

# Transportation Planning & Prioritization:

## A Guide for Local Governments

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# 1. Introduction

The Northeast Georgia Regional Commission (NEGRC), founded in 1963 as the Area Planning and Development Commission, serves the county and municipal governments of Barrow, Clarke, Elbert, Greene, Jackson, Jasper, Madison, Morgan, Newton, Oconee, Oglethorpe, and Walton Counties (*see map of the Northeast Georgia region within the State of Georgia at right*). The NEGRC is a focal point for regional issues concerning these local governments in planning, economic development, grant preparation, job training, and aging services.



Through the stakeholder input process associated with the 2018 regional plan update, the Regional Commission identified the need for local governments to address aging infrastructure and allocate limited resources efficiently, especially in regards to transportation. This document serves as the implementation measure associated with that work: a feasibility study and guide for cities and counties to develop transportation prioritization and management processes, including a step-by-step Suggested Transportation Prioritization Process in Chapter 4. As a follow-up, the NEGRC will publish a how-to guide for local governments to conduct comprehensive infrastructure inventories and assessments. That work is scheduled to be completed in 2022.

## Document Structure

**Best Practices** – An overview of transportation prioritization and management, including a review of case studies and methodologies.

**Regional Transportation Context** – An analysis of responses to a survey of Northeast Georgia county managers, administrators, and clerks about how their communities plan for and prioritize transportation improvements.

**Suggested Transportation Prioritization Process** – An ordered list of the steps and methods that cities and counties should consider using to improve efficiency and value in transportation decision-making.

**Case Study: Oxford, Georgia** – An analysis of the transportation planning and prioritization system in the City of Oxford, a small municipality located in Newton County.

**Debrief & Evaluation** – A meta-analysis of the project, including lessons learned in how to apply transportation prioritization and management principles to other Northeast Georgia communities, successes and areas for improvement, and opportunities for further investigation.

## 2. Best Practices

Infrastructure is the support-system that sustains cities’ and counties’ abilities to provide access to goods and services, promote health and sanitation, and convey information. While a community’s streets, pipes, and wires carry significant construction and maintenance costs, spending intelligently on new projects and keeping existing facilities operational is critical to sustaining the value of the community’s investment.

The presence and condition of infrastructure has a marked impact on the value of property in a community. For example, proximity to sewerage service and major transportation corridors dramatically raises the value of adjacent land. While infrastructure often represents a substantial cost to a local government, it may help open the door to the kind of development desired by the community. (In order to be fiscally sustainable, that development must generate more money than the infrastructure maintenance and service delivery it requires.)

This section provides a description of some of the background information, methodologies, tools, and best practices involved in creating and implementing transportation planning and prioritization processes on the local level. These practices, in tandem with lessons learned from the Regional Transportation Context described in Chapter 3, provide the basis for Chapter 4, which presents a Suggested Transportation Prioritization Process.

### Case Studies

To formulate an understanding of the current state of public-sector transportation prioritization and planning, the NEGRC conducted a review of several planning and informational documents, as follows.

### “Project Prioritization and Addition of New Projects for the State Transportation Program”

State of Vermont Agency of Transportation (VTrans)

<https://tinyurl.com/y9bsarvc>

VTrans, the State of Vermont’s transportation department, “developed a quantitative project prioritization method that assigns a numeric score to competing projects” in response to state legislative directives in 2005 and 2006. This legislation required VTrans to work with Vermont’s Regional Planning Commissions (RPC) and the Chittenden County Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) to establish a framework. The numeric scores yielded by the prioritization process guide both transportation planning and budgeting statewide, and the rating system is required by law to include “asset management-based factors which are objective and quantifiable,” such as:

- Safety
- Traffic volume
- Availability of alternate routes
- Future maintenance and reconstruction costs
- Priorities assigned by the regional planning commission or the MPO

Notably, while Vermont’s process is designed to evolve over time, state law requires prioritization activities to include consideration of economic and regional “social and cultural life” contexts in project ratings (factored into the 20-point Regional Priority score).

Numeric ratings and prioritization apply to projects across the modal spectrum, including “bridge[s], pavement, roadway[s], buildings, bike/pedestrian [projects], park & ride lots, aviation, rail, and new public transit routes.” Flexibility exists within the system: each project manager chooses appropriate methods for evaluating the subject asset/improvement, and the process is expected to rely on data and technology. VTrans continues to work with the State’s RPCs and MPO on prioritization.



“Hampton Roads Prioritization of Transportation Projects”

Hampton Roads Transportation Planning Organization (HRTPO)

<https://tinyurl.com/y9gwo6mj>

As the Metropolitan Planning Organization for the Hampton Roads area, the HRTPO is tasked with conducting multijurisdictional transportation planning. MPOs are federally mandated in urbanized areas (population greater than 50,000) and HRTPO MPO works with the Virginia Department of Transportation to ensure that local projects are planned, funded, and developed according to US and Virginia coordination requirements.


After a yearlong process, the HRTPO board voted to adopt a project prioritization framework. All projects are rated with a single score based on three criteria: Project Utility, Project Viability, and Economic Vitality. Within each criterion, subcriteria such as *Safety and security, Land use, Impact to nearby roadways, Labor market access, Funding, and Process/project readiness* enable a detailed analysis by the HRTPO staff. Every project features a one-page summary with scores for each main criterion, rank within a grouping of other similar projects, cost and location information, and a brief description (see example at right).

The HRTPO uses the scores to publish project rankings by category and to define which work to consider for inclusion in the fiscally-constrained Long-Range Transportation Plan. The document notes that “the scoring of transportation projects will require periodic review and maintenance to reflect changes in project definition and project status.”

### Virginia Beach Fixed Guideway Project

#### Project Description

**SYSTEM:** Fixed Guideway  
**FROM:** Newtown Road Station  
**TO:** Virginia Beach Oceanfront  
**DESCRIPTION OF WORK:** Construction of Fixed Guideway system along alignment of abandoned Norfolk Southern (NS) Railroad. Access options from east end of NS railroad at Birdneck Road to the Oceanfront are being evaluated.



Project Utility

87

Economic Vitality

94

Project Viability

23

Total Project Score

204

Estimated Total Construction Cost

Costs are currently being developed as part of Virginia Beach Transit Extension Study  
Cost Source: Hampton Roads Transit

#### Summary of Prioritization Scores

- The Virginia Beach Fixed Guideway project is currently under study (Virginia Beach Transit Extension Study); ROW acquisition/utilities coordination underway.
- Project reduces emissions, is compatible with Virginia Beach's Strategic Growth Areas, and provides connectivity to the Norfolk LRT.
- Project provides new travel options for major employment centers and tourist destinations.

#### Overview of Prioritization Ranking

Project Name	From	To	Jurisdiction	Total Project Score
FIXED GUIDEWAY				
VB Fixed Guideway Transit Project	Norfolk CL @ LRT terminus (Newtown Rd)	Oceanfront	VB	204
Naval Station Norfolk Fixed Guideway Transit Project	Norfolk CL @ LRT terminus (Newtown Rd)	Naval Station Norfolk	NOR	187
Peninsula Fixed Guideway Transit Project (A3 Alignment)	Christopher Newport University	Huntington Pointe	NN	113
Peninsula Fixed Guideway Transit Project (A1 Alignment)	Newport News City Hall	Denbigh Blvd	NN	111

Hampton Roads Transportation Planning Organization | Prioritization of Transportation Projects: Project Evaluation and Scoring | Page 22

HRTPO provides one-page summaries for candidate projects; this sample sheet describes a project from the Multimodal Passenger section

# “Transportation Project Prioritization and Performance-Based Planning Efforts in Rural and Small Metropolitan Regions”

National Association of Development Organizations (NADO) Research Foundation  
<https://tinyurl.com/y7jdmygz>

This 2011 report summarizes the results of NADO’s national research into MPO and Rural Planning Organization (RPO) transportation planning, including “organizational and leadership structures, work elements completed through planning contracts, funding and staffing levels, and decision[-]making processes.” RPOs function similarly to MPOs, but operate outside of urbanized areas, often working under direct contract with state departments of transportation. Many “Regional Development Organizations” (RDO), a generic term for agencies such as the NEGRC, serve as the designated RPO and/or MPO for their respective regions. The report includes national data on how various types of RDOs handle transportation prioritization activities (the charts at right, which apply only to RPOs, provide an example).

Featured case studies show how state and regional governmental organizations conduct transportation project prioritization and planning activities. Examples from the North Carolina Department of Transportation, the North Central Pennsylvania Regional Planning and Development Commission, and the Yakima Valley Conference of Governments in the State of Washington highlight criteria-based prioritization methods. These applications include references to traditional measures such as congestion mitigation and highway safety, but also provide considerations for multimodal access and environmental impacts.

FIGURE 12 How are projects on the regional TIP ranked?



FIGURE 13 What kind of criteria are used to rank projects in the regional TIP?

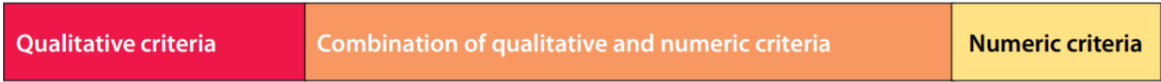
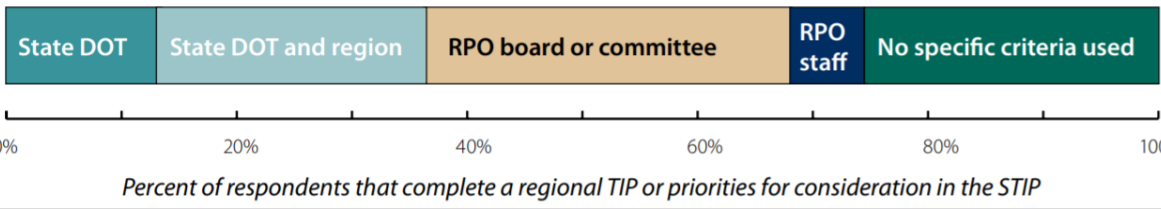


FIGURE 14 Who determines the criteria used to prioritize projects?



NADO’s national analysis shows that RPOs most commonly rank projects within the **whole multi-county region**, use a **combination of qualitative and numeric criteria**, and assign criteria determination duties to the **RPO board or committee**

## “Prioritizing Transportation”

Transportation Demand Management (TDM) Encyclopedia, Victoria Transport Policy Institute (VTPI)

<https://tinyurl.com/y8f7cstt>

The VTPI provides an extensive encyclopedia of TDM practices to make transportation planning, policy, and funding more efficient. Its section on prioritization features methods-based strategies grounded in the practice of intentionally prioritizing investments in efficient transportation over less focused “first-come, first-served” approaches.

“Efficiency” and “value” in this guide are treated with respect to concepts such as **space** (*prioritize modes that carry more people in less roadway square-footage, such as buses*) and **funding** (*prioritize investments in people-centric, lower-cost transportation choices like bicycling and walking*). While efficiency and value are promoted as potentially successful ways to evaluate transportation investments, the report stresses that equity is critical. For example, while it may be attractive to build a toll lane because users will eventually pay for at least part of the costs of developing the project, the lane will only be available to people who can afford to use it.

This TDM encyclopedia chapter also provides information on the basics of prioritization, including how to organize a process and a reference to organizational and/or structural changes that may be necessary to design a system. Its “Best Practices” and “Case Studies” sections deliver more specific tools for implementing a prioritization-based transportation planning approach.

## Analysis: Best Practices

Without smart investment in new facilities and preservation of existing infrastructure through repairs and periodic maintenance, a community is certain to experience decline. Unfortunately, many states, counties, and cities have committed to building more infrastructure than their tax bases can sustain, particularly with regard to transportation. The following practices are intended to help local governments prioritize infrastructure decision-making with an eye not only toward aligning expenses with what the community is willing and able to pay for over the life of the investment, but particularly toward ensuring that projects are ranked and developed to suit local priorities.

Generally, a transportation prioritization process will involve the following steps:

1. Determine values and principles
2. Select criteria and metrics
3. Rank projects
4. Implement
5. Evaluate and adapt

The following section discusses these steps in detail.



## Values

Transportation prioritization begins with the selection of values by the community. Values may include fiscal sustainability, safety, resilience, congestion mitigation, public and environmental health, accessibility, and equity, among others. Selecting and committing to a set of values will help guide decision-making and resource allocation.

The first value of prioritization should be **“fix-it-first.”** Local governments often wrestle with allocating limited resources amongst a variety of competing needs and desires. The elevated costs of deferring repairs and upkeep are widely understood, yet maintenance is often one of the first cuts when resources are short. A fix-it-first mentality keeps maintenance at the forefront of the funding list and deprioritizes the expense of new capacity until prior obligations to existing infrastructure have been met. This prioritization value requires local governments to build processes and make staffing decisions that encourage and reward upkeep over new investment.

The second value should be to **coordinate land use with infrastructure** construction and maintenance, especially with an eye toward the long-term: population growth or decline, environmental limiters (topography, water availability, etc.), fiscal impact, and regional context should be considered. Matters of land use and infrastructure are tightly interrelated, so it is important to break down decision-making silos and coordinate planning efforts. While this is often done on a project-by-project basis, the system-wide implications of ignoring opportunities to coordinate can be severe. For example, the construction of a highway bypass may temporarily improve the flow of existing traffic, but planners often fail to account for the induced demand created by added roadway capacity. Comprehensive plans and transportation master plans can help coordinate land use and infrastructure decisions, but only if the plans are well-organized and collaborative, and if communities commit to using them in routine decision-making processes.

Additional key values to take into account when defining prioritization programs include equity, environmental conservation, multimodal safety and convenience, and accessibility for people with disabilities.

The community will use its collaboratively defined values to mold the criteria and metrics discussed in the next section.



*Maintain and improve existing facilities in established centers before creating new infrastructure and allowing growth in undeveloped areas*



# Criteria and Metrics

**Is it critical?** Based on previously-identified values, communities can begin prioritizing projects based on several overlapping frameworks. As Chuck Marohn suggests in *Strong Towns: A Bottom-Up Revolution to Rebuild American Prosperity* (2019), systems have critical, redundant, and non-critical components. Critical components bring the system down if they fail, redundant components are essential but have backups, and non-critical components only harm part of the system if they fail. Communities can order their transportation priorities by identifying critical components and prioritizing their maintenance and construction. For example, in a street network, a cul-de-sac would be a lower priority than a main thoroughfare.

Priorities can also be assessed by how critical a given component is to various users. A dedicated pedestrian facility may not necessarily have as many users as a motor-vehicle lane, but a blocked or broken sidewalk could present an insurmountable challenge for a person with a disability.



**Is it efficient?** Prioritization criteria can also be framed based on a "Green Transportation Hierarchy," as referenced by VTPI:



<https://tinyurl.com/y2tk7958>

While environmental sensitivity is implied in the title, the Green Transportation Hierarchy can best be described as a model that prioritizes efficient and cost-effective modes of travel (in terms of financial, space, energy, and other costs).

In 2012, the Northeast Georgia Regional Commission published a guide to Low-Cost Bicycling and Walking Improvements (see cover page at left) that provides details on

a range of efficient projects such as striping bike lanes on roads with available pavement and installing improved crosswalks. Other examples of high-value, relatively low-cost projects (from the NEGRRC guide and other sources) include:

- Road diets
- Wayfinding programs
- Improved signalization for all modes
- Efficient traffic light timing
- Roundabouts
- Turn restrictions
- Painted bike lanes and bike boxes
- Demonstration projects
- Safe routes to school
- Singletrack to school
- Bicycle parking
- Traffic safety education
- Complete streets policies
- Pedestrian malls

**Is it effective?** Preventative maintenance is far more economical than the replacement or restorative maintenance required to address failing infrastructure. Many communities prioritize the biggest repair jobs first, leaving regular preventive maintenance (PM) with whatever funds remain; communities should consider inverting this approach to make limited funds go further. The PM-first approach prioritizes upkeep (e.g., crack-sealing pavement) and then addresses major repair jobs (full-depth pavement reclamation) before finally funding new infrastructure. This enables preservation of a greater share of the system in the short term while promoting intentional project prioritization and advanced budgeting to identify, prepare for, and address major maintenance needs (if they have not already been averted through regular PM).

Maintenance is only one component of the effectiveness metric: communities should avoid making investments simply by examining potential upkeep costs and choosing the project with the least amount of long-term commitment. A tree-lined street carries a larger maintenance obligation than a barren corridor, but it also creates a more valuable place that pleases people. A cheap, easy-to-maintain, barren street saves money in the annual budget but misses the significant economic and emotional value created by the tree-lined street in spite of the higher costs of installing and maintaining an attractive environment. A plan that helps communities create lasting value rather than opt for the lowest-cost (whether up-front or in the longer term) is more likely to create a thriving community.

**Is it smart?** Advances in information technology have dramatically expanded options for collecting, measuring, and analyzing data. For example, transportation planners can now digitally measure access to jobs, available services, and pavement condition index reports with specialized software. Modeling future scenarios can help managers optimize infrastructure systems and investments. Digital tools such as 3-D drawing can be used to enhance more traditional methods of data collection such as walk audits. However, despite the constantly evolving nature of planning and decision-making technology, there is still no substitute for walking the streets of a community to observe where people face challenges in navigating their environment.

**Is it comprehensive?** The traditional “Level of Service” (LOS) analysis often used by transportation engineers can be misleading since that methodology only tracks automobile data points. Other metrics to consider include:

- **Multimodal LOS ratings** provide context into the transportation system’s ability to serve all users
- **Average door-to-door commute times for residents** and **Average annual transportation expenditures per capita** go beyond abstract statistics to apply the analysis to critical indicators of people’s daily quality of life
- **Freight transportation delivery speeds and costs** show planners and decision-makers how goods and services move through and into their communities
- **Diversity and quality of transportation choices for all mode types** focuses the process on people rather than cars and user experience rather than simple facility availability
- **Accessibility for transportation-disadvantaged populations** accounts for people with disabilities, lower-income individuals, and other communities (including residents who may be able to drive a personal automobile but choose not to do so)
- **Quality of walking and cycling environments** examines safety, attractiveness, and connectivity to improve user conditions and revitalize local economies
- **Land use accessibility (e.g., number of jobs and public services within walking distance of residents)** encourages decision-makers to consider the land use/ transportation connection and neighborhood planning and development concerns
- **Crashes and crash fatalities *per capita*** present a critical data point beyond raw crash numbers to identify key safety issues, even in less-populated areas
- **Multimodal user satisfaction survey results** provide quantitative and/or qualitative information direct from travelers
- **User surveys identifying access barriers and problems** focus on marginalized communities who have often been underserved by the transportation decision-making process

## Ranking

After selecting metrics, planners should develop a system to rank projects according to their relative value. The example to the right shows one way of organizing and evaluating roadway projects; using this Hampton Roads model for assessment, active transportation, bridge and tunnel, transit, and interchange projects are each subject to their own unique criteria and ranking worksheets.

By tailoring criteria and ranking systems to individual types of projects, planners may be able to access and analyze finer-grained comparative data within each category. *However, since not all project types are able to score the same amount of points under the HRTPO model (for example, active transportation projects are not evaluated for Economic Vitality and are, therefore, limited to a point-score of 200 while others can gain up to 300), this system has the potential to greatly undervalue certain kinds of projects.* Therefore, while the framework and the individual criteria are valuable models on their own, planners should pursue a true value- and efficiency-based system that will allow them to measure all projects evenly.

Whether a community opts to individualize criteria and ranking systems for different project types under a fair system in which all proposals are capable of earning the same number of points or prefers to create a single, comprehensive set of criteria that applies to all proposed work, the ranking should be straightforward and easy to understand. Projects should be evaluated based on numeric point totals in broadly applicable categories and then ranked accordingly in a scientific, unbiased manner. Unless revenue sources dictate otherwise, decision-makers should allocate funding based on the merits of each project and the agreed-upon ranking system.

Highway Projects Weighting Factors	
Criteria and Sub-criteria	Weighting
PROJECT UTILITY	
Congestion Level:	30.00
% Reduction in Existing and Future V/C Ratios (Daily Delay)	10.00
Existing V/C Ratio	10.00
Impact to Nearby Roadways	10.00
System Continuity and Connectivity	25.00
Safety and Security:	15.00
Crash Ratio	8.00
Improvement to Incident Management or Evacuation Routes	7.00
Cost Effectiveness (Cost/VMT)	15.00
Land Use/Future Development Compatibility	10.00
Modal Enhancements:	5.00
Enhances Other Categories	3.00
Improves Vehicular Access	2.00
PROJECT UTILITY TOTAL	100.00
PROJECT VIABILITY	
Percent of Additional Funding (sliding scale 0-50)	50.00
Prior Commitment (project included in the currently adopted LRTP?)	10.00
Percentage of Project Design Complete (sliding scale 1-10)	10.00
Environmental Documents Complete	15.00
Environmental Decisions Obtained	5.00
ROW Obtained/Utilities Coordinated	5.00
Additional Environmental Permits Obtained	5.00
PROJECT VIABILITY TOTAL	100.00
ECONOMIC VITALITY	
Total Reduction in Travel Time	30.00
Labor Market Access	20.00
Increase Travel Time Reliability	10.00
Increased Access for High Density Employment Areas	10.00
Addresses the Needs of Basic Sector Industries	30.00
Increases Access for Port Facilities	10.00
Increases Access to Tourist Destinations	10.00
Increases Access for Defense Installations	6.00
Facility part of STRAHNET	4.00
Facility part of "Roadways Serving the Military"	3.00
Increased Opportunity	20.00
Provides New or Increased Access	10.00
Supports Plans for Future Growth	10.00
ECONOMIC VITALITY TOTAL	100.00

Example (for highways) of Hampton Roads TPO’s evaluation worksheet



## Implementation

Once decision-makers finalize the project ranking hierarchy, planners must devise an implementation strategy or “work program.” An intentional focus on implementation helps ensure success by matching project needs to available funding sources and assigning responsibility for task completion. *Many plans, whether in transportation or other subject matter, falter at this stage in part because implementation is not embedded within the plan-development process.*

An infrastructure plan whose implementation timeframe is only measured in years may be at risk of losing momentum and relevance, and of failing to deliver what residents were promised. Build a plan that identifies a series of immediately actionable items to improve its chances of implementation. As noted previously, a scoring and ranking system that values efficiency, low cost, and maintenance will inherently bring needed and quickly implementable projects to the forefront. Schedule the first of these improvements for completion within 90 days of plan adoption to capitalize on community interest and excitement.

Implementation measures should be presented as easily defined action items that break down into discrete timeframes. Where applicable, the work program must include data such as location and segment length/endpoints, current project phase (concept, design, right-of-way acquisition, construction, etc.), cost, and funding source, but providing too much detail may be distracting. Since a prioritization-based approach is inherently mindful of fiscal constraints, planners may choose to list and rank only projects with identified funding sources or to include other, more conceptual work as “Long-Range” targets to provide context about the community’s ultimate vision. In both scenarios, it is essential to use the focused ranking of key projects to produce a tangible and concise work program that promotes successful implementation by policymakers and planners.



*Low-cost, easily implemented improvements such as pedestrian crossings can improve the transportation system without major investment, increase safety, and support local economic development*





*Residents, elected officials, staff, and other stakeholders should be involved in evaluation and adaptation activities*

## Evaluation and Adaptation

The planning exercise will not reach its greatest potential unless communities commit to self-evaluation throughout the implementation period. Implementation, evaluation, and adaptation should occur in rapid succession to leverage lessons learned while the experience of developing a particular project is still fresh.

Once implementation of the work program has begun, communities should examine their chosen values and metrics to determine whether their actions were successful or not. If an action did not achieve the desired results, what can be adjusted (including metrics and the ranking system, itself) to meet expectations next time? The evaluation period is a time for learning rather than fixating on failure, and negative feedback may be easier to process and act on if it occurs early in the process before significant effort, resources, and political capital have been expended. Building a feedback loop that will warn of failure early in the process will help the local government adapt quickly and effectively. For example, employing a “tactical urbanism” approach that catalyzes quick and cost-effective improvements can help local governments avoid permanent and expensive infrastructure investments that may not work as intended. Fiscal thresholds can also be set to provide warning when a project is on pace to exceed its budget. The evaluation period is also a time for leaders to assess whether the process is clearly meeting residents’ needs.

### 3. Regional Transportation Context

Local governments handle planning, prioritization, funding, and implementation differently, following various approaches that suit each particular city or county. To understand how transportation planning and prioritization works in Northeast Georgia, NEGRC staff surveyed managers, administrators, and/or clerks from each of the twelve counties in the region, with 75% of counties reporting. Findings here apply local grounding to the Best Practices in Chapter 2, with both contributing to the Suggested Transportation Prioritization Process outlined in Chapter 4.

#### County-Level Transportation Prioritization and Planning

Three-quarters of responding counties conduct county-level transportation prioritization and planning activities, including one county that is currently developing a transportation plan but does not conduct formal, focused prioritization. While another county has included transportation improvements in its capital improvement plan for several years, the community recently began to maintain a list of shovel-ready projects to be competitive in rapid-response funding opportunities; many of these projects relate specifically to intersections, where local governments typically possess the required property ahead of project implementation.

Jackson County completed a 20-year comprehensive transportation plan in 2019 using funding derived from its participation in the Gainesville-Hall MPO; this model could potentially present similar opportunities for other local governments, and another county reported a similar project being underway with MPO funding. Along those lines, one county's response indicated that, while the local approach is not comprehensive, additional funding for planning would allow the government to improve efforts to benefit residents.

#### Municipal-Level Transportation Prioritization and Planning

Fewer than half of respondents indicated that they are aware of any comprehensive transportation planning or prioritization processes on the municipal level in their counties. Most of the communities offered as examples of cities conducting such work are county seats and larger, sophisticated governments, although some county-level transportation plans provide coverage with city-specific sections.

#### Analysis

When asked about gaps or deficiencies in the way their communities plan for transportation, respondents were split: 56% of respondents indicated that issues exist, while the remaining 44% noted that the current process is sufficient. Among those who provided comments, funding was far and away the most common reason cited for counties' gaps or deficiencies in transportation planning, with one specific issue entailing the timing of funding: "last-minute" announcements of opportunities to pay for improvements such as signage and striping fails to support "a planned, systematic approach." A shovel-ready project list would ensure a community's ability to capitalize on this type of program.

All but one respondent reported being interested in learning more about the subjects of transportation planning and prioritization (the single "No" came from a county with partial MPO coverage and no self-perceived gaps or deficiencies). This indicates recognition on the part of the NEGRC's local governments that an informed, concerted process could improve planning and decision-making. This guide can serve that purpose, and the Regional Commission may be able to offer educational programming on the subject geared specifically toward staff and elected officials. A potentially more valuable means of applying the principles found herein could be direct NEGRC assistance to local governments in facilitating planning and prioritization processes.

## 4. Suggested Transportation Prioritization Process

Based on the preceding case studies and best practices, as well as responses to and analysis of the regional questionnaire, the NEGRC suggests the following methodology for conducting a city or county transportation prioritization process:

1. **Determine Values and Principles** – Ensure participation in and ownership of the prioritization process by the community.

- a. **Visioning and SWOT Sessions**

Use in-house staff or request assistance from the NEGRC to facilitate community input sessions that provide essential initial information such as how residents and elected officials believe the transportation system should function and what its greatest strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) are

- b. **Focused Interviews**

Hold discussions with key stakeholders in the transportation process, including community leaders, people with disabilities, low-income communities, user groups (bicycling associations, senior centers, etc.), major employers, transit riders, and other interested parties

- c. **Online Comment Opportunities**

Provide access to the process through internet questionnaires, social media polls, and video meetings

- d. **Draft List of Values**

The NEGRC recommends the following base values for any local government considering a transportation prioritization process, in addition to more contextualized, community-specific principles:

- i. *“Fix-it-first,” maintenance-forward approach* – prioritize expenditures that preventively maintain and repair existing facilities

- ii. *Land use/transportation coordination* – ensure that infrastructure improvements mirror the community’s physical growth plans
    - iii. *Social equity and accessibility* – seek out input from a cross-section of the community and actively promote the interests of lower-income populations, people of color, people with disabilities, and others
    - iv. *Complete streets, trails, and transit* – invest in high-value projects that create safe and welcoming streets and trails for people walking and bicycling, and, if appropriate for your community, prioritize public transportation
    - v. *Environmental conservation* – study, map, and protect water sources, sensitive areas, etc.

- e. **Vetting**

After formulating a list of values and principles, ask the community for feedback and adjust accordingly

2. **Select Criteria and Metrics** – Use agreed-upon values and principles to determine specific measures by which to evaluate and rank proposed projects.

- a. **Minimum, Common Standards**

While communities’ chosen criteria and metrics will vary based on their values and principles, any city or county pursuing transportation prioritization should include the following attributes in its analysis:

- i. *Critical* – top value should be given to projects that maintain, repair, or rebuild critical infrastructure; define “critical” in a way that ensures that, for example, a sidewalk vital to people with disabilities is given the same importance as a bridge or a traffic signal
    - ii. *Efficient* – make the most out of scarce resources by prioritizing preventive maintenance and early repairs, as well as new investments that increase the safety and desirability of walking and bicycling
    - iii. *Comprehensive* – resolve to study and act on an array of datasets to determine a project’s worth, not relying exclusively on typical analyses such as automobile LOS or volume-to-capacity ratio
    - iv. *Smart* – use technology not only to improve efficiency in the existing transportation system (traffic signal timing, real-time bus location mapping/ETA, etc.) but also to inform the prioritization process (data

availability and analysis, neighborhood/corridor 3D modeling, online participatory methods and outreach)

**b. Community-Informed Process**

Consider the methods presented in **1. Determine Values and Principles** to ask the public for assistance in creating and/or commenting on the proposed final list of criteria and metrics

**3. Rank Projects** – Establish a clear, concise, and unbiased approach to sequencing projects for implementation and investment that is easy for residents, elected officials, and transportation system users to understand and trust.

- a. Project Value** – develop one common framework to assign values to projects across modes and types or use a mode-/project-tailored basis that provides all candidates an equal chance of earning the same number of points; create a number-based valuation system organized in a spreadsheet or other database
- b. Emotional Value** – leave room in the process for projects that are strongly linked to community pride and/or identity, even if they may not be imperative to the more rigid, mechanical workings of the transportation system
- c. Ordering and Ranking** – use assigned project values (including emotional value) to arrange a simple and well-organized ranking of candidate projects for public investment; if certain stakeholder groups or private-sector entities disagree with their preferred projects' places on the list, consider offering opportunities for public/private partnerships

**4. Implement** – Begin accomplishing the goals described in the prioritization process.

- a. Internal Work Program** – create a phase-based implementation program within the prioritization document; provide only critical information such as project name, location/endpoints/distance, project phase, cost, and funding source(s) in the work program
- b. Immediate Returns** – use the momentum gained through the planning process to generate enthusiasm about plan implementation by committing to initiate work on the highest-value projects directly after adoption; projects can be grouped into completion timeframes such as 90 days, one year, three years, and, if desired, long-term

- c. Shovel-Ready Projects List** – maintain a complete list of programmed transportation projects that can be ready for external funding and construction on short notice to take advantage of opportunities immediately upon notification of availability; *these need not necessarily be the highest-priority projects in the ranked list*
- d. Interjurisdictional Coordination** – highlight opportunities to notify, partner with, and seek guidance from bordering and nearby governments when projects cross or approach jurisdictional lines; this is particularly important with respect to shared boundaries, but can also be beneficial in various other applications, including as it applies to MPO areas

**5. Evaluate and Adapt** – Ensure the plan's continued relevance by seeking feedback on implemented projects and improving processes related to planning, design, and construction. Focus on opportunities for improvement rather than fixating on perceived failures.

- a. Post-Assessment** – host a regular community forum and online feedback opportunity to gain valuable insights on future investments; for shorter work programs, this can be done upon completion of every project, while communities with more extensive lists may opt to schedule annual reviews via “State of the City” updates and other similar, standing commitments
- b. Adjustment and Amendment** – make use of lessons learned in projects and the prioritization process; if a change needs to be made to the prioritization framework, itself, then amend the document
- c. Experimentation** – if projects are consistently difficult to implement, consider a temporary, “tactical urbanism” approach that accomplishes small tasks quickly; this can improve internal and external morale while offering opportunities for learning that may apply to more permanent project types
- d. Notation** – keep track of what works and what does not for future reference



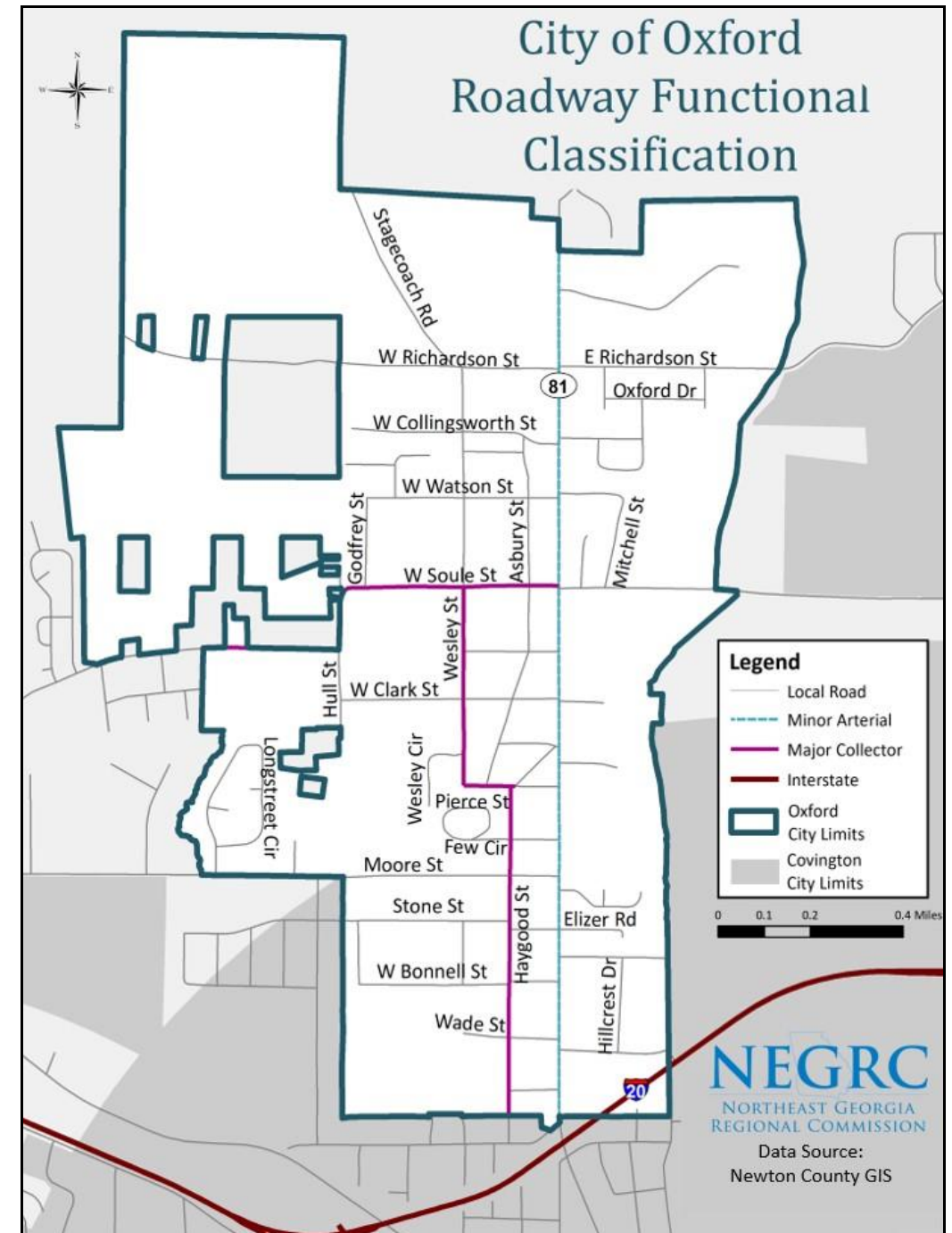
## 5. Case Study: Oxford, Georgia

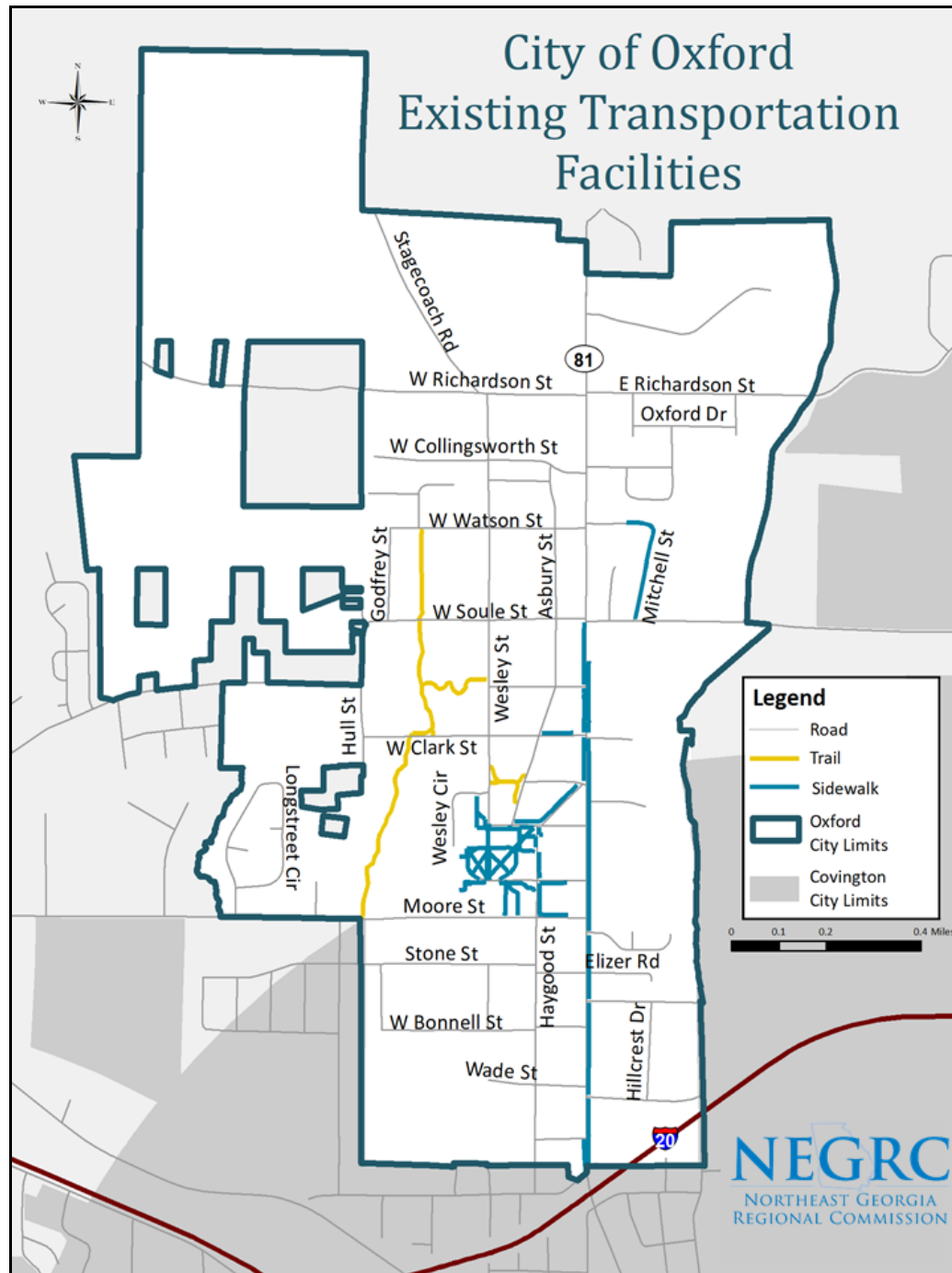
Oxford, Georgia (2018 estimated population 2,313, US Census Bureau) is a small but organizationally sophisticated city located in central Newton County, 35 miles east of Atlanta and 45 miles southwest of Athens. The City's operations include streets and stormwater upkeep, solid waste and recycling collection, an in-house police department, and provision of water, sewerage, and electrical service directly to customers.

Oxford leadership agreed to allow the NEGRC to study the community's transportation system and planning/prioritization practices to provide further insights into how a local government might apply the processes presented in this plan. The City designated a local work group, comprising membership by representatives of the city council; planning commission; trees, parks, and recreation board; and downtown development authority, as well as the city manager, to coordinate with the NEGRC. The work group provided feedback in areas including transportation goals, local priorities, and how the planning and prioritization processes currently work and how they would ideally function in the future.

### Transportation in Oxford

Oxford has approximately 13 linear miles of streets and roads, over two miles of which are covered by State Route 81/Emory St. Most roadways are classified as local roads, while SR81 is a minor arterial and the city limits include less than one-quarter mile of Interstate 20 that is not connected to any other streets in the City. Most traffic going to, from, or through Oxford utilizes SR81, which sees approximately 10,000 daily trips. Neighborhood streets see virtually no traffic outside of travel directly to or from residences; aside from SR81, no street with a Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) traffic count location exhibits more than 580 daily trips. (<https://tinyurl.com/y7yeon8ji>)





The City’s sidewalk system is focused mostly along SR81 and within the grounds of the Oxford College campus. Direct sidewalk connectivity into Covington (the Newton County seat), which shares a boundary with Oxford, exists, but the SR81 bridge over I20 is a safety concern for the City. Oxford’s popular multi-use trail system provides approximately two miles of mostly recreational bicycling and walking facilities for the community.

To maintain its road, sidewalk, and trail networks, the City mostly procures services from private contractors or utilizes Newton County’s road crews. Most work, including resurfacing, repairs, and major patching and sealing projects is handled this way. The six-person streets crew operates out of Oxford’s Public Works Department and handles minor patching and sealing, repairs required by other City projects (such as filling holes after digging up a section of water line), and right-of-way (ROW) upkeep, such as mowing, blowing, and debris collection. Occasionally, if GDOT is slow to respond to requests, the streets crew will fill potholes on SR81.

### Local/In-House Planning & Implementation

Oxford has historically handled transportation projects on an as-needed basis. Most work originates from resident- and Councilmember-identified needs or prior commitments to specific goals or projects. Local Maintenance and Improvement Grants (LMIG) from GDOT, SPLOST funding dedicated to transportation (approximately \$500,000 of the City’s roughly \$1.5M allocation in the current Newton County package), and project-specific funding have ensured that Oxford’s streets are resurfaced, potholes are filled, cracks are sealed, and sidewalks are repaired and – where agreed-upon – added to the network.

By the measure of public expenditures, sidewalk construction has been Oxford’s main transportation priority in recent years. Major projects include new facilities in the southern part of the City adjacent to Covington, where a pedestrian bridge over I20 is planned as a joint venture between the two cities and GDOT. When Oxford officials noticed significant pedestrian traffic along Moore St., the City’s main connective east-west thoroughfare, the Council took action and built sidewalks along the extent of the segment that borders the Oxford College campus.

The five-year capital budget includes all major expenditures planned within the City; while it does not feature an overall transportation account or “bucket,” project-specific line-items allocate funds to important investments on an individual basis. In regards to paving, leadership maintains a list of roads for eventual resurfacing, identifies which segments they can fund with a given year’s allocation, and contracts the work externally, either to a private company or, when the work has involved LMIG dollars, to Newton County. Oxford programs funding this way to ensure that the City will not face an immediate, dramatic need to repave a vast amount of its road network at once; due to the limited miles in the system, this approach has worked well.

### Comprehensive Plan

The short-term work program in Oxford’s comprehensive plan (adopted 2018) identifies several transportation-related action items:

- Complete bike/ped bridge over I20; extend sidewalk to Town Center
- Redesign streets to begin implementing Town Center
- Design and install streetscape improvements to George/Whatcoat Streets
- Adopt sustainability plan to include transportation, biodiversity, resource conservation, invasive species, etc.
- Implement public transportation service
- Develop citywide Complete Streets and Trails Plan that includes a focus on connectivity to Covington
- Devise and implement strategy to assume local control of SR81
- Develop parking study to improve availability and distribution citywide

The comprehensive plan’s Vision and Goals also reference transportation, setting the context for the specific projects referenced above with special mention of neighborhood connectivity and community identity, complete streets and trails, attractive streetscapes, and wayfinding.

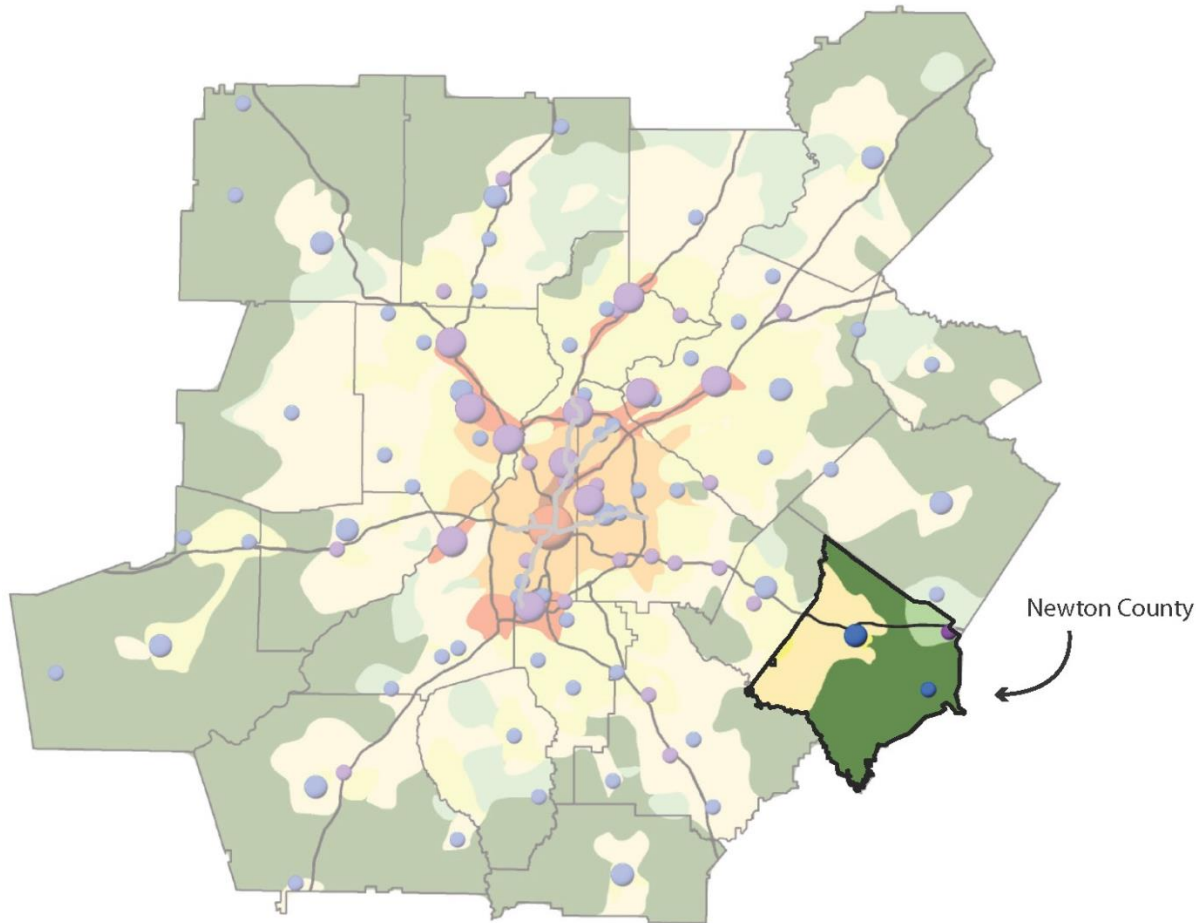


*Oxford residents, elected, officials, staff, and other stakeholders participated heavily in the development of the community’s 2018 comprehensive plan, with high public meeting turnout for a community of its size*



## Intergovernmental Coordination

While the city limits are included in the Atlanta Regional Commission’s MPO planning boundary, Oxford does not directly participate in regional transportation planning in Atlanta. It is instead represented through the Newton County government on the Transportation & Air Quality Committee and Transportation Coordinating Committee, as well as via Municipal District 5, which also includes other cities in Newton, DeKalb, and Rockdale Counties.



*The Atlanta Regional Commission’s MPO planning boundary with Newton County highlighted and the Oxford/Covington/Porterdale municipal area in blue, centrally*

## Opportunities

Work group members noted that Oxford should improve walkability within the City and into Covington, identifying sidewalks and crosswalks as valuable investments; some called out Moore St. and Emory St./SR81, specifically. They also favored investing in complete streets that make bicycling and walking safer and more attractive for residents and visitors.

Despite Oxford’s small size, several work group comments indicated a need for providing public transportation services to transportation-disadvantaged residents (seniors, people with disabilities, low-income individuals, etc.) and those who may choose not to own or drive an automobile. Examples of critical trip purposes that people are often unable to handle without a private automobile include grocery shopping, medical appointments and prescription purchases, and other similar activities. Since Oxford does not currently have businesses offering these services, residents must leave the city limits to access them; the local government would likely need to work with Newton County and/or other municipalities to provide transit to interested parties. The Newton County Tomorrow nonprofit organization, which is overseen in part by elected officials from the County and its municipalities, has discussed this topic and could be a valuable collaborator.

Some group members admitted to being uncertain about how the transportation planning process works; considering the group’s composition, with membership from both within and outside of the local government’s operations, this is to be expected. It does, however, present an opportunity to inform and engage the public in future transportation activities.

Regarding the City’s current and future transportation priorities, group member comments aligned well with stated goals and policies represented in the comprehensive plan, such as pursuing complete streets and keeping roads safe and well maintained. Further, work team responses to focused questions indicate not only that members understand Oxford’s priorities, but that they agree with them broadly. One remark, however, suggested that while sidewalks and crosswalks constitute an important component of the City’s transportation system, added facilities are not likely necessary outside of Emory St./SR81.



## Potential Goals and Priorities

Based on work group feedback and comprehensive plan content (data analysis, goals, and specific projects), the following goals and priorities characterize a potential transportation vision for the community:

1. Make transportation decisions with participation from a broad cross-section of the city, including elected officials, staff, a diverse array of residents, institutional partners, and businesses
2. Ensure the safety of all residents and visitors using Oxford's transportation system by providing connective complete streets and trails for walking and bicycling, enforcing traffic laws, and offering public transit services
3. Consider accessibility for people with disabilities, seniors, and other transportation-disadvantaged populations in all relevant projects and plans
4. Plan for efficient use of capital and operational resources to maintain existing transportation facilities such as roads, sidewalks, multi-use trails, and signage
5. Utilize partnerships with Newton County and its other municipalities, GDOT, Oxford College, Newton County Tomorrow, and other local and regional collaborators



*The City's multi-use trail system is a point of community pride and provides safe, attractive spaces for walking, bicycling, jogging, in-line skating, and other transportation and recreational opportunities*

## Recommendations

While the items on the Potential Goals and Policies list represent content from previous studies and work group feedback, they do not stem from a concerted, community-driven approach to transportation planning and prioritization. According to work team members, Oxford may not be ready for a robust transportation prioritization exercise: since the City has no formal, adopted comprehensive transportation plan or projects list, prioritization would likely be difficult and premature.

Therefore, Oxford should consider developing a system-wide, multimodal transportation plan. As conceived in the comprehensive plan, an approach focused on complete streets and trails would be appropriate. Since “complete streets” includes consideration of all modes, such a project would enable to City to focus on walking and bicycling while also paying close attention to public transportation, road resurfacing, and driving safety measures. The process and document could be as simple or sophisticated as leadership desires, and the robust public involvement typical of other planning undertakings in Oxford would ensure broad buy-in on the community’s part. Specific prioritization activities could also be included, with a ranked/phased listing of projects providing the bulk of the plan’s implementation program. The NEGRC would be available to assist the City by facilitating the process and drafting the document.

*Note that these recommendations are based on community feedback about desired future scenarios stemming from both this project and the 2018 comprehensive plan; the City's current transportation funding and project implementation processes appear to be sufficient to maintain existing infrastructure and accomplish consensus-based projects on an ad-hoc basis.*

## 6. Debrief & Evaluation

This section provides a meta-analysis and debrief about the process of developing this guide, about how it relates to the stated need in the NEGRC's regional plan, and about how the NEGRC may be able to provide direct assistance on the subject to local governments.

### Project Successes and Opportunities

While the NEGRC has provided significant transportation-related assistance to local governments and the State of Georgia, transportation prioritization has not been a specific area of focus. This guide is produced to benefit communities within and outside of Northeast Georgia, as well as to provide information for other regional planning organizations.

Potential points for improvement or further study include:

- Clarifying a recommended scoring/ranking methodology; this would be difficult outside of an actual prioritization process
- Gaining a more specific understanding of the actual age and condition of the region's key transportation infrastructure; while this would be important work and provide excellent data for state and local decision-makers, it would also be a complex, time-consuming activity
- Offering a prioritization workshop for NEGRC member governments

### Regional Plan Context

The initial need in the NEGRC's regional plan identifying an opportunity to develop a transportation prioritization guide focused on addressing aging infrastructure and allocating scarce resources efficiently. Toward the aging infrastructure issue, this study places substantial emphasis on periodic and preventive maintenance and early repairs. Attention to efficient, focused prioritization of new projects of real need and high value ensures that the document provides readers with key insights on how to spend limited funding effectively to preserve and intelligently expand local transportation systems. Both areas rely on and benefit from the document's grounding in establishing an effective public process and judiciously analyzing existing assets to learn which are critical and which are not. This will help local governments, the region, and the State of Georgia ensure continued value from such typically major investments as transportation projects.

### Local Transferability

While the NEGRC has not facilitated transportation prioritization activities for local governments in the past, the Commission is now prepared to do so, likely with a limited learning curve as planners navigate and refine the process. As shown in the county-level information provided by managers, administrators, and clerks, significant differences exist in how the region's cities and counties plan for, prioritize, fund, and implement transportation projects, so each undertaking would need to be tailored directly toward the community involved. Without published rules from the State of Georgia or the federal government, working with a city or county to sculpt a unique process that will provide the greatest possible local benefit should be straightforward and relatively easily achieved.

As with any planning process, implementation is critical, so the NEGRC could also work with communities after completion and/or adoption of an eventual document to facilitate or conduct periodic checks on how the local government uses the work to make decisions and fund projects.



*Compact communities with complete streets where residents are safe walking and bicycling can facilitate community and individual resilience*

## Resilience

Although the regional plan identified the need for this project and planners framed its details long before COVID-19 began to affect Northeast Georgia communities, local government resilience must still be considered. As local, state, and federal economies contract and budgets shrink, a long-term, consistent focus on maintaining existing facilities *before* a downturn limits funding or stay-at-home advisories prohibit crews from working will reward forward-thinking communities. Since transportation infrastructure is often very expensive, situations such as the coronavirus pandemic emphasize the need for continual attention to existing facilities; because these investments are typically highly durable, cities and counties will be able to use their previous focus on upkeep to defer costs until recovery begins to generate revenues near normal levels. Maintenance-forward communities are resilient communities.