



Project Summary Report: 8210

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Livability for Montana Transportation

<http://www.mdt.mt.gov/research/projects/planning/benchmarks.shtml>

Introduction

The concept of livability is not new to Montana or the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT). In light of the current national dialogue on livability, the challenge facing MDT is to more formally define livability for Montana and its communities and understand how livability relates to transportation.

What We Did

Several research tasks were undertaken to understand what livability means for Montana as it relates to transportation systems. The tasks included: analysis of Montana demographics, synthesis of TranPlan 21 comments, surveys of elected leaders and stakeholders, and meetings with MDT staff. National and local literature was reviewed to better understand how livability is being defined nationally.

Qualitative analysis of tasks, where appropriate, included categorizing elements as high, medium, and low priority, based on ranking data developed during each task. The number of elements in each prioritization category was based on breakpoints in the data.

What We Found

It is clear there is no single universally accepted definition of livability, as livability needs, issues, and solutions vary across community types; one size does not fit all. However, some national, state, and local organizations are attempting to define livability due to its policy importance. For example, livability has already been used as a metric in deciding allocation of federal funds.

When attempting to define livability, Montana has a foundation upon which to build; the literature identified many existing programs, policies and projects that improve livability. It is important to note livability can be a broad term encompassing almost every aspect of a community; this definition goes well beyond the transportation system and could include the local economy, surrounding environment, community values, and land development. When investigating how transportation impacts livability, the focus should be only on items truly relevant to transportation.

Researchers identified Montana demographic factors that will have a critical influence on livability goals as they relate to transportation.

Because of these unique aspects, national or other state definitions of livability may not be applicable to Montana or may need considerable modification.

MDT developed a long-range transportation policy plan, originally adopted in 1995, called TranPlan 21. This plan, is part of an ongoing planning process that used to identify, develop and implement policies with input from the public, stakeholders, and others. The two most recent surveys were completed in 2009 and 2007. The survey includes questions to identify what Montanan's value for transportation in their communities.

Qualitative analysis was used to categorize the comments from the TranPlan 21 public and stakeholder surveys. The most common themes are summarized in Figure 1. Maintaining and improving road conditions was the theme most commented upon by both stakeholder respondents and the public.

Researchers conducted a telephone survey with Montana citizens regarding their feelings toward livability. Care was taken to not mention livability directly during the survey, but refer to "quality of life" or "making a community a good place to live." An elected leader online survey,

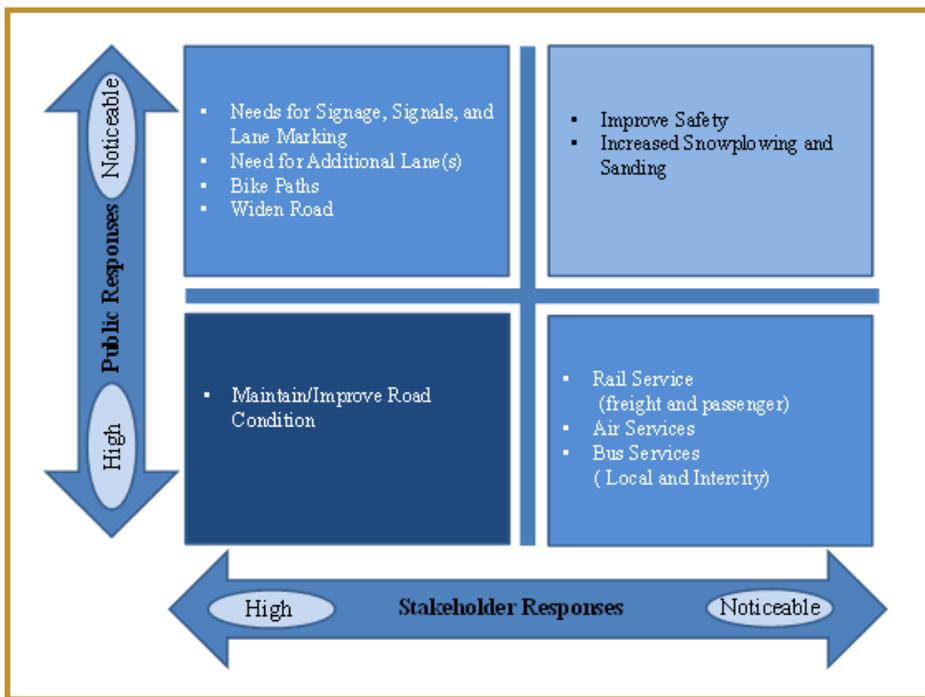


Figure 1 - Summary of TranPlan 21 Comments

patterned after the public survey, was conducted with Montana mayors, county commissioners, and other local officials.

Generally, Montana citizens and local leaders feel their communities are good places to live. On a scale of one to five (with five being “excellent”), 82% of the public and 85% of the elected leaders surveys ranked their communities with either a four or a five.

The survey also asked respondents “what makes your community a good place to live?” Responses indicate the most important factors that impact the livability of a community are not directly related to transportation, such as nice people, low population, outdoor activities, and a good education system. The most important factor, specifically related to transportation, to both the public and elected leaders is constructing and maintaining good roads, followed by access to air travel.

The major transportation themes identified from the public survey and elected leader survey responses are displayed in Figure 2. Both elected leaders and the public gave a high priority to good road conditions, but the public assigned a high priority to air travel and bus transit, while elected officials assigned a medium rating to both of these themes.

Researchers randomly selected forty-six organizations from stakeholder lists provided by MDT and

attempted to set up phone interviews. This resulted in 22 conversations with stakeholder organizations spread geographically across the state. These organizations also represent a mix of local government agencies, transit providers, resource agencies, Native American reservations, and health and human service organizations. Respondents identified several projects that improve livability. The general livability themes identified by these stakeholder groups include tailoring

livability to community needs (or “one size does not fit all”); access to work, school, and health care; transit systems; and safety. This is a small sample of stakeholders, most of whom had a focused interest. Therefore, the main themes identified in this task may not represent the views of Montanans in general.

Researchers interviewed officials from planning offices within the state departments of transportation of Colorado, Idaho, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota and Wyoming to determine actions and ideas regarding livability in their respective organizations. None of the states have a formal definition of livability, but some are working on the task. Most respondents felt livability was just a new label given to tasks their state DOTs were already planning and performing. Project examples with livability ideals are plentiful, but calling them “livability projects” may not be warranted without a consensus on the definition. In regard to the next transportation bill, all states expressed concern the bill may authorize new funding categories targeted at livability, as well as additional requirements on existing funding intended to promote livability progress.

None of the states interviewed have developed metrics dealing specifically with livability progress. However,

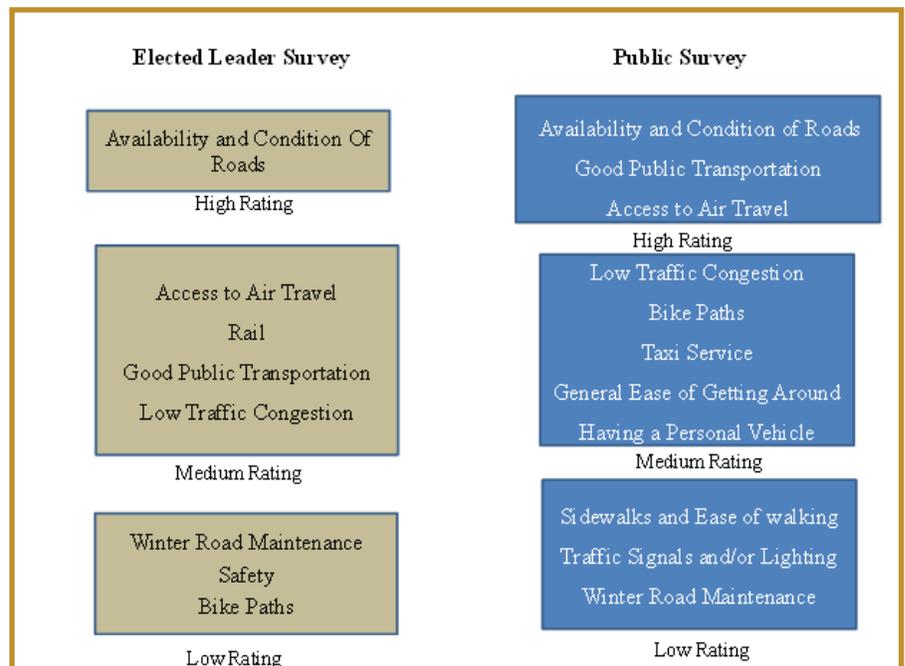


Figure 2 - Major Livability Themes Identified from Survey

Concept	TransPlan21	Other States	MDT	Public	Elected Leader	Stakeholder
Well Maintained Road System	●	●	●	●	●	●
Local Transit	○	●	○	●	○	●
Safety	○	●	●	○	○	●
Bicycle Facilities	○	○	○	○	○	●
Air Service	○	○		●	○	○
Pedestrian Facilities and Ease of Walking Access		○	○	○	○	●
Not One Size, but Flexible and Scalable		●	●			●
Local Needs / Vision Should Lead		●	●			○
Economic Viability from Transportation Infrastructure			○		○	●
Intercity Transit	○	○	○	○		○
Winter Maintenance	○		○	○	○	○
Passenger Rail	○	○		○	○	
Congestion	○		○	○	○	
Landscaping and Aesthetics			○	○		○
Access to Highways			○	○		○
Freight Rail	○				○	○
Traffic Noise			○	○		
Taxi Service				○		
Parking			○			

●- Mentioned Often and or Ranked High
○- Mentioned

Figure 3 - Traceability Matrix

respondents identified important livability issues, for both rural and urban areas, including well-maintained roadways and transit service.

The research team conducted outreach meetings with twelve different MDT groups (bureaus, divisions, and districts). MDT staff identified numerous current internal programs and projects that have had a positive impact on livability, as well as numerous current and potential partner organizations for advancing livability in the future. For example, MDT has had a context-sensitive solutions policy in place since 2003. Of the 14 major livability themes identified by MDT, staff gave the highest priority to issues related to community vision, safety, and access.

A traceability matrix was developed to display and compare the results from the various sources collected for this project (Figure 3). The research team identified 19 livability themes related to transportation across all the tasks. For the matrix, researchers then prioritized the themes as “mentioned often or ranked as a high priority,” “mentioned,” or “not mentioned.” The one high priority concept across all groups was a well-maintained road system. Other concepts mentioned often in two or more tasks were flexible/scalable transportation; suitability to local needs; and vision, safety, and local transit.

What the Researchers Recommend

It is important to emphasize a single, specific definition of livability will not apply to every community in the state, due to the differences in population size, population growth, and community values. Local needs and local vision should drive what is important for each community.

Further, the transportation system can have an impact on the livability of a community, but it is only one of many elements that make a community livable. Across all of the tasks, the results of this research identified the quality of the street and highway network as the aspect of the transportation system with the most impact on livability. Numerous

other aspects were also identified as having an impact on livability. These common themes were compiled and analyzed, and form the basis of the following definition:

“Provide a transportation system that emphasizes a safe, maintained road network; allows for multimodal transportation opportunities; and considers local community values.”

The research team recommends MDT adopt the definition provided for livability as it relates to transportation. MDT could consider an annual livability report card for Montana, including the metrics identified and highlights of projects that impact livability in the state. Also, MDT could create a performance measurement index of livability for each project. This initiative would help MDT to prioritize its projects to fulfill Montana’s unique needs. Finally, MDT should consider a second phase to this project that would involve collaborating with regional partners to define livability for the rural, intermountain West.

For Montanans, the most important elements of a livable community, although not necessarily transportation related, are friendly neighbors, rural character, availability of outdoor activities, access to high quality education and health care, abundance of natural scenic beauty, and availability of entertainment and cultural activities. However, transportation aspects that Montanans perceive bring value to a community include:

Primarily

- A safe and well-maintained road network
- Infrastructure and services that match local community values and needs

Secondarily

- Multi-modal alternatives to automobile travel—access to transit, rail, and air services; and bicycle and pedestrian facilities
- Access to nearby cities and towns for employment, health care services, and recreational activities through personal vehicles, transit, intercity bus, or other options
- Local enhancements that connect residents to the people and activities of their neighborhoods and communities
- Context-sensitive transportation planning that promotes the character of the community
- Preservation of the natural resources, scenic views, and rural sense of place valued by Montanans
- Road surfaces that are well maintained in all weather conditions
- Transportation Infrastructure that improves local economies

For More Details . . .

The research is documented in Report FHWA/MT-12-001/Livability for Montana Transportation.

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MDT Implementation Status April 2012

Results of this research project will be used in discussions with federal, state, local and stakeholders in terms of defining livability for Montana. Other future work as suggested in the final report could be employed if Livability is implemented at the national level.

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