



Regional Equity Framework

FINAL – 1/30/25

A People-Centered Engagement Plan and Evaluation of LRT and BRT

"It is important to meet this community where they are at. It has to be worth it for them. Survey incentives or focus group incentives. There is a lot of food insecurity in this area. Adjust to the time & location they are available. Language and added incentive. Some people have two jobs. People are struggling." Local Service Provider

PROJECT BACKGROUND

The Metro Connector Study (MCS) is evaluating light rail transit (LRT) and bus rail transit (BRT) options for increasing the convenience, accessibility and efficiency of transit in the Metropolitan Providence region by better connecting Cumberland, Central Falls, Pawtucket, Providence, Cranston, and Warwick. By increasing regional connectivity to local transportation hubs, and residential neighborhoods the project also aims to support statewide goals included in Moving Forward RI 2040, including increasing ridership, improving public health and broader economic development to benefit a diverse range of residents.

PURPOSE OF THIS DOCUMENT

RIPTA understands that regional transit equity begins with the assumption that the experiences of those living along the Study corridors greatly differ across race, socioeconomic status, neighborhood density, availability of household vehicles, access to local services, and more. This diversity requires the MCS to be cognizant of the potential tradeoffs and benefits any future transit investments will bring.

A central goal of Moving Forward RI 2040 is strengthening communities, measured by ensuring that transportation investments benefit disadvantaged communities and minimize displacement. To address this goal this document establishes a regional transit equity framework into two key elements of the MCS's phase two of the project planning process: 1) community engagement best practices and engagement plan; and 2) a regional transit equity evaluation rubric.

Regional transit equity considerations will be considered both in terms of how this study is conducted and ultimately the recommendations it produces. The regional transit equity framework will help the project team identify and evaluate the potential benefits, burdens, and the policy tradeoffs that may come with proposed new transit investments and a redesigned public space for critical populations in the study area.

RIPTA aims to deploy an equity evaluation rubric that reflects a shared vision and alignment between internal and external stakeholders while implementing consistent evaluation measures for the overall study. To address transit equity for those who would be most impacted, the engagement plan and rubric will support the project team in unpacking and understanding the potential benefits and burdens of future investments in these corridors.

IDENTIFYING CRITICAL POPULATIONS

Vehicle ownership and level of household income are the two most significant determinants of regional transit equity. This is noted in the Existing Conditions analysis:

“Residents in the study area with the **highest propensity for transit are those without a vehicle**, who are almost eight times more likely to ride transit than the average person. **Households that have one vehicle also have a higher-than-average propensity for transit**, likely because there is usually more than one worker per household.”

“**Black residents** are twice as likely to take transit and **residents whose income is less than \$25,000** are also more likely than average to take transit. Households with one car and **foreign-born residents** are also more likely to take transit than average, as are households with **Asian and Hispanic residents**, and those of other races.”

In addition to considering the needs and potential impacts on transit-dependent populations across the Study area, the project team will also weigh transit equity benefits and burdens within specific neighborhoods. For example:

- Service frequency along a new LRT or BRT corridor will be paramount not only for accessibility, convenience and reliability when traveling to work, school or other important services, but also for personal, cultural and recreational trips.
- Crosstown route design will also be paramount in terms of making connections not just along the corridor but to both local and regional activity centers in all six municipalities. Today, many residents of the Study area must travel to Kennedy Plaza in Providence in order to access key destinations in their own municipality via public transit. This makes vehicle ownership a necessity for many residents regardless of individual economic considerations.
- Pedestrian and bicycle safety along busy urban arterials such as North Main St. in Providence or Bald Hill Rd. in Warwick is also a regional transit equity consideration and will also be a key part of corridor design for multi-modal use.
- Gentrification and housing speculation in lieu of these potential transit, infrastructure, and public realm investments will most likely harm the exact residents for whom increased service and reliability would be most impactful—low-income households, seniors, small business, and people who speak another language other than English.

Ultimately, the opportunity to embed equitable analysis and engagement across this study's evaluation framework is one that can provide broad-based benefits for both transit-critical users in communities like Central Falls and South Providence and across the region while inducing future demand across a broad spectrum of current and future residents.

DEFINING REGIONAL TRANSIT EQUITY CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE MCS EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

To define the regional transit equity considerations for this study, the project team considered the six key areas of need identified in the [Project Purpose, Needs and Goals Statement](#). This document will guide the overall [MCS evaluation framework](#) while also providing the foundation for how this project will shape its outreach and engagement plan during the assessment phase of the study. The following describes how equity will be considered within each of these areas based on project need:

Need 1: High Ridership Demand

Metropolitan Providence exhibits a high demand for transit, surpassing many larger cities with newly built rapid transit lines. For instance, the R-Line rapid bus service connecting Pawtucket and Providence is one of the highest ridership routes in New England, indicating a significant need for increased transit capacity and service quality. This demand justifies greater investment in the transit infrastructure to meet the existing ridership levels and enhance the overall transit system.

Equity Consideration 1: Critical Population a Priority Population

Meeting levels of existing transit demand has large implications for transit-critical populations such as people that speak another language other than English, low-income households, and foreign-born populations; inducing future demand for current non-transit-critical populations is needed to meet climate resiliency goals along with economic development goals that are needed for employee recruitment and retention.

Need 2: Binding State Goals to Reduce GHG Emissions

Rhode Island's 2021 Act on Climate sets binding emissions reduction goals to achieve net-zero by 2050. The 2022 Climate Update identifies the transportation sector as the largest source of GHG emissions in the state (39.7%).

Equity Consideration 2: Increase Demand for Public Transportation

High-capacity transit is essential for reducing these emissions as it can significantly shift trips from personal vehicles to public transit, contributing to an estimated reduction of 0.23 MMTCO₂ by 2030. By increasing ridership and improving the attractiveness of the transit network, high-capacity transit supports the state's climate goals and fosters a more sustainable transportation system.

Need 3: Housing Supply Gap

Rhode Island faces a substantial housing supply gap, with the lowest housing production rate in the nation over the past decade and more than one-third of households being cost-burdened. The state needs an additional 24,000 affordable units, particularly in Providence, Warwick, and Cranston, and up to 55,000 units to meet overall housing needs. Recent

amendments to state zoning law incentivize housing within 1/8 mile of frequent transit stops.

Equity Consideration 3: Encourage Development Without Displacement

Increased transit frequency and reliability along the studied corridors can help address the housing gap and provide low-cost mobility to new residents, promoting sustainable housing development. Conversely, issues of gentrification and displacement via housing speculation costs are likely to adversely affect priority equity residents, requiring an intersectional policy approach for this need to be addressed in an equitable manner.

Need 4: Lack of Crosstown Mobility

Given the interconnected nature of public health to transit equity, this framework ties social determinants of health as core predictors of critical populations. For instance, the availability of public transportation in a community is considered one of the five core social determinants of health. Other factors include the availability of quality schools, access to healthy food and levels of unemployment.

Current transit routes often require passengers to travel into downtown Providence and transfer to reach nearby destinations, creating inefficiencies and inequities for critical populations. Improved north-south transit frequency and capacity could establish a regional transit spine, enabling new crosstown connections along major east-west arterials, particularly in Cranston and Warwick.

Equity Consideration 4: Improve Social Determinants of Health

These connections would enhance access to local transportation hubs and regional activity centers, significantly improving transit mobility and convenience for residents from neighborhoods who often lack crosstown mobility. This is especially important for improving social determinants of health for residents that do not have access to a vehicle, residents that earn less than \$25,000, as well as Black, Hispanic/Latino, and other foreign-born people

Need 5: Limited Access to Regional Economic Activity Centers and Institutions

Key economic generators and activity centers, particularly south of Providence, lack sufficient transit connectivity. These include CCRI's flagship campus, T.F. Green International Airport, the Pastore Center, and various retail centers.

Equity Consideration 5: Improve Social Determinants of Health

Enhancing transit frequency and direct connections to these areas can attract new riders and improve access to important destinations, supporting broad-based regional economic growth and development. Nearly half of all trips utilized in the study area in 2023 were related to school, shopping, errands, and other trips most likely associated with being a customer, client, patient or student, and increased accessibility to these locations holds broad equity benefits for both transit critical and non-transit critical users.

Need 6: Safety and Complete Streets

Rhode Island's "Complete Streets" law mandates safe travel for all roadway users, including transit riders, pedestrians, bicyclists, and individuals of all abilities. Segments of the corridors studied have high incident rates, necessitating safety improvements.

Equity Consideration 5: Improve Social Determinants of Health

This study must incorporate design features to ensure safe access to transit, such as sidewalks, crosswalks, pedestrian signals, bicycle lanes, bus pull-outs, accessibility features, and traffic calming measures, thereby enhancing safety and the perception of safety in these areas. This is of particular importance for seniors and individuals with disabilities but is a broad-based equitable benefit for all users both inside and outside the study area.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT BEST PRACTICES

Meet Residents Where They Are and Where They Can Be

Be it large public meetings, pop-up events, or focus groups, engagement must first consider the ease of accessibility and the timing of events to reach a cross-section of individuals both inside and outside the study area. This is of particular importance for residents that hold multiple jobs or work during non-peak business hours. This means low-touch engagement (such as online surveys) at places of community gathering combined with intensive high-touch engagement (such as focus groups) offered at multiple time windows and days of the week.

Partnering with Community-based Organizations

Building deep trust and relationships takes time and can be difficult to achieve for project team members that are not embedded in the community. The MCS intends to connect with local community organizations with the relationships and knowledge with critical populations we need to include in this study like LISC RI, Progreso Latino, West Bay Community Action, or the RI Hispanic Chamber. The MCS, when possible, will partner with these organizations to support outreach, high-touch engagement, and project communication.

Language Accessibility is Language Justice

Residents that are considered to have “Limited English Proficiency” are a protected class under Title VI and are a population that utilizes multi-modal transit options at greater rates than the general population. This portends a key constituency for induced transit demand in the future. This means equitable engagement practices require the MCS to provide outreach materials in multiple languages, use of local newspapers, radio, and social media to promote engagement, to hold outreach events with translation services when needed, and ensure high-touch engagement events are in coordination with trusted community-based organizations whenever possible.

Incentives for Participation

Time is most likely the greatest resource and contribution that can be given by a resident as part of this study. That must be respected and rewarded in all engagement activities. This might mean food at a public meeting, a raffle as part of participating in a survey, or a gift card for participating in a focus group. In all instances, the ability to talk to critical populations and a diverse broad-based universe of community participants relies upon layering other best practices and incentivizing participation.

Transparency on Impacts and Trade Offs

Upfront communication and transparency on the potential negative externalities and tradeoffs in the short-term for major construction efforts is paramount to maintaining community trust. The impact and disruption on the streetscape and public realm in the short-term for the lives of residents that utilize the thruways of this corridor must be acknowledged. Similarly, conversations about potential shifts in roadway capacity and on-street parking should occur with community members *early and often*. Such conversations cannot be left for engineering and construction staff to handle implementation. Instead,

these challenging conversations must be utilized as a form of community education and dialogue to *make the case* for priority transit investments.

Promote Adaptability

When designing and implementing different forms of engagement, adaptability is critical. A mix of in-person and virtual engagement events is needed to create an inclusive process, especially for critical populations. For some, virtual engagement is necessary when considering the time constraints faced by many in participating civic planning. For other constituencies, barriers and comfort level with technology and language access requires in-person events. Similarly, survey dissemination and recruitment for high-touch engagement efforts such as focus groups require a similar mix. Paper surveys and flyers distributed at community centers/places of gathering are needed to supplement forms of social media and email outreach that will reach a more traditionally involved audience.

ENGAGING TO UNDERSTAND AND ASSESS

How should I use this community engagement plan?

The MCS Public Involvement Plan will be completing phase one of its engagement and research activities. To effectively use this engagement plan, review the key element below to plan your activity (what and when), purpose (why), and outcomes. It will be updated at the end of each wave of each engagement, including any key public facing documents that should be translated and shared with the general public. This plan and its best practices can also be used beyond this engagement and should consider resource allocation necessary for implementation.

Critical populations for waves 1 and 2 include the following:

- Black residents, both transit critical and non-transit critical
- Hispanic/Latino residents, both transit critical and non-transit critical
- Residents with Limited English Proficiency
- Women, senior citizens and individuals with children
- Households with zero vehicle access
- Households that earn less than \$25,000

Project team and core stakeholders for each wave of engagement includes the following:

- RIPTA, Consultant Team and TWG Members
- Trusted community groups such as social service providers like Progreso Latino, AARP RI, West Bay Community Action, or One Central Providence

Wave 1: Information Sharing on Your Feedback and How We Used It

- When: Winter/Spring 2025
- What: Host multi-lingual focus groups at trusted community partner alongside border virtual open houses and pop-up event
- Why:
 - To present a clear vision and alternative scenarios for priority transit investments based on community engagement to date
 - To brief elected officials, community group partners, and neighborhood associations on findings to date, along with evaluation and equity framework and upcoming engagement plan
 - Utilize existing findings to speak with specific targeted constituencies that were not fully engaged as part of Phase 1 Engagement Activities
 - Create opportunities for community education on alternative scenarios, discussing net benefits and policy trade offs
 - Space for relationship and trust building with community-based organizations, neighborhood associations, and broader residents to support project communication goals
 - Outline and pilot elements of evaluation and equity frameworks to shape community insight and conversations
- Potential Outcomes
 - Work closely with community partners and multi-modal organizations on outreach and recruitment
 - Leverage local radio and local papers to publicize focus group
 - Eight constituency-based focus groups, including incentive for participation
 - Key findings memo, including full-scale focus group analysis, key quotes, and participant-derived recommendations aligned with research framework
 - Findings from open house and pop up to confirm or supplement focus group findings
 - Updated presentation materials will be provided for RIPTA to share with elected officials, potential project partners, advocacy groups, neighborhood groups and others.
 - Strategic support and aligned content for Draft Alternatives Memo to be presented in Summer-Fall of 2025

Wave 2: Evaluation of Project Benefits, Tradeoffs and Regional Transit Equity

- When: Fall 2025
- What: Workshops with Trusted Service Providers to Apply Equity Rubric
- Why:
 - Share preliminary findings from evaluation of project benefits, tradeoff and regional transit equity
 - Conduct up to 3 participatory workshops to collect feedback and input on investment benefits, tradeoff and regional transit equity
 - Increase buy-in from community for investments
 - Identify synergy that increase support and identify deal-breakers that erode their support
- Outcome
 - Key findings memo, including full-scale analysis of regional transit equity rubric and quantitative summary of benefits, burdens, and investments
 - Public facing executive summary of key findings memo, including translation to all major language spoken in the corridor
 - Consultant team will work closely with RIPTA to understand how to incorporate evaluation finding in final recommendations

Wave 3: Information Sharing on Your Feedback and How We Used It

- When: Fall 2025
- Who: Residents, Service Providers, Property Owners and Small Business, and Elected from Municipalities
- What: Public Meeting with Roundtable Discussions with Why:
 - Share final recommendations from study, including how community feedback on benefits, burdens, and regional transit equity were addressed (or not)
 - Share any decision-making next steps that RIPTA will take now that study is complete
 - Share engagement plan to continue to promote regional transit
- Outcome
 - Building momentum to deepen regional transit equity beyond study
 - A visible cohort of supporters of LRT and/or BRT across all five municipalities
 - Clarity on opposition to LRT and/or BRT to help inform future research, engagement, and transportation investment

REGIONAL TRANSIT EQUITY RUBRIC

How should I use this rubric?

To effectively use this rubric, begin by scoring each design and/or investment on a scale of 1 to 3 based on the framework's six equity considerations. Each equity consideration is tied to a project need and equity consideration that emphasizes critical policy goals and performance measures from the MCS evaluation framework and *Moving Forward RI 2040* as well as phase one findings from stakeholder outreach and engagement conducted by the project team.

When considering alternative investment or design recommendations, it is essential to consider both the immediate transit needs, long-term community impacts and equity implications such as gentrification and displacement. Incorporating this rubric is essential for mitigating unintended burdens and ensuring that transit improvements lead to broad community benefits requires ongoing commitment to inclusive planning, engagement, and the implementation of policies designed to mitigate potential negative impacts such as displacement and increased living costs. This approach will help maximize the positive impacts of new transit developments while minimizing the risks to vulnerable populations.

Transportation projects, especially those that improve infrastructure and connectivity, such as BRT and LRT, can inadvertently lead to increased property values and living costs, often resulting in the displacement of long-term, low-income residents. It is the intent of this rubric to hold both RIPTA and the consultant team accountable to one another as well as residents and community stakeholders for whom this project holds so much potential. In practicing internal evaluation and transparent external communication practices, the MCS can present recommendations that are equitable, feasible, and honest to the externalities—both positive and negative—contained within them.

Each project is evaluated on a scale of 1 to 3 for each of the six project needs and equity considerations, where:

- 1 point: The design and/or investment meets the equity consideration, project goal and principle minimally or not at all.
- 2 points: The design and/or investment moderately meets the equity consideration, project goal and principle.
- 3 points: The design and/or investment significantly boosts ridership by delivering highly accessible, fast, and frequent service, effectively competing with driving.

Principle: Maximize Transit Accessibility and Effectiveness

To achieve high ridership, transit must be accessible and competitive with private vehicle use. This principle emphasizes the need for efficient, frequent, and reliable service that attracts riders by offering a compelling alternative to driving. By focusing on areas with high transit demand, the project aims to enhance accessibility for all users, particularly those who rely on transit due to lack of other transportation options.

Ideal: RIPTA will provide transit service that is fast, frequent, and reliable, ensuring that it meets or exceeds the level of service offered by personal vehicles. This will involve targeting high-demand areas to boost ridership and improve overall transit effectiveness.

Project Need Rubric:

- 1 point: The design and/or investment provides minimal improvements in service; it does not significantly enhance accessibility or ridership.
- 2 points: The design and/or investment offers moderate service improvements, making transit more accessible and attracting some additional riders.
- 3 points: The design and/or investment significantly boosts ridership by delivering highly accessible, fast, and frequent service, effectively competing with driving.

Equity Consideration #2: Increase Demand for Public Transportation

Principle: Promote Seamless and Safe Multimodal Integration

Effective transportation systems require seamless integration across various modes, such as buses, bicycles, and walking paths. This principle supports the creation of multi-modal networks that ensure safe, convenient access for all users. Emphasizing Complete Streets designs helps to integrate transportation modes and enhance safety for pedestrians and cyclists, making the overall transit network more functional and user-friendly.

Ideal: RIPTA will improve multi-modal connectivity and support Complete Streets principles, which involve designing roads and transit facilities to be safe and accessible for all modes of transportation, including walking and cycling.

Project Need Rubric:

- 1 point: The design and/or investment provides minimal enhancements to multi-modal connectivity and lacks Complete Streets features.
- 2 points: The design and/or investment moderately improves connectivity and partially supports Complete Streets, with some safety and integration improvements.
- 3 points: The design and/or investment excels in creating seamless multimodal connections and fully integrates Complete Streets principles, ensuring comprehensive safety and accessibility.

Equity Consideration #3: Encourage Development Without Displacement

Principle: Ensure Equitable Access and Benefits to Those Most Burdened by Current and Future Demand

Regional equity in transportation means providing fair access to transit services, particularly for underserved and transit-dependent populations who are most impacted by current transportation and public realm disinvestments as well as future investments. This principle focuses on ensuring that improvements in transit service benefit those who rely on it the most and who face barriers to accessing transportation. It also involves preventing displacement and ensuring that transit development supports existing residents, small business, and property owners.

Ideal: RIPTA will prioritize transit service in areas frequented by transit-dependent populations, ensuring that these groups benefit from the improvements and minimize large-scale negative externalities resulting from increased private development. This approach seeks to enhance mobility and quality of life for those who rely on transit the most.

Project Need Rubric:

- 1 point: The design and/or investment has minimal focus on equity; it does not effectively serve transit-dependent populations or provide any effort to minimize negative externalities such as direct displacement of priority equity residents
- 2 points: The design and/or investment moderately addresses equity, offering some benefits to transit-dependent populations while acknowledging strategies to minimize negative externalities such as direct displacement of priority equity residents

- 3 points: The design and/or investment fully integrates equity considerations, delivering significant benefits to transit-dependent populations and makes direct efforts via policy considerations to minimize negative externalities such as direct displacement of priority equity residents.

Equity Consideration #4: Improve Social Determinants of Health

Principle: Encourage Sustainable Development and Environmental Responsibility

Sustainable growth involves promoting transit-oriented development (TOD) and encouraging modes of transportation that reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. This principle focuses on developing areas around transit hubs to create compact, walkable communities while encouraging shifts away from single-occupancy vehicle use to more sustainable modes like public transit, biking, and walking.

Ideal: RIPTA will support TOD by working closely with municipal planners to integrate transit into areas planned for high density development and with existing development plans, aiming to reduce auto dependency and promote sustainable transportation practices. This includes designing transit and the surrounding streetscape to encourage higher density, mixed-use development around transit nodes.

Project Need Rubric:

- 1 point: The design and/or investment offers minimal support for TOD and GHG reduction, with little encouragement for sustainable transportation.
- 2 points: The design and/or investment moderately supports TOD and GHG reduction, encouraging some shift to sustainable transportation options.
- 3 points: The design and/or investment strongly supports TOD and significantly reduces GHG emissions, greatly encouraging a shift to sustainable transportation modes.

Equity Consideration#5: Improve Social Determinants of Health

Principle: Enhance Economic Access and Opportunities

Effective transit systems are crucial for economic development as they provide improved access to job markets, education, and essential services. This principle focuses on how transit improvements can open up new economic opportunities by connecting people to important destinations, thereby boosting economic growth and supporting workforce development.

ideal: RIPTA will prioritize projects that enhance access to key regional destinations such as employment centers, educational institutions, and essential services, thereby creating new economic opportunities and supporting regional economic development.

Project Rubric

- 1 point: The design and/or investment has minimal impact on economic access and does not significantly enhance opportunities for residents.
- 2 points: The design and/or investment offers moderate improvements in access to regional destinations, creating some new opportunities.
- 3 points: The design and/or investment significantly enhances access to key destinations, greatly expanding economic opportunities for residents.

Equity Consideration #6: Focus on Solutions with Community and Financial Support

Principle: Balance Feasibility and Effectiveness

Balancing feasibility with effectiveness ensures that transit designs and/or investments are effective in achieving their goals and practical to implement within budget and time constraints. This principle emphasizes the need for projects that are financially sustainable, have broad local support, and are realistically achievable given current resources and constraints.

Ideal: RIPTA will focus on designs and/or investments that achieve local consensus, balance costs and benefits, and are feasible to implement. This includes considering the financial sustainability and implementation practicality of each project to ensure successful execution.

Project Need Rubric

- 1 point: The design and/or investment has minimal local support, high costs with limited benefits, and faces significant implementation challenges.
- 2 points: The design and/or investment achieves moderate local support, balances costs and benefits, and is feasible with some challenges.
- 3 points: The design and/or investment enjoys strong local support, is well-balanced in terms of costs and benefits, and is highly practical and feasible to implement.

Final Interpretation of All Scores

- 18-15 points: Highly equitable investment and/or design recommendation
- 14-11 points: Moderately equitable investment and/or design recommendation
- 10 points or below: Low equity; investment and/or design recommendation requires significant improvements