

CHAPTER 2: PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PROCESS

The transportation planning process impacts citizens throughout the Northern Middlesex region, so it is essential that the NMMPO provide adequate opportunities for citizens and public officials to be involved in the development of the RTP. Local communities and the general public play a major role in developing the transportation programs and strategies to meet the region's needs. An open and effective planning process aids in the creation of the RTP and ensures that transportation and land use decisions fit the communities' visions for growth and development.

During the RTP development, the transportation planning team undertook an extensive public involvement effort, which consisted of interactive forums designed to obtain feedback regarding acceptable and effective ways to improve the transportation system to reflect the needs and values of the region. These public participation efforts allowed the public to be directly involved in the regional transportation planning process leading to the development of the RTP.

It was important for the NMMPO to ensure that all citizens regardless of race, color, religion, income status, national origin, age, gender, disability, marital status, or political affiliation, had an equal opportunity to participate in the decision-making process for the RTP. Additionally, it was critical that the public involvement process include population groups that historically have not been involved or well-represented in the transportation planning process. This includes minorities, transit dependent citizens, low income individuals, and persons with disabilities. Our public outreach efforts were designed to ensure that the planning process was inclusive and accessible to all members of the community and followed specific strategies that relate to Title VI and Executive Orders 12898 and 13166.

PUBLIC OUTREACH PLAN

In 2010 the Northern Middlesex Metropolitan Planning Organization (NMMPO) adopted a public participation plan which is utilized throughout the transportation planning process. A copy of the Public Participation Plan is included in Appendix 5. To ensure that the public was actively engaged and information was properly disseminated during the development of the RTP, the NMMPO developed a Public Outreach Plan to guide the RTP public participation process, which can be found in Appendix 6.

RTP STAKEHOLDERS

The following stakeholders, representing a diverse cross-section of the region, were invited to participate in public input sessions, to help foster communication and promote public involvement, and to make recommendations during the RTP development process:

- Lowell neighborhood groups and organizations
- Community Teamwork, Inc.
- United Teen Equality Center
- Greater Lowell Chamber of Commerce
- Greater Lowell CEDS Committee
- Greater Lowell Workforce Investment Board and Lowell Career Center
- Middlesex 3 Coalition
- Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association
- Coalition for a Better Acre
- Municipal bicycle and pedestrian committees
- Councils on Aging
- Lowell Regional Transit Authority
- UMass Lowell
- Middlesex Community College
- National Park Service
- Public safety officials
- Housing authorities
- Veterans' organizations
- Organizations representing the disabled community
- Northern Middlesex Stormwater Collaborative
- Planning Boards
- Conservation Commissions
- Conservation Agents
- Energy committees
- Town engineers, planners, managers, selectmen and City Councilors
- Non-profit organizations

WEBSITE AND SOCIAL MEDIA

The NMMPO developed a Northern Middlesex Transportation Plan Update for 2040 page on its website, <http://www.nmcog.org/RTP2040.htm>, where visitors could learn more about the RTP update, take a survey, and stay up-to-date on public input opportunities throughout the region. The RTP update process also had a social media presence on Facebook and Twitter (@RTP2040).

PUBLIC INPUT SESSIONS

Three public input sessions were held during the development of the RTP. The goal of the sessions was to tap into the special knowledge of citizens regarding transportation issues throughout the region. Details on the dates and locations of the sessions are listed below:

- Tyngsborough Town Hall, Thursday, March 26th, 4:30 to 7:30PM, Community Room , 25 Bryants Lane, Tyngsborough.
- Chelmsford Senior Center Monday, March 30th, 12:30 to 2PM, 75 Groton Road North Chelmsford.
- Lowell City Hall, Wednesday, April 8th, 4:30 to 7:30PM, Mayors Reception Room, 375 Merrimack Street, Lowell.

You're invited...Please join us!





Regional Transportation Plan Public Input Sessions

<p>Tyngsborough Town Hall Thursday, March 26th 4:30 – 7:30 PM Community Room 25 Bryants Lane Tyngsborough, MA</p>	<p>Chelmsford Senior Center Monday, March 30th 12:30 – 2 PM 75 Groton Road N. Chelmsford, MA</p>	<p>Lowell City Hall Wednesday, April 8th 4:30 – 7:30 PM Mayors Reception Room 375 Merrimack Street Lowell, MA</p>
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Who: Anyone with thoughts, concerns or ideas about traffic and congestion, bicycling, pedestrian safety, public transit, and other transportation issues.

What: You are invited to help shape the region's long-term transportation plan! The Public Input Session will be in an open house format with stations where you can learn about the plan, provide feedback and suggestions, and fill out a survey.

We want to hear from you!



Hosted by the Northern
Middlesex Council of
Governments

For more information visit the project website:
<http://www.nmcog.org/RTP2040.htm>
Or contact Justin Howard at:
978-454-8021 x121 | jhoward@nmcog.org

*City/Town clerks: Please post pursuant to Open Meeting Law
Interpretation services available upon request*

A detailed account of the public comments and input obtained during the public input sessions is provided in Appendix 7.

BUSINESS, COMMUNITY, AND NEIGHBORHOOD MEETINGS

Meetings were held with community and neighborhood stakeholders and organizations throughout the region to gather unique insight on transportation issues that affect them. Details on the organizations, dates, and locations of the meetings are listed in Table 2.1 below. A detailed account of the public comments and input obtained during the business, community, and neighborhood meetings is provided in Appendix 7.

Table 2.1: RTP Public Outreach Meetings

Location	Date	Location	Address	Town
Middlesex 3 Coalition	9-Jan-15	Town Hall Annex	25 Center St	Burlington
United Teen Equality Center	25-Feb-15	UTEC headquarters	34 Hurd St	Lowell
Greater Lowell Workforce Investment Board	26-Feb-15	Career Center of Lowell	107 Merrimack St	Lowell
Belvidere Neighborhood Council	11-Mar-15	Sullivan School	150 Draper St	Lowell
Centralville Neighborhood Action Group	16-Mar-15	Dom Polski Club	10 Coburn St	Lowell
ACTION	18-Mar-15	Mercier Center	21 Salem St	Lowell
Mill City Grows Gathering	21-Mar-15	Middlesex Community College	33 Kearney Square	Lowell
Lowell Downtown Neighborhood Association	23-Mar-15	Lowell Telecommunications	246 Market St	Lowell
Westford Annual Town Meeting	28-Mar-15	Abbott School	25 Depot St	Westford
Pawtucketville Citizens Council	6-Apr-15	An Wang Middle School	365 West Meadow Rd	Lowell
Merrimack Valley Chapter of the NAACP	14-Apr-15	Community Teamwork Offices	155 Merrimack St	Lowell
Crosstown Connect TMA	29-May-15	Maynard Golf Course	50 Brown St	Maynard

MEETING SUMMARY

The public input sessions and organizational meetings identified the needs and concerns of area residents related to traffic and congestion, roadways and bridges, bike and pedestrian issues, and

public transit. While detailed notes on each meeting can be found in the appendices, the major themes that emerged are discussed here by category.

ROADWAYS AND BRIDGES

Many residents would like to see improvements to the VFW Highway and Bridge Street intersection. Two Lowell-based organizations, the Coalition for a Better Acre (CBA), as well as the NAACP, mentioned the need for “Complete Streets” to be incorporated into all roadway project planning.

One of the most common concerns cited among residents was the need for a new, permanent Rourke Bridge to replace the temporary bridge that currently exists. Some residents feel there is a need for an additional bridge over the Merrimack River, particularly near Brox Quarry and Brigham Avenue in Dracut. There was some concern regarding several of the bridges in Lowell that are privately-owned and falling into a state of disrepair. Some feel that the City of Lowell should acquire these bridges and rehabilitate or replace them.

TRAFFIC AND CONGESTION

There is an interest among some residents to shift travel from single occupancy vehicles to carpools or vanpools, in order to alleviate some of the traffic problems on Route 128 and I-495. Many residents are concerned about commuter traffic and congestion at the Merrimack River crossings. Another common concern involved traffic safety around schools. For example, at St. Michael’s School in Lowell, parents park their cars in the street as students are being dismissed. Students also walk in the streets around the school, rather than using sidewalks. Crossing guards and traffic enforcement are needed to increase safety for both students and drivers.

BIKE AND PEDESTRIAN FACILITIES

Residents in almost all communities would like more sidewalks, improved sidewalk conditions, and a sidewalk inventory. It was commonly noted that poorly maintained sidewalks are particularly difficult for the elderly and disabled. Safety concerns about sidewalks were brought up often in the communities of Chelmsford, Lowell and Westford. Appropriate pedestrian facilities are desirable in the Drum Hill area of Chelmsford and at the Lord Overpass, the Gallagher Terminal, Merrimack Street, City Hall, and the intersection of Pawtucket Street and School Street in Lowell.

Many residents would like to see more bicycle lanes throughout the region, and some feel that they should be incorporated into all new roadway construction. There were many residents in favor of trail enhancements in the City of Lowell.

PUBLIC TRANSIT

Residents consistently mentioned the need to expand commuter rail to New Hampshire. They feel an expansion would not only benefit the economy, but the quality of life for residents as well. Many residents also would like to see the Lowell trolley system extended and utilized as a public transit system.

At the Public Input Session in Lowell, there was much attention given to a potential collaboration between the LRTA and UMass Lowell to increase bus ridership among the student population. The expansion of the LRTA bus routes to key areas is an important transportation need commonly cited by residents. Key areas of note are Tyngsborough, East Dracut, Pawtucket Boulevard in Lowell, and Boston, Burlington, and the Pheasant Mall (in Nashua, New Hampshire).

In addition to more bus routes, residents would like to see an extension of service hours in the evenings and on weekends. An increase in service hours would increase the attractiveness and convenience of using the LRTA system beyond the typical commute to and from work. Some residents complained that LRTA buses are often unreliable because they are late and do not stop for people flagging them down. It was often noted that, in addition to increasing its reliability, the LRTA needs to improve its customer service, produce better bus route maps, and provide more information about snow routes. Many residents would also like to see the bus terminal relocated to the downtown area from its current location at the Gallagher Intermodal Terminal.

SURVEYING THE REGION'S TRANSPORTATION NEEDS

MUNICIPAL SURVEY

NMMPO staff developed a project needs survey and distributed it to municipal officials in order to identify transportation needs specific to each community in the Northern Middlesex region. Each community was asked to prioritize its future transportation projects over the 25-year RTP timeline and to provide schedule and cost estimates for each. The responses from each community helped to shape the RTP universe of projects and recommendations. A copy of the municipal survey is provided in Appendix 8.

PUBLIC SURVEY

As part of its public outreach effort, the NMMPO developed a 25-question survey to gather input on transportation issues, such as commuting, parking, roadway conditions, public transit service, and bicycle and pedestrian facilities (Appendices 7 and 9). Print and online versions of the survey were available in English, Spanish, and Khmer and were distributed to local communities, elected officials, special interest groups, neighborhood and civic organizations, and business groups throughout the planning process. The deadline for the survey was April 15, 2015. NMMPO collected 200 responses, which were submitted from all across the study area.

The majority of respondents (76%) were between the ages of 21 and 59 years old, while 24% were 60 years or older. There were no survey respondents under the age of 21 years old. Table 2.2 shows that most (49%) of the respondents live in Lowell, while 15% live and 30% work outside the Northern Middlesex region.

Table 2.2: Places of Residence and Work for Survey Respondents

Community	Percentage of Respondents Living in Community	Percentage of Respondents Working in Community
Lowell	48.60%	50.60%
Westford	13.10%	6.00%
Billerica	5.70%	4.80%
Dracut	9.10%	3.00%
Chelmsford	3.40%	3.00%
Tewksbury	2.30%	1.80%
Tyngsborough	2.30%	1.20%
Pepperell	0.60%	0.00%
Dunstable	0.00%	0.00%
Outside of Region	14.80%	29.60%
Total	100%	100%

In terms of where respondents shop, 49% shop within the Northern Middlesex region. A significant number of respondents (37%) shop across the border in New Hampshire and another 10% shop in Burlington, Massachusetts. The majority of respondents (90%) receive medical services in the Northern Middlesex region, with 54% receiving these services in Lowell.

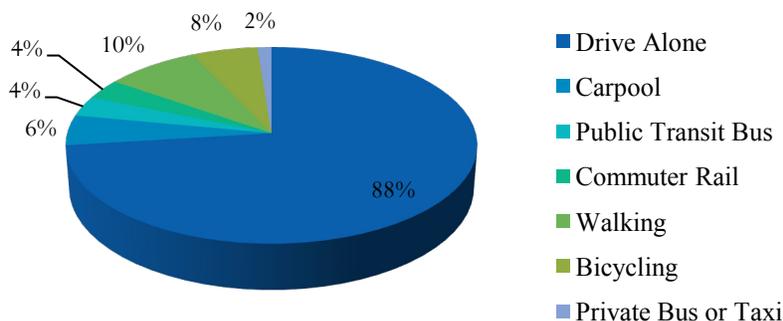
COMMUTING

Most respondents (67%) leave home to go to work between 7 a.m. and 8 a.m., while another 22% leave home after 8 a.m. Only 11% of respondents leave home to go to work before 7 a.m. Fifty five percent (55%) of respondents leave work to return home between 5 p.m. and 7 p.m. An additional 36% leave work between 4 p.m. and 5 p.m., while 9% leave work after 7 p.m.

Thirty-two percent (32%) of respondents have less than a 5-mile commute one-way to work, while twenty percent (20%) have more than a 20-mile commute one-way to work. The remaining (48%) have between a 5- and 20-mile commute one-way to work. In addition, 64% of respondents have a one-way commute that is less than 30 minutes. Twenty-eight percent (28%) of commuters have a one-way commute that takes between 30 and 60 minutes, and 8% of respondents have a one-way commute that takes more than 60 minutes.

The majority of respondents (88%) drive alone to work, while 4% carpool with others. Alternative transportation modes, such as public transit bus service (4%), commuter rail (6%), walking (10%), and bicycling (8%), are also used by commuters in the Northern Middlesex region. Less than 2% of survey respondents commute by private bus or taxi, as shown in Figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1: Modes of Travel to Work among Survey Respondents



PARKING

A number of respondents felt that parking is not an issue within the Northern Middlesex region. Most respondents who had an issue mentioned trouble finding parking in Downtown Lowell, both on-street and in the parking garages. The areas around the Western Avenue Studios and UMass

Lowell were mentioned often. A few also mentioned the lack of bicycle parking around the region. In general, town centers, transit stations, rail trails, grocery stores and restaurants, public buildings, such as City Hall, schools, and libraries, malls and shopping plazas, senior centers, and medical buildings were most frequently cited as having parking issues.

Survey respondents suggested an increased supply of safe, strategic parking throughout the region, along with more parking garages in Downtown Lowell, free parking for downtown residents, and consistent enforcement of parking violations.

ROADWAYS

When respondents were asked if they avoid certain streets or intersections in the Northern Middlesex region because they feel unsafe, most cited locations in Lowell, such as:

- Lord Overpass
- Lowell Connector
- Rourke Bridge
- Bridge Street at VFW Highway, Lowell
- Nesmith Street at Andover Street, Lowell
- Thorndike Street-Fletcher Street-Dutton Street intersection
- School Street at Pawtucket Street
- Western Avenue
- Gorham Street
- Church Street
- Market Street
- Westford Street

Other locations often perceived as unsafe are the Drum Hill Square in Chelmsford, Salem Road at Route 113 in Dracut, Nashua Road at Lakeview Avenue in Tyngsborough, Route 3A at the Tyngsborough Bridge, and Minot's Corner in Westford. Lack of lighting, inconsistent "rules of the road" education and enforcement, antiquated traffic signals with the need for delayed left turn arrows, and high speeds were also safety concerns cited.

When asked about poor pavement or potholes, numerous respondents replied that there are too many streets throughout the region with these conditions to mention. Of those mentioned, the Lowell Connector, Varnum Avenue, Western Avenue, and the Dutton Street-Fletcher Street-Thorndike Street intersection in Lowell were noted most often.

Respondents were also asked if they avoid certain streets or intersections because they are too congested. All bridges crossing the Merrimack River were commonly mentioned. Bridge Street in Lowell was noted most often as being congested. Other streets often cited were Middlesex Street, Merrimack Street, Wood Street, and Broadway Street. The Lowell intersections at Nesmith Street and Andover Street, School Street and Pawtucket Street, Lowell Connector and Thorndike Street, the Lakeview Avenue-VFW Highway-Aiken Street area, and Mammoth Road and Pawtucket Boulevard were often noted as congested. Congested streets and intersections outside Lowell often noted were Drum Hill Road in Chelmsford, Chelmsford Center, and Minot's Corner in Westford.

Public Transit

The majority of respondents (59%) do not use public transit, as shown in Figure 2.2. Thirty-six percent (36%) use commuter rail, while others use the MBTA subway (24%) and the LRTA bus service (9%). Few respondents (4%) use commuter buses such as Boston Express, Peter Pan, or Greyhound Lines.

Figure 2.2: Public Transit Usage among Survey Respondents

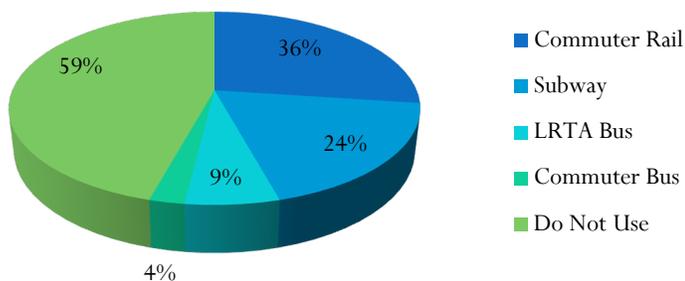
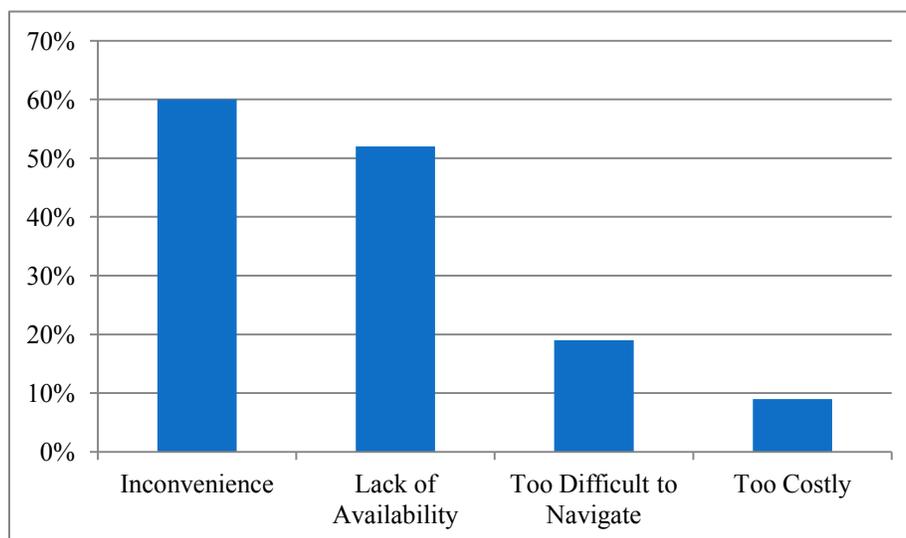


Figure 2.3 on the following page shows the main reasons that respondents do not use public transit. These include inconvenience (60%) and lack of availability near home or work (52%). Others claim it is too difficult to navigate (19%) and too costly (9%).

Figure 2.3: Reasons for Not Using Public Transit among Percentage of Survey Respondents

Of those respondents using public transit, most (74%) use it to access recreational destinations, shopping or dining (53%), and employment (40%). Others use it to visit friends or relatives (26%), go to medical appointments (20%), run errands (11%), and attend school (5%) or church (1%).

Sixty-eight percent (68%) of respondents feel that public transit services currently offered are not adequate to meet their needs. When asked about additions and enhancement to transit service that would make it a more attractive option, the following improvements were often cited:

- Improved bus service (expanded, logical, and more frequent routes; coordinated with commuter rail schedule);
- Gallagher Terminal enhancements (cleanliness, safety, convenience, more taxi service);
- Reduced delays, wait times, and crowded conditions on trains and subways;
- Expanded commuter rail service beyond Lowell (including New Hampshire);
- Reliable and reasonably priced passes and parking at transit stations;
- Easy and convenient access to Downtown Lowell from transit stations;
- Additional transit options (local light rail, expanded trolley service);
- Increased public education and communication (updated websites, social media presence, signage, GPS technology); and
- Location of jobs near transit to spur economic growth.

Active Transportation

Seventy percent (70%) of respondents feel that improved bicycle facilities (bicycle lanes, racks, signage, and shared use paths) are needed in the Northern Middlesex region. According to respondents, the following general locations could benefit from improved bicycle facilities, connectivity, and accessibility:

- Transportation facilities (Parking garages, transit stations);
- Public buildings (City Hall, libraries, school campuses, post offices, and police stations);
- Grocery stores, restaurants, and farmers' markets;
- Shopping centers, artist lofts, and entertainment venues (Mill No. 5, cinemas);
- Key business and employment nodes; and
- Along bridges and bicycle paths.

While a few respondents indicated that additional bicycle lanes, sharrows, and shared use paths are not necessary, the majority would like a continuous, connected network of these facilities at particular locations to better accommodate bicyclists. The most popular locations noted were:

- Downtown Lowell (Arcand, Dutton, Thorndike, Market, and Andover Streets);
- Rourke Bridge;
- UMass Lowell;
- Routes 3, 3A, 38, 110, 133, 225; and
- Bruce Freeman Rail Trail.

Additional bicycle facility improvements suggested by survey respondents included bicycle rental and storage, installation of cycle tracks, improved signage, traffic control devices, pavement markings, wider roadway shoulders, the development of bicycle routes, and improved maintenance of roadways and shared use paths. Several respondents also strongly encouraged “rules of the road” education and enforcement to improve bicycle safety. A majority of respondents (83%) feel that improved pedestrian facilities are needed in the Northern Middlesex region. Numerous respondents would like Lowell to be a more “walkable” city, and in addition, many also mentioned the need for a pedestrian walkway from Dutton Street to Western Avenue. The following improvements were also cited frequently:

- Expanded, accessible, connected and well-maintained sidewalks, walking paths, and pedestrian bridges;
- Enhanced streetscape (benches, trash receptacles, lighting, trees);

- Improved intersection and roadway design (traffic calming, crosswalks, pedestrian signals, directional lighting, signage);
- Appropriate linkages to, within, and between schools;
- Safe transit stops (properly signed bus stops, bus shelters); and
- Consistent sidewalk maintenance and enforcement of the traffic laws along roadways and walkways.

Among the survey respondents, Downtown Lowell was the most popular location in need of improved pedestrian facilities. The areas around Dutton Street, Western Avenue, Thorndike Street, VFW Highway, and the Lord Overpass were referenced by multiple respondents. Better pedestrian connections in and around the Gallagher Terminal and from the terminal to Downtown Lowell were recommended as well. Routes 3A, 27, 38, 113, 133, and 225 were often mentioned as roadways in need of pedestrian improvements.

Transportation Priorities

Respondents were asked to prioritize transportation issues specific to the Northern Middlesex region. Table 2.3 identifies the top transportation priorities among respondents (based on a weighted average). Note that the expansion of commuter rail service to New Hampshire is the most important issue to respondents.

Table 2.3: Top Transportation Priorities in the Northern Middlesex Region

Priority	Transportation Issue	Weighted Average
1	Expanding commuter rail service to New Hampshire	2.59
2	Repairing poor pavement conditions	2.21
3	Creating off- and on-road facilities for bicycling	2.14
4	Providing additional public transit services	2.00
5	Reducing traffic congestion and delay	1.93
6	Rehabilitating and repairing structurally deficient bridges	1.80
7	Reducing the number of traffic accidents	1.75
8	Providing additional sidewalks and pedestrian facilities	1.70

MPO ENDORSEMENT PROCESS

The Draft 2016-2040 RTP was released for a 30-day public comment period by vote of the NMMPO on June 23, 2015, as required by federal regulations. Copies of the Draft RTP were distributed to all interested parties, including the region's elected officials, local communities, the Lowell Regional Transit Authority, MassDOT, the Federal Highway Administration, the Federal

Transit Administration, business groups, the Greater Lowell CEDS Committee, the Lowell National Historical Park, and other appropriate agencies and affected groups within the region, as identified in the Public Outreach Plan. The draft plan was posted on the NMCOCG website, and the public was able to submit comments electronically through the website. The thirty-day comment period was also announced in the *Lowell Sun*, the *Khmer Post*, and in local community newspapers.

A public meeting on the Draft RTP was held on July 16, 2015. A summary of public comments received on the draft document can be found in Appendix : . The NMMPO met on July 23, 2015 to discuss the public comments received, review the response to comments and discuss the final document. A summary of the response to comments can also be found in Appendix ; . Subsequently the NMMPO voted to endorse the draft final document.