

Long Range Transportation Needs Assessment Focus Groups

Summary Report

Conducted for
The City of Sioux Falls

by
ETC Institute

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Contents

Overview	1
Topic #1: Transportation Challenges for the Sioux Falls Region.....	2
Topic #2: Perception of Traffic Congestion	5
Topic #3: Public Transportation Issues	6
Topic #4: Transportation Safety Issues.....	8
Topic #5: Bicycle and Pedestrian Issues.....	10
Topic #6: Rural Issues.....	11
Topic #7: Maintenance Issues.....	11
Topic #8: Airport Issues.....	12
Topic #9: Rail Issues	13
Topic #10: Priority of Transportation Improvements.....	13
Topic #11: Funding Issues	14
Topic #12: Types of Information that Should Be Gathered.....	15
Topic #13: Guiding Principle for Transportation Planning	18
Other Comments	18

Sioux Falls Long Range Transportation Needs Assessment Focus Group Summary

Overview

ETC Institute facilitated six focus groups with residents and special interest groups from the Sioux Falls region on February 22-23, 2005. The purpose of the focus groups was to gather input from a wide range of persons about the region's long range transportation needs. The input from the focus groups will be used to develop three statistically valid surveys that will be administered to residents, employers, and traditionally under served populations in Minnehaha and Lincoln Counties during the spring of 2005.

The focus groups were designed to gather detailed feedback about the following issues:

1. Perceived transportation challenges for the Sioux Falls area
2. Perceptions of traffic congestion
3. Public transportation issues
4. Transportation safety in the region
5. Bicycle and pedestrian issues
6. Rural issues
7. Maintenance issues
8. Airport issues
9. Rail issues
10. Perceived priority of transportation in the region
11. Funding issues
12. Types of data to gather on the survey
13. Guiding principles for transportation planning in the region

The focus groups were held in a meeting room at the downtown library in Sioux Falls. A total of 59 persons attended the focus groups. The six focus groups were composed of the following groups of people:

- Group 1: Transportation planners from the region
- Group 2: Community advocates/special interest groups
- Group 3: A randomly selected group of Lincoln County residents
- Group 4: Employers and business leaders from the region
- Group 5: A randomly selected group of seniors from the region
- Group 6: A randomly selected group of Minnehaha County residents

A brief summary of the topics that were discussed along with selected comments from the persons who participated in the focus groups are provided below.

Topic #1: Transportation Challenges for the Sioux Falls Region.

The moderator began each focus group by asking those in attendance to identify the transportation issues that they thought would be the biggest challenges for the region over the next 20 years. Some of the issues that were mentioned included: corridor acquisition, maintenance of existing roads, congestion management, and public transportation.

Specific comments that were made on this topic are listed below by type of group. Interestingly, comments from transportation planners and community advocates generally focused on long-term issues while comments from seniors and residents generally focused on short term issues.

Transportation Planners

- “Keeping up with the growth that is projected for the region and prioritizing transportation needs accordingly.”
- “Finding sources of revenue to keep up with our maintenance needs.”
- “Preserving corridors on the outskirts of Sioux Falls.”
- “Sidewalk construction...how they should be designed and where/when they should be provided for pedestrian traffic and pedestrian safety.”
- “We really need to look at our regional bike and trail system.”
- “Advanced land acquisition will be a problem.”
- “East-West traffic flow will remain a problem.”

- “Educating the public to get their ‘buy in’ for the transportation improvements we will be making. We need their support for acquiring right-of-way, etc.”
- “Environmental issues are becoming more important, especially with our region being largely farm land.”

Community Advocates

- “Something needs to be done about traffic congestion.”
- “With continued growth, we need to go from ‘car travel only’ to a region that has alternative forms of transportation.”
- “New sources of funding for transportation need to be found.”
- “Buses do not run to all parts of town – the system needs to be expanded.”
- “There should be more education about the buses and the hours of operation.”
- “We should work at changing the perception of bus transit as a social service to a viable transportation option, especially as our population ages.”
- “Our residents have the notion that you should be able to get anywhere in 10 minutes...we need that to change.”

Seniors

- “East 10th is a bottleneck by Campbell Supply.”
- “Too many people are running red lights.”
- “West 12th between West and the Interstate at 4:30 in the afternoon is a bottleneck.”
- “I don’t like the medians they have installed where you can’t turn into businesses.”
- “More businesses development on the east side of town will keep traffic out of the west side of town.”
- “I don’t like cul-de-sacs. They are confusing. The city should go back to the old grid system.”

Lincoln County Residents

- “The road from I-29 to Tea needs to be widened.”
- “There should be underground sensors at I-29 and Louise to make traffic flow better.”
- “The roads going east and west, like 57th and 69th, are crumbling.”
- “The speed limits are too slow for a city our size...the speed limit should be 45 rather than 30.”
- “69th and 57th should be widened.”
- “We need more turning lanes.”
- “A new street is needed to connect 26th to the west side of town.”

Minnehaha County Residents

- “The public needs to be educated on the use of turn signals and common courtesy.”
- “Bus shelters are cold. They should provide a door and some heat.”
- “Without adequate bus service, our teens cannot get after school jobs.”
- “There should be a bus that arrives at the Mall 30 minutes after closing to pick up our kids who work.”
- “The buses need bus racks.”
- “Para transit has to be scheduled too far in advance.”
- “Some traffic lights are not necessary...sensors should be used whenever possible.”
- “We should encircle the City with a great road and treat the City as a hub with spokes into the region.”
- “We need to improve rail service...I would like to take a train to Rapid City.”

- “Put more cameras at intersections.”
- “Not all seniors qualify for para transit. That should be changed...more people would use it.”

Business Leaders/Employers

- “41st Street and the whole southwestern area of the region is a problem and will continue to be a problem.”
- “We need 24-hour public transit.”
- “The on-ramps and off-ramps at 57th and 69th are not good.”
- “The intersection of I-229 and I-29 have very poor lighting and are easy to miss.”
- “Five o’clock traffic is bad all over town.”
- “I know this sounds sexist, but young women age 18 to their mid 20’s are not courteous drivers.”
- “We need better transportation to and from surrounding communities.”
- “East/west traffic flow in and out of downtown is poor; if we want the downtown area to grow, we need to make it easy for people to get here.”
- “We have a conundrum of traffic lights.”

Topic #2: Perception of Traffic Congestion

Focus group participants was asked to rate traffic congesting in the Sioux Falls area on a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 meant that congestion was a major problem and 1 meant that congestion was not a problem at all. The distribution of the ratings is provided below:

- 5% of the respondents gave a rating of 9 or 10, indicating that they thought traffic congestion was a major problem.
- 25% of the respondents gave a rating of 7 or 8, indicating that they thought traffic congestion was a problem, particularly at certain times of day

- 56% of the respondents gave a rating of 5 or 6, indicating that they thought traffic congestion was not a significant problem.
- 14% of the respondents have a rating of less than 5, indicating they did not think traffic congestion was a problem.

Topic #3: Public Transportation Issues

The moderator asked each of the focus group participants what they thought about the region's existing public transportation system. Although most of the participants in the focus groups did not use public transportation, almost all of the participants thought it was important to fund public transportation. Many of the focus group participants indicated that they viewed the region's public transit service as a social service for persons with low income and special needs.

Some of the specific comments that were made on this topic are listed below. The comments are not separated by type of group to protect the confidentiality of the respondents.

- "We may need to experiment with public transportation to our satellite communities in the future."
- "There isn't enough congestion yet, but with the new mall, perceptions of public transit use may change."
- "We will have to speed up transit travel – it is too slow for people to really consider using it."
- "Currently there is limited transit to rural care centers for our elderly – as our population ages, that will be more important."
- "We will need to plan our transit routes more carefully around the density of the population."
- "We need more straight line routes...nobody knows where to get on and off the bus."
- "There should be a loop around the west side of town."

- “Our bus routes should be on some kind of a grid system...I don’t know where they go.”
- “More people will need to ride the bus as the population grows.”
- “We need to work on changing cultural perceptions in our community about bus riders...regular people don’t even think about using the bus because of the social stigma associated with it.”
- “We need better bus transit to our rural areas, like Tea and others.”
- “There needs to be better communication and information about bus services for those who are visually impaired.”
- “There is limited room in the downtown area for parking and I think public transportation would help.”
- “You never see anyone on the buses.”
- “Why don’t they fund expansion of the bus service by selling advertising space on the buses.”
- “Para transit is inconvenient because you have to call a day or two ahead.”
- “Seniors can’t afford to be traveling by taxi all the time...we need some kind of bus service that can get older residents around the community.”
- “We should have more small buses for our less populated areas.”
- “The Trolley for downtown is great.”
- “Bus service would help kids get to work.”
- “Rural areas need more bus service.”
- “The bus system doesn’t go to 69th and the health clinic is out there.”
- “Many kids can’t go to ‘after school’ activities without bus service but they won’t use the bus system we have now because of its image...it’s not ‘cool’ to ride the bus.”

- “Sioux Falls has planned well for buses. I don’t ride them but I see them everywhere.”
- “Our public transit is better than many cities our size. But still, it is inadequate.”
- “The bus doesn’t get to my part of town so all my employees depend on cars...it’s there only option.”
- “I would subsidize bus passes for my employees, but I don’t think that the free passes will get people to ride the bus. Cost has never been the problem – it’s where the bus comes and when it comes.”
- “I’m sure some people don’t apply for a job with my company because the bus doesn’t come here.”
- “Our biggest problem in Sioux Falls is the perception that the bus is a social service and not a need.”
- “We need more bike lockers and bike racks on the buses.”

Topic #4: Transportation Safety Issues

The moderator asked each of the focus group participants whether they had concerns about transportation safety in the region. Although most participants said that they felt safe when traveling on city streets and area highways, there were concerns about street lighting, striping, sidewalks, school zones, and other safety issues. Some of the specific concerns about transportation safety are listed below.

- “There could be a safety issue here because people would have to wait in the dark for a bus.”
- “Intersections should be better trimmed of tree and bush growth...it’s hard to see at some intersections.”
- “The directions and lighting are poor on Russell south to the Interstate.”
- “The on-ramps are too short on the old intersections of the Interstate.”
- “Road divider lines should be painted more often.”
- “By Roosevelt, traffic is very bad. The kids drive 30-50 miles per hour through there.”

- “I don’t see the kids getting tickets...we need better enforcement of traffic laws.”
- “From a pedestrian perspective the danger is in the school zones and people speeding through them. The newer schools are set out further and the activity is buffered with a large parking area. Young drivers can’t accelerate until they are out of the area.”
- “Pedestrian connectivity between neighborhoods – we sometimes force people to drive”.
- “Around schools I think pedestrian safety is a concern.”
- “People use neighborhood streets to avoid traffic congestion on major streets. That makes pedestrian safety much more of a concern”
- “Driver courtesy is really a problem in Sioux Falls, especially compared to other cities.”
- “Safety also is a concern for drivers and their ability to avoid endangering pedestrians and bicyclists.”
- “Our schools are on major roads, which is not safe for our kids.”
- “The high school in Tea has students speeding through an elementary school zone.’
- “School areas are not well marked. The signs that read ‘when children are present’ is ambiguous...people just ignore the signs...they need specific times.”
- “It’s important to see uniformed officers around schools.”
- “We need more flashing lights around school zones.”
- “The wording on the school zone signs ‘when children are present’ is confusing.”
- “Lighting in the downtown area at night is good but it is not in the north area of town.”

Topic #5: Bicycle and Pedestrian Issues

Most focus group participants thought walking and biking trails were important for quality of life in the Sioux Falls area, but only a few participants viewed walking and biking trails, paths, and lanes as core components of the region's transportation system.

Some of the specific comments related to bicycle and pedestrian issues are listed below.

- "There is just one small dedicated bike lane now."
- "There is not enough interest...yet...to pay for development of additional bike trails."
- "Getting bike racks on buses would be great."
- "Parks and Recreation has done a great job with biking trails."
- "Those trails developed by Parks and Recreation are very good."
- "Trails should be widened... there is not enough room for pedestrians and bicyclists."
- "I would like the bike trails to be more accessible to people's homes. Right now, people put their bikes in their cars...drive to the trails...and then ride their bike."
- "We should have more dedicated bike lanes – biking on our roads now is a death trap."
- "The trails are nice to walk on."
- "I don't feel safe walking in neighborhoods for two reasons – 1) the trees and bushes are too low, and 2) there are cracks in the sidewalk and I'm afraid of tripping."

Topic #6: Rural Issues

Many participants felt it was important for the City of Sioux Falls to work with the County and rural communities to plan and develop “connected” transportation systems in the region. Although residents thought there is a need to increase funding for township roads, most focus group participants thought it was most important to improve roads that link the rural areas with the City of Sioux Falls. Some of the specific comments on this issue are listed below.

- “Overall communication is good between Sioux Falls and our rural areas, but it could be better.”
- “We are now a regional center, not just a collection of neighboring towns.”
- “If we have any rural vs. urban issues, it seems to be Sioux Falls vs. the rest of the State.”

Topic #7: Maintenance Issues

The moderator asked each of the focus group participants if they had any concerns about maintenance of existing roads and highways in the region. In general, most focus group participants thought that maintenance of current roads was okay, but they were concerned with the ability of the region to continue maintaining roads in the future. Some of the specific comments that were made on this topic are listed below.

- Maintenance is good now, but we need a plan to take care of all of the new roads that are being built.”
- “Rail road crossings are too rough...my car was damaged going over one.”
- “There are too many pot holes and the striping should be done more often.”
- “The roads are getting worse.”
- “Maintain the roads properly and put signs up to keep big vehicles off our City streets.”
- “Resurface 12th Street and widen it.”
- “Build a good street – build it properly with the best materials.”

Topic #8: Airport Issues

Focus group participants were asked to share their perceptions of airport services in the region. Although most participants were satisfied with the quality of airport facilities in the area, many participants were concerned about the cost and availability of passenger air service in the region. Some of the specific comments related to the discussion about airport issues are listed below.

- “Parking at the airport is great.”
- “Don’t build homes too close to the airport.”
- “The facility is fine but we often drive to Omaha or Minneapolis because the carriers don’t meet our needs.”
- “Car rentals should be moved out of the airport to make more room for parking.”
- “People travel 2 ½ hours to Omaha to get better fares.”
- “There are some dedicated trips to Las Vegas and Phoenix that are priced well but most are not.”
- “Sioux Falls is vulnerable because airlines won’t commit to the community.”
- “Our City is landlocked and the airport is small, but it should be adequate for the next 20 years.”
- “Our airport has wonderful service for a town our size.”
- “The facility is good but not the service...too few flights and it’s too expensive.”
- “The airport is excellent.”
- “We have no choice of carriers.”

Topic #9: Rail Issues

In general, comments about rail related issues were very limited. Two persons were concerned about traffic delays caused by trains passing through the City of Sioux Falls. A few others were interested in having passenger rail service to destinations, such as Rapid City, Pierre, and Minneapolis. Most focus group participants did not have any comments about rail related issues.

Topic #10: Priority of Transportation Improvements

Compared to other priorities in the region, each focus group participant was asked to rate the importance of transportation improvements on a scale of 1 to 10, where “10” meant that transportation was the region’s most important issue and “1” meant transportation was the region’s least important issue. The distribution of the ratings is provided below:

- 24% of the respondents gave a rating of 9 or 10, indicating that they thought transportation should be one of the region’s highest priorities.
- 49% of the respondents gave a rating of 7 or 8, indicating that they thought transportation was more important than many other issues in the region.
- 22% of the respondents gave a rating of 5 or 6, indicating that they thought transportation should receive a medium priority compared to other issues.
- 5% of the respondents gave a rating of less than 5, indicating that they thought transportation should be a low priority for the region.

The issues that participants identified as being more important than transportation included: the region’s water supply, sanitary sewer and stormwater drainage issues, the Events Center, health care, economic development, and education.

Topic #11: Funding Issues

Focus group residents were asked how they thought transportation improvements in the region should be funded. Although the majority of focus group participants thought the amount of funding for transportation should be increased, they had mixed opinions regarding their willingness to pay more taxes. Some of the ideas that were suggested to fund transportation improvements are listed below:

- “We need to get additional transportation funding from use taxes...for example, people should pay more taxes for SUV’s because they are harder on the roads.”
- “Go after the contractors and developers who don’t do their work well and make them pay for repairs.”
- “Get more money from developers...they are encouraging the construction of additional roads, so their developments should help pay for the new roads.”
- “Make the road into Tea a toll road.”
- “Raise the gas tax.”
- “If a new road is needed and it is arterial, the City and County should pay for it. If it is not arterial, the developer should pay for it.”
- “We need to find new sources for funding transportation improvements, but I don’t know what those sources are.”
- “New roads should be paid for through a gas tax. The best way to get something funded is through the users.”
- “It would be fine to allocate more money for transportation. If we can find money for the Zoo, we should be able to find money for our roads...shouldn’t we?”

In addition to suggesting ways to fund transportation improvements, focus group participants were asked how they would allocate \$100 million dollars of hypothetical transportation funding to seven major categories of spending. The range of amounts that were suggested by focus group participants are listed below. The lowest value reflects the least amount that a focus group participant allocated to the category. The highest value reflects the most that a participant allocated to the category.

- Public transportation (10-70% of the total budget)
- Rail services (0-33% of the total budget)
- New roads (0-60% of the total budget)
- Walking and biking trails (0-15% of the total budget)
- Maintenance of existing roads and highways (10-50% of the total budget)
- New traffic signals, signs, and ITS technology (5-30% of the total budget)
- Airports (0-10% of the total budget)

Topic #12: Types of Information that Should Be Gathered

Since one of the purposes of the focus groups was to help identify possible questions for the surveys that will be conducted during the spring of 2005, the moderator gave each of the focus group participants time to suggest ideas for questions that should be included on the surveys.

Some of the questions or types of information that participants thought should be gathered are listed below.

- “Would citizens use ‘real time’ driver information?”
- “Would citizens use ‘ride share’ facilities?”
- “How willing would residents in rural communities be to share in the funding of road development?”
- “How do residents define congestion...is it waiting through one signal, a little extra time to get to their destination, etc.?”
- “How do you residents think the new Events Center will affect traffic in downtown Sioux Falls?”
- “Are our traffic safety features keeping up with our growth?”
- “Should the speed limits in Sioux Falls be re-evaluated?”
- “Should parking meters be removed downtown or should the hours be expanded?”
- “What does the citizenry see as priority; roads, buses, rural transit?”

- “Would residents be in favor of a transit authority with taxing authority?”
- “What can we do to get people to use transit?”
- “Would employers provide incentives to employees who use the bus?”
- “Do you feel safe and comfortable using public transit?”
- “Do you need more education about transit.”
- “What would it take to get you to leave your car at home?”
- “Would an expansion of transit hours get you to ride the bus?”
- “What would it take to increase bus ridership?”
- “How would you feel about more pedestrian bridges?”
- “Is there enough access to Sioux Falls from the Interstate?”
- “If transit was more available, would you use it?”
- “Would you support a gas tax increase?”
- “Would you be more inclined to apply for a job if the bus went to that location?”
- “How do you feel about smaller commuter planes that flew out of Sioux Falls more often?”
- “Does our current road system keep you out of downtown?”
- “Would you use bus service to the airport?”
- “Where does the public feel new transportation dollars should go?”
- “How can we maximize public transportation systems with the least amount of money?”
- “Ask about buses for the high school?”
- “Would people car pool if they got some kind of a tax break?”

- “Ask the public to rank transportation priorities.”
- “What is the community’s priority for public spending – where does transportation fit compared to the Events Center, storm sewer improvements, fire stations, libraries, etc., given that no new sources of funding are available?”
- “How receptive would residents be to ‘increasing the size of the pie’ or acquiring more money, rather than the allocation of what funding is now available?”
- “What do residents think of the look and functionality of medians.”
- “Should more parking be required on school property for the high schools?”
- “Would residents prefer to drive through or around the City?”
- “What do people think about using roundabouts?”
- “Do people use Channel 16 for information about traffic?”
- “Does the public really understand the money trail of public funds?”
- “At what point will the citizenry get invested in these public projects?”
- “Are residents satisfied with the current transportation system?”
- “Where do bikes belong in transportation expenditures?”
- “Does the public think we are listening to their concerns – do they feel like they are a part of the process?”
- “Are we planning early enough and acquiring land soon enough?”
- “In general, what kind of community do people want to live in, i.e. commercial, pedestrian access, nature trails, twin homes, etc.?”

Topic #13: Guiding Principle for Transportation Planning

One component of this study involves the identification of “guiding principles” for transportation planning in the region over the next 20 years. In order to help develop these principles, the moderator asked focus group participants to suggest ideas that should be incorporated into the study. The ideas that were suggested are listed below..

- “We need to ensure that the public is involved in setting long term transportation priorities.”
- “We should have a commitment to environmental concerns.”
- “Cooperation is needed between government agencies. Jurisdiction is generally a barrier at the executive level.”
- “We need to remember that there is more than one mode of transportation: cars, bikes, buses, etc.”
- “We need to build support for acquiring land well ahead of need for transportation.”
- “We need to ensure that township roads are connected to Sioux Falls – people work and shop here and they need to be a part of the public input.”
- “We need to provide a safe transportation system for our community.”

Other Comments

At the end of each focus group, the moderator allowed participants to make closing comments. Some of the concerns that were shared that were not already addressed in this report are listed below.

- “Redoing some of the older commercial areas with fewer driveways would be very political and controversial.”
- “Our streets won’t handle the traffic from the Events Center?”
- “What can be done about safety on 41st Street?”
- “Any new development should include a road plan.”

- “I’d like to know who is really doing the major road planning in this area?”
- “Please tell them to plan rather than just react.”
- “Can they put up more shelters for bus stops?”
- “What can be done to force people to have car insurance?”
- “Budget well for good maintenance and also for those of us who can’t drive anymore.”
- “Make those concrete dividers way more visible with lighting or landscaping.”