



# Smart INVESTMENTS<sup>SM</sup>

IN TRANSPORTATION FOR MINNESOTA

## Better Connections for Minnesotans with low incomes and limited transportation options

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All Minnesotans benefit from good access to important destinations, but better transportation connections are particularly important for Minnesotans with low incomes and limited transportation options. Upward mobility is tied to physical mobility — specifically, the ability to reach employment reliably and affordably.

Public transit provides a vital link to jobs and prosperity, but research shows that improved transportation for low-income households must address more than transit, particularly in the short-term. Further, the stereotypes of the small-town main street, the car-dependent suburbanite and the poor, transit-dependent inner city dweller fail to capture the complexity of what drives individual transportation decisions in the state.

As it stands, cars often work best in most communities because auto use has shaped decisions about land use. In the long term, communities must tackle how land is used in order to improve access to destinations. Especially for low-income Minnesotans, housing, employment locations and transportation choices are inextricably bound together.

To develop a more nuanced picture of these issues, Growth & Justice looked at research in four key areas — transit, cars, ridesharing and land use. Here are some of the key findings that will help shape our forthcoming report and policy recommendations for *Smart Investments<sup>SM</sup> in Transportation for Minnesota*.

### Transit: Important, but not the only answer.

Low- and moderate-income Minnesotans depend more on public transit and constitute the core ridership of state transit systems — including bus, light rail and dial-a-ride. For example, Minnesotans with incomes below the poverty level are three times more likely than those with higher incomes to ride transit to work. But Census data also show that about three-fourths of workers from poor households drive or rideshare to work — both statewide and in the Twin Cities.

Improved transit alone can't solve some of the key issues facing low-income Minnesotans.

**Transportation is a major barrier to employment for low-income people.** Better, affordable transit can lower that barrier.

**Transit reduces the financial burden of transportation for low-income households.** For all households, not just low-income ones, research shows that transportation's share of the average budget drops from about 20 percent to about 10 percent for households with good access to transit.

**Transit options must differ by location.** Densely settled urban areas with clusters of important destinations can allow transit to deliver riders to centralized stops where they disembark and walk to their destinations. Transit service



in the outer suburbs is largely limited at present to commuter runs from collection points to urban area job centers and back. Transit in sparsely populated areas generally means town-to-town buses and trips from dial-a-ride services and volunteer drivers targeted to the elderly, individuals with disabilities and low-income riders.

**Buses offer greater choice of destinations.** Low-income transit riders benefit from improvements in frequent, reliable and easy-to-use bus service on regular routes.

## Driving: Low-income people still depend upon cars.

Cars emit climate-changing greenhouse gases, clog the roads with congestion, and impose financial burdens for ownership and upkeep on households with modest and low incomes. But with transportation policy focused on car travel for the last half century, it's not surprising that even as we strive to decrease reliance on cars, most people are car-dependent. This holds true for low-income Minnesotans, too.

**Cars expand employment opportunities.** Research indicates that low-income people with cars are better able to find and keep jobs.

**Transit service often provides a steppingstone to car ownership.** Many low-income people use transit for their commutes to work until they can afford to purchase or lease a car. Still, transit service has a significant and long-lasting impact on low-income workers by giving them initial access to employment and boosting their incomes.

**Car ownership creates financial hardship for low-income households.** Despite the benefits of car ownership, driving a car is the most expensive way to travel to work. Older, lower-priced cars cost more to operate, are less reliable and contribute more to pollution.

**Time matters more than distance when choosing transit options.** In our car-oriented landscape, travel by car usually takes less time than other options.

## Ridesharing: An under-appreciated commuter connection.

Talk of transportation modes generally focuses on cars and transit, but when it comes to commuting, a surprisingly large percentage of workers — and low-income workers in particular — depends upon shared rides. Ridesharing in vanpools and carpools often involves employer or government subsidies and incentives, which can increase its viability as a travel arrangement for Minnesotans with low incomes and limited transportation options.

**More commuters use ridesharing than public transit.** This is also true among Minnesotans in poverty. Outside the Twin Cities area 13.3 percent of the working poor pool their trips to the job site, compared to 3.2 percent who use public transit. In the developed areas of the seven-county Twin Cities region, 15.8 percent of area workers in poverty rideshare, compared to 13.5 percent using transit.

**Carpools are the most common form of ridesharing.** Privately organized carpools, where a driver drops riders at their work destinations, are an important option for low-income workers, but are more difficult to organize as job sites become more spread out.

**Vanpools are a useful option for shift workers.** Vanpools generally work best when organized for a specific work-site, so that all riders are headed for the same destination. They also offer a needed alternative way to work for very early morning and late-night shifts, when transit may not be an option.

**Ridesharing services can serve commuters where other transit isn't viable.** Greater Minnesota and some areas of the Twin Cities lack the population density and concentrated employment sites that make fixed route transit economically feasible. Targeting vanpool service to low-income Minnesotans in these areas could boost their access to employment.



## Land Use: Car use has shaped decisions about land use.

Why and how people travel relates not only to transportation modes but also to the structure of communities. Car travel works best for most people at present because cars have shaped decisions about land use and the location of housing, employment and services. To dramatically improve access and travel, Minnesota must now wrestle with how land is used and how communities are designed.

**Land use patterns induce car-dependent decisions.** In a car-centric landscape, important destinations are spread out and located with little connection to transit service or the potential for transit. Many low- and moderate-income working families in metro areas locate far from work to lower housing costs, but then spend much of what they save on higher transportation expenses.

**Employment growth in urban areas is increasingly decentralized.** This makes access to jobs difficult for persons with low-incomes and limited transportation options who would rely on transit to get to work. Research indicates that efforts to locate jobs near low-income Minnesotans might not result in increased employment, either, since proximity to jobs is only one of several employment barriers they face.

**Affordable housing, transit and development practices aren't well aligned.** In some cases, state law and government practices designed to protect Minnesota landowners deter the development of affordable housing near key transit hubs. Low-income households make up a larger-than-average share of the residents near rail-line transit stations nationwide, but they spend a greater-than-average share of their income for housing.

**Streets are built to move cars, not people.** Other modes of transportation, including walking and cycling to destinations or to transit stops, are discouraged by street design that focuses on traffic speed and volume. Thus, even short trips get made by car.

More information on these topics and related policy options, as well as citations of the research, are available [here](#) in the full research report.

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