

Washington County Transit Needs Assessment

Engagement Summary (March – September 2025)



October, 2025

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INTRODUCTION

This report summarizes engagement activities conducted as part of the 2025-2026 update of the Washington County Transit Needs Assessment. Feedback received during the engagement component of the project is a crucial element in the development of themes and strategies that will be included in the project's final report. This summary covers engagement that has been conducted as of September 2025. It includes a summary of existing feedback that was collected as part of the county's Long Range Transportation Plan update and synthesizes key findings from the focus group meetings and community pop-up events. Lastly, this summary identifies overarching themes that can inform the next phase of planning.

EXISTING DATA

Long Range Transportation Plan (2024)

Development of Washington County's updated Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) included a significant public engagement effort that took place in 2024. While this plan covered all aspects of the county's transportation network, there was some feedback collected on public transit options in the county. The comments touched on a few key themes:

- **Access to Essential Services:** Feedback highlighted the importance of reliable connections to everyday needs such as groceries, healthcare, libraries, and schools. Transit is seen as a critical lifeline for residents without access to private vehicles.
- **Balancing Mobility and Safety:** Residents expressed concern that highway expansion (e.g., on Hwy 15) may worsen traffic and diminish safety. There is interest in exploring transit or multimodal alternatives rather than defaulting to road widening.
- **Restoring and Expanding Local Transit Options:** There was expressed interest in reinstating bus stops in Mahtomedi and establishing a north-south county route points to a broader need for improved local coverage and connections between communities within and outside Washington County.
- **Equity and Inclusion:** There was a theme of ensuring that vulnerable populations are not left behind in the transportation system.

EVENTS

Between March and September 2025, Washington County conducted a series of focus groups and pop-up engagement events to understand transit needs across the county. Engagement efforts emphasized reaching under-resourced groups, including seniors, individuals with disabilities, immigrant and non-English speaking households, and low-income families.

Focus Group Meetings (Phase 1)

The first round of focus group meetings and mobility manager meetings are spread throughout the project to provide updates and receive feedback throughout the process.

Cimarron (Lake Elmo)

Focus Group: Primarily Latino families residing in the Cimarron Manufactured Home Park.

- Although largely car-dependent today, many participants had prior positive experiences with transit in other cities.
- Key barriers to transit included lack of clear information about nearby services, absence of multilingual guidance, and fear of getting lost.
- Participants expressed strong interest in Metro micro and curb-to-curb services, as well as support for transportation navigators who could provide in-language, hands-on assistance.
- Desired destinations included Woodbury, Oakdale, Stillwater, St. Paul, and Minneapolis.

Cottage Grove

Focus Group: Residents, including seniors, long-time community members, and individuals with disabilities.

- Focus Group members described Cottage Grove as a “bedroom community” where reliance on cars is very high. Metro Mobility was viewed as unreliable by members of the focus group, while Lyft/Uber costs were prohibitive for short trips.
- Participants highlighted the need for circulator services, smaller neighborhood shuttles, and expansion of Metro micro zones with potential overlap into Woodbury.
- Suggested priority destinations included retail centers, medical facilities, and community amenities such as the YMCA and library.

Forest Lake

Focus Group: Spanish-speaking families

- Focus Group members emphasized feeling completely disconnected from countywide transit. With many one-car households and long commutes to Minneapolis, St. Paul, and beyond, participants reported significant insecurity when vehicles break down.
- Priorities included regional bus connections to job centers, Metro micro for local trips, and bilingual navigators.
- Parents also highlighted the impact of transportation gaps on children’s ability to access healthcare, school programs, and extracurricular activities.

Figure 1. Forest Lake Focus Group Meeting

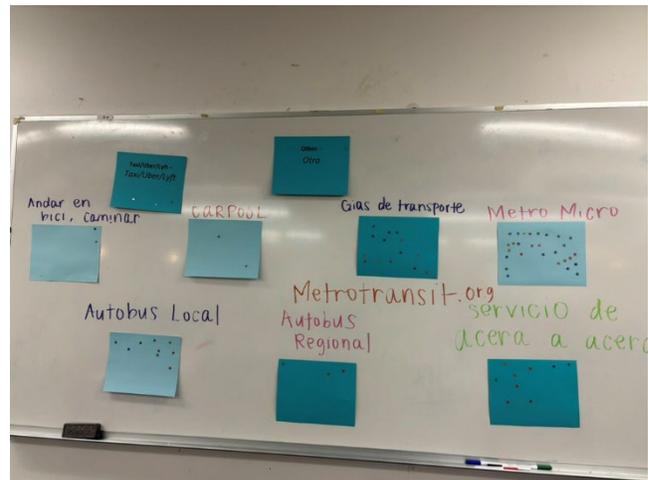


Landfall

Focus Group: Landfall residents, primarily Spanish-speaking households

- Focus group members identified major gaps between existing regional services and their daily needs. Although the Gold Line was available, participants said it did not serve local destinations or work schedules and required multiple transfers.
- There was strong support for Metro micro, local circulator routes, and transportation guides who could provide hands-on instruction in Spanish.
- Families wanted short-distance services to grocery stores, clinics, workplaces, and community centers.

Figure 2. Transit Priorities Exercise Responses



Woodbury

Focus Group: Somali and English-speaking participants, including families, students, and workers

- Focus group members were generally car-dependent but expressed openness to transit if it better met their needs.
- Suggestions included transit options for students facing high parking costs, direct routes to major employers such as Amazon, and safe, accessible services for those uncomfortable driving on highways.
- Microtransit was viewed positively for shopping trips, but its geographic coverage was seen as too limited.
- Safety, both personal security and pedestrian/bike infrastructure, emerged as a recurring concern.

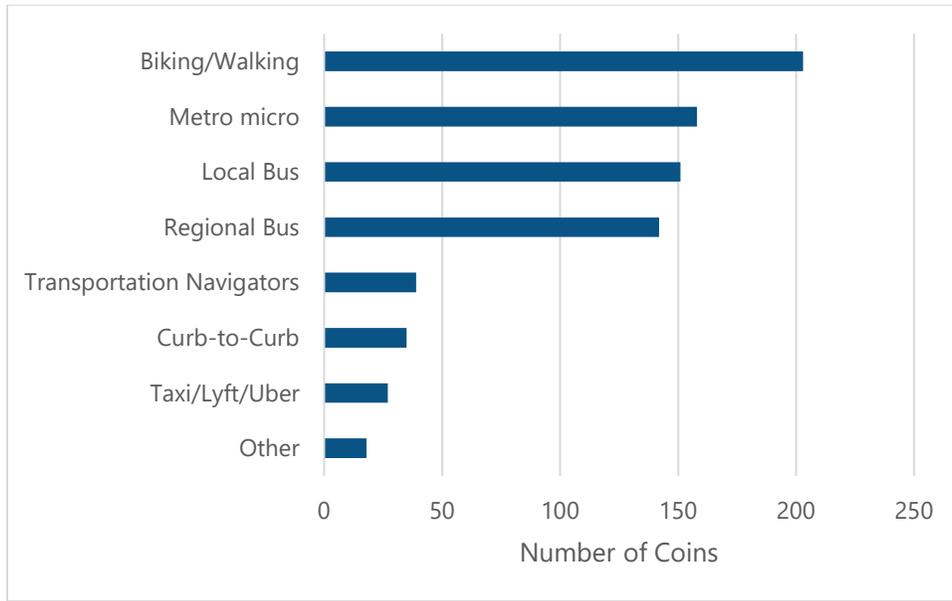
Key Themes from First Round Focus Group Meetings

Overall, the focus groups revealed consistent interest in flexible, local services (especially Metro micro), better regional connections, and strong support for bilingual navigation assistance, alongside community-specific needs such as circulators in Cottage Grove and regional buses for Forest Lake.

Gold Line Opening

In March, the project team hosted its first pop-up style engagement event at the Metro Gold Line opening in Woodbury. The event was well-attended with most of the crowd made up of transit users and families. At the event, the project team engaged visitors using the Coins in Jars exercise similar to the one used at following pop-up events. Participants were asked how they would allocate five coins to transportation improvements most valuable to them and their families. The results, shown in Figure 4 show clear preferences for flexible, affordable, and accessible options.

Figure 3. Coins in Jars Results from Gold Line Opening Engagement Event



The engagement activity results from the event showed four investment categories with strong support. These included walking/biking improvements, which scored the highest among those surveyed. Metro micro received the second highest overall support, with participants across several communities prioritizing on-demand service for local trips to shopping, healthcare, and schools. Regional bus service also ranked highly, particularly among those commuting to job centers and healthcare in Minneapolis and St. Paul.

The remaining three investment categories, (and an “other” category) received lower support at this event. Transportation guides and navigators were one of them, indicating some demand for bilingual, in-person assistance to help new or infrequent riders navigate the system. Curb-to-curb services, especially for seniors, families without cars, and riders needing accessible door-to-door options. While lower in priority, respondents also mentioned interest in Taxi/Uber/Lyft subsidies, carpool and vanpool options, which were viewed as supplemental rather than core transportation solutions.

Overall, the exercise reinforced that residents want practical, easy-to-use services that reduce dependence on unreliable personal vehicles and make essential destinations, (work, healthcare, shopping, and schools) more accessible. The strongest themes were flexibility, local access, and language/navigation support.

Figure 4. Metro Transit Gold Line Opening Engagement Event



Pop-Up Events

Six pop-up events were held during approximately the same time frame as the first round of focus group meetings and mobility manager meetings will be spread throughout the project to provide updates and receive feedback throughout the process.

Stillwater Community Services PIT Event

Participants highlighted pedestrian and bike safety concerns along Highway 36 and other corridors, requesting longer crossing times, improved accessibility, and enhanced connections between upper and lower Stillwater. Residents emphasized the need for local loops, connections to the Gold Line, and inter-county coordination for mobility services across the St. Croix River. Responses to “Mad-Lib” prompt responses underscored strong demand for local circulators, regional bus access to St. Paul, and better connections for medical, shopping, and recreational trips.

Washington County Fair in Lake Elmo

Attendees expressed interest in expanding Metro micro to reach new housing developments in Woodbury, particularly senior and low-income communities. Other input included calls for improved accessibility for individuals with disabilities, expanded evening and weekend service, and more transit along Highway 36 to Stillwater.

Walton Park in Oakdale Back to School

Community members, including youth and avid bicyclists, emphasized safety concerns such as speeding traffic, lack of helmets, and gaps in sidewalks and trails. Several residents highlighted Oakdale’s limited investment in bike and pedestrian infrastructure. Others requested Metro micro expansion into Oakdale and improved lighting and crossing features near retail areas.

Forest Lake Senior Expo

Participants at the Forest Lake Senior Expo emphasized the limited transit options available in the area, with many expressing concern about losing driving ability and the resulting lack of independence. Residents highlighted the need for affordable and reliable connections to everyday destinations within Forest Lake, as well as to regional medical centers, Saint Paul/Minneapolis, and the airport. Comments also pointed to gaps in service coverage and an interest in on-demand or volunteer driver programs as potential solutions. Overall, there was a strong sentiment that Forest Lake and nearby communities are overly car-dependent, leaving seniors and non-drivers feeling isolated.

Woodbury YMCA Senior Expo

Participants at the Woodbury engagement event mentioned a variety of transit needs including a need for affordable airport access, noting that current options such as connecting from the Gold Line to Route 54 are not practical for seniors and that ride-hailing services are too costly. Attendees also emphasized the importance of better local and regional connections, particularly between Cottage Grove, Woodbury, and Newport, to reach shopping, healthcare, and other services. In addition, there was clear interest and curiosity about new services like Metro micro and the upcoming Gold Line, reflecting community openness to innovative transit solutions.

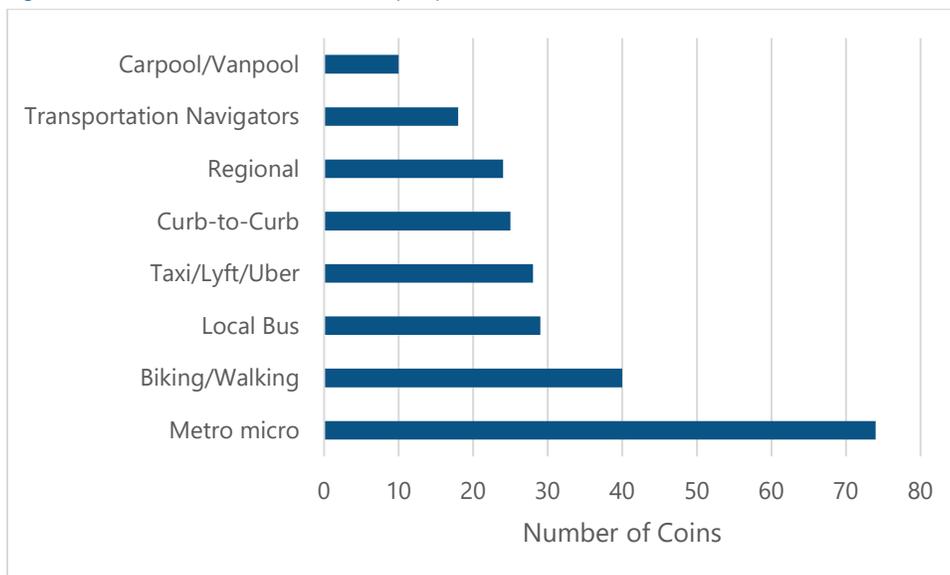
Pondview Townhomes Woodbury

Feedback from the Pondview event reflected diverse individual needs for transportation. One parent expressed interest in more options to help children travel to school, while another attendee noted relying on Uber/Lyft due to difficulty using crowded transit services, highlighting the need for flexible transportation solutions. The event itself drew mostly children and teens, with limited parent participation, but it provided a valuable opportunity to connect with local community and share information about the transit needs study.

Coins in Jars Summary from Pop-ups

In addition to the conversations held, an exercise for ranking transit priorities was available for attendees of the Forest Lake and Woodbury Senior Expos to participate in. Participants were asked how they would allocate five coins to transportation improvements most valuable to them and their families. The chart below in Figure 3 summarizes the results.

Figure 5. Coins in Jars Results from Pop-Up Events



Pop-Up Summary

At the project's pop-up events participants consistently raised concerns about safety and accessibility, especially for pedestrians and bicyclists, and emphasized the importance of local connections to shopping, healthcare, and community services. There was strong interest in expanding options like Metro micro, along with interest for more reliable regional bus service to Saint Paul and Minneapolis and better connections to destinations such as medical centers and the airport. Seniors and residents in communities like Forest Lake, Woodbury, and Oakdale remarked the challenges of car dependence and the risk of losing independence without transit alternatives.

KEY THEMES ACROSS ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

- 1. Strong Demand for Flexible, Local Services**

Residents across all communities consistently prioritized Metro micro and curb-to-curb options, especially for short trips to shopping, healthcare, and community destinations.
- 2. Desire for Regional Connectivity**

Families in Forest Lake and Cimarron stressed the importance of regional bus links to Minneapolis, St. Paul, and employment centers. Interest in park-and-ride facilities and affordable express routes was also noted.
- 3. Language and Navigation Barriers**

Participants highlighted the need for bilingual materials, transportation navigators, and hands-on training to reduce fear and confusion when using transit.
- 4. Equity and Accessibility Gaps**

Seniors, people with disabilities, and low-income residents reported limited options beyond personal vehicles. Metro Mobility was frequently cited as unreliable, while Uber/Lyft costs created additional barriers.
- 5. Safety and Infrastructure Concerns**

Both focus group and pop-up participants raised concerns about pedestrian and bike safety, inadequate lighting, and the need for safe, clean, and welcoming transit facilities.
- 6. Community-Specific Needs**

While broad themes were consistent, each community expressed unique priorities: Cottage Grove residents emphasized circulators, Forest Lake stressed regional access, Landfall highlighted local loops, and Woodbury participants pointed to student and employment connections.

NEXT STEPS

With the bulk of public engagement events as part of this study complete, remaining public involvement in the plan will include updates on the project website and to the County Board of Commissioners as the plan is further developed. Draft strategies and themes developed as part of the Transit Needs Assessment will be presented to the focus groups in a second round of meetings which will provide the groups with an opportunity to provide additional feedback before they are finalized.