

6 • Public & Agency Involvement

Overview/Summary

Public outreach for ROCOG's 2045 Long Range Transportation Plan began in February 2019 and continued through the summer of 2020. ROCOG staff employed various means of outreach, from the traditional, in-person informational meetings to new interactive online methods. Outreach in the summer of 2020 was marked by the unique experience of social distancing requirements in response to the world-wide COVID-19 pandemic. This national and state emergency necessitated that in-person gatherings be limited in size, with participants maintaining a safe distance of at least 6 feet from each other, and often wearing masks covering the nose and mouth. Remote and online outreach was, therefore, often preferable and ROCOG staff relied on innovative methods such as ESRI StoryMaps to gather public input.

Public Involvement in Developing This Plan

Federal planning guidelines encourage the use of a proactive public involvement process to develop and

adopt the long range transportation plan. ROCOG's 2019 Public Involvement Policy (PIP) includes these key elements in its public involvement vision:

- Involve the community in all MPO planning, project development, and service development activities that impact the delivery of transportation services to the citizens of this community.
- Provide multiple means for citizens to become involved in transportation planning efforts that are convenient to the citizenry and tailored to their levels of interest.
- Provide information on both broad and specific planning issues and about available public involvement opportunities.
- Inform citizens not only about planning options and alternatives but also about the constraints and political considerations that affect decisions.
- Seek broad-based community consensus on transportation plans through a collaborative process by involving and listening to the views of representatives of divergent interests and reflecting those interests in adopted plans. Area residents,

member jurisdictions, affected public agencies, representatives of transportation agency employees or unions, and public/private providers of transportation will be made aware of the activities of the MPO.

During this Plan update process, efforts were made to make information available through a number of avenues, including in-person presentations and open houses, media releases, and the web pages of ROCOG and Olmsted County. New in this round of planning was the introduction of social media outreach through ROCOG's new Facebook page, and interactive outreach opportunities provided by the use of StoryMaps, which allowed users to see more detail and provide input about proposed projects at their own pace. ROCOG also utilized local media such as the Rochester Post Bulletin to advertise availability of information and meetings. Further, ROCOG staff interacted with the Rochester Neighborhood Associations, the Diversity Council, the United Way of Olmsted County, Olmsted County Public Health educators, and the Olmsted County Community Action Program. Interpreter services were offered on request for individuals who request such accommodations (no requests were received).

ROCOG used a multi-faceted strategy of public involvement. The major elements of the public involvement plan for this planning work included:



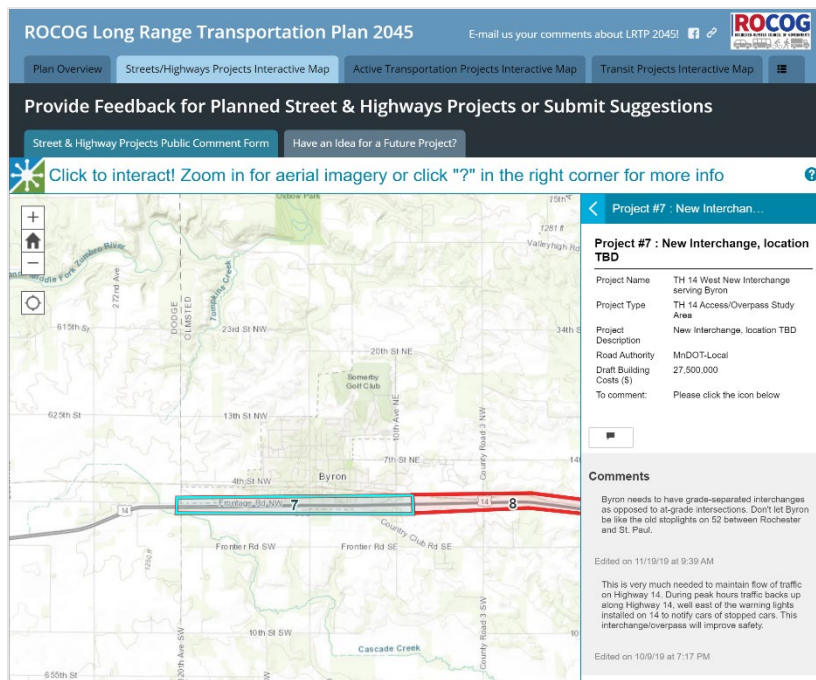
• Public Open Houses

Four open houses were held throughout this planning process to give the public the opportunity to view draft multi-modal maps and view presentation materials of the data gathered as of that point in the reaffirmation process. Comments were solicited both verbally from participants and on comment cards. The local media were also invited along with ROCOG Board members and other related ROCOG committees' members. The first two open houses were traditional, in-person events, and were held on February 26, 2019, and October 15, 2019. Due to the social-distancing requirements of the COVID-19 pandemic response, the last open house planned for

the summer of 2020 was rescheduled as a pair of online, virtual open houses. These were held on September 8 and 9, 2020.

- **StoryMaps**

ROCOG developed extensive outreach materials using StoryMaps, which provided users an interactive experience and allowed them to make direct comments about the proposed projects in the plan. The StoryMap included maps showing the proposed projects in each of the three modes: streets and highways, active transportation, and transit. Users



could view each proposed project on a current map and make comments about it. The StoryMap also included draft presentations about each of the plan chapters, which allowed the public to see the information contained in the plan as it was being developed. Finally, the StoryMap included a Survey 1-2-3 survey in which users could suggest other street/highway, active transportation, or transit projects that were not among those identified by staff and included in the maps.

- **Social Media**

ROCOG developed a Facebook page for the first time as part of the outreach for this plan. This allowed ROCOG to better announce upcoming open houses, in-person presentations, public hearings, and other LRTP-related events. It has also provided ROCOG a better way to publicize its work in general as an MPO, and thus better explain to the public it serves the nature and role of its work.

- **Downtown Rapid Transit Outreach**

Because Rochester's Downtown Rapid Transit (formerly known as the Circulator) project is being developed at the same time as this Long Range Transportation Plan update, ROCOG has worked closely with the City of Rochester in incorporating this major transit project in the LRTP. Outreach for inclusion of this project in the LRTP was mainly in the form of a website and community meetings run by

City of Rochester staff and their consultants and attended by ROCOG/Olmsted County Planning Department staff. ROCOG staff contact information was also readily available on the web site for further input or question/answer opportunities during the entire reaffirmation planning process.

- **Rochester Pedestrian/Bicycle Advisory Committee (PBAC)**

PBAC worked with staff on development of Chapter 12 regarding non-motorized systems planning. This is the third plan development process where PBAC has provided input to the development of the LRTP. PBAC is also proactive in reaching out through community forums and workshops to provide a venue for community discussion on issues of importance related to non-motorized travel in the community.

- **ROCOG Transportation Technical Advisory Committee (TTAC)**

TTAC worked with staff in the development of the Plan's chapters addressing roadway network development, safety, system management and operations, transit operations, and financing of the long-range plan recommendations.

- **ROCOG Policy Board**

As part of an initial agreement, the Board met on their regular schedule throughout the long-range plan reaffirmation process. They commented on summaries of the draft plan chapters as they were

developed and provided input and direction when needed.



- **Rochester Citizens Advisory on Transit Committee (CAT)**

Olmsted County Planning Department staff met with this group prior to the early public forums and four more times (May and September 2019, and July and August 2020) throughout the planning process. In addition to these specific activities, the City of Rochester's Transit and Parking Division and members of CAT are proactive in working with social service agencies and at the neighborhood level to investigate the transportation needs of environmental justice

populations. The Rochester transit service attempts to provide services that meet the transportation needs of the disabled and low-income through fixed route public transit and the ADA paratransit services.

- **Public Comment Period & Public Hearing**

A 30-day public comment period began August 19, 2020, as part of the review of the final draft plan. Copies of the plan were available at the Olmsted County Planning Department offices and on-line. Resource agencies were also given notice of this comment period for their review. A formal public hearing was held at the beginning of the public comment period to provide interested stakeholders an opportunity to address any issues or concerns with ROCOG and ROCOG staff.

- **Update of the 2045 Plan**

Formal action to update the 2045 Long Range Transportation Plan was taken on September 23, 2020. Following that action, the full plan was posted on-line, and print copies of the plan will be made available upon request.

Major Outreach Efforts

ROCOG staff engaged in purposeful outreach efforts for this plan update, with the intention of generating more public comments than had been received in the past. The major outreach efforts included in-person outreach,

digital outreach, presentations to groups, and solicitation of agency input.

In-Person Outreach

Open houses are a more traditional type of outreach that ROCOG staff employed to educate the public about the LRTP and to elicit their feedback. Four open houses were held: traditional in-person events on February 26, 2019, and October 15, 2019; and online, virtual events on September 8 and 9, 2020. Both in-person open houses were held in a large meeting room and atrium at the Olmsted County Planning Department, starting in the late afternoon and extending until the evening. All events were announced to the print and broadcast news media and posted on the ROCOG website and Facebook page.

For the in-person meetings, ROCOG staff produced posters and handouts that explained the nature of the plan and what it would contain. At the virtual open house, ROCOG staff delivered a PowerPoint summary of the plan and fielded questions from the audience.

The February 2019 open house was dedicated to presenting the background information gathered at that point about the planning area, and information about the nature of ROCOG as an MPO. This open house generated 30 comments from the public. The October 2019 open house was focused much more on getting comments about specific modal (i.e., street/highway, active transportation, and transit) projects that had been

identified by that point. This open house generated 19 comments from the public. The virtual open houses in September 2020 focused on the finalized projects list and plan recommendations. Together, the virtual open houses generated 38 responses.



Pop-ups were a new type of outreach that ROCOG employed as part of this plan update. During the summer and fall of 2019, ROCOG staff brought a select number of informative posters about the modal projects to various sites and engaged attendees or passersby to get their input on proposed projects. During the pop-ups, ROCOG staff engaged dozens of people and generated nearly 100 comments. ROCOG staff set up at the following events:

- Diversity Council Annual Celebration, Phoenix Farm, August 7, 2019
- Shoppes at University Square in the downtown skyway, September 11, 2019
- University of Minnesota-Rochester, main lobby, September 11, 2019

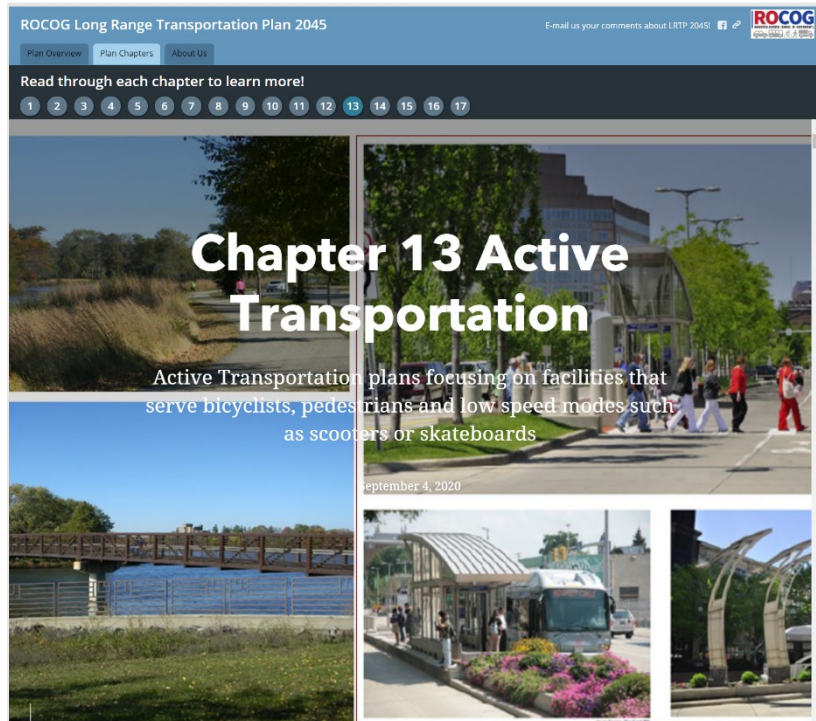
A fourth pop-up was originally scheduled for the Rochester Public Library, but a burst pipe caused a flood that closed the library for several days and reduced usable space in the building for several weeks after that. ROCOG staff were forced to cancel that event.

Digital Outreach

ROCOG utilized its website (rocogmn.org) to make announcements about upcoming meetings, outreach events, and general topics related to the LRTP specifically and ROCOG more generally. To this more traditional means of outreach, ROCOG added a Facebook page in 2019. Both the ROCOG website and Facebook page were not used so much to promulgate LRTP information themselves, but instead were used to point users to an innovative method of presenting the large amounts of information about the LRTP: ESRI StoryMaps.

ROCOG staff constructed StoryMaps for each chapter of the LRTP, as well as for the modal projects. Each chapter had a summary presentation that allowed for dynamic graphics to be placed along with informative text,

allowing the information to be presented in a more engaging manner than would have been true with a mere PDF or Word document.



Each mode (streets/highways, active transportation, and transit) had a StoryMap that showed the proposed projects on a map of the area. Users could click on the individual projects to see more information about them and to leave comments about that particular project. The modal StoryMaps also included a survey in which users could suggest other projects that were not identified on the draft map. By the end of the fall 2019 public

comment period (November 30, 2019), the StoryMaps had generated 185 comments. As points of comparison, the traditional method of waiting for the public to send in their comments resulted in eight responses (all emailed to staff); the in-person outreach in fall 2019 (see section above) and presentations to groups (see next section) totaled 141 comments from the public.

The StoryMap experience was very productive in terms of generating interest and input from the public. ROCOG staff concluded that StoryMaps are a very helpful companion effort to the traditional method of in-person outreach and presentations to groups by allowing people who attend an in-person event the opportunity to investigate the information further, at their leisure, and contribute more thoughtful comments. One piece of information ROCOG staff did not capture in this process, and which would be important to do in the next effort, was whether StoryMap users had attended an in-person outreach effort or a presentation to a group. Knowing this would give ROCOG a better understanding of how the in-person and traditional methods of outreach may have driven traffic to the StoryMaps.

During the public comment period that ended September 23, 2020, the StoryMaps generated 44 responses from the public.

Presentations to Groups

ROCOG staff produced a PowerPoint summary of the information that would be included in the LRTP and focused it on the modal projects. Staff took this presentation to various locations in the summer and fall of 2019 and solicited questions and comments from each audience. ROCOG made this presentation to the following groups:

- Pedestrian and Bicycle Advisory Committee, August 20, 2019
- Intercultural Mutual Assistance Association, September 17, 2019
- R Neighbors/Council of Neighborhoods, September 17, 2019
- Olmsted County Township Officers Association, September 26, 2019
- Citizens Advisory on Transit, September 26, 2019
- Olmsted County Planning Advisory Commission, October 3, 2019
- City of Rochester Planning and Zoning Commission, October 9, 2019
- Chamber of Commerce Transportation Forum, October 11, 2019
- One Topic, One Hour (at 125 LIVE), October 21, 2019
- County Committee of the Whole, November 19, 2019

- Rochester City Council Study Session, December 2, 2019

These presentations resulted in 33 questions and comments from the public.

In the summer of 2020, ROCOG staff made further presentations to the following groups:

- Pedestrian and Bicycle Advisory Committee, August 12, 2020
- Citizens Advisory on Transit, July 23, 2020
- Citizens Advisory on Transit, August 27, 2020

These presentations resulted in seven responses from the public.

Solicitation of Agency Input

In December of 2019, ROCOG sent an email to a list of contacts at various federal, state, and local agencies, organizations, companies, and nonprofits that might have an interest in commenting on the LRTP. The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources provided the only response: a recommendation that “impacts to natural resources be avoided and minimized to the greatest extent possible,” and a thorough set of guidance on how transportation projects can work to minimize damage to vulnerable species and habitats.

Resource Agency Consultation

ROCOG works with resource agencies on plans and projects to ensure that the most up-to-date resource inventory and program information is considered during the development of areawide land use plans and transportation system plans.

Consideration of environmental resources plays a key role in development of the land use plans, including designation of urban growth areas and resource protection areas that lay the foundation of the transportation system planning that ROCOG conducts. ROCOG is involved in this land use planning effort and through those efforts seeks to gather meaningful input relevant to the transportation planning process. This in turn leads to the development of this long range transportation plan.

Other

Finally, ROCOG alerted the media, including the Rochester *Post Bulletin* newspaper, to the LRTP planning process, and the various open houses and public input opportunities throughout the planning process. ROCOG also set up a static display of posters, selected from among those presented at the open houses, at the Government Center, September 23-27, 2019. These were not staffed but were accompanied by cards with ROCOG contact information that encouraged users to visit the StoryMaps to leave their comments.

Results of Outreach

Results of the outreach effort are reported in greater detail in documents gathered in Appendix B.

First Round: February 2019

The February 2019 open house was an attempt to introduce the overall concepts of the plan to the public, and to elicit general comments and questions about the scope of the plan and the type of recommendations that would result from it upon adoption more than a year and a half later. Most of the responses from the public at the February 2019 open house were questions about the nature of the projects identified for each of the modes. The comments that were collected mainly concerned roadway improvements, active transportation infrastructure improvements, safety, transit, and general development concerns (Figure 6-1).

Second Round: Fall 2019

The fall 2019 outreach effort was much more intense, with dozens of scheduled efforts spanning in-person and digital activities. The in-person activities of presentations to groups, pop-up interviews, and an open house in October 2019 generated 42% of the responses during this outreach period. The StoryMap digital outreach effort generated another 55% of the total 334 responses (the remainder of the responses came as emails to staff).

Figure 6-2 illustrates the proportion of comments made using each method.

Figure 6-1

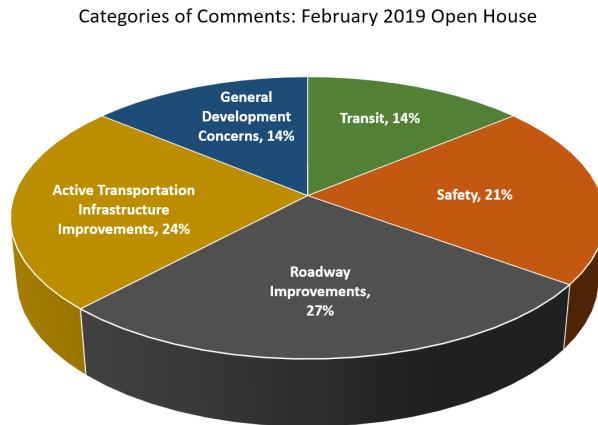
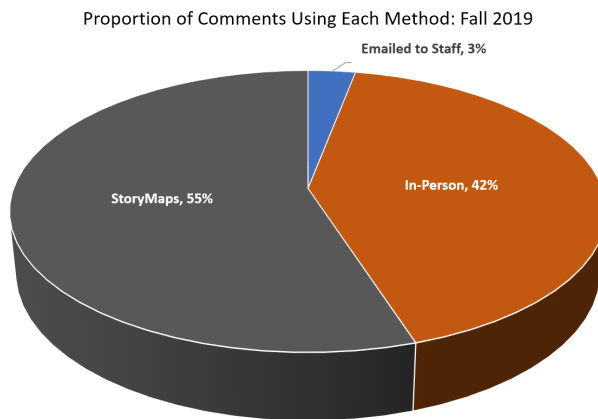
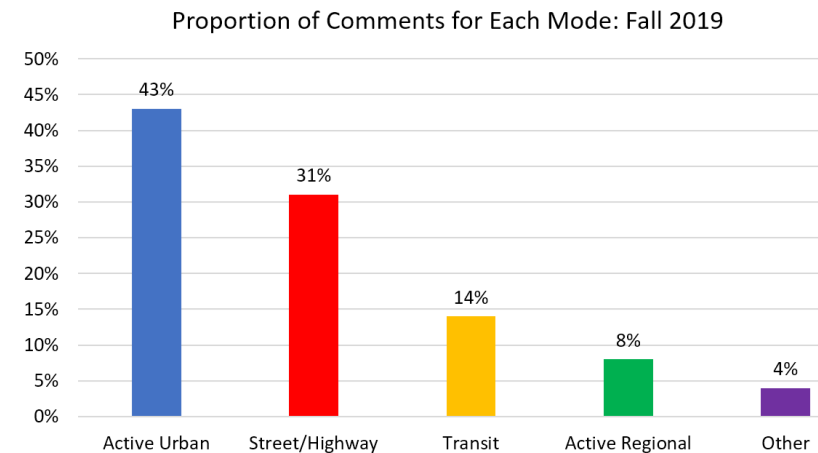


Figure 6-2



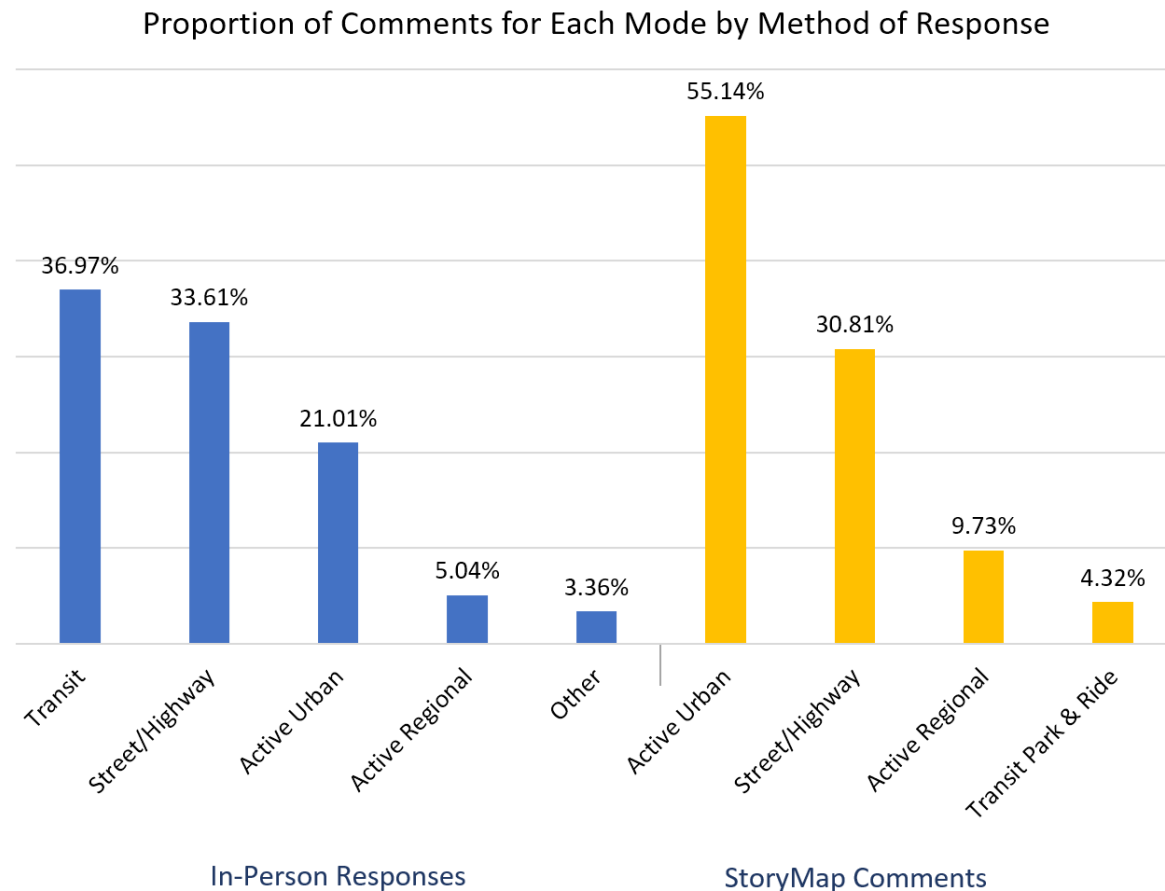
Active urban transportation was the mode that garnered the most responses, with streets/highways coming in second (Figure 6-3).

Figure 6-3



Active urban transportation also dominated the responses from StoryMaps users. In-person responses were much more evenly split among transit (with the most), streets/highways, and active transportation. Figure 6-4 shows the proportion of comments for the different modes broken down by in-person or StoryMap comments.

The Downtown Circulator (later known as Rapid Transit) was the single topic that garnered the most responses, which were mostly in-person questions since the Circulator was not presented in StoryMaps (the project development was not far enough along during the period when StoryMaps were being built and made ready for public comment). Along with the Circulator, other topics and projects showed different patterns of response from

Figure 6-4

in-person to digital outreach. When the responses to all the projects across all methods of response were analyzed, four street/highway projects in the city of Rochester emerged near the top of the responses from

both in-person and online respondents. The following is a ranking of the projects with the most responses:

1. The US-14/County Road 104 future interchange (generally positive response)

2. Widening Civic Center Dr NW (evenly split responses between definitely in favor and definitely against)
3. Relocating the 55 St NW/E Frontage Rd NW intersection (mixed reactions; respondents saw pros and cons)
4. The North Broadway Ave. and 14 St NW/NE intersection (generally positive response)

Projects 1 and 4 were mostly supported because respondents saw a need to address serious safety concerns. Indeed, improving road safety was the most common need to be addressed, as identified by respondents, along with improving bike/ped connections and traffic back-up relief. There was less agreement among the public about the necessary solutions to transportation problems, and the split between in-person and StoryMap responses is reflected in the priorities of suggested solutions. The following is a ranking of the most common priorities identified, with the method of response in parentheses:

1. More transit routes/frequency (in-person)
2. Must include bicycle facilities (StoryMap)
3. New paved connection (in-person)

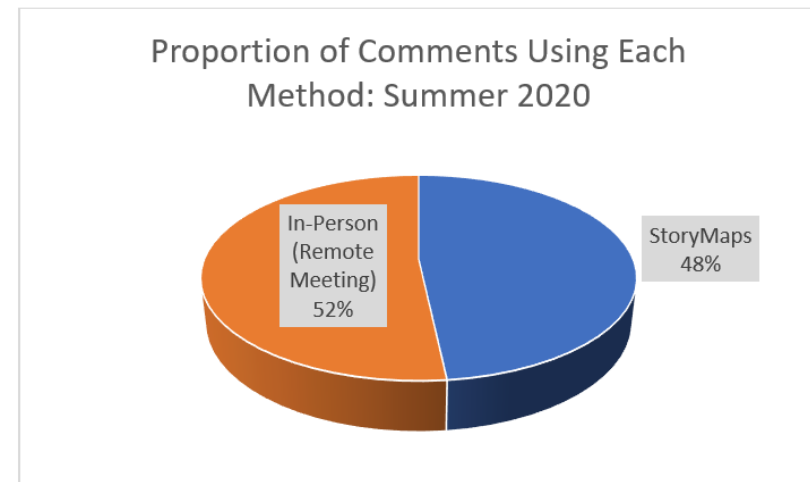
Third Round: Summer 2020

In August and September 2020, ROCOG took on outreach during the COVID-19 pandemic response, which limited, and in many cases prohibited, in-person gatherings of the kind typical of planning outreach

efforts. All activities that would normally be conducted in-person had to be done with remote meeting technology, such as Skype, Teams, Zoom, etc. In this analysis, we will refer to meetings with different groups and virtual open houses as “in-person (remote meeting)” with the understanding that these activities are analogous to the traditional in-person meetings and open houses ROCOG would normally hold.

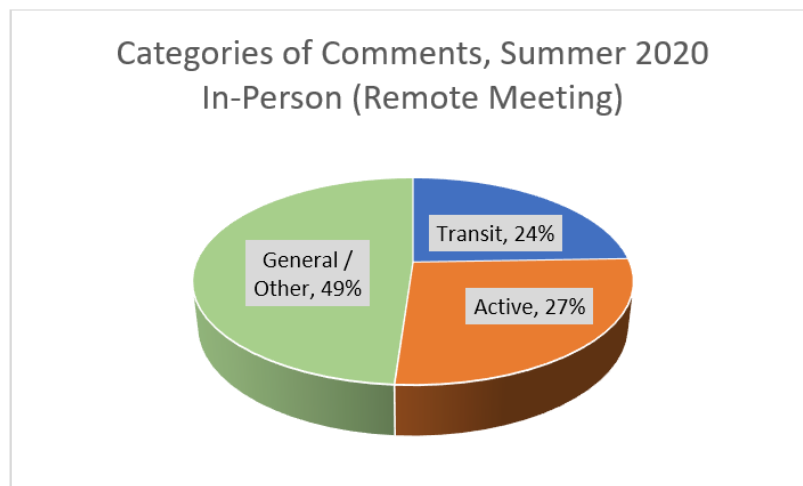
The summer 2020 outreach effort resulted in 87 responses from the public. These were split fairly equally, with 42 coming from StoryMap comments and 45 coming from in-person (remote meeting) responses during committee meetings and virtual open houses (Figure 6-5).

Figure 6-5



The in-person (remote meeting) activities generated 45 responses. The specific modes of transit and active transportation each prompted about a quarter of all responses (11 and 12, respectively). The other 22 responses were in regard to general topics about the Plan, combinations of modal use, etc. (Figure 6-6).

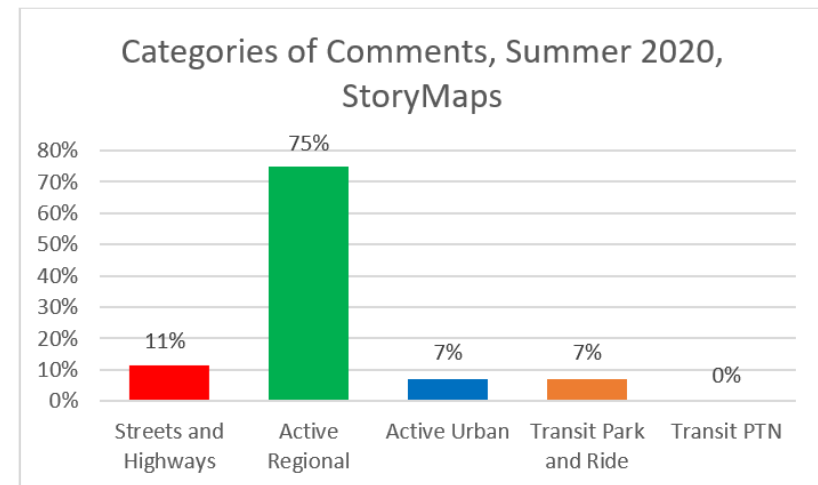
Figure 6-6



The StoryMaps generated 42 responses, and they were dominated by the 31 related to the Active Regional mode, which made up three-quarters of the responses. Streets and Highways generated five responses, and Active Urban and Transit–Park and Ride each generated three. Transit–Primary Transit Network did not generate any responses (Figure 6-7).

There was not much overlap in themes or projects between the in-person (remote meeting) responses and

Figure 6-7



the StoryMap responses. StoryMap responses were project-specific, because the nature of the StoryMap commenting system basically forced users to comment on a specific project, rather than ask questions more general in nature. The in-person (remote meeting) responses, however, were allowed to be more free-form, since they did not have a structure like StoryMaps imposing an external discipline on the responses and because ROCOG staff were available to answer more general questions and any follow-ups.

The in-person (remote meeting) responses ranged across several topics. Among the transit-related responses, the most popular topic was the Downtown Rapid Transit and the BRT vehicles it would introduce to Rochester. The second-most popular transit topic was the park and ride

system, particularly how it would operate in areas outside of Rochester.

The active transportation topic most popular among in-person (remote meeting) attendees was the construction of wider shoulders and off-street trails. The second-most popular topic was policies and infrastructure related to commuters and electric bike charging.

The in-person (remote meeting) activities mostly generated general responses from the audiences. The most popular topic among these general responses was how transportation planning could further the cause of racial, social, and economic equity. The second-most popular topic was how transportation planning could result in lower carbon footprints.

The StoryMap responses coalesced around bicycle safety projects that would connect users to different places in the MPA, especially in the southeast quadrant of Rochester and points beyond. The three most common projects to have comments were:

- Provide 5'-6' asphalt shoulders along CSAH 1 from 97th ST SE south to TH 30
- Construct off-road trail connecting Chester Woods County Park with Eyota and Dover
- Provide 7'-8' asphalt shoulders along CSAH 11 from CSAH 36 (Marion Rd) to TH 14

Other projects that elicited several responses were those that proposed wider shoulders on County State Aid Highways.