



December 1, 2020

Dear Members of Metro Council,

In advance of your vote on Mayor Cooper's transportation plan we wanted to share three key issues our board of directors, our members and the staff at Walk Bike Nashville have identified. In short, we have concerns about the feasibility of the plan and the lack of a clear timeline for funding the projects contained in the plan. While we applaud the Mayor's Office for their effort to digest existing plans and put forth a new plan, especially during these unprecedented and uncertain times, the plan lacks critical details about funding and an implementation timeline.

We have raised these three key issues with Faye DiMassimo and the Mayor's transportation team during our "stakeholder session," in various correspondence and through personal interactions. While we appreciate the effort that was made to update the plan between the drafts released in October and December, even in the latest draft, these issues still exist and therefore we wanted to bring them to your attention. Our aim in raising these issues with you is that as Council Members, you will track the Mayor's Office and the relevant departments' progress along with us, keeping these three key concerns top-of-mind. Our hope is that the plan will be updated with more specifics as projects move toward implementation and lessons are learned through engagement of the community in the planning process.

### **Equity and Meaningful Community Engagement**

We believe transportation investments should remove barriers to mobility and prioritize the needs of Black, Indigenous, people of color (BIPOC), and low-income people who stand to gain the most from better transit service and transportation infrastructure. Nashville is a diverse city and our transportation system should reflect the diversity of needs of BIPOC as well as New Americans, people with disabilities, and the elderly. While we appreciate mentions of equity throughout the plan (especially the discussion of procedural, distributional and structural equity on pages 94-96), we believe goals around equity should be measurable and have stated outcomes. For example, why is there so much transit investment planned on Murfreesboro and Clarksville Pike but not on Gallatin or Nolensville? Why isn't there a larger investment in Vision Zero operational and capital spending, as retrofitting our streets for safety at fatal crash locations, especially at dangerous bus stops, is also a way to support equity. Equity should be embedded in the prioritization and selection of all projects in a way that is transparent to everyone. As the plan is written now, we have concerns about how and if equity will be central to the selection and implementation of projects.

Even with the challenges that the pandemic has presented, it is of critical importance to continually engage community members in the transportation planning processes. Community members who have historically been left out of the process, unequally burdened by transportation infrastructure and members of communities where there has not been an adequate level of investment need to be central to an engagement process.

Decisions about the prioritization of projects should be data-driven and informed by community members and their experiences. We appreciate the use of data to make decisions and want to be sure that data is backed by personal narratives and experiences from those who have the most at stake.

During the process for the Mayor's Transportation Plan, not enough time and budget was allotted for a community engagement process. Meaningful community engagement begins with asking the right questions, questions that the plan writers want to rely on community members expertise to answer. The answers received should shape the plan's details that are up for public debate and contributions of community members should be clearly sourced and noted. We see little evidence that the feedback received through stakeholder sessions was incorporated in the plan.

While the results of the basic question about prioritization posed at the public meetings/listening sessions is published in the plan (see pages 59-65), our staff and volunteers reported that the listening sessions had very little discussion. The questions being asked were very broad and not specific to the communities in which the meeting was being held. Instead of hosting a meeting that limits people to arriving at a meeting location at a pre-set time and date, we want to encourage a participatory creation process with community members, where people are asked for feedback on specific proposals and see their input be integrated into the plan.

In its current iteration, the plan is so broad most community members cannot give meaningful feedback that is specific to their experiences. We hope that Council Members can partner with the Mayor's Office to help facilitate a more meaningful engagement process in the future.

### **Departmental Staffing Levels**

Staffing levels at departments responsible for transportation, especially at Metro Public Works and Metro Planning, are at all time low. More funding is needed for staffing in the upcoming FY 2022 operational budget. We are excited to see the emphasis on a Department of Transportation, but still have questions about how sufficient staffing will be funded in the operational budget. Nashville's current population and expected growth necessitates a significant increase in staffing capacity at existing departments, as well as a Department of Transportation to bring innovation and multi-modalism to street design. For example, for sidewalks - but in other areas as well - Metro Public Works staff are having to continually adapt to changing funding levels, which hinders their ability to focus on getting projects done.

While we are encouraged to read about the development of a new construction manual with new performance measures based on metrics for equity and project delivery (see pages 93-96) we are left with just as many questions about how this will be implemented while departments have historically low staffing numbers and Metro continues to limit capital spending. Who will be responsible for answering these questions? Who will review and read them? Will the answers be public? What is the process when a project doesn't adequately meet the standards or the answers given are unsatisfactory? Our hope would be that process is clear, open and public and Council Members and their constituents are involved in this project review process.

### **Goals with Measurable Outcomes, Timelines and Funding**

Without a funding plan with identified dedicated revenue sources, we have real doubts about how elements of this plan will ever move forward. Nashville's lack of a dedicated funding source for transit is a factor in making Nashville less competitive for grant programs. “Opportunistic funding” will not be sufficient. There are no realistic and specific project timelines identified in the plan.

Metro Nashville departments responsible for the plan’s implementation have fewer staff and less funding than a year ago. In addition, pursuing “opportunistic funding”, especially grants, takes resources and staff time. There is currently no staff person at Metro Public Works or Metro Planning dedicated to pursuing and managing grants. At current staffing levels, these departments cannot pursue all federal and state grants opportunities. This calendar year there were two promising grant funding opportunities that Metro Public Works was not able to fully pursue due to staffing constraints and a lack of “shovel ready” (i.e. designed and engineered) projects.

We hope that as Metro Council members you will work with Metro Public Works and other relevant departments to add additional staff in this next FY 2022 budget cycle as well as unfreeze capital allocations from prior FY spending plans to demonstrate a robust commitment to implementation of this plan with a focus on equity. Prioritizing the recruitment of transportation staff is the best way to plan and fund transportation projects in the short-term. In the medium to long-term, new revenue sources must be identified and pursued in order to secure long-term dedicated funding.

While we applaud the broad goals included in the plan; the plan lacks specific measurable outcomes that will help us understand progress toward those goals. We hope that Council Members will lead and guide the discussion about how to generate more funding for transportation projects in the future and work with the Mayor’s Office to develop additional benchmarks to measure progress.

Please feel free to contact us with any questions or if you would like to discuss these issues or any aspect of the Mayor’s plan further.

Thank you,

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Brenda Pérez  
*Walk Bike Nashville*

CC: Mayor Cooper, Faye DiMassimo, Kristin Wilson