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PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

This chapter provides a summary of public outreach efforts, including stakeholder interviews, visioning, surveys, virtual open houses, and draft plan public comment.

This chapter also describes innovations and methods used to adapt to challenges in outreach posed by COVID-19.

The backbone of every well-developed MTP is public engagement. Involving early input from the public, helps ensure that planners and decision makers better understand the community's transportation needs and goals. This public input process enables decisionmakers to be more readily equipped to maintain community dialogue and address needs and goals with more effective impact.

Methods may vary by region, but the collaborative process of public involvement remains an integral part of creating a well-rounded transportation plan. To maximize public input, public participation plans were implemented early in the development of the RGVMP 2045 MTP.

A variety of engagement strategies were used in accordance with and in addition to the federally required Public Participation Plan (PPP), including online visioning exercises, surveys, stakeholder meetings, and virtual open houses. The following sections in this chapter outline the legal requirements for a PPP and the different methods used to engage the RGVMP community.

LEGAL REQUIREMENTS FOR PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

In addition to the federal guidelines discussed in Chapter 2, MPOs are required to provide "reasonable opportunity" for the public to comment on the MTP, TIP, and any major plan revisions, according to the FAST-Act, and 23 CFR 450.316.

The public includes "citizens, affected public agencies, representatives of public transportation employees, freight shippers, providers of freight transportation services, private providers of transportation, representatives of users of public transportation, representatives of users of pedestrian walkways and bicycle transportation facilities, representatives of the disabled, and other interested parties." [1201(i)(6)(A)] The RGVMP is also required to consult with state and local agencies and coordinate the transportation plan with other existing plans.

Public Participation Process

As required by the FAST-Act and 23 CFR 450.316, the RGVMP followed the guidelines below to create the RGVMP 2045 MTP:

- Develop a **documented PPP** that defines the process for all affected individuals and stakeholders. The RGVMP PPP was adopted on August 7, 2019.
- **Consult** with all interested parties to develop the PPP.
- Provide reasonable **public access**. All technical and policy information used in development of the MTP, TIP, and other appropriate transportation plans and projects should be provided in electronic-accessible formats. Open house meetings should be conducted at convenient and accessible locations and times.
- Leave time for **public comment**. The public should have ample time to respond to the PPP before it is adopted; at a minimum, the comment period should be 45 days. Comment periods before the adoption of MTPs, TDPs, 5307 Program of Projects, and other appropriate transportation plans or projects should be no less than 30 days.
- **Notify** the public of participation opportunities. Notice of the public comment period should be advertised in the newspaper and sent via mail to the entire RGVMP mailing list *before* the start of the 45-day comment period.
- **Respond in writing** (when applicable) to public input, specifically in response to substantial comments made during public engagement. Summary, analysis, and report of disposition of comments shall be made as part of the final document.



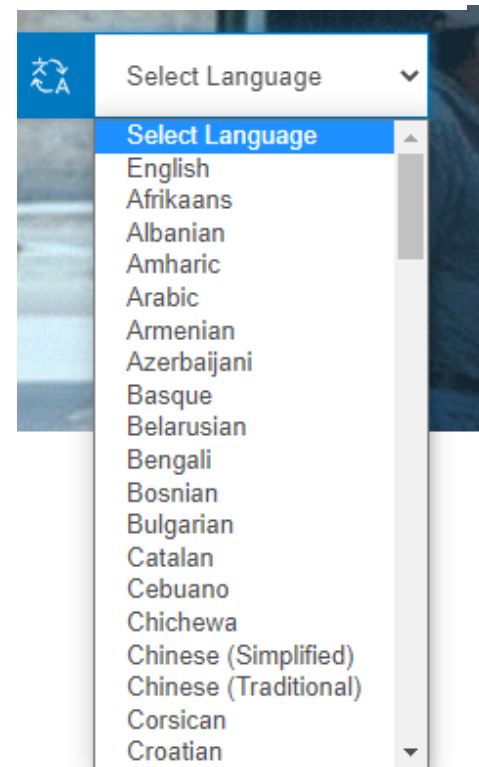
- **Seek out** and consider those traditionally underserved by existing transportation systems, such as minorities, older adults, disabled individuals, and low-income households.
- **Coordinate** the PPP with statewide transportation planning public involvement and consultation processes wherever possible.

Limited English Proficiency Plan

Under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the MPO planning process and tasks shall not be discriminatory of race, color, or national origin. Residents are also entitled to language assistance in compliance with Executive Order 13166 ("Improving Access to Service for Persons with Limited English Proficiency"). These requirements apply to all federal agencies, and those receiving funds from federal agencies. The following are techniques the RGVMPPO has employed to ensure individuals with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) are able to participate in the public involvement process:

- Use of non-technical language to describe plans and proposed changes
- Visualization techniques to display data and proposed transportation plans
- Connecting with community leaders and organizations who can help the MPO reach more LEP residents
- Translation into different languages available (see Figure 3-1)

Figure 3-1: Desktop Translation Screenshot



PPP Evaluation

Continuous evaluation of public involvement strategies is required by the FHWA and TxDOT. Some of the key performance indicators include evaluating the extent to which the PPP:

- Provides direction for public involvement activities
- Includes descriptions of roles and responsibilities of the MPO and other agencies in the public involvement process
- Lists techniques that are or could be used by the MPO to encourage the public to engage in the planning process

A general evaluation guide for PPP key performance indicators can be found in the public involvement technical memorandum.

PUBLIC OUTREACH EFFORTS

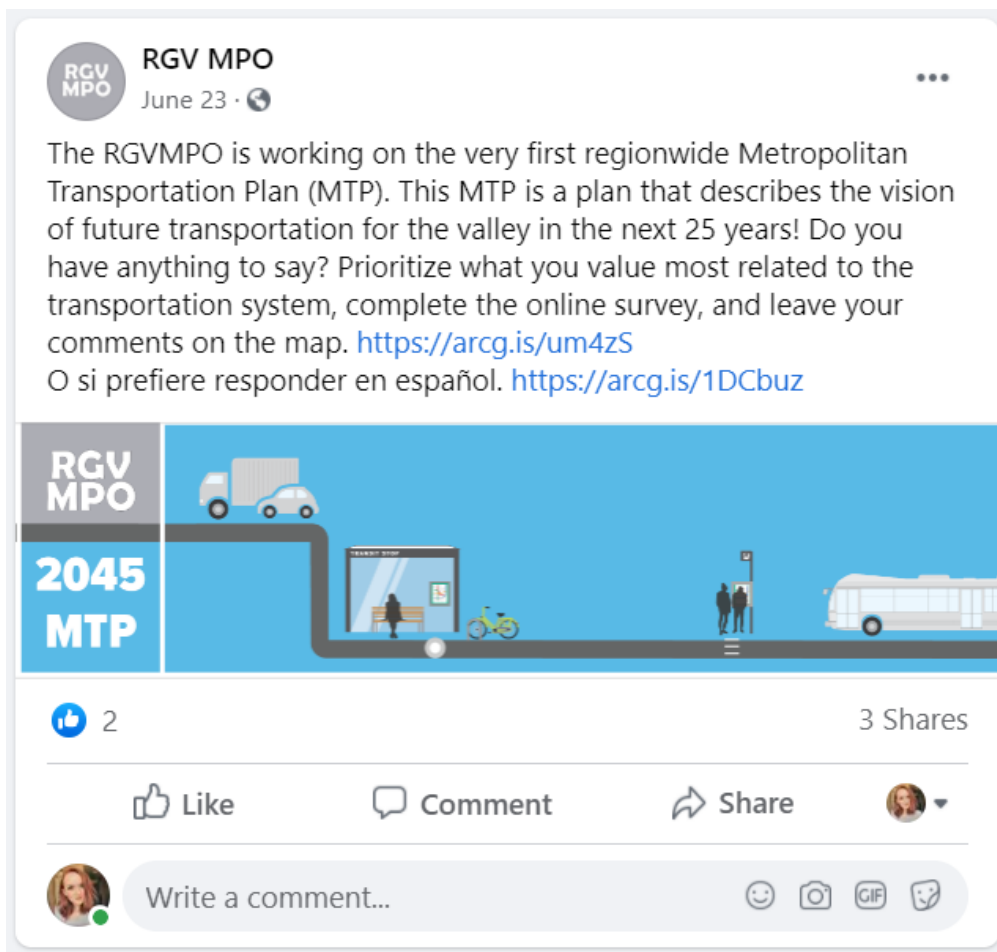
The RGVMPPO conducted multiple public and stakeholder outreach efforts to better understand the community's transportation challenges, needs, and opportunities. The participants' responses provided insight into their vision for the future of the transportation system and their goals for the RGVMPAB in 2045. This section describes all public engagement strategies used for the RGVMPPO 2045

MTP update, including an online visioning exercise, public surveys, stakeholder meetings, and virtual open houses.

Online Visioning Tool

The main objective of the online visioning process for the RGV MPO 2045 MTP was to solicit input from the public regarding their priorities for the future RGV MAB transportation system. Due to unforeseen circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the entirety of the visioning process was conducted online. Community members were notified of the survey primarily through social media posts, outreach to stakeholders, and posts on the RGV MPO website. A social media post is presented in Figure 3-2.

Figure 3-2: Online Visioning Facebook Post





The feedback received from the online visioning tool played a role in shaping the MTP goals and objectives and provided critical insights that helped the RGVMPPO prioritize the transportation improvement projects proposed for inclusion in the plan. The online tool was opened on April 1, 2020 and closed on July 20, 2020. During this time, the tool received a total of 83 survey responses and 200 comments on the interactive map.

The digital visioning process was custom-built for the development of the MTP. The tool consisted of modules that both educated the public about the plan development process and requested feedback about community values and existing conditions in the region.

Accessibility for the online visioning tool was prioritized throughout the design process, starting with responsive web design. The mobile-friendly version of the website, as shown in Figure 3-3, allowed users who only had access to a mobile device to participate in the online visioning process. Access for LEP residents was also taken into consideration. The mobile site can be accessed in English or Spanish, and the desktop site can be accessed in English, Spanish, and translated into several other languages using an imbedded translation engine.

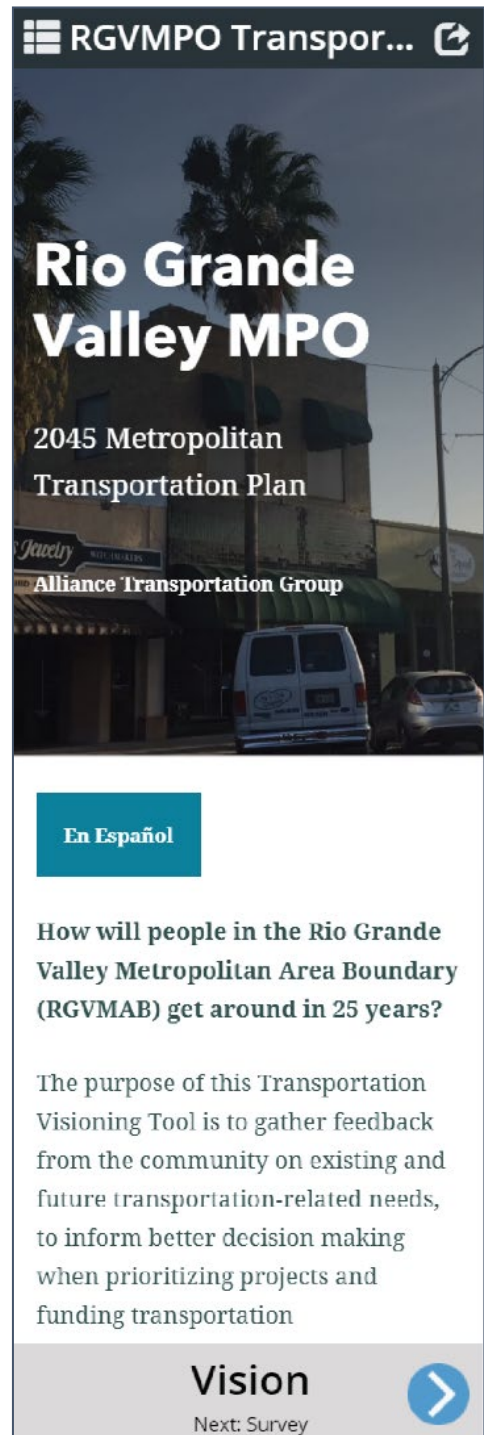
The structure of the tool included a survey that gathered information about participants' transportation usage and an interactive map of the region. The responses from these modules are summarized in the following section.

Online Visioning Responses

The survey and interactive mapping tool solicited insightful feedback from participants, and patterns often emerged in the responses. Some of the most common comments focused on inefficiency in the transportation systems, congestion and traffic, connectivity, and safety – especially for bicyclists and pedestrians.

Most frequently, participants voiced a need for safer bike and pedestrian routes. One comment said, ***“Bikers often share the roads with distracted drivers and are putting themselves at risk. Creating safe biking and walking trails would give people the options of choosing these means of conveyance over a car.”***

**Figure 3-3: Online Visioning
Mobile Web Design**

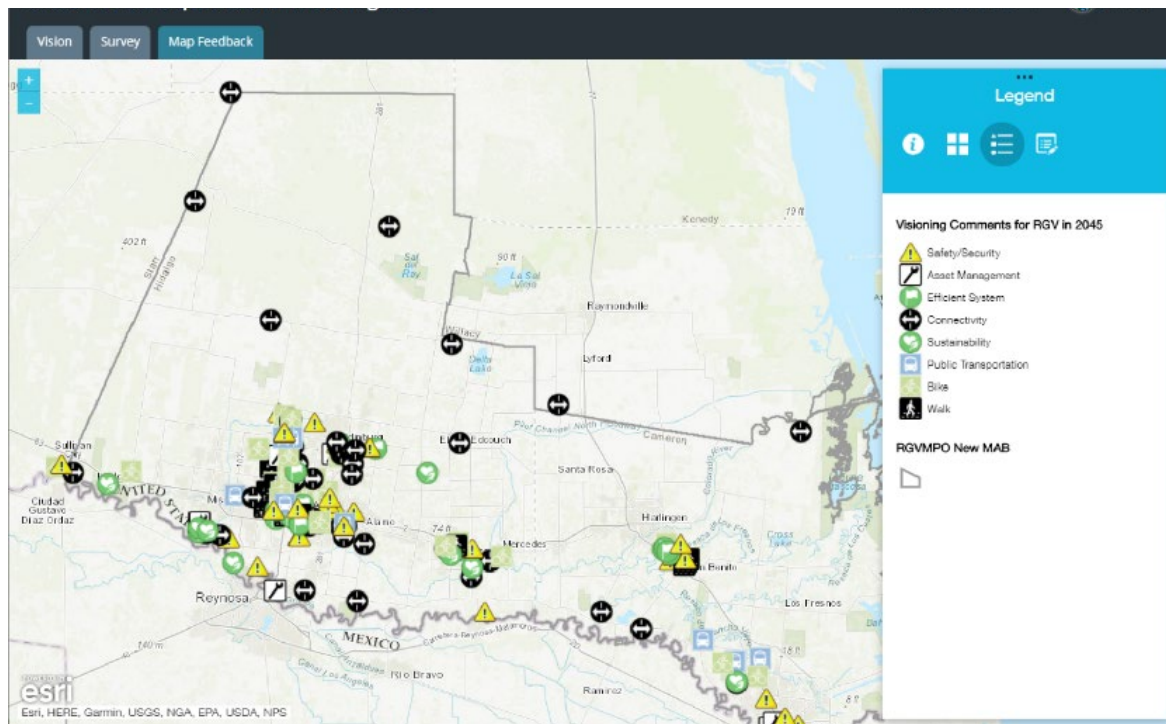


Additionally, the heat in South Texas was mentioned, prompting the suggestion for improved bus stop amenities that provide shade, protect riders from the elements, prevent heat exhaustion, and subsequently, increase ridership.

Minimizing the delays travelers experience due to congested roadways and improving travel time reliability was also a common theme in both the survey and the interactive mapping tool. One respondent summed up the topic, accordingly, referring to transit: "We need something to help us go to other cities quicker." Additionally, some mentioned the information about bus routes and schedules was hard to find, creating another obstacle to using public transit.

System connectivity was the third-highest priority on the survey and the most common category for responses received on the interactive mapping tool. Fragmented transit and active transportation routes in the RGV MAB were a repeated complaint, and many participants expressed a desire for a regional transit connection that travels the length of the RGV MAB.

Figure 3-4: Screenshot of Feedback Map Module





Stakeholder Interviews

The RGVMPO conducted interviews with stakeholders from a diverse and wide-ranging set of communities across the RGVMAB. The stakeholder groups included environmental groups, transit providers, municipal and county governments, educational institutions, freight industry leaders, port authorities, law enforcement and emergency services, bicycle and pedestrian advocacy organizations, and community interest groups. The purpose of the interviews was to listen and record any regional transportation issues or opportunities that stakeholders identified for the next 25 years. Like the Online Visioning Process, stakeholder interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams due to concerns amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Staff recorded notes during the meetings and summarized a comprehensive list of topics discussed. The feedback from stakeholders has been summarized by topic in Table 3-1 below and by general comments by group in Table 3-2.

Table 3-1: Summary of Stakeholder Comments

Topic	Stakeholder Comments
Safety	<i>Lacking bike/ pedestrian infrastructure causes people to travel in unsafe conditions</i>
	<i>More education for drivers on how to share the road is needed</i>
Efficient System	<i>Congestion can cause delays for EMS workers during emergencies</i>
	<i>Evening and weekend transit service is needed</i>
	<i>An outer loop could help with freight traffic</i>
Connectivity	<i>Improve bike/ped regional connections, especially to eco-tourism sites</i>
	<i>Desire better transit connections: connecting college campuses has been good</i>
	<i>Connect rural areas to transit</i>
Environmental Stewardship	<i>Flooding is a big issue; it can cause vehicular crashes and oil runoff that is bad for the environment. Desire for better drainage on roadways</i>
Asset Management	<i>Roads should be better maintained</i>
	<i>Leveled railroad crossings and even sidewalks will allow for more active transportation</i>
	<i>Desire for faster completion of construction projects</i>
Inclusive Transportation System	<i>Poor sidewalk infrastructure is an ADA accessibility concern</i>
	<i>Transit dependent population needs better access to transit to prevent isolation</i>
Economic Growth	<i>Truck traffic should be isolated; trucks divert into city streets to save time and cause inappropriate noise and heavy traffic for residential areas</i>
	<i>Desire for more ports of entry at the U.S.-Mexico Border to encourage more commercial traffic</i>

Table 3-2: Summary of Stakeholder Comments by Group

Stakeholder Group	Summary of Comments
Freight and Port	<p>Congestion common during peak travel times, outer loops could help</p> <p>More relief routes should be identified</p> <p>Freight traffic has been increasing, and will continue to increase</p> <p>Bike and pedestrian trails are being used more often</p> <p>AV transportation should be highlighted in MTP</p> <p>Truck parking can be a challenge and cause visibility issues</p>
Valley Tourism Professionals	<p>RGV has drastically improved hike and bike trails, but better connectivity still needed</p> <p>Need better maps of hike and bike trails for tourists</p> <p>Consider transit for eco tourism areas</p> <p>Flooding is an issue in several areas</p> <p>Information about transit should be easier to find</p>
Community Group Professionals	<p>Information about transit should be easier to find</p> <p>Transit is vital to quality of life, especially because most families have one vehicle and often live very remote</p> <p>Lack of sidewalks and ADA infrastructure</p>
EMS and Law Enforcement	<p>Flooding is an issue; it has caused vehicular crashes on expressways</p> <p>Bus stops need better amenities</p> <p>More bike and pedestrian infrastructure needed</p> <p>Sidewalks need improvement</p>
Medical	<p>Traffic is a problem, especially at interchange</p> <p>Small accidents can cause a large delay, and minutes are very important in the case of an emergency</p> <p>Additional lane on major highways for emergency vehicles</p> <p>Better signage for hospital needed</p>
Bike and Pedestrian Advisory Committee	<p>More driver education about sharing the road with bikes and pedestrians</p> <p>Chip seal roads are rough and difficult to ride bikes on</p> <p>Biking is becoming more common and people are using existing trail networks</p> <p>There is a need for better signage / wayfinding information, especially for those with a language barrier</p> <p>Better connectivity needed</p>
City Stakeholders	<p>Freight traffic has steadily been increasing</p> <p>Desire to extend public transit service hours and add Sunday service</p> <p>Improve hike and bike systems with safer crossings and grade separations when possible</p> <p>Drainage systems are not designed to accommodate runoff, flooding is common</p> <p>Cyclists are active in civic meetings and provide insightful feedback</p>
EDC and Chamber of Commerce	<p>Congestion is an issue during peak hours</p> <p>Desire for outer loop to decrease traffic</p> <p>Freight traffic has been steadily increasing</p> <p>Lack of sidewalks and bike lane has become apparent as more people are using active transportation</p> <p>Would like consideration of AV solutions for the future</p>



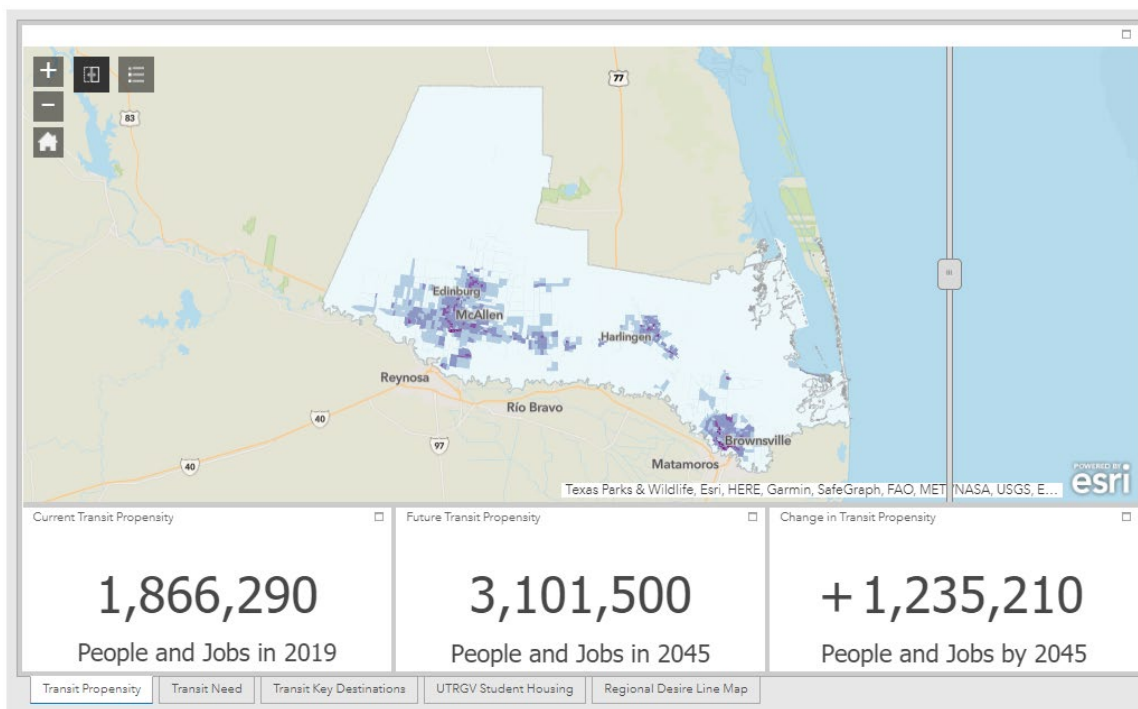
Stakeholder Group	Summary of Comments
Education	<i>Connection between campuses has been successful</i> <i>Expansion in modes could be beneficial</i> <i>Fiscal constraints are a challenge to creating efficient routes</i> <i>Education needed about the benefits of transit</i> <i>Lack of bike / ped infrastructure is a safety hazard</i> <i>Campus is projected to grow, and transit is free to students</i>
Environmental	<i>Flooding is an issue in Brownsville</i> <i>Active transportation between green spaces is needed (often close in proximity but not in access)</i> <i>Connectivity is needed on major roadways where the road acts as a barrier</i> <i>Leverage funding to increase nature education and wayfinding for ecotourism in Cameron County</i> <i>Consider equity in terms of access and connectivity to nature</i>

Draft Plan Review and Adoption

A virtual open house was held on November 4, 2020 to December 4, 2020 with the purpose of presenting the analysis work completed in the development of the plan as well as the 30-day public comment period for the RGVMP 2045 MTP document, in accordance with federal PPP guidelines.

Similar to the visioning process, all open house activities were conducted virtually due to COVID-19 pandemic limitations. A custom-built website was created to display the open house information and solicit public feedback. The RGVMP 2045 publicized the virtual open houses via social media posts and information on their website, ensuring the public was notified of the comment periods, and a mobile-friendly version of the open house site was available for people without access to desktop computers.

Figure 3-5: Interactive Transit Propensity Map



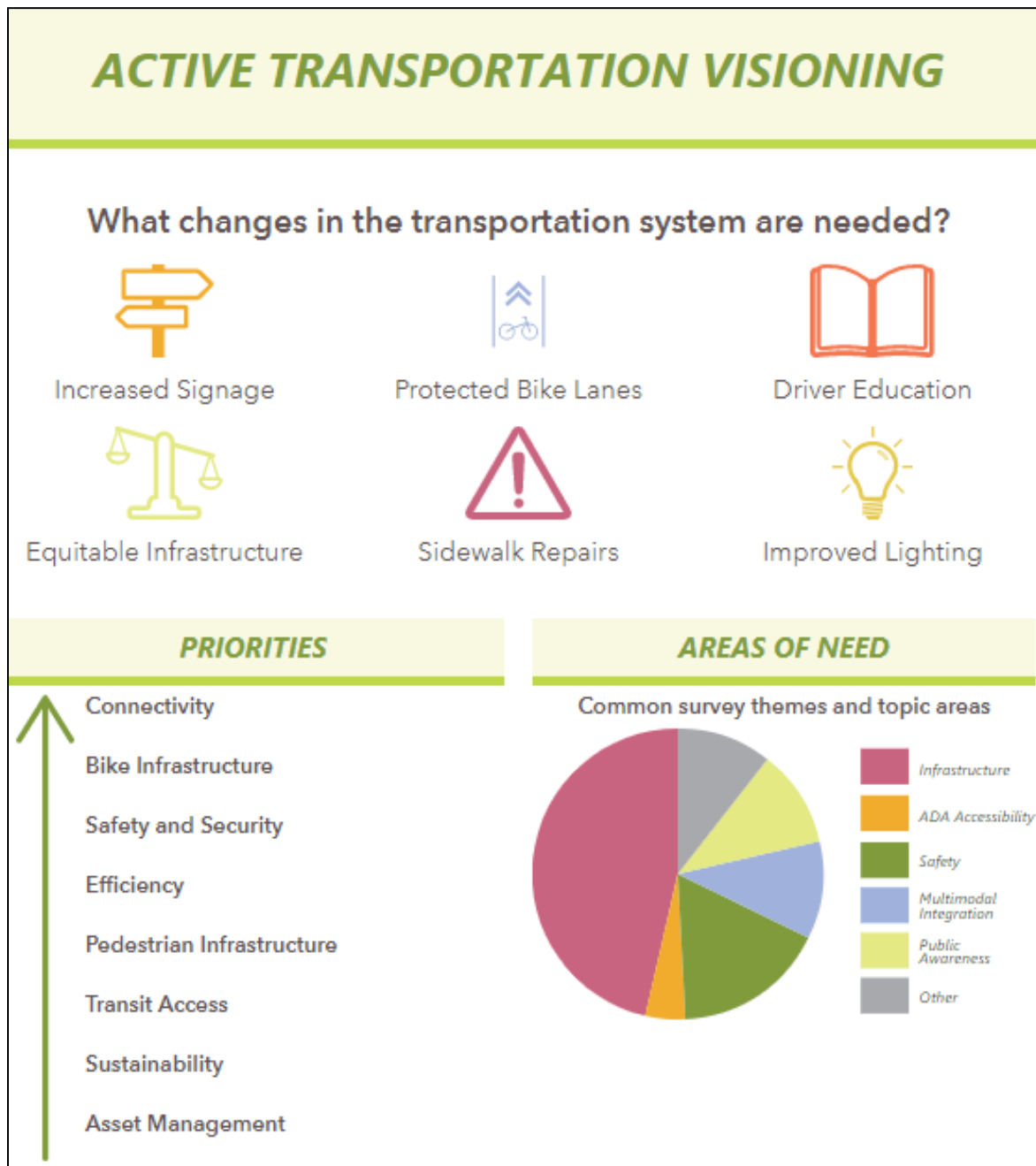
The website provided residents with an overview of the draft RGVMP 2045 MTP, including the proposed plan of fiscally constrained projects, and solicitations for feedback. The homepage of the open house website also included educational aspects about what an MTP is and why the MPO needs to develop one.

The Current Conditions Assessment discussed in the following chapter (Chapter 4) was a key aspect used to visualize findings and allow users to interact with data. For example, the Transit section included a map (shown in Figure 3-5) that allowed users to slide a vertical bar to reveal the future transit propensity in the RGVMPAB based on demographic growth projections from the regional Travel Demand Model.

Users could also view the results of the online visioning process, shown in Figure 3-6, and take an additional survey. The survey received **XX responses**, much of the feedback echoing themes from stakeholders and the visioning process public feedback.



Figure 3-6: Screenshot of Infographics Displaying Active Transportation Visioning Results



Additionally, the project team provided a digital copy of the draft plan on the virtual open house platform. This section of the open house also allowed the public to navigate the proposed plan of fiscally constrained projects and provide feedback. Further to this, the RGVMPO uploaded a digital copy of the draft plan to the agency website to increase accessibility during public comment. Many comments were received during this period. A full summary of public comments and responses from the RGVMPO can be found in the public involvement technical memorandum.

The RGVMPO Transportation Policy Board, having reviewed the draft RGVMPO 2045 MTP, and having incorporated and considered public comments given during the public comment period, adopted the RGVMPO 2045 MTP as the MTP for the RGVMAB on December 10, 2020.

Summary

A robust public involvement and stakeholder engagement process was carried out by the RGVMPO to identify issues and understand the needs of the public, as well as those of agencies and organizations with a specific interest in the RGVMAB transportation system. Public participation has long been a federal requirement for the long-range transportation planning process. The public participation process carried out by the RGVMPO in support of the MTP not only complies with federal regulations, but also ensures the plan goes above and beyond the results of the technical analyses and incorporates information on how the public experiences and perceives the transportation system, which may not always align with the technical data. Developing a plan in close cooperation with the public and key stakeholders also helps to ensure broad community support for plan adoption and implementation.

Goals and objectives provide guidance to the RGVMPO and policy makers in selecting projects for inclusion in the RGVMPO 2045 MTP and help to link other transportation planning processes and documents produced by the MPO, like the TIP and the Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP), with the long term vision of the community. As state DOTs and MPOs across the nation transition to a performance-based planning and programming process as required under MAP- 21, it will be increasingly important to develop outcome-based goals and objectives that are closely tied to the adopted performance measures. A key principle of a performance-based planning and programming process is that each step in the planning process needs to be clearly connected to the next, starting with the initial goal setting phase.