Inclusive Transportation Planning Focus Groups 2018
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

In the Fall of 2018, the Greater Portland Council of Governments (GPCOG) conducted six focus groups to inform its Inclusive Transportation Planning Project. Each session was hosted at a community location in partnership with a stakeholder organization and attended by transit agency staff. Partners included Age Friendly organizations in Biddeford, Raymond, Old Orchard Beach, and Saco, Catholic Charities of Maine, the Cities of Biddeford and South Portland, Maine Immigrant Access Network, Portland Housing Authority, and South Portland Housing Authority. The focus groups were held in Portland, Raymond, Saco, and South Portland and included 70 older adults, people with disabilities, and people of color. Sessions were facilitated by GPCOG Senior Project Manager Zoe Miller. Each session began with an introduction to GPCOG's work in transportation planning and an overview of the intent of the focus groups, emphasizing the importance of public participation and partnerships.

The focus groups had two goals. First, they sought to solicit input on participants' experience with transportation, including challenges and ideas for solutions. Second, the focus groups' sought feedback on how GPCOG and PACTS can better include the concerns of underrepresented communities in transportation planning and decision-making.

Many participants in the focus groups use public transportation (including demand response) or rides from friends/family to access medical care, social services, shopping, recreational and social activities, and jobs. Participants also reported driving themselves but worrying about how much longer they would be able to. For the Focus groups with Catholic Charities of Maine and Maine Immigrant Access Network, the participants were staff who work with immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers. They answered questions based on both personal experience and that of the people they work with.

Key themes from the focus groups, both challenges and opportunities, are summarized below. Participants also shared individual stories and comments which highlight how transportation challenges impact their daily lives and the lives of others.

<u>Transportation Experiences</u>

- Access to public transportation enables many older adults and others without vehicles to connect with the outside world. Particularly for older adults, access to reliable and affordable transportation options prevents isolation and the associated negative effects on mental and physical health.

    o "Without transportation nothing else is any good."
    o "Having transportation to medical services is very important to me."

- o "I have no car now, so I have to wait until the weekends for my kids to do my shopping. They have to leave work to take me to doctor's appointments. If there was a bus, I could get on the bus to go shopping, to the doctor's office, or just to visit friends."
  - o "I'd like to be able to go Christmas shopping. That's coming up. I've always gone to the stores and done my own shopping. I have no way to get there."
  - o "[There's] isolation that comes about when you have no transportation. When I was driving, I used to go to a lot of events around here: the concerts, the art in the park, just different things. That's all out for me now because I have no way to go."
  - o "I just have to stay here and wait for somebody to come after me. It's hard. You can have all the entertainment you want here, but it's still not getting out. You see the four walls the whole week. I want to get out, I want to see something different."
  - o "[The state of Maine] could have a little shuttle bus for all the doctors' appointments. People wouldn't have to worry, 'Is my daughter coming today? Did she get the day off?' They should have a shuttle come right to the door."
  - o "Whenever you need to go somewhere, if you don't have a car, you either have to take a bike, walk, take the bus and not miss it, or ask a friend to help you. Those are your options when you don't have a car."
  - o "I don't have a car. I've been using the bus for years. It helps me get to my appointments or gets me in town to visit friends."

- Some people expressed their view that public transportation is infrequent and unreliable.

  - o "Waiting for the bus can be a whole day affair."
  - o "Sometimes they tell you certain times, but the bus doesn't come until fifteen minutes later. And sometimes it doesn't even come until the next hour. The hours are not relatable, so you kind of just have to guess and come earlier than usual and see if it comes."
  - o "I don't drive, so accessibility is an issue. Waiting for the bus in the wintertime for an hour is really long. if they were more frequent, it would make life a lot easier."

- Older adults and people with disabilities expressed having trouble getting to public transit, even when it is close by, particularly in the winter. Crossing a busy street to get to a bus stop can be difficult and intimidating. Bus stops were often described as unsafe and uncomfortable – lacking visibility and signage.

  - o "I used to take the bus but now walking to the bus stop is difficult."
  - o "The bus should be able to come up here [to the housing apartments] once or twice a week."
  - o "The biggest problem we have in Old Orchard Beach is people don't know where to stand to get a bus because there's absolutely no signage. You see them standing wherever and the bus goes right by them."
  - o "If you use the bus, you have to walk a fair distance, and Portland is terrible at keeping sidewalks clear. So walking in the winter is really difficult."

- The cost of fares for public transit was also a noted challenge, particularly for newly arrived immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers.

  o "All the money [new Mainers] get goes to rent so they don't have any left over to go and buy a bus pass. They might not take that job because of a lack of pass rides."

- People with disabilities and those with limited ability to speak and read in English find it particularly difficult to understand transit information and instructions.

  o "When people are new [to the U.S], always they have a hard time knowing the time. It is sometimes very tough for those who don't speak good English and cannot understand the schedule for the bus. Sometimes they are just told you have to come there an hour before."
  o "The bus schedule is not known by so many people. Unless someone has the knowledge to go online and check the bus schedule, but many people that I work with, they don't even know how to navigate the Internet. If you want to change, you have to make the bus schedule known by so many people. Including many languages."
  o "Visual cues for people who don't speak English would be super helpful."

- Public transit is necessary but challenging in more rural areas outside of the Portland area.
  o "Some places are not covered by the bus. It's hard. It's making it hard to live there. If the transportation was reliable in those [surrounding] cities, it could make it easy for people to live there."

- People with little or no experience using public transportation are often wary of trying something new. They also have difficulty accessing and understanding information about fares, routes, and connections. In some cases, the trip-planning and real-time information that would make use easier may be unavailable or inaccessible.

  o "I've been on the bus once when I was 15, so I wouldn't even know what to do."
  o "The word needs to be out there more for people (with disabilities). We need more ways of transportation other than the ShuttleBus and we need to know about them, because if we don't know about them, we can't use them."
  o "I think some type of board [at senior housing sites] showing how the connections can be made and how we could transfer to other places would help to show how the whole thing works."
  o "My son lives in Biddeford, and I've been thinking about starting to take the bus out there. I don't know exactly how that works, but, I'm hoping to learn."
  o "New people move into [senior housing] all the time. Sometimes people's fear that they have to know everything when they get on the bus can be a little bit unreasonable. And when they get on the bus it's not so bad."

- Routes and schedules are not well coordinated among transit providers and with hospitals, employers, shopping and recreational centers, housing, and other common destinations.

  - o "Some clients, when they do second shift jobs, there is no transportation that is coming. Some companies like to hire third shift, and there are no buses during that time."
  - o "We've had concerns about the bus not running early or late enough for our clients to get to work. The bus hours can be really challenging for folks that need to get to work."
  - o "The 9A and the 9B need to run a little bit later. Because there are people that work and if you don't get the 8:10 bus and you have to wait for the 8:35 bus, that's the very last one going out. And if you miss it, it's really frustrating because there's no other buses after that. And the connections, like if one bus is late … you can't make your connection. It does need to be addressed on timing and connections from one bus to another. That's too long of a journey from City Hall to around the corner for older people. People need extra time on foot to get from point A to point B."
  - o "We need the developers to have to be held responsible that if they're going to put up a 55-plus community, or an aging community in buildings or apartments, make sure they have public transportation."
  - o "Depending on where our folks live it can be hard to get to a Hannaford, grocery stores."
  - o "It's very easy for me to take the bus to go over to the community center. However, it does not run in a timed spot so that it's convenient for different things. They do games on Thursdays, for a long time I've wanted to go and do that, but the schedule was so messed up, that it was making me wait 45 minutes or so for it to come back around. The convenience is wonderful, and it would certainly be helpful if they had more runs."

Inclusion in Transportation Planning and Decision-Making

- People do not feel that they have a venue to share their experiences and concerns in a meaningful and productive way.
  - o "We don't have a contact person that we can call."
  - o "I've literally probably put in at least four complaints in the past year and a half, and I haven't heard a darn thing."

- There needs to be a better understanding among the public and decision makers about the importance of public transportation and the challenges that certain people are experiencing with the existing system.
  - o "It would be very advantageous for elected officials to be involved."
  - o "Our town council is very much behind the aging group; I don't know that that's true in every town in York County. The more calls you get, the more likely the town council is to act on your behalf."

- o "The more organizations that come to the table that work with the aging communities on public transportation, the easier it is going to be to get the word out."

Potential Approaches to Address These Concerns:

GPCOG and PACTS can work to:

- Better communicate the concerns and challenges experienced by older adults, people with disabilities, and people of color to decision makers
- Provide coordinated marketing and communication about options to the public, partners, and community leaders to engage with more people.
- Work with partners and communities to distribute the Southern Maine Mobility Guide.

Transit agencies can work to:

- Establish a sliding fee or other discounted payment options for people based on income.
- Provide travel training to increase the awareness and understanding of options; this could create a network that enables people to act as liaisons to groups.
- Create a centralized, accessible, and responsive contact to handle questions, comments, complaints.
- Engage with developers, elected officials, employers, institutions, and the public on public transit decisions, including route and schedule changes.
- Improve connectivity and coordination among transit providers, and with employers, hospitals, and other institutions and destinations.