

HENNEPIN COUNTY AGING INITIATIVE

Community Focus Group Project: Transportation

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Hennepin County

Research, Planning & Development Department

TRANSPORTATION

Transportation Preview. Both survey responses and the focus group discussions revealed two overarching themes about transportation. One is the heavy reliance on cars as the principal mode of transportation. Many participants acknowledged the need to think about alternatives that would work as they age and can no longer safely drive. Some acknowledged they might need to move to locations that allow easier access to stores and other places people need to go, and to transit options.

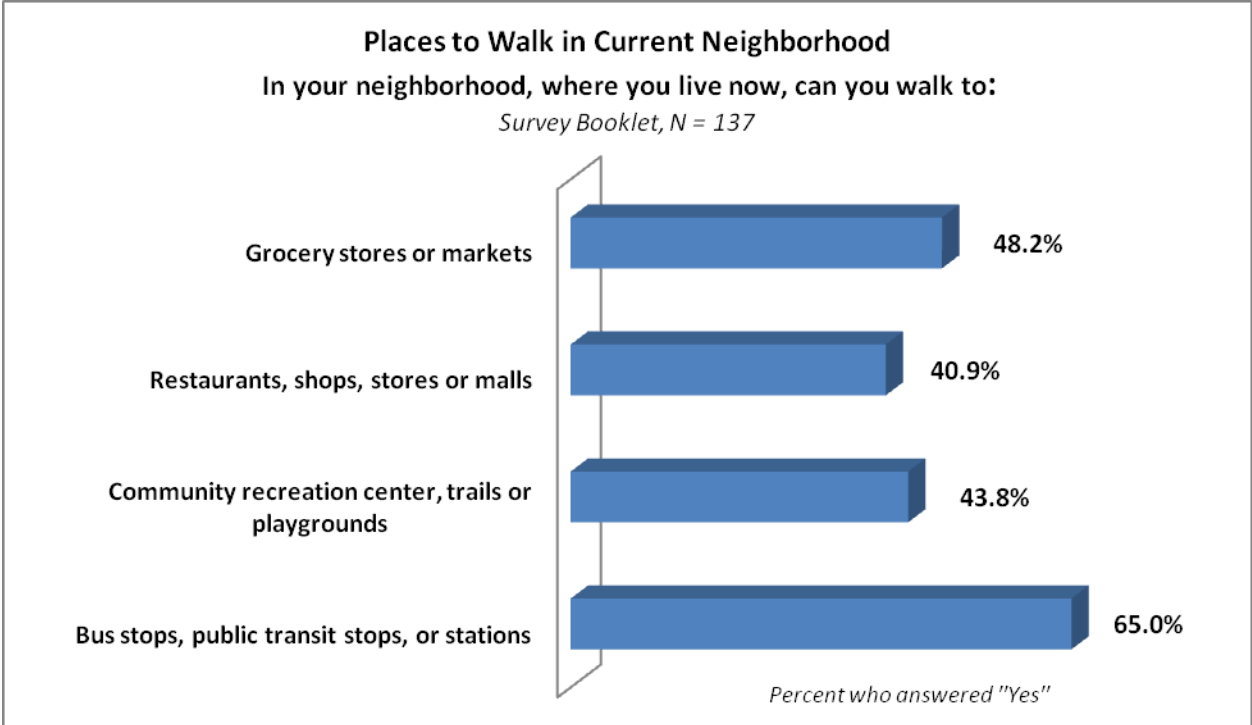
Another issue raised in focus group discussions involved complaints from those who make regular use of public transportation, particularly buses. Safety concerns riding the bus, inadequate bus shelters and other issues are significant issues for bus riders, and most acknowledged those issues would be more serious as they age. Greater use of public transit is unlikely if these issues aren't addressed. Although the light rail received more positive reviews as a senior friendly option, the limited reach of light rail doesn't make it a viable option for many boomers as they age.

Overall, it is clear that transportation will be a significant issue as this age group becomes older. One of the participants, articulating her sense of priority from the overall focus group discussion, suggested an important role for Hennepin County in addressing this issue:

"I don't know how much Hennepin County really is a player in transportation, but I think the whole issue of mobility and how we tackle mobility in the Metro area is so — it's a complex system, and I think the mobility for an aging population is just going to be so critical, and so how do we put all of the transportation and walkability issue — you know, how does that become comprehensive? And Hennepin County is not the biggest player in public transportation, the Met Council is, but Hennepin County can be a very strong advocate. So I would really urge them to be a thoughtful and strong advocate as it relates to the transportation system planning. With this many people, how are we going to get around?"

The focus group survey and discussions included questions about transportation, seeking to understand current patterns as well as future possibilities. These included questions about walking, barriers to walking, current transit choices, and use of mass transit.

Walking in neighborhoods. We asked people to describe whether they can walk to locations and services in their current neighborhoods. Just under half (48 percent) can walk to a grocery store or market, and about 44 percent to recreation centers, trails or playgrounds. About 41 percent can walk to a restaurant, shop, store or mall, and 65 percent to a mass transit stop.



We also asked written questions about walking in an average week, weather permitting. Slightly less than one third (28 percent) don't walk to any destination in an average week. Only 12 percent walk to a destination every day.

In focus group discussions, participants identified issues they face walking in their neighborhoods.

"You know, I used to think I was big and bad, but now, you know, at night, you know, I'm scared to walk to the street. The world has really changed now, you know, and just going to the bus stop is a challenge."

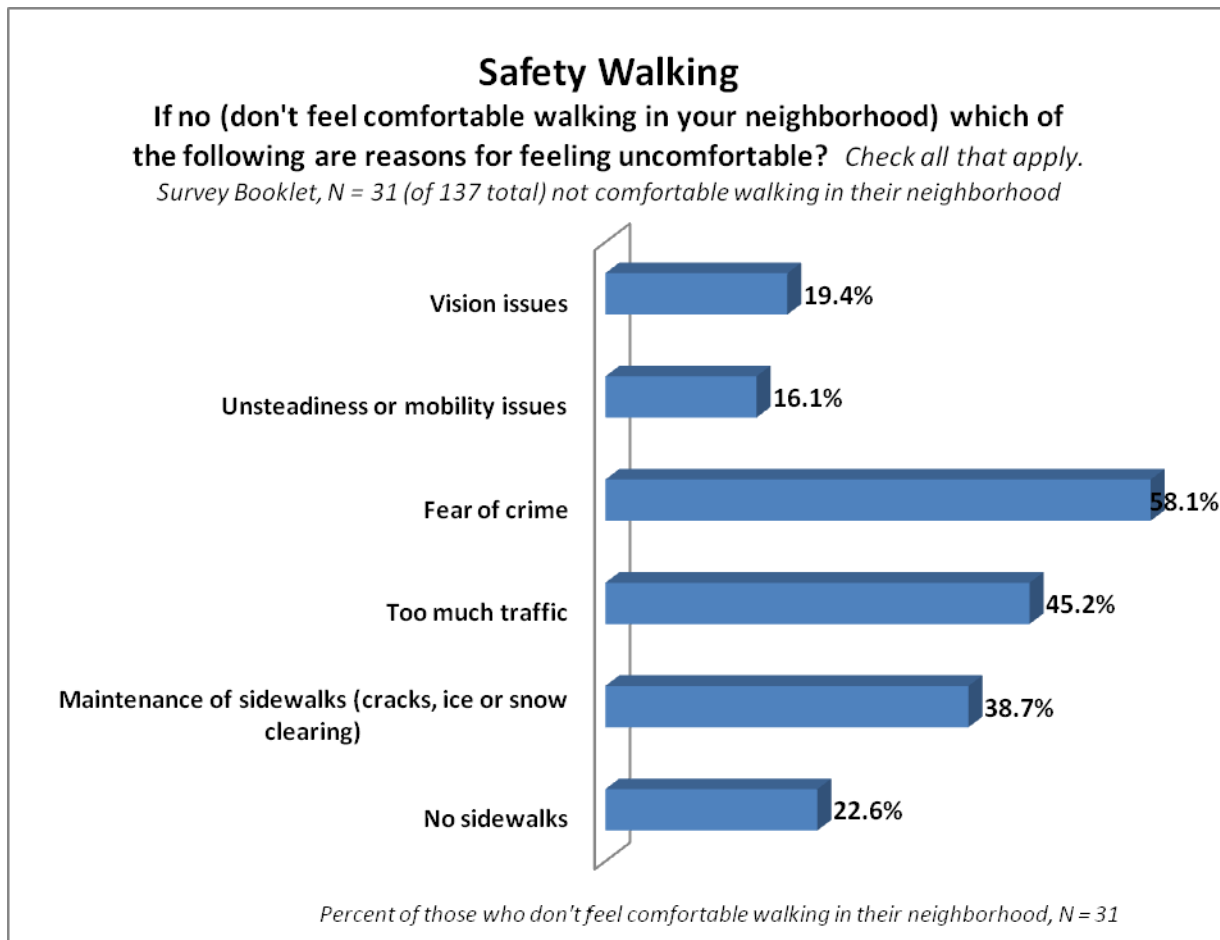
"Where I live, anyplace you live, if you live in Edina or wherever, it's always walking alone at night is risky."

"No, I don't feel safe in my neighborhood. I've noticed in the past four years that there is more kids walking the streets, and you know what they're going to do. I mean, they're not being quiet talking, children walking. They're being very loud and obnoxious. I know in 15 years, 20 years I definitely won't feel safe."

"Yeah, it's something nobody really thinks about until you have to do it. In the summer I take my mom out for walks through the neighborhood in her wheelchair, but the pavement — there are blocks of cement, and there are bumps, bumps, bumps, bumps, bumps, and it's uncomfortable for her. And, you know, you wouldn't think about that unless you're in a wheelchair, so they need to figure out how to make a nice smooth path on the sidewalks as we age."

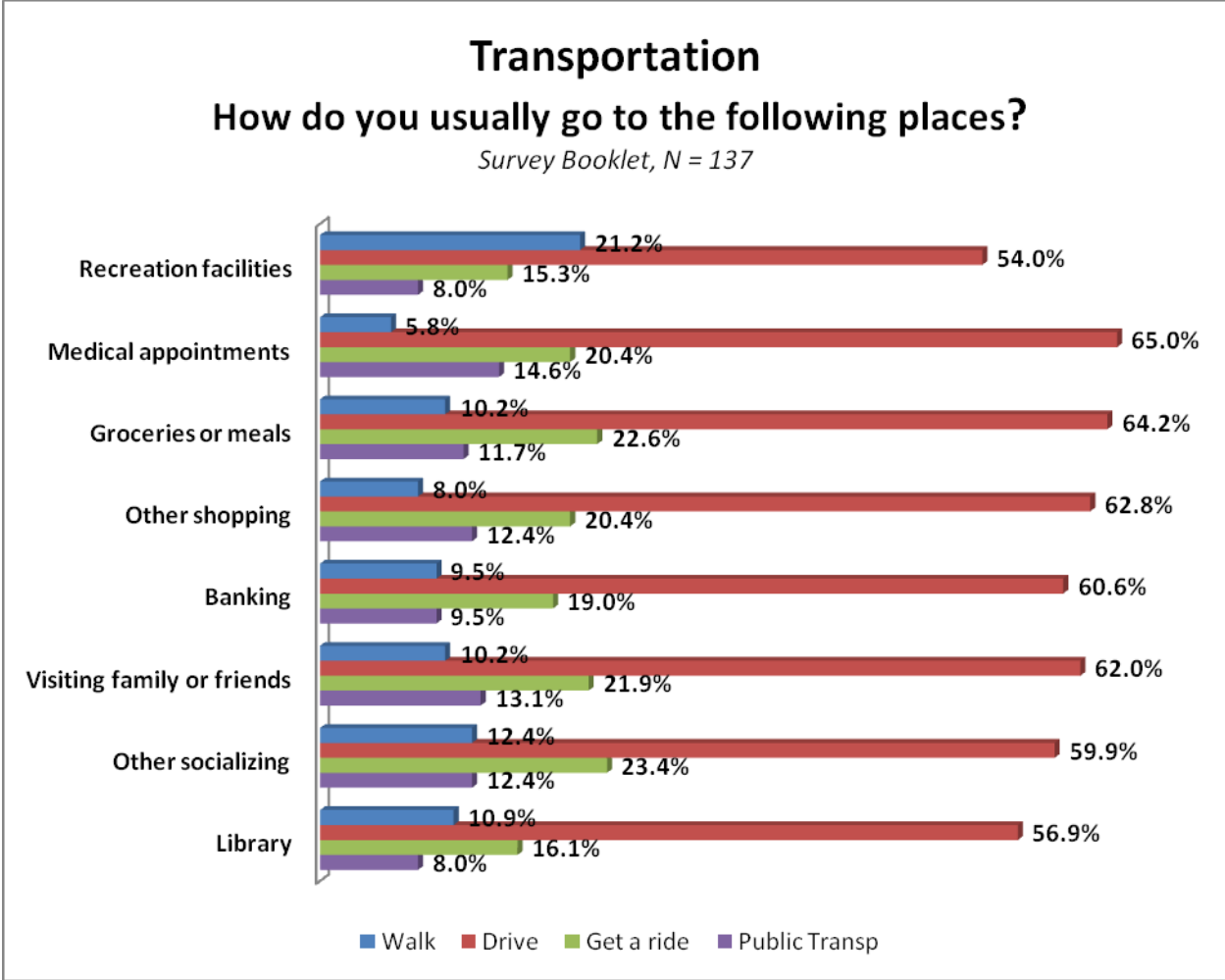
“I live in Bloomington, and it’s easy to walk, but you there’s no destinations within walking distance. You can go out for a walk for exercise, but you can’t walk and do shopping or any kind goods or services really, except a hair salon that’s close enough for my wife to go to.”

We also asked in a written question whether people feel comfortable walking in their neighborhoods. Nearly 72 percent said “Yes”, while nearly 23 percent reported “No.” For those who do not feel comfortable walking in their neighborhood, there were additional written questions about the reasons why. Crime is the biggest reason people are not comfortable walking in their neighborhoods. Other reasons include too much traffic (45 percent), sidewalk maintenance (39 percent) and lack of sidewalks (23 percent). Sixteen percent reported that they were unsteady or had mobility issues, and 20 percent reported vision issues.



Usual mode of transportation. We asked a number of questions which included information about driving, or use of a car, to get to destinations. Nearly 75 percent of all of our focus group participants report a current driver’s license, and about 68 percent currently own a car.

Not surprisingly, when asked about their usual mode of transportation, the automobile dominated other modes of transportation. Between 70 and 87 percent of usual trips were taken in a car. About 65 percent drove or were driven to medical appointments; about 15 percent used mass transit.



Concerns about mobility when older. Participants worried about what they would do when they were no longer able to drive. Inability to drive brings fears of isolation and diminished quality of life.

“One thing that really scares the heck out of me is getting around, driving, losing my driver's license. So at the very least, we've been looking to downsize in our home and be close to a grocery store and be close to transit. The loss of mobility is — boy, for whatever causes it, physically or just being able to drive, bugs me.”

“And so what will happen when you're not able to drive? I will become a hermit and I will wither away.”

Many identify the primary alternative to driving their own car as getting rides from others.

“You better hope those grandchildren will pick you up and give you rides.”

“I look at my mother-in-law, she's 89-years-old bless her heart, smart as a whip, can't drive anymore. The bus stops in front of her house and she has yet to take a bus anywhere. She relies on one of her six children or grandchildren. That's the key. Have lots of kids and grandkids.”

“When you are older, you are scared and you need someone to pick you up and take you here and there.”

Many said that alternatives to the car – like taxis or even the bus – are too expensive.

“Sometimes when you get older, they take your driver’s license away. I don’t even know how to catch a bus, and it’s too expensive. If I ever don’t have my car, I take a cab, but I can’t do that all

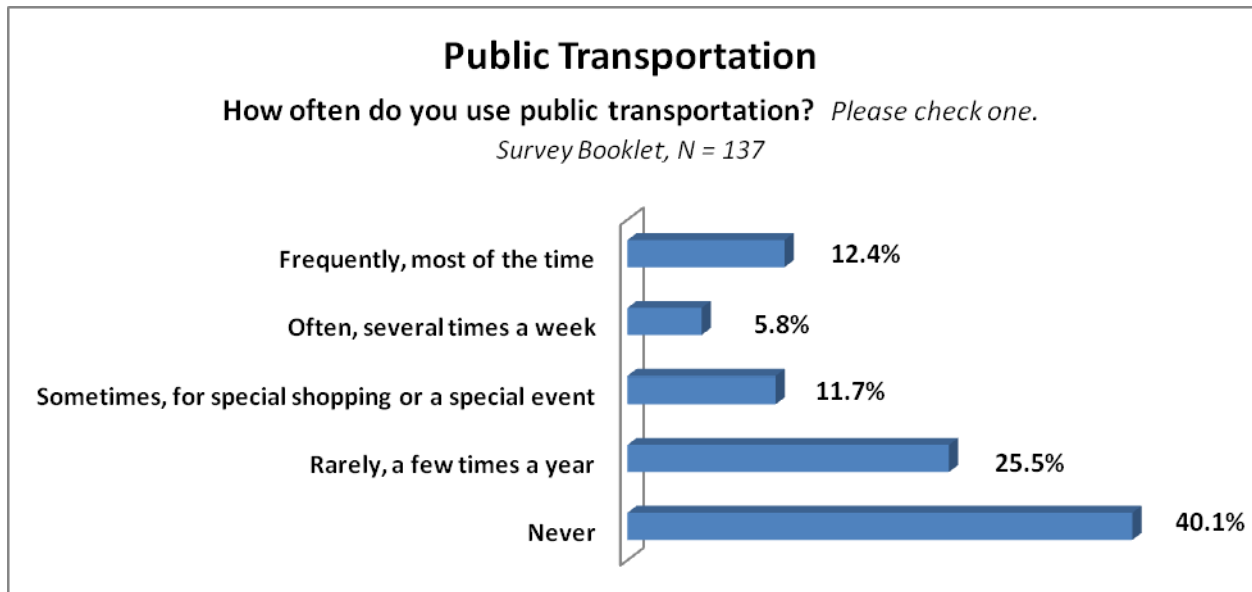
“It [bus] doesn’t go where we want to go. Hard might get lost. Taxi expensive and sometimes scary. They get in cab, it goes 75 miles an hour. That’s scary.”

Some said they used the light rail system, but noted that it does not directly serve many of the places they went.

“What’s needed is more options. I mean, I love taking the light rail to see the Twins or whatever, but it’s much harder to get other places. Yeah, the trouble is you can get to the Guthrie on the light rail, and it’s really only a couple blocks walk, but it’s a really spooky couple of blocks, you know?”

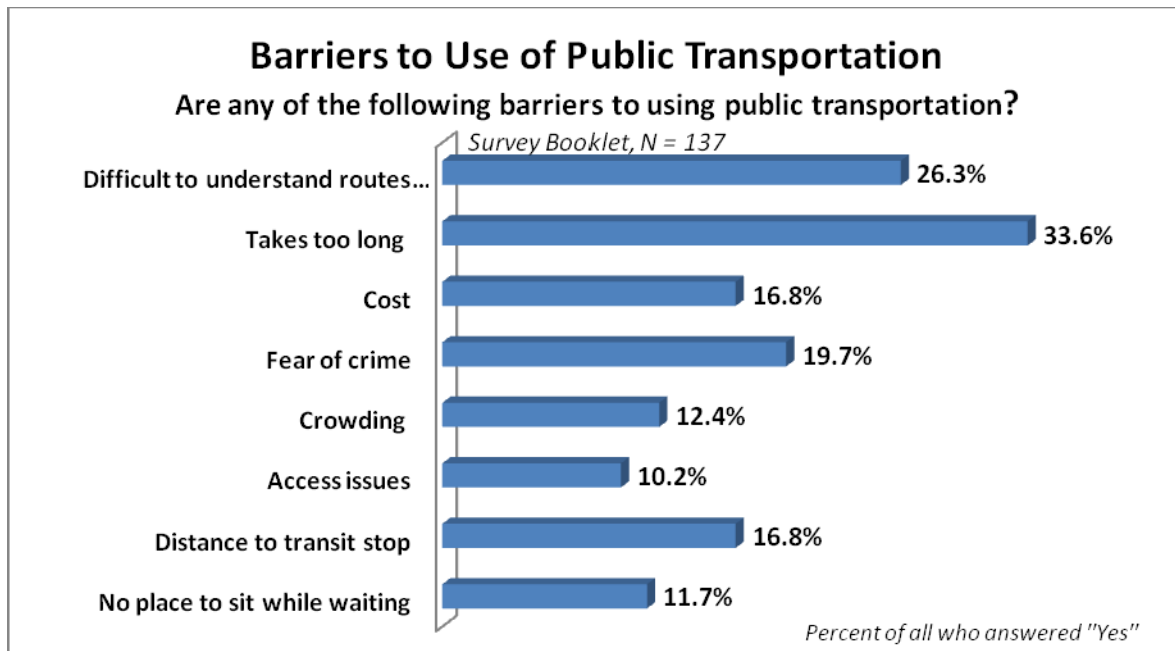
A number of people suggested that transportation was an issue which would lead them to move to alternate housing. Many wished for housing alternatives which would allow them to walk to grocery stores, restaurants and even medical care. Others hoped such housing would have easier access to public transit, with particular mention of light rail as a “senior friendly” mode of transportation.

Public transportation. We asked written questions about use of public transportation, and found that about 12 percent use it regularly and another 6 percent frequently. Forty percent indicate they never use public transit, and about 26 percent use it rarely.



We asked written questions about barriers to use of public transit. As the following graph indicates, the length of time it takes to get to a destination was the barrier cited by the largest number of participants

(33.6 percent), followed by difficulty understanding routes and timetables (26 percent). This was mentioned in particular by those who do not have English as their first language. Fear of crime was identified by about 20 percent of participants, and about 17 percent identified cost and distance to the transit stop.



Safety. Many people, particularly those who make regular use of public transit, are concerned about safety in using public transportation. Most of these participants ride buses, and concerns expressed were about buses.

“So some people are intimidating. Their very presence is intimidating. They don't have to say anything, but it's just something about them that's frightening, so I move out of their way as quickly as possible. And I'm a bus rider. A lot of my colleagues here, we ride buses, so we hear it and we feel it. There's a lot of violence on the street and a lot of anger, and it is scary.”

Several participants across more than one group mentioned safety fears being reduced when police officers are visibly riding buses.

“Yeah, if you have more police ride the bus, they get quiet. I was getting ready to get on the bus one day — this tickled me. A police was there, was getting ready to board the bus. He's got a dog with him. Everybody got quiet. It was so quiet, you might as well have been in the cemetery, man. You don't want to fight Fido. Usually that bus is loud. When that police got on the bus with that dog, you didn't hear nothing. Everybody was probably praying, “Please, don't sniff at me.”

Shelters. There were also issues raised about the difficulties in waiting for a bus, the condition of bus shelters, and differential maintenance of shelters.

“Well, a lot of bus stops don't even have shelter, and that's kind of unreal in Minnesota. Or they could start putting more lights in these bus shelters, because a lot of them's dark. They don't want them too comfortable, because the homeless hang out there, you know. At the

same time, I'm old and I'm waiting for a bus and the wind is whipping, and there's not even a screen or nothing."

"Yeah, but it's hard if you have to standing out to take the bus, it's cold. I don't know but I get colder faster now... they should have heaters in the bus stops."