



MTP 2045 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview

The French Broad River Metropolitan Planning Organization's 2045 Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP) is a federally-required plan for MPOs that looks 25 years into the future to prioritize transportation investments and planning efforts in the region. The French Broad River MPO's MTP is required to be updated every five years with the previous MTP being adopted by the MPO Board in September 2015. The MTP 2045, planned to be adopted in September 2020 and will be required to be updated by September 2025.

This MTP was developed by MPO staff between 2019 and 2020 with a steering committee made-up of the MPO's Prioritization Subcommittee, a committee that includes local government staff, NCDOT staff, and local elected officials. The planning effort included a "Land Use Study" to project Socio-Economic changes to the region, led by the Manhan Group.

The process also included public involvement ranging from surveys conducted in the spring and summer of 2019 to review of the final document and virtual workshops held in the summer of 2020.

The MTP, overall, provides a snapshot of major planning factors and trends in the region, projected growth, planned investments, and a consideration of goals for improving the region's transportation network. The French Broad River MPO region is changing, largely as a result of its desirability as a place to live and destination, but these changes play a large (not necessarily negative) role in impacts to the transportation network and considerations for planning a better tomorrow.

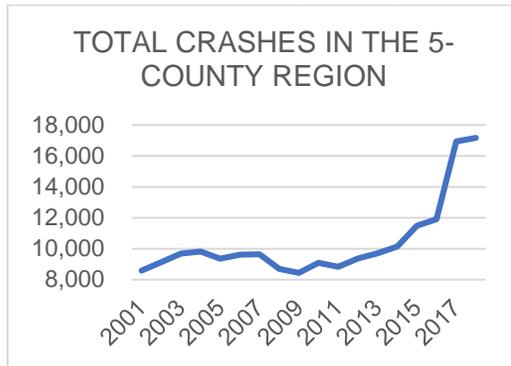
Existing Conditions and Trends

The MTP is required to look at planning factors, as developed by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and Federal Transit Administration (FTA.)

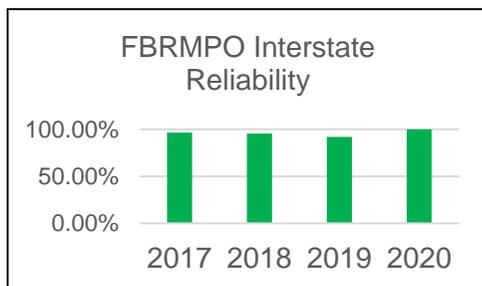
Generally, while examining the region's current conditions and trends, a few major themes emerge:

1. **The Region is Growing-** the French Broad River MPO Planning Area is in one of the fastest growing regions in one of the fastest growing states in the country. Growth and development currently lack a coordinated regional strategy but the impacts of the region's changes go beyond the local level, particularly to the region's transportation network.
2. **Roadway Safety is a Growing Concern-** crashes in the region have increased by nearly 70% between 2013 and 2018. While many of these crashes have only caused damage to property, many others have caused injuries, some serious, as well as fatalities. Fortunately, the increase in crashes has not directly correlated with a similar increase in roadway fatalities, though fatalities are still increasing significantly. In the same time period crashes increased by 70%, roadway fatalities only increased by 17%. Providing a transportation network that enables people to safely get to destinations is a cornerstone of this plan but improving safety will require design features that are often unpopular (access management,

roundabouts) and efforts that go beyond the realm of engineering.

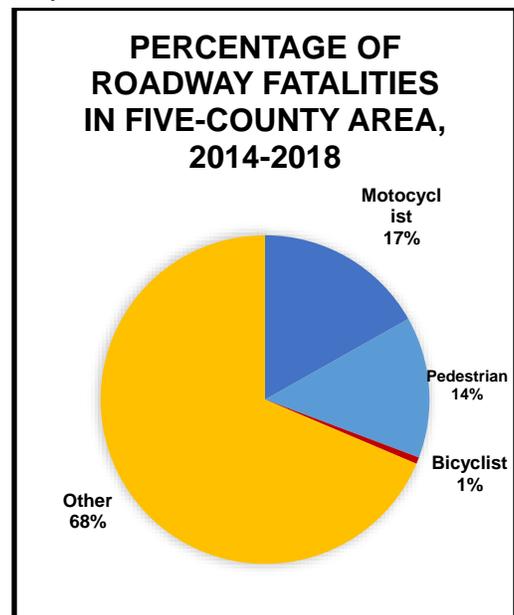


- Roadway Volumes are Increasing, Overall System Reliability is Above-Targets-** over the last 10-15 years, there have been significant increases in roadway volumes, with some (mostly interstate) segments experiencing an increase of more than 10,000 vehicles/day. However, while this has led to decreased reliability on a number of segments, the overall system remains more reliable than state targets. In 2019, the region’s interstate system was considered 92% reliable, well above the state’s target of 75%. In that same year, the non-interstate system was considered 94% reliable, above the state’s target of 70%.



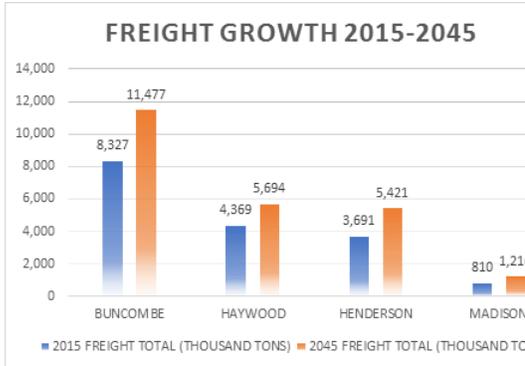
- Vulnerable Users are an Increasing Concern-** vulnerable users are considered transportation users that are more likely to be in a serious or fatal crash if involved in a crash.

These include pedestrians, bicyclists, and motorcyclists. The five-county area is now averaging more than 120 pedestrian crashes/year and 40 bicyclist crashes/year- both modes more than doubling their crash averages from 2001. Between 2014 and 2018, while vulnerable users only made up 3.1% of all recorded crashes, 32% of the roadway fatalities involved vulnerable users, 17% of roadway fatalities were motorcyclists, 11% were pedestrians, and 1% were bicyclists.



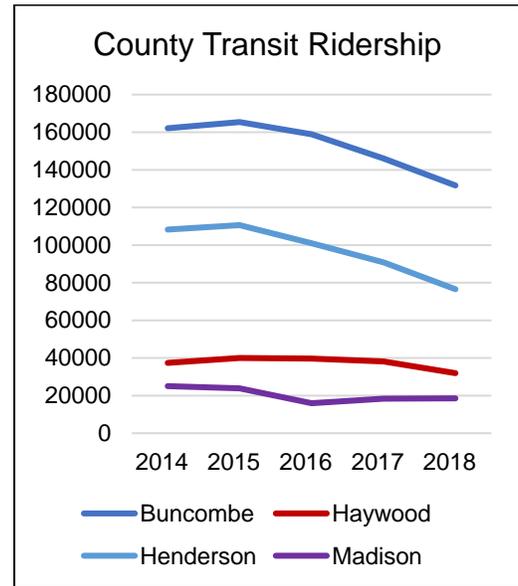
- Truck Volumes Continue to Increase-** the region’s primary freight movement continues to be through I-26 in south Buncombe and Henderson counties to I-40 in west Buncombe and Haywood counties. This is reflective of the region’s overall growth and increased demand and output in materials. It is also reflective of the national freight movement between the ports of Charleston, South Carolina and Savannah, Georgia to areas in Midwest, Tennessee, and

Kentucky. According to the North Carolina Statewide Freight Plan, volumes and tonnage are projected to continue to increase.



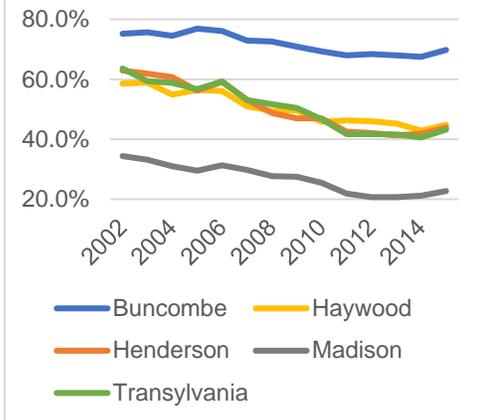
6. **Resiliency is a Major and Growing Issue in the Region-** the region is seeing an increase in major precipitation events leading to increased flooding events and landslides. When examining bottleneck data for 2019, two of the three largest bottlenecks were areas were landslides that had temporarily and repeatedly shutdown I-40 in Haywood County. This reflects a need for an increased focus on natural hazards impact on the transportation system (including flood, landslide, and wildfire.)
7. **Transit Demand is Increasing, Transit Ridership is Decreasing-** a number of indicators for transit demand in the region are increasing (senior populations, individuals with a disability, and low-income households) while several plans in the region have reflected goals tied to increased transit usage and the establishment of new fixed-route service (Haywood County) or the expansion of existing services. However, generally transit ridership has been declining in the region with significant decreases in ridership in

most county systems and a more recent decline to Asheville's ridership.



8. **Commuting in the Region is Changing Rapidly-** while commute trips only account for a portion of all trips made in the region, the region's commuting habits have been changing. Between 2002 and 2015, every county in the region had a decrease in the percentage of residents living and working within their counties, some counties experienced significant shifts. This suggests more pressure on cross-county routes, particularly interstate routes, but also indicates an expanding region, with McDowell County estimated to have more than 13% of its residents commuting to Buncombe County for work, up from 6% in 2002.

Residents Living and Working in the Same County 2002 - 2015



At the same time, data indicates that fewer residents in the region drive into their places of employment. According to the 2018 American Community Survey from the US Census Bureau, the Asheville Metropolitan Area has the sixth highest percentage of its workforce that “works from home,” at 9.3%. This is an increase of almost three-fold from 2010.

Projecting Growth and Development to 2045

As part of the MTP effort, the French Broad River MPO undertook a “Land Use Study” with the Manhan Group that projected how much population and employment growth the region would experience between 2015 (the base year for this study) and 2045. This is a required part of maintaining the region’s Travel Demand Model in coordination with NCDOT.

Overall, the region is expected to grow by 190,000 new residents between 2015 and 2045 with more than 100,000 of those new

residents moving to Buncombe County. However, Henderson and Haywood counties are expected to experience growth in excess of 40%.

Of these new residents, many are expected to be retirees. The region’s percentage of residents over the age of 65 is currently in excess of state and national averages- those percentages have been increasing in recent years and are expected to continue to increase.

The MPO considered three different growth scenarios for where growth and development may occur: a Business-as-Usual Scenario, an Efficient Growth Scenario (from GroWNC), and a Congestion Management Scenario. The MPO Board selected the Congestion Management Scenario which, according to the Travel Demand Model, decreased Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT) in the region, increased trips by walking, biking, and transit when compared to the other scenarios considered.

Goals, Funding, and Projects

Goals

The MTP lays out a number of goals--most of which are similar to the 2040 MTP. The goals of this MTP include Addressing Congestion, Improving Safety, Improving Multimodal Transportation, Improving Transit, Protecting the Environment and Unique Places, Improving Freight Movements, and (new goal) Improving the Overall Equity of the Transportation Network.

However, many of these goals are difficult to achieve given the state and federal policies that govern the eligible expenses and amount of funding for certain types of projects.

Overall, certain goals have considerably more funding in MTP projects, namely improvements to address congestion and some safety concerns on freeways for vehicles and freight, while other goals are often less directly addressed in MTP projects. Overall, the MTP evaluated projects based on goals to try to achieve regional goals as closely as possible given current financial policies.

Funding

The MTP also has a financial plan that is considerably more optimistic than past financial plans with the assumption that revenues will keep up with inflation. It is important to note that current revenue sources are not keeping up with inflation, especially at the federal level, and those issues are anticipated to worsen with new technology for fuel efficiency and electric vehicles. However, there have been repeated transfers from general funds or one-time policy changes that have changed the financial situation and left past financial assumptions trying to catch-up with an overly-constrained project list.

The financial plan is also largely based on the Strategic Transportation Investments Act of North Carolina and how it distributes transportation funds in the state. The analysis for funding in our region based on the current law results in considerable investments for interstate and freeway facilities, but less funding, comparatively, for other types of facilities and modes.

It should also be noted that the estimated project costs used for this plan were taken in late, 2019 and early, 2020. It is anticipated that shortly before the adoption of this plan, cost estimates for a number of projects are expected to rise, furthering financial complications at NCDOT.

Projects

The overwhelming majority of funding in this MTP goes to interstate facilities in the region. This includes currently programmed investments for the widening of I-26, I-240, and Future 26, as well as new interchanges on I-40, but also longer-term investments planned for I-40 in Buncombe and Haywood counties and US 23/74 in Haywood County. The proportion of funding to these projects reflects the impact of current financial policies but also reflects the region's dependence on freeway facilities and projected increases in volumes on many of these facilities.

Other funding tiers include a number of smaller projects on US, NC, and secondary routes. This includes major investments such as the widening of US 25A and NC 191 to improve the north-south routes between Buncombe and Henderson counties, but smaller projects as well including the modernization of Signal Hill, Duncan Hill, and Berkley roads in Henderson County, Woodfin Street in Buncombe County, and US 19/23 in Haywood County.

For projects on non-interstate roads, safety was considered a prime focus point for all modes. Investments were targeted in areas with higher crash rates and severities. A large number of projects in the MTP are access management projects that would reduce crashes on major US and NC routes. Many of these investments would be expected to significantly upgrade bicycle and pedestrian safety as well, per NCDOT's Complete Streets Policy.

Transit funding is anticipated to remain relatively flat, which is an optimistic outlook, especially for state and federal funds. It should be noted that the MPO is currently undergoing a Regional Transit Feasibility

Study that should be incorporated into the next MTP.

Bicycle and Pedestrian funding is expected to be around \$200 million over the next 25 years. While that it is less than 1/10th the amount programmed for interstates and freeways, it should be noted that this is for “stand-alone bicycle and pedestrian projects”- additional improvements may be made as part of highway projects.

Environmental Justice and Public Participation

As part of the MTP development process, MPO staff engaged in a number of public participation activities including online surveys, public workshops, and attendance at regional events to engage the public in the planning effort. While these efforts still only engaged a small percentage of the region’s population, these efforts enabled the public to comment on planned projects and goals, and the MPO saw a marked increase of public comments compared to past MTP efforts.

The MPO is also required to consider environmental justice (EJ) in the development of the plan- an effort to evaluate the distribution of benefits and burdens from planned transportation investments on communities of concern. It was determined in the analysis that there was not a disproportionate distribution of planned projects that negatively impacted communities of concern, but it should be noted that this analysis was done at the census block group level and continued considerations should be made as projects continue to be developed.

Conclusion

Overall, the 2045 MTP shows the French Broad River MPO at a time of change. The region is growing, the challenges to the transportation system are considerable and not always trending in a direction in-line with regional goals, and while planned investments are considerable and in some ways immense, the financial uncertainties as a result of increasing costs and the COVID-19 crisis are currently troubling.

This region faces many challenges in and outside of the transportation realm. As one of the most desirable places to live in the country, the region has innumerable natural and cultural assets and some of the challenges that the region faces are a direct result of its success. We believe that in the midst of hard times, there is a better tomorrow ahead. The MTP serves as a regional guide for how we might navigate to that brighter future.