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## Case Study: New Orleans Regional Planning Commission's Data-Driven Approach to Transportation Equity

The New Orleans Regional Planning Commission (NORPC) places equity at the core of its transportation planning, including it as one of the six primary goals in the [Greater New Orleans 2048 Metropolitan Transportation Plan](#) (MTP) and, most recently, in the [2052 MTP](#). Equity is a project prioritization element within the MTP to ensure that projects contribute to greater equity in the transportation system. NORPC works to ensure representation from all parts of the region's communities as it develops plans and projects. Drawing on insights gleaned from historically underserved and overburdened communities and findings from U.S. Census and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) data, NORPC created an evaluation methodology for identifying vulnerable populations in its [Title VI Plan](#), further demonstrating its commitment to equitable transportation delivery within the region.

NORPC leads a collaborative program with local transit authorities, [New Links](#), which started as a reimagining of the regional transit network. This builds on a long-term strategy of addressing equity through transit. It includes robust public engagement and origin-destination mapping that helps identify low-income and minority populations who most need transit. This program further demonstrates the commitment to partnership in making the New Orleans area a more equitable and connected community.

### Background and Demographics

The Regional Planning Commission (RPC), a board made up of local elected officials and citizen members, represents the diverse 6-parish region of southeast Louisiana that includes New Orleans, and surrounding communities, on a range of planning issues and functions as the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) known as NORPC.

#### PROJECT SNAPSHOT

- The [2048 MTP](#) included an initial project prioritization scorecard that quantified equity elements.
- The [2052 MTP](#) updates the process used in the 2048 MTP approach, establishing qualitative measures to evaluate equity considerations in project selection.
- The [NORPC Title VI Plan](#) outlines a methodology for identifying vulnerable populations.

#### IMPLEMENTATION HIGHLIGHTS

- NORPC established a definition of environmental justice based on demographic data from the American Community Survey (ACS).
- Through the New Links program, NORPC partners with regional transit agencies to rethink the transit network.
- To assess underserved areas, NORPC produced a metric combining CDC's Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) with in-house calculations.

Despite population declines after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, New Orleans remains Louisiana’s most populated area, as of 2016, with an estimated 982,397 people. Just over half of the regional population (52%) is white, 40% is Black, 3% is Asian, and 9% is Hispanic. The regional median household income is \$48,476, ranging from \$37,488 to \$61,691 between parishes. Overall, 18% of persons in the region are in poverty, substantially higher than the national average.<sup>1</sup>

## Advancing Equitable Practices

### *Equitable Long-Range Planning*

NORPC uses a data-driven approach with an equity lens to establish plans and priorities. The MPO primarily uses the decennial census data, drawing on the ACS for information on employment, households, and other demographics. NORPC aims to make its data universal and communicable for a broad audience.

To assess the attributes of different geographic areas of the community, NORPC initially used CDC’s SVI alongside insights gleaned from a close working relationship with the Louisiana Department of Health. NORPC’s public outreach coordinator, principal planner, and GIS manager worked together to create an overall definition of environmental justice using ACS data. SVI uses 2018 data at the tract level, which did not suit the granularity of NORPC’s interventions. From the SVI, NORPC extrapolated a more targeted index for calculating social vulnerability. The MPO recalculated the SVI at smaller geographic units and redid the scoring using the 4-theme score and 15-layer score<sup>2</sup>. The next round of the SVI will be updated soon with the Census 2020 numbers.

### *2048 Metropolitan Transportation Plan*

The [2048 MTP](#) vision statement outlines the broad concept of connecting people and places, held up by six goals to further clarify how the region will accomplish this: Safety, State of Good Repair, Livability, Stewardship, Economic Development, and Equity. The three objectives under the equity goal further detail the intent to avoid undue burden on disadvantaged populations, emphasize improvements in access and connectivity for “communities of need”, and highlight the voices of the historically underserved or overburdened in planning processes<sup>3</sup>. According to the plan, 46 of the projects identified, or 21% of total planned projects, address the equity goal<sup>4</sup>.

### *Project prioritization in the 2048 MTP*

The 2048 MTP includes a scorecard (see Appendix) created to assist in project selection by attributing value to each of the six project prioritization elements. Equity is one of the prioritization elements with up to 25 points awarded, out of a total of 150 points for all elements, giving equity equal weight to each other prioritization element. Negative impacts to vulnerable communities may deduct up to 10 points

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<sup>1</sup> NORPC. 2019. “Greater New Orleans 2048: 2019-2048 Metropolitan Transportation Plan for the New Orleans Metropolitan Planning Area – Volume I -Final Report,” (adopted 2019, amended 2021). [NO Safety Target MTP Amendment 2.9.21 \(norpc.org\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

from the overall equity score. A project must score a minimum of 15 equity points to be moved forward. The equity score is broken down into the following categories, each individually award up to five points:

- 1) new mobility options to communities of need,
- 2) traffic calming in areas of need,
- 3) new transportation amenities for a community of need,
- 4) project development with consultation of “potentially impacted residents”<sup>5</sup>
- 5) another method for achieving greater transportation equity.

#### *Metropolitan Transportation Plan 2052: Advancing earlier equity efforts*

The [2052 MTP](#) continues to emphasize equity as a key element of the vision for New Orleans. The scorecard in this new plan has been simplified from previous versions. After using the previous version for several years, NORPC recognized its attempt to quantify a very qualitative circumstance and, therefore, pulled back from the original, more rigid approach. The new, simplified system still scores projects with very similar categories but acts more as a categorization and evaluation tool than a traditional project prioritization scoring mechanism. The scorecard helps to determine how projects in the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) and MTP align with the goals and what adjustments need to be made to better align the vision and values with reality. The equity scorecard is an in-house tool created to provide tangible proof of NORPC’s commitment to equity. It quickly proved to be a valuable tool. The current combination of data and the revised scorecard provide powerful insights upon which NORPC bases priorities for funding and action. Moving toward an equity lens will guide project development and selection processes.

#### *Environmental Justice Policy Impacts on NORPC’s Processes*

In the past year, NORPC staff worked to gain understanding of the current Federal policies related to Environmental Justice (EJ). Moving forward, scoping processes and strategic planning efforts like the MTP will include these EJ policy priorities. Regarding public transit equity, targeted efforts, such as in-person surveying and input from community leaders, provide feedback from populations with the greatest needs. NORPC’s approach focused on the city at the neighborhood level, developing goals based on neighborhoods, finding actively engaged organizations in those neighborhoods to support the goals and be champions. To increase the effectiveness of this work, NORPC recently held staff training on entering communities and coordinating thoughtful input collection.

#### *Title VI Plan*

The [NORPC Title VI Plan](#) includes a “Methodology for Identification of Target Populations (Demographics) & Spatial Concentrations of Targeted Populations”. Drawing on data from the US Census Bureau, ACS, and Louisiana Department of Social Services, that applies to the smallest geographic unit available, NORPC identifies concentrations of the following groups: low income, Federal assistance recipients, minority, elderly, limited English proficiency (LEP) or English spoken as a second language, disabled populations, and zero car households. The mobility needs of these populations are incorporated into the planning process through data analyses as well as feedback from targeted outreach at frequented locations within these community areas, NORPC participation in community

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<sup>5</sup> NORPC. 2019. “Greater New Orleans 2048: 2019-2048 Metropolitan Transportation Plan for the New Orleans Metropolitan Planning Area – Volume I -Final Report,” (adopted 2019, amended 2021), p. B.7. [NO Safety Target MTP Amendment 2.9.21 \(norpc.org\)](#)

meetings, surveys, and communications and announcements about the planning process posted in multiple languages.

### *Public Participation during the COVID-19 pandemic*

The COVID-19 pandemic created additional challenges for public participation. Virtual platforms provided flexibility for some public participation processes; however, virtual meetings did not provide access to all depending on availability to internet access. The situation required creative solutions and community partnerships to reach the populations. However, the bus service never stopped, which provided a connection point for NORPC to reach the community at bus stops and major transfer centers. The Regional Transit Authority (RTA) partnered with NORPC, posting flyers and signs in the buses and hosted a call line for people to get information. From now on, NORPC aims to host at least two virtual meetings for all engagement processes. Meetings are recorded and published online with allowance for additional comments in the virtual comments box outside of the scheduled meeting time.

## Stakeholder Collaboration

### *New Links*

NORPC developed the [New Links](#) transit plan to “reimagine how public transit connects Orleans, Jefferson, and St. Bernard parishes” and guide long-term planning and evaluation of the transit network. This collaborative planning effort, led by NORPC and bringing together the two largest transit authorities in the greater New Orleans region, New Orleans Regional Transit Authority (NORTA) and Jefferson Transit (JP Transit), committed to a network redesign, with equity at the core. Together, these agencies analyzed [origin-destination demographic data](#), [market trends and transit needs](#), and the overall [transit system](#) and engaged the community in [evaluation](#) and [concept development](#). To ensure receipt of representative feedback, NORPC tracked the demographics of respondents across the three parishes over time to adjust outreach as needed to include underrepresented groups. In conducting a service equity analysis, NORPC identified a need to ensure that improvements meet the needs of those that rely on transit, particularly low-income households, and those without access to a car.

### *New Orleans Paratransit Study*

As a part of the New Links network redesign, NORPC partnered with the NORTA, JP Transit, and researchers from the Texas A&M Transportation Institute to conduct a [study of the paratransit services](#) in New Orleans. This study aimed to pinpoint opportunities for improvement in accessibility and connectivity leading to the development of recommendations within the New Links plan. Representatives from NORPC, NORTA, and JP Transit served on the Project Advisory Council (PAC) to support the study. The study team is using information from the PAC, stakeholder interviews, rider focus groups, and other forms of engagement to understand the experiences of community members using paratransit services. This study began in March 2022 and is expected to be completed in January 2023.

## Next Steps

### Refinement of Data and Tools

NORPC is investigating new ways to use the CDC’s SVI, and other tools, earlier in the planning process, instead of waiting until the end of the process to assess the impacts. Instead, NORPC aims to develop plans tailored to community needs from the beginning of planning processes. Additionally, it plans to develop a system for identifying the most effective outreach for each type of project. This includes

engaging with contacts across its network to better understand connection points and collaboration opportunities in preparation for plans and projects.

#### Resilience and Environmental Justice

Given the impacts of hurricanes and other weather events due to climate change, NORPC is identifying which data sets can aid them in EJ and climate change planning. It recently led several studies that dealt with these issues and continues to work with partners, including the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development, to prioritize resiliency planning in the context of EJ and identify tools to better understand the context.

#### Contact Information

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#### Resources

[Metropolitan Transportation Plan 2048](#)

[Metropolitan Transportation Plan 2052](#)

[New Links: Final Recommended Network report-2021](#)

[New Orleans Paratransit Study - New Orleans Regional Planning Commission \(norpc.org\)](#)

[New Orleans Regional Transit Authority - Transit Equity \(norta.com\)](#)

[NORPC Title VI Plan](#)

[NORPC Coordinated Public Transit – Human Services Transportation Plan](#)

## Appendix : NORPC Project Prioritization Equity Scorecard (2048 MTP)

### GOAL 6: EQUITY

THE BENEFITS WE ACCRUE FROM OUR TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM SHOULD BE SHARED BY ALL RESIDENTS OF OUR REGION, AND NO PERSON OR COMMUNITY SHOULD SUFFER DISPROPORTIONATELY FROM OUR DECISIONS.

EQUITY – POSITIVE COMMUNITY IMPACTS		
Points Possible	Description	Points Awarded
0 – 5	This project will provide new mobility options for an identified community of need, (bicycle facilities, transit connections, ADA facilities, improved roadway connectivity, etc.).	
0 – 5	This project will provide benefits of reduced traffic or traffic calming in an identified community of need (noise, congestion, safety, etc.).	
0 – 5	This project will provide new transportation related amenities to an identified community of need (streetscaping, landscaping).	
EQUITY – NEGATIVE COMMUNITY IMPACTS		
Points Possible	Description	Points Negated
(-0) – (-10)	The project is expected to have notable negative impacts on an identified community of need (increased noise, increased congestion, reduced air quality, multiple displacements, etc.)	
EQUITY – OUTREACH		
Points Possible	Description	Points Awarded
0-5	The project was developed in consultation with representatives of potentially impacted residents.	
EQUITY – OTHER		
Points Possible	Description	Points Awarded
0-5	This project achieves the equity goal in a way not addressed by the above descriptors.	

MINIMUM POINTS: 15

TOTAL POINTS OUT OF 25: \_\_\_\_\_ PROJECT ACHIEVES EQUITY GOAL: Y / N