received Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) funding to carry out projects within the city. The city anticipates applying to the TAP program again in the future to implement recommendations provided in its Transportation Plan. Similar efforts will be made during the development of the county's plan to identify funding opportunities that can be utilized for implementation activities.

### **Outcomes:**

Survey respondents indicated they want to walk more (51%), bike more (45%), take public transit more (44%) and drive less (22%). Goals included expanding transit service to key destinations, improving affordability and accessibility of transit services, expanding transit service availability and efficiency and increasing visibility of current transit services.

Next steps involve adopting the plan and seeking funding opportunities. The county will add needs for Missouri Department of Transportation funding consideration. The Transportation Planning Committee will continue serving throughout implementation.

### **Learnings:**

- When conducting outreach, go where people are. Partner with non-profits and human service agencies that are familiar to and trusted by community members. Engage in small group or one-on-one discussions, as these conversations also build trust. To further build trust, share progress with community members throughout the project. Pursue an iterative public engagement plan.
- Choose accessible venues and survey mediums. Offer incentives to those who complete the survey; SMCOG held a gift card raffle.
- Interact with residents individually or in small groups to allow for open communication and to better assist residents in reading, hearing or understanding the survey and planning effort.