

The MPO Wants to Know: Sustainability

In an effort to better understand public views, the MPO has launched a series of online surveys about various transportation-related topics. The survey results will help the MPO develop plans and projects for the future. The responses also will be shared with appropriate roundtables and policymakers. For a list of available surveys, please visit the MPO website at <http://www.dmampo.org/user/survey.html>. Below are the results of the latest survey, which was distributed to coincide with the June 29th sustainable planning conference that the MPO helped plan.

Question 1. What does the term sustainability mean to you?

Three primary concerns continually arose in the responses – interconnectedness, maintenance, and thoughts of the future. One respondent noted that *sustainability* “concerns the interconnected outcomes regarding economic vitality, environmental integrity, and social equity.” It is considering long term economic, environmental, and social viability.

Sustainability is “acting in ways that can be carried forward indefinitely,” maintaining and growing by using resources wisely. It means utilizing renewable resources and ensuring that society does not waste resources in spite of future generations.

Furthermore, *sustainability* implies “meeting the needs of the present while protecting the ability of future generations to meet their needs.” *Sustainability* is “reducing human impacts to level that do not impoverish nature and place future generations at risk.” One respondent noted that *sustainability* is considering the impact of an action over the course of one hundred years.

Sustainability is exhibiting good stewardship of resources and is implementing a process of change to reduce each person’s footprint. As one individual mentioned, “reuse, reduce, recycle!”

Question 2. Many individuals recognize that economic, environmental, and social issues – the three major components of sustainability – are interdependent and integrated. As such, what do you feel are the biggest economic challenges facing the Des Moines metropolitan area?

Respondents identified a plethora of economic challenges facing the Des Moines metropolitan area. Not surprisingly, job retention, creation, and growth are at the top of the list. Some are concerned about maintaining a high quality of life to prevent the brain drain.

Others are concerned about the impact of urban sprawl. Respondents desire reduced dependence on non-renewable fuels and automobiles, increased density, and improved public transportation access. Individuals seek to maintain a vibrant downtown Des Moines and worry that suburban growth damages the city center economically and socially. One respondent noted that “the suburbs and Des Moines do not work well together,” resulting in economic challenges for the region.

The cost to initiate sustainability efforts also is significant, potentially representing a barrier to implementation. Several respondents believe that taxes present economic challenges; communities depend too much on property taxes, and there are numerous tax-exempt entities.

Some are concerned that the area is comprised of a consumption-based economy; we lack local services, goods, and products, including food. Furthermore, existing resources are not fully leveraged, and existing agricultural space and conditions should be considered more thoroughly. Still other respondents believe that sustainable energy and infrastructure are the biggest economic challenges for the area.

Question 3. Building upon question number two, what do you feel are the biggest environmental challenges facing the Des Moines metropolitan area?

Approximately 30% of respondents believe that water-related issues present the biggest environmental challenge for the Des Moines metropolitan area. This includes water quality, water quantity, runoff, stormwater management, and flooding. Several respondents suggest that existing agricultural practices, including those implemented by confined animal feeding operations (CAFOs), should be addressed.

Over 20% of respondents feel that transportation-related issues pose the biggest environmental challenge for the area. Individuals believe the area needs more public transportation options and that businesses and arts and social service organizations should promote public transportation. By encouraging alternative forms of transportation, pollution potentially could be reduced. One respondent stated, “We solve every transportation

problem with more roads and parking garages rather than more sustainable solutions like bike routes and public transit.”

Approximately 17% of respondents point to sprawl as the biggest environmental challenge in the area. In fact, several respondents note the link between land use and transportation issues. There are too many built-in incentives for people that build and/or buy in new areas rather than in existing urban areas. The system provides too much room to build out. One respondent asserts that “we need to focus on building out communities within their footprint rather than continually expanding boundaries to accommodate growth.” The growth also results in the destruction of natural habitats that otherwise could be left to flourish.

Nearly 6% of respondents believe that air quality pollution is a daunting issue for the area. Other respondents suggest energy inefficiency in homes, vacant properties, non-local food sources, and green space issues are large challenges for the Des Moines area. One respondent notes that implementing the smart planning principles will be a challenge.

Question 4. Finally, what do you feel are the biggest social issues facing the Des Moines metropolitan area?

Almost half of respondents (45%) feel that socioeconomic issues represent a great challenge for the metropolitan area. Respondents note that, because Des Moines is “a great place to live, people can easily forget our poor, underfed, and homeless.” Programs to assist underserved populations are underfunded, and access to high quality services may be limited. Furthermore, the differential in wealth continues to increase; one respondent is concerned that “economic growth without hurting the socially disadvantaged” will pose a large challenge.

Other respondents are concerned about encouraging population diversity in terms of race, religion, age, and life stage. Respondents feel that the education and assimilation of various cultures is integral for the area.

Still more respondents consider building neighborhoods as the biggest social challenge facing the Des Moines metropolitan area. Respondents feel that people should know their neighbors, that neighborhoods must be maintained to keep the area strong, and that connecting people with the outdoors and natural areas is vital.

Others worry about balanced growth, keeping young professionals in the area, and maintaining arts programs in schools. One respondent notes that we need to work “for mutual benefit.” Along the same lines, one respondent feels the biggest social challenge for the area is having all of the communities “work together for the greater benefit of the metro area.

We all need to give up some control to accomplish initiatives that are best for the region.”

Question 5. During its last session, the Iowa Legislature passed smart planning legislation that states that entities “shall consider and may apply” the smart planning principles. One of the principles is transportation diversity; how can the MPO help promote transportation diversity?

Approximately 40% of the responses pertain to the need for increased public transportation options. Respondents desire better access; specifically, they seek an expansion of the bus system (including linkages between the airport and long haul busses), routes that connect to one another rather than emanating from a hub, and routes that operate more frequently. One respondent suggests the MPO help promote the Des Moines Area Regional Transit Authority (DART); at present, “this city has a stigma attached to riding the bus.”

Other respondents seek more options, such as streetcars, passenger rail, and light rail. Individuals want rail connections between Des Moines and Omaha, Chicago, Cedar Rapids, and Iowa City. One respondent states, “Other places can do these things; let us learn from them.”

Nearly 35% of respondents believe the MPO can help promote transportation diversity by continued promotion of bicycle and pedestrian facilities. Respondents want more bike lanes and trails that link to other modes of transportation. Individuals want to live in walkable communities and feel the MPO should continue to support complete streets in the area. Furthermore, the MPO should help ensure sidewalks are maintained in the metro area and should promote bike racks on busses and near businesses.

Additional respondents suggest the MPO support zoning that allows for the development of mixed-use areas. Respondents want the MPO to educate and engage the public, to study future needs, and to “not make it so convenient for people to drive and park their cars.” Other thoughts relate to reviewing the funding model to alter the allocation of funding between roadways, public transportation, and bicycle and pedestrian transportation.

Question 6. How do you picture the metropolitan transportation system in the next thirty years?

Over half of the responses (55%) relate to more public transportation options in the next thirty years. One individual states, “I hope for a drastic redirection of priorities from single passenger automobile use to mass transportation that works.” Some respondents hope to see light rail and monorail. They desire connections to major destinations, including

Chicago, Omaha, Denver, Minneapolis, Kansas City, and beyond. They also want commuter rail to Indianola, Ames, and Newton. Another respondent states, “While I would love to see trains, we already have a great road infrastructure, so I think it makes sense to work with that – lots more buses, ride shares, etc.”

Other respondents see the transportation system including hybrid and electric buses, bus rapid transit routes, and more routes, potentially modeled after Chicago’s grid layout, that reach the suburbs and even rural areas. Residents think the Megabus to Chicago is a great start and that more similar programs are needed. One respondent hopes to see streetcars transporting people from neighborhoods to downtown and vice versa.

Some individuals foresee more electric and low-emission vehicles in the area. One respondent anticipates more north-south roads, while others hope for fewer lanes, fewer free parking spots and sprawling parking lots, automobile travel reduced by 50%, and incentives for people driving micro-sized cars.

Respondents see moving away from automobiles to bicycles. As such, they anticipate more bike lanes and paths, well-maintained sidewalks, and more bike racks. Some want bike rental programs similar to those implemented in Chicago, Denver, and Minneapolis. Respondents desire a walkable metropolitan area that is a “paradise” for walkers and bikers.

While the majority of respondents expect the metropolitan area to become more multi-modal in the future, one respondent thinks the transportation system will be the same as it is now and was thirty years ago – 98% automotive. Another individual states that “all roads and transit lead to downtown for office workers who no longer exist, but nobody can get anywhere else to work, shop, play, or participate in civic life.”

Question 7. The MPO is in the process of developing a subcommittee to consider sustainability issues. What specific issues/concerns would you like this group to address? (Please check all that apply)

- Address the relationship between land use and transportation89.3%
 - Assist in the development of transportation-related strategies aimed at maintaining the high quality of life in central Iowa in the future64.3%
 - Provide guidance and input in the development of the Sustainable Communities Planning Grant application and, if received, a regional comprehensive plan75.0%
 - Other
- Address balanced growth
 - Assist groups seeking to revitalize established neighborhoods
 - Consider how peak oil will impact transportation options
 - Explore and promote intermodal transportation

- Help inform the business community about the benefits of sustainable development issues
- Look at special transportation needs of the aging population
- Seek to understand the impact more roadways will have on the urban community

Question 8. Do you feel that the MPO is doing enough to promote sustainability?

Yes31.8%
 No.....68.2%

Question 9. What else should the MPO pursue in order to increase sustainability in the metropolitan area and to maintain the high quality of life for future generations?

Respondents offered a variety of suggestions for the MPO to pursue. One individual states that “there is always more to be done. I think the MPO is taking the right steps and should continue down this path. I recognize you need to create consensus among partners, but we also need you to lead on these concepts.” Another respondent notes that “the MPO is on the right track, and I am very impressed. Of course, everyone can always do more.” This individual then suggests more public education, social media usage, and the provision of other opportunities for people who want to learn more about sustainability.

Likewise, several other respondents want the MPO to seek more citizen input in the decision making process and to continue asking for community opinions. One respondent suggests “true land use planning,” while another states that “there needs to be one voice and one decision making body on regional planning issues.”

Additionally, respondents want the MPO to ensure all planning focuses on multi-passenger modes as well as walking and biking; they want a transportation system that allows for ease of movement. They do not want the MPO to “encourage low density residential development by providing great roads for automobiles” and want to make certain that the MPO does not promote projects that are not financially feasible or that adversely impact the environment. One respondent suggests the MPO “learn from communities here and abroad that have experience to make our process better.”