

Farmington Metropolitan Planning Organization

Summary of Public Surveys For the Metropolitan Transportation Plan Update



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SECTION 1 Introduction

In March 2009, the Farmington Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) issued two surveys to solicit public input on general travel characteristics, public transit services, and improvements needed for our regional transportation system. The MPO is currently in the process of updating its long range plan called the Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP), which identifies solutions and policies to the regional transportation system over the course of 20 years.

The information collected from the survey provides the MPO with a baseline for future transportation decisions. It gives the MPO an understanding of how effectively our transportation system is currently operating and where improvements are needed.

The surveys were available through a link on the MPO website and the majority of responses were received this way. Various organizations, such as the local chambers of commerce and San Juan College, assisted the MPO by sending the link out to their respective agencies and constituents. Hard copies of the surveys were also available to the public and these were completed and mailed to the MPO primarily by senior citizen groups.

Through the approximate six week period from early March through mid April, the Farmington MPO received 639 surveys. Of this total, 248 transit surveys and 391 surveys on general transportation characteristics and needed improvements were returned.

SECTION 2 Summary Results of Public Transit Survey

The transit survey focused on current use of the Red Apple Transit system and what changes and/or improvements the public would like to see.

CURRENT TRANSIT USE

Despite increasing ridership on Red Apple Transit, the majority of respondents (74.2 percent) stated they did not use the Red Apple system (Figure 1). For those who do take some form of public transportation, shopping centers, apartment complexes, and the Farmington Civic Center were the most common places where people begin their transit trip. Shopping centers, the Farmington Public Library, San Juan College, and local senior centers were typical destination points for transit trips.

Getting to a bus stop by walking/biking or driving each received about 45 percent of responses. In response to the question of frequency of transit use, the most common answer was “Never” (80.2 percent). This answer relates to the fact that the majority of responses said they do not use transit.

For those that do, riding the bus a few times a year ranked second at 12 percent.

Respondents were asked about why they take the bus: 31.7 percent said to get to work followed closely by 28.3 percent of people who take the bus for shopping purposes. Doctor’s appointments, for school, and for recreational activities rounded out the top reasons why people ride the bus (Figure 2).

Over two-thirds of responses (67.9 percent) said they were aware of Red Apple Transit service to Aztec, Bloomfield, Kirtland, and other locations in San Juan County. However, just 29 percent knew that Red Apple Transit has a website. This could be due to the fact that the website is relatively new.

Those who took the survey mentioned they would use transit during the typical morning and afternoon peaks periods: 6am to 9am (56.4 percent) and from 3pm to 6pm (47.9 percent), correlating with typical working hours. Mid-day and evening hours also ranked high, indicating the need for transit to assist with running errands and arriving at various appointments such as doctor’s visit.

Figure 1 – Transit Modes

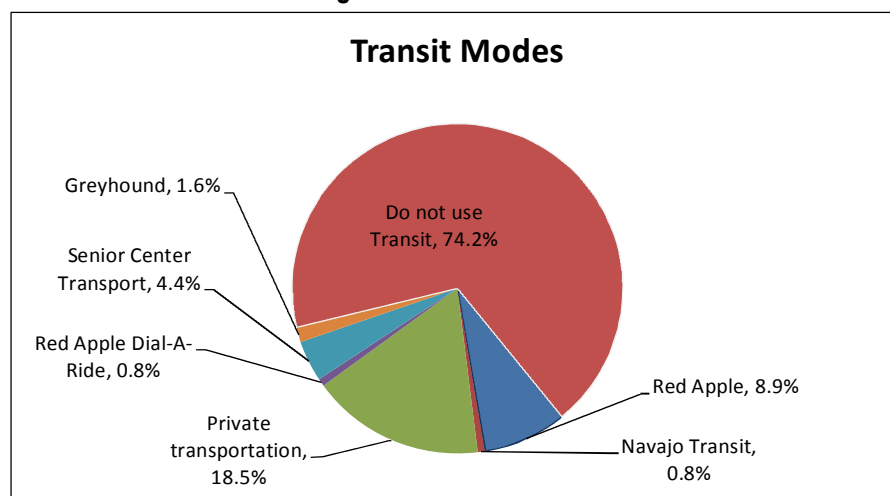
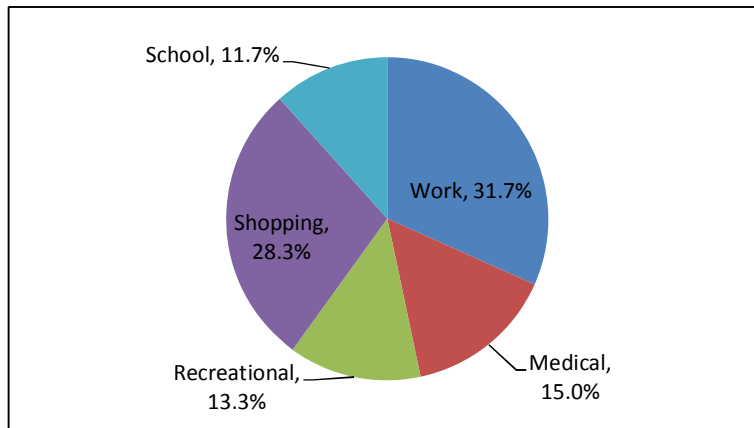


Figure 2 – Types of Transit Trips



ADDITIONAL AND EXPANDED SERVICES

Most people who took the survey (about 73 percent) would like to see additional and expanded Red Apple Transit services. The survey gave respondents several options regarding changes to existing service and also asked where one would go if service were available. An open-ended question was also provided for people to offer their own comments.

Of the options given for desired changes to service, full answers by number of responses are shown in Figure 3. Respondents were then asked to rank these options in order of importance. The top four answers were:

- More frequent service (24 percent)
- Serve more places in Farmington (21 percent)
- Serve more places in San Juan County (18 percent)
- Longer hours of operation (9 percent)

When asked where one would go if service were available, a mix of local and regional destinations rated the highest. On the local side, other places in Farmington and Aztec were the preferred choices. Indicating a need for transit connections on a regional level, the City of Durango and the Durango-LaPlata County Airport were ranked the highest (Figure 4). In addition, other notable

destinations included the Waterflow area, Albuquerque, and Ignacio, CO.

The public had the option to further identify other destinations that could possibly be served by transit in the future. Common answers included shopping districts, doctor offices, and medical facilities within the tri-city area. On a larger scale, areas outside the MPO were mentioned, including Shiprock, Ignacio, and NAPI/Navajo housing along NM 371.

It should be noted that many responses included San Juan College and Wal-Mart. While these two places already are served by Red Apple Transit, the claim could be made that the public would like to see more frequent service to these popular destinations or that other locations within the MPO should be connected to the college and Wal-Mart by transit.

Figure 3 – Desired Changes to Transit Service

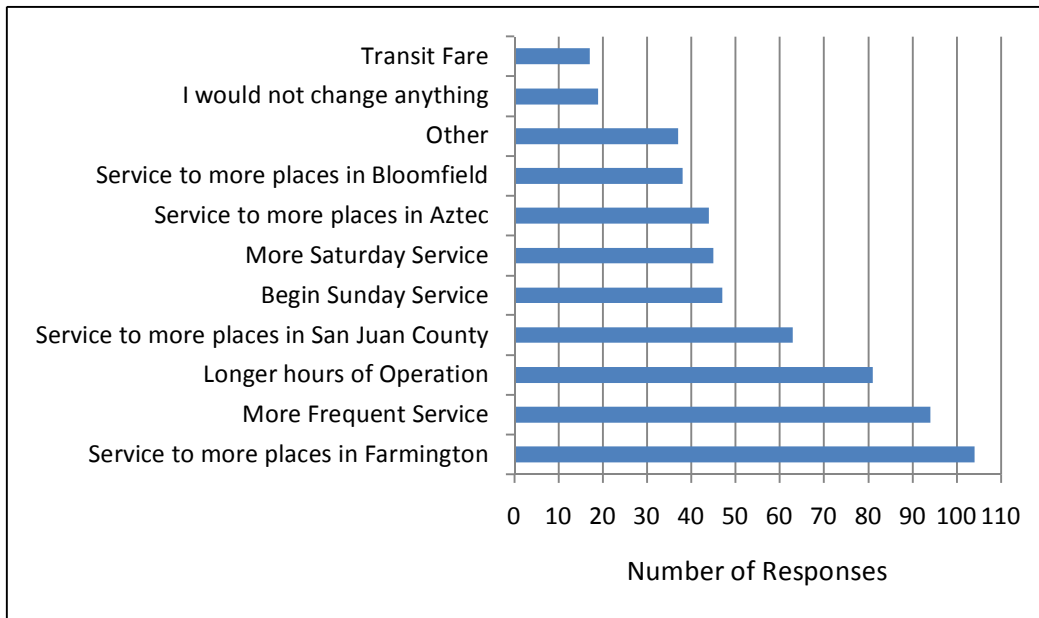
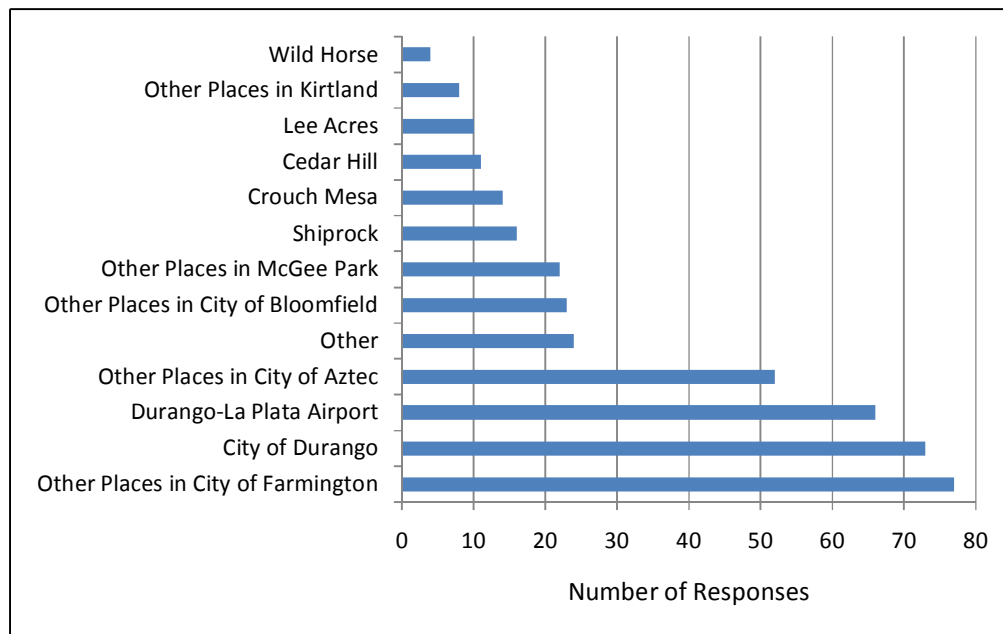


Figure 4 – Destinations If Transit Service Were Available



Several comments were provided in the survey and they can be summarized into two main themes:

- *Convenience* - Regional routes from outlying cities to Farmington only run a few times a day; the one-way loop routes in Farmington make travel too

long; the buses need to go in each direction; there needs to be more bus stops.

- *Expansion* – make connections to Shiprock and places in Colorado such as Durango and the LaPlata County Airport.

TRANSIT EXPANSION AND TAX INCREASES

As stated earlier, about 73 percent of respondents noted they “would like to see additional/ expanded transit services offered in Farmington/San Juan County.” Across the board, respondents were favorable to the use of local tax dollars to help fund new transit services, with only 13.4 percent responding negatively to any increase in taxes.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS

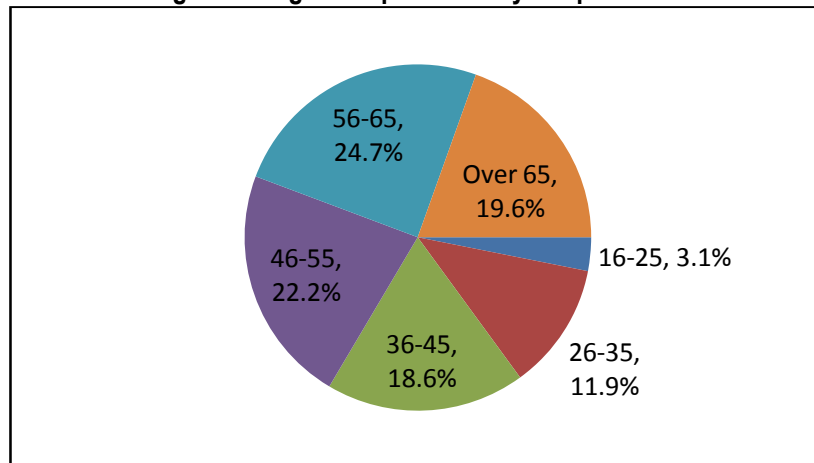
Based on zip codes provided, just over half of respondents live in the City of Farmington (53.8 percent). The next largest group of residents was the City of Aztec (25.4 percent). Over 90 percent of respondents have a valid driver’s license and own at least one automobile. The survey was completed by mostly middle-aged and senior citizen residents (see Figure 5).

CONCLUSIONS AND OBSERVATIONS

The public transit survey provides the MPO and its members with a snapshot of existing ridership and ideas on how to improve and expand the system as part of the long range plan update. Red Apple Transit ridership continues to grow each year and has exceeded 100,000 riders the past two years. It has surpassed estimates, and the system is now recognized as a viable transportation option for a portion of the general public.

It is not surprising that transit is most often used for shopping and medical trips. Because Wal-Mart and San Juan College are popular destinations, it is understandable why the public would like to see more transit service made available to these places.

Figure 5 – Age Groups of Survey Respondents



Several improvements to Red Apple Transit were also expressed in the survey. More frequent service ranked as one of the top answers. While local Farmington routes have a reasonable headway of 30 minutes, it is probable that the need for increased frequency referred to the regional routes to Aztec, Bloomfield, and Kirtland. Adding at least a couple of more runs to the regional routes to reduce headways to a couple of hours would help make them much more convenient.

The public would also like to see direct two-way routes rather than the one-way loop system. Due to the additional time needed for one leg of a round trip, many comments were made stating that the system often times does not fit into a person's schedule. From the results, the public is looking at the expansion of transit on both the local and larger

regional scales. They would like to see service expanded throughout San Juan County to reach the various communities. Many comments received indicate a need for transit to cities and destinations in Southwest Colorado. Transit could provide a service for those who live in one state and work in the other as well as for casual visits or weekend trips between the two states.

It must be noted that federal law prohibits a local bus system from crossing state lines; however, agreements can be structured among various transit agencies to develop a service plan. Based on the survey, the public has identified a need for this type of service, and it will be beneficial for the various governments in Northwest New Mexico and Southwest Colorado to consider this option in the future.

SECTION 3 Summary Results of Public Participation Survey

The second survey issued by the MPO focused on general travel characteristics and asked about future improvements to the transportation system. It will be referenced as the public participation survey throughout this section.

CURRENT TRANSPORTATION USE

As the largest city and the economic center in the Four Corners area, the City of Farmington is the starting and ending destination for many trips in the MPO. Figures 6 and 7 indicate where respondents begin and end their typical work or school trip. Over 86 percent of these trips are taken in single-occupant vehicles while another 7.5 percent carpool. Other modes – taking the bus or walking/biking – make up less than 5 percent of mode choice.

For those who completed the survey, 39.6 percent travel less than 5 miles to their destination. When combined, nearly 80 percent of trips are 15 miles or less. This can directly relate to the numbers above that showed Farmington as the beginning and ending of most trips. 55 percent of trips leave home between 7am and 8am. 58 percent of trips leave work or school between 4pm and 6pm to head back home.

REDUCING TRAFFIC CONGESTION

Several options were provided on how to reduce traffic congestion and the public was asked to rate each in terms of being an effective measure. The rating scale ranged from 1 (Not effective) to

5 (Most effective). For infrastructure improvement measures, the following average ratings were received:

Measure	Avg Rating
Improve traffic signal timing/operation	4.07
Build new roads for better connectivity	3.85
Improve access management	3.73
Build more sidewalks	3.01
Build more bike facilities	2.82

For transit related improvements, the survey produced the following average ratings:

Measure	Avg Rating
Expand/improve public transit	3.85
Serve surrounding San Juan County by transit	3.8
Increase frequency of current system	3.76
Improve Red Apple system (build transit hub, etc)	3.73
Build more sidewalk connections to transit	3.02
Add amenities (benches, shelters, etc)	2.86

Figure 6 – Where Typical Work/School Trips Begin

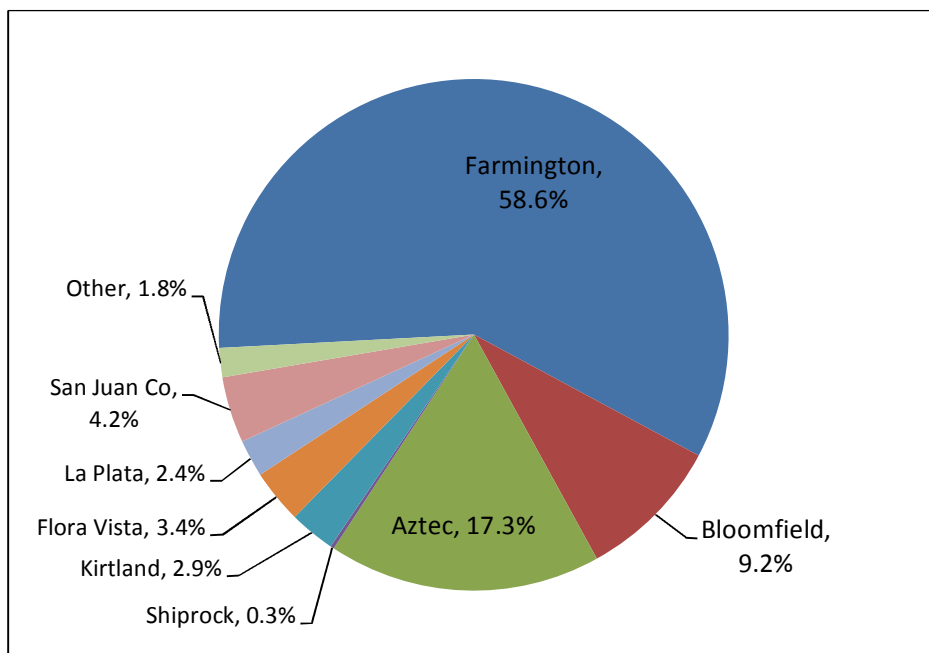
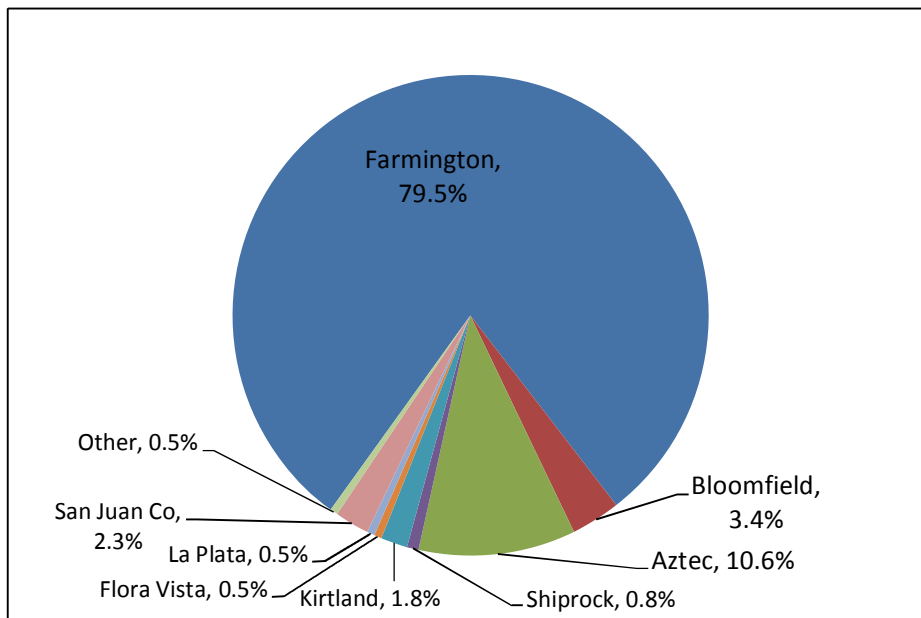


Figure 7 – Where Typical Work/School Trips End



FUTURE IMPROVEMENTS

Respondents were asked what improvements would be needed to encourage them to bicycle more. Building on-road facilities (bike lanes) and off-road facilities (sidepaths, trails) ranked virtually the same at 36.8 percent and 35.4 percent, respectively. During development of the Farmington MPO Bicycle/Pedestrian Plan, public comments were also evenly split with regards to preference for more on-road or off-road facilities.

About 65 percent of responses said they would not be in favor of tolls for highway improvements. Only 16 percent were in favor of tolls while 19 percent were unsure.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

An opportunity to provide additional comments concluded the public participation survey. Several comments were provided to the MPO that are categorized under the following themes:

- *Bicycle/Sidewalk* – the public would like to see more walking and biking facilities and the removal of obstacles that make walking difficult (telephone poles, poor sidewalk conditions).
- *Engineering Improvements* – The public identified various intersections as being dangerous, suggested roads that should be widened, and poor road conditions. A few comments were in favor of the proposed Piñon Hills river bridge.
- *Signal Synchronization* – The public perceives the need for better timing of traffic signals.
- *Transit* – The public described how the current system can be inconvenient, how it tends to not fit with daily schedules, and possible areas for expansion.
- *Rail Service* – Some members of the public mentioned light rail service among the cities as well as a train connection to Albuquerque.

CONCLUSIONS AND OBSERVATIONS

Like most urban areas, the majority of typical trips peak during the early morning and early evening hours. Despite just ranking as somewhat effective in reducing traffic congestion, building more bicycle/pedestrian facilities could provide a viable option for commuters, especially given that nearly 40 percent of trips are less than 5 miles, 22 percent are less than 10 miles, and 18 percent are less than 15 miles.

Similar to the transit survey, this survey indicated that making the system more convenient and expanding it out to reach other populations were identified as primary needs. Interestingly, while the transit survey showed that 63 percent of respondents favor a local tax to improve transit services, the public participation survey indicated that 65 percent would not support tolls for road improvements.

Based on responses, the public is seeking a more balanced transportation system. Whether it is on-street or off-road facilities, the public would like to see more bike lanes and trails. Several ideas were provided about where transit could go in the future to serve more areas of the county. Furthermore, the public has a handful of big picture ideas, such as local rail service or regional public transit connections to Albuquerque and places in Southwest Colorado.

CONCLUSION

For the most part, travel characteristics of those who participated in the survey reflect typical travel patterns. Travel in the MPO area, like the majority of urbanized areas, is dominated by the personal vehicle. The public stands to benefit from more mode choice, especially given the large percentage of relatively short commute distances of 15 miles or less. If a more complete bicycle and pedestrian network could be constructed, it could likely provide commuters with other viable options besides the automobile.

The public expressed the importance of better road connectivity, improved signal timing, and convenient transit service as practical solutions to reducing traffic congestion. The MPO will fully consider these and other strategies and measure their effectiveness for addressing future road congestion as part of the MTP update.

While Red Apple Transit is set up as a coverage system, a growth in ridership and a need to expand to areas not served by transit will necessitate the creation of a bi-directional system with direct connections to various residential neighborhoods and public destinations. As Red Apple Transit provides a way for basic mobility for people in the communities, any changes within the current system must be looked at from two points of views: as an efficient alternative to the car in higher density areas and as a basic right for those who lack other mobility options.

The FMPO long range plan update will look at integrating land use and transportation decisions so that transit, walking, and biking become viable alternative modes of transportation for all those who travel through the region. In this way, the needs of travelers in this area and the goals of the MPO for the future transportation system will be met.