

## Case Study: North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority (NJTPA) Planning Equity Practices

NJTPA takes a multifaceted approach to addressing transportation equity and access across the northern and central counties of New Jersey, centered on the vision, goals, and planning processes set forth in the Long-Range Transportation Plan (LRTP), [Plan 2050: Transportation. People. Opportunity.](#), adopted in 2021.

NJTPA laid the foundation for the plans and programs in place focusing increased emphasis on outreach and engagement and prioritization of equity in planning processes. While conversations and activity among staff began in the late 1990s, much of NJTPA's equity strategy was not synthesized until recently. Various activities supported equity, but no cohesive strategy was implemented to prioritize equity across the various plans and processes. The recent [Title VI Implementation Plan](#) catalyzed NJTPA's equity focus. From there, it continued to expand, ultimately influencing the development of NJTPA's *Plan 2050*, which now serves as the central guiding document for its equity initiatives throughout the region. As an organization, NJTPA has moved beyond focusing on travel time optimization and now emphasizes transportation as moving people to where they want to be, providing opportunity and access equitably across the system.

### Background and Demographics

The NJTPA is the metropolitan planning organization (MPO) for northern and central New Jersey, directing and coordinating transportation planning activities for a 13-county area that is home to approximately 7 million people. This region contains a range of communities and people, including rural, suburban, and urban places, people with diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, a range of income and education levels, varied abilities, and varying levels of access to the resources of the region.

### Agency Challenges

Measurable Equity and Access across the Transportation System

Planning an equitable transportation system for such a diverse population is complex. Engaging the region's diverse residents can be challenging and requires imagination to provide various opportunities for participation in the transportation planning process.

In addition to identifying the need to improve equity connections between the LRTP and other plans, NJTPA also worked to

#### PROJECT SNAPSHOT

- The *Long-Range Transportation Plan* sets the foundation for the equity plans and processes within NJTPA.
- The 2019 update to the *Title VI Implementation Plan* brought together NJTPA's various equity efforts. It has been further refined in its current version, adopted November 2021.
- The *Coordinated Human Services Transportation Plan* focuses on the travel needs of seniors, low-income people, and individuals with disabilities.
- The *Public Engagement Plan* provides tools and methods to capture diverse perspectives by focusing on breaking down barriers for traditionally marginalized groups.

#### IMPLEMENTATION HIGHLIGHTS

- Outreach Liaisons guide engagement with diverse groups that represent a cross-section of North Jersey and provide input for shaping transportation priorities.
- NJTPA initiatives such as On Air and UpNext provide forums for children and young adults to participate in planning the transportation system of the future.
- Through its project prioritization process, NJTPA awards points to projects that benefit Environmental Justice (EJ) communities or reduce their burden, incentivizing equity-oriented projects to move forward.

incorporate equity considerations more strongly into the project prioritization process and build understanding and engagement.

NJTPA found that areas in the region with some of the oldest infrastructure tended to align with historically disadvantaged, underserved, or overburdened communities, sometimes referred to as “Environmental Justice (EJ) communities.” It was challenging for NJTPA to precisely determine the balance of benefits and burdens on various populations with the current tools it had available. In 2021, NJTPA assessed the outcomes of safety improvements in these communities using a correlation analysis to examine intersections between areas of improvement and various EJ factors, outlined in NJTPA’s Title VI Plan, such as race, income, English proficiency, and zero-vehicle households. NJTPA found particular safety issues to be prevalent in these communities, especially for crashes involving bicyclists and pedestrians.

## **Advancing Equitable Practices**

### ***Equitable Long-Range Planning***

*Plan 2050: Transportation. People. Opportunity.*

To achieve the goal of equitable transportation and access in North Jersey, NJTPA saw the need for a cohesive and intentional approach to equity within their plans and processes. [Plan 2050](#), adopted in 2021, serves as NJTPA’s central vision document that informs other plans and processes across the organization. The LRTP includes equity as a top goal, building on the priorities set forth in the Title VI Implementation Plan and the Regional Coordinated Human Services Transportation Plan (CHSTP) and leveraging the findings of an accessibility synthesis effort.

### ***Title VI and Environmental Justice***

The current Title VI Implementation Plan, which resulted from NJTPA’s more intentional focus on equity, was adopted in September 2019 and updated in January 2021. EJ is federally mandated as part of the transportation planning process to ensure alignment with Title VI of the 1963 Civil Rights Act in delivering equal access and equal distribution of benefits and burdens. NJTPA incorporates EJ considerations into its planning activities, particularly with its equity emphasis in the LRTP and its stakeholder engagement work with [Together New Jersey](#), a consortium of regional partners working together to engage coordinated planning processes for a 13-county area and develop strategies that promote greater equity across the region’s transportation system.

### ***Planning for Accessibility and Mobility***

*Regional Coordinated Human Services Transportation Plan (CHSTP)*

The [regional CHSTP](#), last completed in 2017, aimed to remove transportation barriers to opportunities for education, employment, services, and recreation through greater coordination and integration across the transportation system. The CHSTP specifically focuses on the transportation needs of seniors, low-income people, veterans, and individuals with disabilities. Recommendations to improve access and equity for these populations include increasing auto connections with assistance, reducing financial barriers to transportation, infrastructure improvements, enhancing and expanding service, and incentivizing operational coordination.

*Accessibility and Mobility Strategy Synthesis: Strategy Identification and Prioritization Report*

The [Accessibility and Mobility Strategy Synthesis](#), a 2021 update to the Congestion Management Process (CMP) completed in 2017, broadly examined the ease of movement within the planning area via a variety of transportation modes. When NJTPA conducted the data analysis for this report, it focused on

low-income populations, seniors, veterans, and people with disabilities. The report included an equity assessment and identified strategies for meeting transportation needs among these groups more equitably to create greater accessibility. The document is intended to provide guidance for NJTPA and other transportation planning agencies in the region to improve access across modes, meet various equity and access priorities, and offer example processes for identifying and prioritizing these strategies. This is an integral part of the transportation planning process, directly tied to the vision and goals set forth in the LRTP.

### **Project Prioritization**

Like other MPOs across the country, the NJTPA has established prioritization procedures to evaluate and score projects during the development of its [Transportation Improvement Program \(TIP\)](#). The criteria used to prioritize projects is [available here](https://www.njtpa.org/Projects-Programs/Transportation-Improvement-Program-(TIP)/Scoring-Criteria.aspx) [https://www.njtpa.org/Projects-Programs/Transportation-Improvement-Program-\(TIP\)/Scoring-Criteria.aspx](https://www.njtpa.org/Projects-Programs/Transportation-Improvement-Program-(TIP)/Scoring-Criteria.aspx). The project selection process involves reviewing crash data alongside various other selection criteria that includes environmental impact, climate resiliency, economic development, historic preservation, needed repair, and EJ. The process is data driven.

The NJTPA Central Staff administers the project prioritization process under the direction of the Project Prioritization Committee (PPC) of the Board of Trustees with participation by the implementing agencies and the Regional Transportation Advisory Committee (RTAC). The project scores resulting from this process are considered during development of the state's Transportation Capital Program (TCP). The TCP becomes the basis for development of the TIP every two years. This same scoring process is also applied earlier in the planning process, when selecting projects for study and development.

The NJTPA Project Prioritization Criteria were originally developed in 1993 based on the goals of its LRTP. The latest version of the project prioritization criteria, adopted in May 2018, received significant input from NJTPA's RTAC and took advantage of new data sources and decision support software, as well as new and emerging federal mandates. Various iterations considered different weights for the criteria, arriving at the final recommended weighted set of criteria in the current TIP. The scoring question related to EJ in the TIP asks if projects "provide benefit or reduce burdens to EJ communities"<sup>1</sup>, awarding up to 16 points of a possible 1000. Related criteria questions include improvement values for distressed municipalities, access to job opportunities, non-motorized users, and complete streets (with possible point values ranging from 18 to 45). NJTPA work is currently underway to revise project prioritization goal scoring in the environmental EJ category to address equity concerns identified during the development and assessment of *Plan 2050* and the current TIP.

### **Stakeholder Collaboration and Public Engagement**

Public engagement informed the development of priorities for *Plan 2050*. Following the guidance set forth in NJTPA's [Public Engagement Plan](#), NJTPA used several strategies to gather feedback from people across the region, including a survey, public meetings, several symposia, various social media channels and specialized outreach to traditionally under represented populations. Over the years, the approach has evolved, from traditional public meetings to pop-up events, and creative ways to engage specific populations. This has included specialized outreach to young adults; a multi-media contest for children; presentations to ESL classes to engage people with limited English proficiency; and focus groups to

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<sup>1</sup> NJTPA. 2018. *Transportation Improvement Program (TIP): Scoring Criteria*, p.3. [071018-BOARD-PP-CRITERIA-2018.pdf \(njtpa.org\)](https://www.njtpa.org/071018-BOARD-PP-CRITERIA-2018.pdf)

engage different populations, including those reentering society after incarceration and people with disabilities and their caregivers.<sup>2</sup>.

### **Public Engagement**

NJTPA's public engagement strategy includes tools and methods to capture diverse perspectives, which then inform the planning process<sup>3</sup> and project selection. In partnership with the Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center at Rutgers University (Rutgers-VTC), the NJTPA conducts research on innovative outreach techniques for engaging traditionally under-represented populations. These strategies have been compiled into a [database tool](#) that anyone can use to develop outreach plans. Many of these strategies were used to develop the innovative outreach techniques highlighted below.

Perspectives from the broader region are captured through the *Together North Jersey* Consortium.

Several themes that emerged from this engagement are addressed within *Plan 2050*: improving the connectivity, efficiency, and reliability of public transportation; greater connectivity along pedestrian and bicycle corridors to transit, downtowns, and recreation; and improving the equity and accessibility of the transportation system overall.

### **Outreach Liaisons**

The [Outreach Liaisons](#) pilot program, launched in 2021 in partnership with Rutgers-VTC, is modelled after a trusted advocate program in the State of Washington. NJTPA recruited community members who provide guidance on ways to interact across cultures and also conduct outreach on behalf of the agency. This pilot group of outreach liaisons is conducting outreach to minorities, low-income communities, senior citizens and people with limited English proficiency.

### **Engaging Children and Young People**

#### [NJTPA On Air Future of Transportation](#)

To engage children ages 5 to 15, NJTPA created a contest inviting them to submit ideas on the future of transportation. For the previous Plan update, Plan 2045, adopted in 2017, public events featured a booth designed to look like an old-time radio studio set up at places like a local science center, libraries and Boys and Girls clubs. Children could put on headphones and listen to a staffer's daughter describe the exercise and then record their ideas in response. In 2021 as part of the development of Plan 2050, the NJTPA sought submissions via interactive media rather than booths to allow for remote participation<sup>4</sup>. This activity helped the NJTPA engage both children and their parents.

### **UpNext North Jersey**

While young people (those currently 18-30 years old) will be most impacted by the current transportation plans that influence the system over the next 20 years, they have traditionally been underrepresented in the planning process<sup>5</sup>. For Plan 45, the NJTPA launched Set the Table, which recruited 20 young adults to host civic dinner parties and gather input from their peers on behalf of the NJTPA. The exercise was so successful that participants suggested creating an advisory group to provide ongoing input. The group was incorporated into the [2018 Public Engagement Plan](#). Rutgers-VTC and the NJTPA recruited participants and launched the [UpNext North Jersey young adult advisory group](#) in late 2019. Due to the pandemic, in person events planned in 2020 and 2021 were shifted to virtual meetings.

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<sup>2</sup>NJTPA. 2021. *Plan 2050: Public Engagement*. [njtpa\\_plan2050\\_final2.pdf](#)

<sup>3</sup> NJTPA. 2018. *Public Engagement Plan*. [Public Engagement Plan \(njtpa.org\)](#)

<sup>4</sup>NJTPA. 2022 "NJTPA On Air: Kids' Future of Transportation Contest." [OnAir | NJTPA | North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority](#)

<sup>5</sup> NJTPA. 2021. *Plan 2050: Public Engagement*, p. 24. [njtpa\\_plan2050\\_final2.pdf](#)

Several events were planned around LRTP themes to gather input on topics such as active transportation, climate change and equity.

#### *Together North Jersey Consortium*

Formed in 2012 under a Housing and Urban Development Sustainable Communities grant, the *Together North Jersey* consortium focuses on transportation and land use connections but also supports other long-range planning topics such as housing. This improves data, strategies, and recommendations for transportation planning across the region. The consortium's work resulted in the [Together New Jersey Plan](#), which serves as a guide for a broad range of plans across the region, centered on land use and transportation, to include sustainability, livability, and equity in their processes. Plan implementation has focused on food access, transit-oriented development, and placemaking at the local level, with an emphasis on historically disadvantaged, underserved, or overburdened communities,

#### *Engage! Tool*

To further support its outreach activities, NJTPA developed an engagement tool, [Engage!](#). The tool is a database of public involvement techniques and tools that anyone can use. This tool helps agencies identify effective methods for reaching diverse groups in their planning and programming processes and learn from NJTPA's experiences. Users can select types of planning and programming in progress and the groups they desire to reach. The toolkit then provides a list of tools that are well-suited for the outreach effort.

### Next Steps

For NJTPA, the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that virtual engagement offers challenges and opportunities. While it is hard to judge how the digital divide may impact equitable access to NJTPA public forums, across the board, NJTPA saw higher levels of engagement when people can attend meetings virtually. In some ways, NJTPA sees that this has made engagement more equitable. Recent advancements with technology have also helped overcome language barriers as meetings may be simulcast in another language with a translator speaking.

As NJTPA looks to its future activities, it plans to further incorporate equity elements into its LRTP, project prioritization process, and other plans and processes to further enhance the equitable delivery of transportation and access across the region with a more explicit equity component. In the last few years, NJTPA developed data analysis, policy, and processes, and the agency aims to continue building upon this work and support greater equity across the transportation system in North Jersey.

### Contact Information

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### Resources

[NJTPA-AMSS-Strategy-Identification-and-Prioritization.pdf](#)

[NJTPA-AMSS-Equity-Assessment.pdf](#)

[NJTPA Title VI Implementation Plan](#)

[NJTPA Diversity Profiles](#)

[Public Engagement Plan \(njtpa.org\)](#)



U.S. Department of Transportation  
**Federal Highway Administration**

[Tips for Planning | NJTPA | North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority](#)

[Pilot Program Aims to Expand NJTPA's Public Engagement Efforts](#)

[Outreach Liaisons](#)

[Together North Jersey](#)

[Plan 2050: Transportation, People, Opportunity](#)

[FY 2022-2025 Transportation Improvement Program](#)

[Human Services Plan | NJTPA | North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority](#)