

Appendix 5: Focus Group Report

Introduction

This report summarizes and analyzes the feedback received from a series of eight focus groups conducted by H-GAC in October 2021 as part of the Regionally Coordinated Transportation Plan 2022 Update process. These focus groups were intended to build upon the insights gleaned from the first round of outreach for this process, which consisted of an online survey, a mapping activity, and a set of virtual interactive outreach events. In this report, the focus group objectives and methodology are described, followed by an explanation of how focus group participants were recruited. Each focus group is then individually summarized and analyzed, with a set of overarching key takeaways listed at the end.

Objectives

Focus group objectives included:

- Understand participants' travel patterns
- Learn more about the factors that motivate mode choice
- Illuminate the opportunities and barriers people experience traveling within the region

Methodology

Eight focus groups were held, one for each of eight target populations. Table 1 includes a list of target populations, as well as the number of participants in each focus group. A total of 64 people participated in a focus group.

Table 1: Focus Group Target Populations and Attendance

Target Population	Number of Participants
Persons with disabilities	24
Seniors	4
Individuals with lower incomes	9
Individuals with limited English proficiency	6
Students	8
Veterans	2
Workforce	5
General Public	6

Focus groups included both members of these target populations, as well as social service providers and others working directly with members of these target populations. Due to restrictions on in-person gatherings related to the COVID-19 pandemic, focus groups were conducted virtually, and participants could join via Zoom or phone.

Focus groups were held on October 18-20 and October 25-27. The time of each focus group was chosen to maximize participation by members of that group: internal and external partners were consulted at the beginning of the implementation process to understand the times of day most accessible for members of each group. More information about internal and external partners can be found in the Participant Recruitment section of this document.

Each focus group was one hour in length. In keeping with general best practices for focus groups, each focus group used the same moderator’s guide and the same general set of questions, though differences in group size meant that not all groups allowed time to ask all questions in the moderator’s guide. Moderators were also encouraged to ask follow-up questions to elicit additional details or clarify a participant’s claims in a previous comment.

The moderator's guide was developed based on the results of Phase I outreach and an understanding of focus group best practices. The moderator's guide can be found in Appendix 5A. Moderators were drawn from H-GAC staff, and all staff members moderating the focus groups were trained in focus group moderation skills. In addition to a list of questions, the moderator's guide also included several elements not intended to be read aloud in a focus group, including timing guides to ensure that focus groups could be completed within the allotted hour, as well as explanations of the thought process that drove the development of the moderator's guide, which could help moderators understand key goals and direct their follow-up questions.

In the focus groups, moderators began with an introductory section, in which they introduced themselves, defined key terms, laid out ground rules, and asked each participant to introduce themselves. Moderators then asked a few basic questions about mode choice to help participants feel more comfortable speaking openly about their experiences. After this, participants were also asked questions about their mode choice preferences and their transportation needs and barriers, before the focus groups wrapped up with a set of concluding questions that allowed participants to offer concrete recommendations to improve their experiences getting around the region.

Participant Recruitment

Participant recruitment relied heavily on internal and external partners to reach members of target populations. Partners included:

- H-GAC Workforce and Human Services teams
- City of Houston Mayor's Office for Persons with Disabilities
- United Way of Greater Houston
- Meals on Wheels Montgomery County
- University of Houston International Student and Scholar Services Office

At the beginning of the planning process for these focus groups, H-GAC consulted with partner organizations. These consultations helped H-GAC staff understand the technology needs and barriers faced by members of the target populations, as well as what time of day would be best for members of each target population. These

consultations also helped partner organizations understand the goals of the focus group and provided an opportunity for partner organization staff and H-GAC staff to collaboratively develop a plan to recruit participants. H-GAC developed promotional content for these partners upon request: see Appendix 5B for a sample flyer created for this purpose.

One important consideration that had to be considered when recruiting participants was the need to be mindful of potential sensitivities associated with some of the target demographics. For this reason, each focus group was numbered, and the numbers were used in all public-facing communications about that focus group. However, partner organizations were informed of the target population for each focus group, to ensure their recruitment efforts were properly focused.

On top of the efforts of these partner organizations, H-GAC staff reached out to individuals who had already participated in RCTP Phase I outreach. Those who responded to the online survey had, in responding to that survey, provided demographic information that indicated which, if any, of the target populations they were a part of. This enabled outreach that properly targeted the correct focus group to each participant.

Word of mouth was also an effective tool for reaching some target populations. For instance, the focus group targeted at individuals with disabilities, the focus group with the highest attendance, many participants heard about the focus group through an enthusiastic member of the community who shared information about the group extensively. This group had to be capped due to the high level of interest after 40 RSVPs, with additional participants directed to a different group into which they also fit.

To encourage participation, those who attended a focus group were offered a \$10 gift card to one of Amazon, Starbucks, or Target. At the end of each focus group, participants were asked to inform the moderator which of these businesses they would prefer to receive a gift card for. Gift cards were distributed electronically after focus groups were completed.

Focus Group Summaries

This section summarizes and analyzes each focus group individually. To ensure participants' anonymity, all responses are stripped of potentially identifying information, and responses to introductory questions are excluded.

Focus Group #1: Persons with Disabilities

When asked about the non-car modes they use to get around, one participant mentioned that their child, who has a disability, uses JRide and Harris County RIDES, and specifically mentioned METROLift as a service that does not work for their child. Another mentioned that their disabled child uses Mounting Horizons to get to their job. A third mentioned that their disabled child uses METROLift to get from their home in Houston to their job in Katy, but expressed extreme dissatisfaction with the quality of this service, noting that service was almost always either very early or very late, and that the service's unreliability almost caused the child to lose their job. Another participant also expressed frustration with METROLift: they had previously held a job outside the METRO service area, and commuting to that job required taking METROLift to the end of its service area and then paying \$28 for a cab to get the remaining distance, leading to an extremely expensive commute. Another participant, who is legally blind, reported finding METRO's local bus service easy to use, as it is reliably on time in their community, but also said that many of the other persons with disabilities they know have a very different experience. They also explained that they do not use METROLift, because it requires long waits and is not consistently on-time, choosing to use Uber and Lyft instead. Another participant, who is deaf, reported using the local buses more than METROLift due to the latter's unreliability, and cited the presence of illuminated signage displaying stop information on METRO buses as a key factor enabling them to use the service. Another participant described an experience in which they had to quit a job because the cost of transportation to and from the job was too high, and that they almost had to quit college for similar reasons. "Without Mounting Horizons," this person stated, "I probably wouldn't be able to work because of the cost of transportation." They also listed their issues with trying to use the fixed-route bus system in their community, including difficulty accessing the stop and unreliable service. Another participant, who also uses Mounting Horizons, stated that both they and many

other individuals with disabilities that they know don't use METROLift because it is unreliable.

When asked about how they make their transportation mode choices, one participant cited distance and importance: for a short trip, they would walk or take an Uber, but for a longer trip they would likely combine METROLift and Uber. Another participant noted that Uber and Lyft don't work for them because those modes are not wheelchair accessible, so when they are unable to drive, they rely on Mounting Horizons. Another participant described working with teenagers and young adults with disabilities and noted that their major concerns were cost and safety, particularly safety concerns associated with having to spend a significant amount of time waiting outside. Another participant also discussed safety concerns, noting that they did not feel comfortable having their disabled adult child ride with a driver they didn't know or trust. This participant noted that the JRide service, which they currently use, has two drivers, both of which the family feels they can trust. They also noted cost concerns. Another participant described a disabled person they work with for whom neither METRO local bus service nor METROLift service is workable: this person is blind, and as a result cannot cross a street safely by themselves, but also needs to be at work too early in the morning to be able to rely on METROLift. They also described another person who wants to work in Katy but cannot get transportation there because METROLift does not serve Katy, so they are forced to take a job in Houston which requires a longer commute. "People with disabilities sometimes choose a job based on the location, and it does get expensive for the family," they noted, as particularly younger adults with disabilities tend to make less money than their abled peers.

The conversation then turned to safety issues. One participant said that infrastructure issues were the biggest safety concern for them, including broken sidewalks and crosswalk signals that don't have an audible signal for individuals with vision issues. Another participant noted that they face similar issues as a wheelchair user, but also explained that the biggest issue they face is a lack of connectivity and insufficient service in Fort Bend County. They discussed trying to get to locations in Harris County from Fort Bend County and having to schedule a 90-minute buffer period to transfer

from Fort Bend Transit to METROLift, because neither service is reliably on-time. “It took me three to four hours to get to work, but I had no other choice at that point,” they said. Another participant described infrastructure issues as a key challenge, noting that they did not feel comfortable traveling by themselves in some areas of the region as a result. Another participant, who works with adults with intellectual disabilities, described vulnerability as a key concern of the families they work with: individuals with disabilities often must wait at the side of the road for transportation services for long periods of time, with no reliable idea of when their ride will show up. Another participant described feeling uncomfortable using Uber, because they felt their drivers are not thoroughly vetted, and many drivers engaged in comments or actions that made this person feel unsafe. They also described a previous job situation in which they had to sit outside of their job for long periods of time to wait for their transit service, which posed problems for them due to their chronic fatigue syndrome. This participant also described infrastructure issues they had experienced in La Marque and Hitchcock, where they observed a person having to ride in their electric wheelchair on the shoulder of the road to access vital services, as there was no sidewalk and no alternative transportation service. Another participant noted heat-related issues: individuals who were reliant on METRO’s fixed-route buses often had to take multiple transfers, which would leave them tired and sweaty by the time they arrived at work. Another participant noted that METROLift can’t always drop off at an area with a curb cut, which means getting from the vehicle to the destination can be a challenge for people with certain kinds of disabilities. They also mentioned that many METROLift drivers did not seem to be adequately trained to work with individuals with disabilities, and that METROLift had once left them waiting for three hours before their vehicle arrived, which then took another three hours to get them to their destination. Another participant noted that employers are not always willing to tolerate employees who are not reliably on time due to transportation issues.

When asked about the one change they would make to improve transportation in the region, one participant pointed to inter-jurisdictional connections, specifically mentioning getting between Harris County and Galveston County, as well as between those places and Brazoria County, as trips that are difficult or impossible for individuals with

disabilities. “Make the boundaries of where transportation providers can operate more flexible,” they suggested. Another participant agreed with this, noting that they are often unable to get from their home in Galveston County to Houston for medical appointments. Another participant suggested a “community hub” to coordinate shared rides for individuals with disabilities, noting that many families are unable to participate in their organization’s programs because of transportation issues. Another participant mentioned that the transportation service they use prioritizes medical appointments for seniors over commute trips for adults with disabilities, meaning that the service is not a reliable commute option. This participant suggested that there need to be more resources devoted to transportation for individuals with disabilities.

Analysis

Participants in this focus group described a wide variety of ways in which services for persons with disabilities do not meet the needs of that community. The services available to them are unreliable, unsafe, and make travel across jurisdictional boundaries extremely difficult or impossible. These issues make it more difficult for adults with disabilities to get and hold jobs, to achieve their educational goals, and to obtain medical care. Inaccessible, poorly maintained, and unsafe pedestrian infrastructure are also key barriers to mobility for these individuals, preventing them from using fixed-route transportation services available to the general public. This focus group pointed to several vital issues that need to be addressed to provide accessible and reliable transportation for individuals with disabilities.

Focus Group #2: Seniors

Participants in this group, when asked about the non-car modes used to get around, only one participant mentioned their bicycle. When asked about the changes in their travel habits in the past year, none of the participants were able to identify any.

Participants were then asked about how they make their mode choice decisions. One participant noted proximity, connectivity, and safety as key considerations, including roadway design, explaining that they would not use their bike if the road did not have infrastructure that allowed them to feel safe while doing so. Another participant described living in a rural area and having no other options besides their car: for them,

travel choices revolve around whether to use toll roads or freeways for longer trips, with factors in their choice including weather and distance. Another participant made a similar comment, noting that their community's rural setting requires them to travel long distances for any trip they need to make, and provides no alternatives to driving. Another participant simply explained that they make all of their trips by vehicle.

When asked about the advantages and drawbacks of their mode choice, one participant described traffic as a major disadvantage, as well as weather conditions leading to unsafe roads, but noted that they did not have any other options and mentioned that they enjoy driving in a warm car. Another participant explained that they needed to travel between work locations over the course of a day, which makes a car a more practical option than a bike for them due to time constraints, even though they would prefer to bike. Another participant noted that travel by car is expensive due to the rising cost of gas, but that having to wait to get picked up by a transportation service makes using one inconvenient. Participants were then asked if the mode they use most often is the mode they would like to use, and one responded by calling their car a "necessary evil," saying, "I've got to get where I've got to go, and I've got two small children that I have to tote around, but I'd much prefer to not be in a vehicle and to bike places if it were practical." Another participant noted that they often had to travel long distances and arrive on time, making their vehicle their option, while another noted that they like the control of driving themselves.

When asked where they look for information about their transportation options, one participant noted that they don't often look for information about transportation because they are usually just using their personal vehicle, but they do sometimes look for information about bicycle infrastructure, which they rely on roadway signage to learn about. Another reported using the internet to get directions if going to a place they're not familiar with. Another reported using the Uber app and the local transit agency's website when helping someone else find information about transportation options in their community. Participants were then asked to explain what about that source of information makes it useful for them. The participant who mentioned using roadway signs to learn more about cycling infrastructure noted that this source of information was

easily visible to both cyclists and drivers, meaning that drivers would be more likely aware of the presence of cyclists, enhancing safety for cyclists on that route. Another participant noted that the internet is both easily accessible for them and works with their visual learning style but reported that they may sometimes call a transit provider directly when helping someone else find information about transportation services.

Participants were then asked to describe what might help them learn more about the transportation options available to them. One participant suggested that localities should do more to inform the public about pedestrian and cyclist connectivity in their areas. Another participant suggested that they simply need more transportation options in their community, noting that many in their county have no options, and where other options exist, they are often too expensive. This participant was then asked what pieces of information they would need to know about any new options that arose, and they mentioned the cost and the area they serve. Another participant also expressed a need for more options, particularly for seniors to access needed services. Another participant noted that in other places, information about transportation options such as buses and cycling was readily available in Google Maps, and that it would be helpful if their community also made that information available through Google Maps. Another participant suggested that localities could call their residents to inform them about transportation options as they became available, while another suggested working with Federally Qualified Health Centers to provide vouchers for transportation services.

When asked about safety concerns, one participant noted that they generally feel safe while driving, but that cycling outside of dedicated infrastructure makes them feel unsafe. Another participant said, “even going to H-E-B or Walmart, I’m always in defensive driving mode.” They pointed to other drivers’ unsafe driving habits as their key safety concern. Another participant described feeling safe in their small hometown, but noted that when traveling to other communities, bridges and traffic caused them to feel less safe. Participants were then asked if they could point to specific modes or locations in which they feel unsafe, and one responded by talking about the country roads in their community with no shoulder, which put road users in a ditch if they go off the road. Another pointed to narrow bridges in their community, which make them feel too close

to cars traveling in the opposite direction, while another responded with one word: "Houston."

Participants were asked about what they find easiest about getting around the region, and one participant explained that they like the toll roads because they help them avoid traffic congestion. Another pointed to major highways as places they feel safe traveling, while another expressed appreciation for the number of close-by destinations in their community. Participants were then asked to discuss the most difficult aspects of traveling around the region. Three participants pointed to constant highway construction, with one specifically noting this issue in relationship to I-10, while another expressed frustration with the long distances they need to travel to access shopping and medical care.

Participants were asked the one change they would most like to make to transportation in the region. One suggested getting rid of one-way streets, while another suggested a regional multi-modal trail with good connectivity to a variety of destinations. Two participants asked for more public transportation service, with one specifically asking for new rail stations. Participants were then asked to name one thing their community leaders could do to make it easier to get around. One asked for funding for a transportation master plan or a multi-modal plan or both, and funding to carry out the strategic objectives of those plans. Another asked for lower gas prices and funding to fix local roads. Participants were then offered one final opportunity to share anything they wanted about their experiences getting around the region. One noted that transportation is a major issue for underserved people in their community and suggested that more public transportation would enable them to get access to medical care and other essential services. Another participant agreed that transportation in their community is too limited and needs to be expanded.

Analysis

Most participants in this focus group live and work in more rural parts of the 13-county region, and their responses illuminate the lack of public transportation available in their communities. While their transportation safety concerns revolve around cars, and they also express frustration with road work, poorly maintained roads, and traffic congestion,

they generally feel that their car is the only option available to them for most trips. This is a particular problem for the most vulnerable people in their communities, as they are often unable to afford a car, limiting their access to vital services. Participants expressed interest in more transit and safe cycling infrastructure in their communities, suggesting that support for and usage of new transportation options in these communities would extend beyond the underserved populations that would most rely on them.

Focus Group #3: Individuals with Lower Incomes

When asked about their non-car mode choices, one participant described replacing most of their former truck trips with electric motorcycle and bike trips to reduce their carbon footprint, while another said they use public transportation, and another mentioned using their bike or walking on the weekend, and specifically chose to live where they did to be able to access basic shopping needs on foot, though they did still need to drive for some trips. Participants were then asked to discuss how their trip choices have changed in the past year, and one explained that they have reduced the distance of the trips they take, preferring to keep their trips under 10 miles when possible. Another described replacing their vehicle with a hybrid car.

Participants were asked to describe the factors that influence their transportation choices. One explained that they would use buses while in a city, but that in their community they have no choice but to drive everywhere. Another described trying to minimize the use of their vehicle by chaining trips and using delivery services when possible, and also explained that public transit does not serve their community, limiting their options. Another explained that the public transit system in their community is the only option they have. Another participant noted that they make their choices based on minimizing their carbon footprint: they use their electric vehicles when they have a place to recharge in the middle of their trip, and don't need to haul anything too big to be put on a motorcycle or bike.

Participants were then asked to explain the advantages and disadvantages of their most common mode choice. One explained that their electric motorcycle and bike are fast enough to allow them to feel safe on the road, and that they get satisfaction out of using

zero-emission transportation choices. They did describe a small amount of inconvenience associated with this mode, particularly with hauling groceries or other items, and noted that a lack of charging locations in the region was a barrier to using these modes more. Another participant explained that speed and ease of access are key considerations for them, as they work long hours and need to be able to get around quickly. They described a negative experience trying to use the bus in their community, finding that getting to the bus stop took too long and was inconvenient, as well as a slow ride once on the bus. They told the group that the bus needs to be a faster, more convenient option for it to be useful for them, noting that some of their co-workers use the bus and are unable to reliably get to work on time. They also echoed a previous concern, noting that a lack of charging infrastructure made a fully electric vehicle an untenable choice for them. Another participant, who works at a social service provider, noted that a lack of public transportation was a major barrier to accessing services in their community, and that their organization had to implement a ride-sharing program in their community to ensure that their clients could access food and educational opportunities. A local food bank only provides services to individuals who arrive by car and does not allow multiple families to share a vehicle, making food assistance inaccessible for those without cars. Another participant noted that their destinations, and the times of day at which they can travel, are limited by their reliance on public transit.

Participants were asked about the sources of information they use to learn about transit options. One described using Uber, Google Maps, and Houston TranStar, while another explained that they feel like they are on their own, and two others also indicated that they make use of Google Maps. Another, working at a health care provider, described using the website for their local transit agency to help clients, along with Uber and Lyft, and Mobility Links.

Participants were then asked to discuss their transportation-related safety concerns. One participant, who uses a motorcycle, explained that they use a lighted helmet and safety vest to feel safe on the road. "I assume that everyone's on the phone while they're driving, and that's how I ride my motorcycle," they said. Another person, who commutes via bicycle, echoed the concern about cell phones. "I don't enter an

intersection until I see the car's tires stop," they explained. A third participant agreed with the worries about distracted driving, but suggested that speeding drivers, particularly after COVID, were an even bigger safety issue. Two participants agreed with this, noting that they feel they must speed to stay safe on the road. Another participant, who provides social services to students in their community, noted that they do not feel comfortable recommending bikes to their students as a way to get around, as it is not safe to bike in their community outside of daylight hours, as students have been hit using bikes to get to school. Another participant noted that, on average, two Houstonians die every month while biking, and that this is why they don't feel comfortable biking in Houston. Another participant disagreed with this, suggesting that there is safe cycling infrastructure in some parts of the city, but that the city needs more bike highways that parallel car infrastructure. Another person mentioned that it's illegal to bike on the sidewalk, but unsafe to bike on the street, leading to a catch-22 for people who want to get around by bicycle.

Participants were then asked about the easiest and most difficult aspects of getting around the region. One pointed to improvements in intersection and freeway interchange design, and more and better markings for pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure. Another pointed to a large amount of road infrastructure, suggesting that some could be limited to bicycles or electric vehicles. Another participant noted that there are surface alternatives to freeway congestion, and that these could be better promoted to reduce highway congestion. Another participant echoed this concern, noting that they often use these alternative routes to get around, and also pointed to new bike lanes on State Highway 3 as a step in the right direction.

When asked about the one change they would most like to see made in transportation in the region, one participant noted that in Baytown, where they live, transit service ends at 5 PM, and suggested that the whole region needs better transit connectivity to Houston via more service and better infrastructure. Another told the group that drivers need to be slowed down. Another suggested rail service from Houston to Galveston, noting that current trolley service in Galveston is useless for them, and another participant agreed, noting that they have been easily able to use public transit in other

cities and should be able to do so in Houston as well. Another participant echoed the previous calls for better regional transit connectivity. Another participant suggested that transit needs to be better planned, to better account for where people want to go. Participants were then asked what community leaders could do to improve transportation in the region. One expressed satisfaction with a local Congressman's work to connect with people about transportation issues, but also pointed out that it has been more than 20 years since the Houston region has gone 24 hours without a road fatality, and that elected officials need to do more to support the groups who are trying to address this issue.

Participants were then given one final opportunity to provide any comments about transportation in the region. One participant expressed a need for better connectivity throughout the region, and another agreed, noting the existence of "transit deserts" where there are no options but driving, and another noted that many of the people who live in those areas don't speak English and face language barriers as well.

Analysis

Participants in this focus group were very focused on the environmental impacts of their transportation choices but noted several barriers to making the environmentally conscious choices they want to make, most notably unsafe roads and a lack of electric vehicle charging infrastructure. Participants also expressed frustration with insufficient transit service, with key destinations not being served and limited evening options. They noted the particular challenges posed to the most vulnerable individuals in their community, including a lack of food access for those who could not drive themselves to the food bank. Participants expressed strong support for expanding transit service, and also supported increasing the right-of-way allocations for bicycle and electric motorcycle users.

Focus Group #4: Limited English Proficiency

All participants in the group reported using their car for all their trips. When asked about how they have changed their travel patterns in the past year, one participant described a return to full-time in person work, while one explained that they now travel a lot less, driving less than 2,500 miles in a year. Another told the group that they had moved from

flying for longer-distance trips to driving, and that they had also moved away from using transit and cycling and towards driving due to safety concerns, noting poor connectivity in existing bicycle infrastructure. They noted safety concerns with their long-distance drives outside the Houston region.

Participants were then asked what factors contribute to their mode choice decisions. One said, "For me, there is no decision-making, I just...we drive our cars," noting that they don't think about other modes even for short trips. Another described driving as a habit, seeing it as the only way to get around, and two others agreed, calling the decision to drive "automatic". Participants were then asked about the advantages and disadvantages of this mode choice. One said that they appreciate the quiet of driving alone, while another noted that they don't have to worry about anyone else's travel needs, they can just go where they want to go when they want to go. One participant noted that loneliness on long trips was one disadvantage, while another noted a sense of guilt over using a less environmentally friendly mode. One participant described vanpooling for 20 years, and talked about how much they enjoyed the experience, and another noted that it helps save on gas and wear and tear on one's car, but that the loss of convenience made it difficult for them to do regularly. When asked about the possibility of using other modes, one described wanting to be able to commute via electric scooter, but explained that they don't feel safe using that mode, as they know several people who have been in accidents while using that mode. They talked about feeling unsafe even in a standard-size car, because the other cars on the road are so big. Another participant agreed, noting that small cars don't feel safe when they have to share the road with large trucks.

Participants were then asked about the sources of information they might use if they wanted to try a different mode. One described trying to use Zipcar to replace their personal vehicle, but that the Zipcar locations were inconvenient to them, and also noted that they use Uber occasionally, and that they would use Google Maps to plan a route. Two participants expressed familiarity with Waze, noting that their friends who use it love to talk its benefits. Another participant mentioned Houston TranStar as a source for weather-related travel disruption information. Participants were then asked

to talk about what might help them learn more about their transportation options. One mentioned that their friends tell them that they have no idea how to take the bus, or what it costs—they noted that they tend to learn about transportation options by word of mouth. They went on to describe their experiences using the bus in Seattle, where bus stops include large screens that provide information about transit options, which attract attention. They contrasted this with bus stops in Houston, which they described as lonely and desolate. Another participant pointed to the difficulties that people have reading bus schedules, suggesting that transit agencies should use more person-centered and trip-centered approaches to communicating information about transit. Another person spoke positively of the METRO app's real-time bus tracking feature, and suggested that this should be integrated into a more general traveler information app. Another participant described their experiences helping international students, noting that the students have trouble understanding the transit system, noting that they are used to relying on visual approaches like maps to understand how to get around on transit and that these are hard to find in the Houston region. Another noted that transit agencies tend to provide navigation assistance only for their services, but that the large number of transportation providers in the region requires a more holistic approach to getting around. Another spoke positively of METRO's online trip planner tool, and a second participant agreed, but noted that it relied on people being able to walk to a METRO bus stop or drive to a METRO park and ride.

When asked about their transportation safety concerns, several participants reported feeling very unsafe, pointing to bad driver behaviors like road rage as a key concern. Another noted that the roads are in poor condition, which also creates safety issues. "It really upsets me when I'm driving and I see a huge pothole," they said, explaining that they try to avoid streets where they know conditions are particularly poor.

Participants were then asked about the easiest and most difficult aspects of travel in the region. Several participants noted that driving was easy, and one clarified that this was only true outside of peak periods. Many participants described traffic congestion as the biggest barrier they faced traveling around the region, with one opining that road

construction cannot keep up with population growth in the region and that alternatives are needed.

When asked about the one change they would make to improve travel in the region, two participants asked for better roads and streets, while another suggested going back in time to re-plan the whole region along the principles used to plan The Woodlands, to improve connectivity. One participant noted that transit in other cities is very efficient, and that the region's transit systems needed more resources to be able to provide efficient services like those places. One participant noted that driving provides them more freedom, allowing them to take many trips without having to worry about all of the accessories and clothes needed for those trips at the beginning of their day.

Participants were then asked what their elected officials and community leaders could do to improve transportation in the region, one participant noted that where they live in Brazoria County, transit service only exists in parts of the county, and they expressed interest in having a transit system that covers the entire county. Another wanted elected officials to understand that the public needs options beyond just driving, and also expressed frustration with the slow pace of road work on Interstate 45. Another participant suggested that work on major roads should be better coordinated. "It feels like everything is under construction at the same time," they said, and that it makes them feel like they don't have any way to avoid road work.

Analysis

Participants in this group rely heavily on their cars, and most of them expressed a preference for this option. It provides them personal space, alone time, and freedom from having to worry about the schedules of others. However, they also expressed interest in other modes of travel, particularly carpools, vanpools, and public transit. They acknowledged tradeoffs that come with driving, notably traffic congestion and safety issues, and sought a more connected region that provides them the freedom to drive without the requirement to drive. They also sought improvements in transportation information resources, looking for person-centered and trip-centered resources that pull together all the travel choices available in the region.

Focus Group #5: Students

Participants were asked about the non-drive-alone modes they use to get around. Two participants cited Uber and Lyft, though one reported using Lyft most of the time because it is usually cheaper for them. Participants were then asked about recent changes in their travel choices, and one responded by noting that rising gas prices had forced them to reduce both the number of trips they take and the distances they drive. Another participant also mentioned rising gas prices as a reason for changing their travel choices: they described increasing their trip chaining, such as stopping for groceries on their way home from school rather than making a separate trip to the grocery store. Another mentioned COVID as a reason for switching from in-person grocery shopping to curbside pickup.

When asked about the factors that they consider when making travel choices, one participant mentioned time of day as a key concern, noting that a trip they would make on foot during the day they might make by Uber, or not make at all, after dark. They also cited cost as a factor, particularly when choosing between Uber and Lyft. Another participant cited the number of people they would be traveling with, mentioning that they would be more likely to carpool if they were going to the same destination as several of their friends or family members. Another participant noted that they think about whether they plan to drink before choosing a travel mode, noting that they would be more likely to use Uber as an alternative to a designated driver. Another participant described their experiences working with students, where most of the students they work with are reliant on friends or family to drive them to places and noted that cost was a concern for those students, especially for those students who do not live close to public transit.

Participants were then asked about the advantages and disadvantages of the mode they choose most often. One participant described how they and their friends “make Uber and Lyft work for us,” by all driving to one person’s home and then using those services in a group from that one location, noting that this felt like a safer alternative to driving individually and parking near their destination. Another participant noted that they sometimes forget to schedule their Uber or Lyft rides, but that they also sometimes use Mounting Horizons services, which are cheaper for them. Another participant also

noted the cost of Uber and Lyft as a disadvantage, but that it provides an important advantage over other shared ride options, because it allows them to leave earlier than their companions if they want. Participants were then asked if the mode they choose most often is the mode they like best. One noted that they like being able to drive themselves, but that the experiences of a relative who lives in Austin had led them to desire better access to public transportation. Another noted that public transportation serves their college campus, but that they don't use it as much as they would like, because they haven't yet figured out how to use it. Another participant who works with students noted that affordability was a key concern for the students they work with, limiting them to trips for which they could get a ride from friends or family. Another participant noted that the need to carry exact change in cash to pay a fare leads them to use transit less than they would like, as they don't like to carry cash and prefer to pay for things with debit or credit cards.

Participants were then asked where they look for information about their transportation options. One said they would look it up online, using a google search, and also ask friends and neighbors. Another pointed to Google Maps as a source of information, explaining that it's more convenient and easier to use than Apple Maps, citing a feature which helps them remember where they parked their car as particularly useful. Another participant agreed with this evaluation of Google Maps and Apple Maps, adding that they also sometimes use Waze to get traffic information as well as talk to their friends to get information about parking. Another participant mentioned using the website for Harris County Transit to get information about that service, as well as calling the agency to speak to a service representative for those who need additional help. When asked what would help them learn more about their transportation options, one participant cited an app that would provide information and navigation across all modes, while another suggested instructional videos.

When asked about transportation safety concerns, one participant mentioned feeling unsafe daily on account of unsafe driver behavior, citing speed and distracted driving as particular concerns. Another participant agreed with this, adding that they have been particularly cautious since being hit by an unsafe driver earlier in the year, and

suggesting that they might feel safer on public transit. Another participant described feeling anxious every time they get behind the wheel, and another also discussed feeling anxious in particular about drivers with road rage, as well as operating a vehicle after dark in close proximity to pedestrians, particularly in the Midtown and Third Ward sections of Houston. One participant mentioned road work as causing unsafe feelings, and another mentioned speeding and drag racing as a safety concern, describing a situation in which they encountered a speeding driver on the wrong side of the road, which prompted another participant to share a story in which they also encountered a driver trying to travel the wrong way on the road.

Participants were then asked to share what they find easiest and most difficult about getting around the region. One participant mentioned the Beltway as something that makes travel in the region easier. Another participant, who recently moved from the Northeast, noted that roads here have more capacity and drivers are more courteous than where they had moved from. Another participant mentioned the existence of many alternatives for getting around, which help them avoid congestion and safety concerns. One participant mentioned constant road work as a factor that makes travel in the region more difficult. Another noted that many transportation services in the region only operate weekdays between 8:00 AM and 5:00 PM, which makes these services unusable for many people who work full-time. They also noted that transit voucher programs that seek to fill the gaps outside those periods have drawbacks, and that many taxi drivers would refuse to transport voucher holders because they were often unable to tip.

When asked to describe one change to transportation that would help them get around easier, one participant mentioned better on-time performance for transit, while another wished for Mounting Horizons to offer service in their community. One participant asked for less congestion, and another expressed a desire for newer, cleaner buses and more information about transit service. Another participant asked community leaders to contribute more to provide transit service in more areas of the region. Another agreed, referring specifically to more outlying areas of the region. Another participant also

expressed a need for more attention to outer communities, asking for more sidewalks and better transit to help residents of those areas choose options other than cars.

Analysis

This group's comments reflect the unique travel patterns of students, who need to travel regularly both to school and to jobs. This group was particularly likely to talk about their travel choices as they relate to their recreation and entertainment activities, which are generally group activities for them. Their tendency to travel in groups made them especially likely to choose services like Uber and Lyft, which are economical choices for group travel that provide them flexibility. For many in this group, auto-dependence led to financial issues due to the rising cost of gas. Participants expressed interest in transit options, but many lack access to transit near their homes or schools, or don't understand how to use it. Additionally, many of the transit options that do exist don't operate at the times of day or days of week that students need to travel. Students need access to low-cost, convenient travel options, and many of the students in this group simply do not have access to those options.

Focus Group #6: Veterans

In this focus group, one participant began by describing the fact that both they and their adult child had recently acquired cars. The moderator followed up to ask how this has changed their travel patterns, and the participant replied, "It opened up places I can go to now that I'm not relying on the bus. It makes a big difference." Before getting the car, this participant used METROLift to get around, and described occasionally renting a U-Haul truck just to get around. They also noted that they still occasionally use METROLift instead of their car due to high gas prices. Other than this, all participants described using their car for all trips.

When asked about the factors that influence their mode choices, one participant mentioned distance and gas prices as key considerations, while another participant pointed to both distance and time of day, noting that they only had access to public transit at certain times of day. Participants were then asked to describe the advantages and drawbacks of the modes they use. One participant described choosing air travel for long-distance trips, and otherwise always driving. Another noted that driving is tiring,

making driving a less useful option when taking long trips alone. When asked if the mode they use is the mode they like the most, one participant noted that availability often determines their mode choice as much as personal preference, noting that METROLift is not reliably on time nor usable for longer trips. Another participant explained that they prefer to drive, except in situations where they plan to drink, in which case they will use Uber or Lyft, because they value convenience highly when they travel.

Participants were then asked to talk about their sources of information about transportation. Both participants described using mobile apps to find information about transportation: one preferred Apple Maps, while the other chose Google Maps. One participant also described using the internet to search for flights and request Ubers. Participants were then asked about safety concerns related to transportation. One participant explained that they usually feel safe while traveling around the region. The other participant described their experiences as a former taxi driver, noting that some areas of the region feel unsafe at night. They also described feeling unsafe while riding the bus, due to aggression from other riders and bus operators' limited capacity to intervene in such situations. They also noted that a recent uptick in aggressive driving has made getting around on foot less safe as well.

When asked to describe the aspects of travel in the region that they find easiest and most difficult, one participant noted to easy freeway connectivity as making travel easier, and the availability of toll roads, while the other noted an abundance of alternative routes available to avoid congestion. One participant noted road work as a factor making travel in the region more difficult, explaining that it is frustrating that the road work seems to be "never-ending", while the other pointed to road flooding caused by bad weather, noting that this had posed problems for them in the past when it prevented METROLift services from picking them up.

Participants were then asked what one thing they would most like to change about transportation in the region. One suggested a uniform transportation system throughout the region that reaches everyone, noting past experiences where a lack of transit had prevented them from taking a better job. The other participant asked for less road work,

pointing in particular to rush-hour lane closures as something they would like to see eliminated. When asked about how elected officials or community leaders could make it easier for them to get around, one participant suggested finishing one project before another starts, while the other participant suggested incentive programs to get road work done faster. One participant also suggested a shared ride program that allows transit-dependent individuals to get to destinations not currently served by transit, while the other participant suggested that lower gas prices would help them get around for less.

Participants were offered a final opportunity to provide comment on transportation issues in the region. One participant discussed a regional transportation grant program, suggesting that this program should serve the whole region, including park and ride services for people who don't want buses traveling through their neighborhoods. They suggested that there should be a regional mandate for public transportation to ensure better housing and employment opportunities. This participant also shared a past experience they had trying to find services for one of their children, who has a disability. They found the Harris County Rides program but described the process of finding out about it as unnecessarily difficult and complicated. They suggested that a resource book should be distributed widely to help people find out about and sign up for the resources available to them. This participant also shared a concern about access to medical services in rural areas, noting that many people in rural areas need medical care and can't get to Houston to access that care, and suggesting that there should be programs to bring specialists from Houston out into some of the rural communities to provide medical care there.

Analysis

For participants in this group, vehicle ownership provides freedom and convenience that other options don't match. For one participant, the value of that convenience is so high that they rarely consider other options, while the other participant in this group gained much more convenient access to jobs and services as a result of their choice to get a car. Participants in this group had more safety concerns related to public transit, regarding both the walk to the bus stop and the time spent on board the vehicle, than

they had safety concerns related to driving. Both participants expressed frustration with road conditions in the region, connecting these frustrations both to difficulties getting around by car as well as on transportation services. While one participant uses public transportation sometimes and expressed interest in ensuring everyone has access to transportation services, they also responded to a lack of access to medical care in rural areas by suggesting that medical providers should come to those communities rather than suggesting a service to transport those in need of medical care to the providers. This indicates that they see significant limitations in the ability of transportation services to help those who can't drive access the services they need.

Focus Group #7: Workforce

Participants in this group, when asked about the non-car modes they use to get around, reported using motorcycles and bicycles. When asked about how they have changed their travel patterns in the past year, one participant reported taking fewer trips, another mentioned a shorter commute, a third noted that they drove less due to working from home, and a fourth reported taking fewer trips on Interstate 10 due to road work.

When asked about the factors that influence their mode choice decisions, one participant mentioned the price of gas, while another noted that they wished to be able to take the bus but do not have a bus serving their community. Another participant reported that they choose which of their vehicles they will use for a given trip based on the length of the trip, while another participant mentioned the weather. Participants were then asked to describe the advantages and drawbacks of the mode they use most often: one described being able to set their own schedule as an advantage, while another cited convenience as an advantage and wear and tear on their car as a disadvantage. A third participant noted that they enjoy the privacy their car offers them, saying, "I can sing to myself." Participants were then asked if the mode they use most often is the mode they like the most. One participant noted that traffic is a frustration for them, while another expressed an interest in having both rail service and Uber service in their community. Another participant seconded the interest in rail service, while another suggested that they would like to see bus service in their community.

Participants were asked to discuss the sources of information they use to learn more about their transportation options. One participant asked a question in response to clarify whether the question was specifically about commute trips or about all trips, noting that their non-commute options were limited. The moderator clarified that the question refers to all trips. A participant mentioned traffic reports on TV news as a source of information, while another mentioned Waze as a source for information on traffic and road work. Another participant noted that they use Google Maps as a source for information about transit options. They also mentioned that as a wheelchair user, they need to know whether the transit service they want to use has a wheelchair lift, and that they had run into issues in the past trying to use a transit service that couldn't accommodate their wheelchair. Another participant noted affordability and travel time as considerations for long trips. One participant noted that they use Google Maps to learn the total distance of their car trip, which they use to estimate the cost of gas for the trip based on what they had paid for fuel in the recent past, while another reported using GasBuddy to learn about gas costs. Participants were then asked to discuss what would help them learn more about their transportation options. Two participants suggested that information would be most easily accessible to them if it were built into Google Maps or Waze, with one also noting that they were particularly interested in the proposed bullet train service to Dallas. Another participant noted that they want to have one app for information on all their transportation options, no matter where they are.

When asked to discuss their transportation safety concerns, one participant reported feeling unsafe "very often", citing speeding drivers and road rage as specific issues. Another participant reported feeling unsafe during rush hours, while a third suggested that they feel unsafe only when traveling through an unfamiliar area, with confusion about navigating properly, road work, bad weather, and unsafe neighborhoods noted as particular concerns. Another mentioned that they own an RV and described feeling unsafe while operating that vehicle due to drivers not knowing how to accommodate such a large vehicle. Another participant discussed feeling safer while driving during the day than early morning or at night, while another one agreed with them, and mentioned Interstate 45 as a place where they won't drive, due to congestion making it feel unsafe. Several participants agreed with this assessment of Interstate 45, noting high traffic

volumes and constant road work. One participant described having to choose between this road and the toll road and choosing the toll road for safety reasons.

Participants were then asked to discuss what they found easiest and most difficult about getting around the region. One cited the EZ Tag as something that makes travel around the region easy, while another cited the Grand Parkway, a particular toll road, for similar reasons, and a third mentioned the large number of freeways in the region. Difficulties cited included traffic congestion, uncertainty caused by road work, and the long distances between destinations in the region.

Participants were then asked to describe one change they would like to make to transportation in the region. Two noted that large areas of the region offer no public transit or insufficient public transit, and that this makes it difficult for the people they work with to access educational opportunities and other services—one noted parts of Harris, Galveston, and Brazoria Counties as places where transit is lacking. Another participant wished for fewer drivers on the roads, while a third suggested that 18-wheelers should be banned from the highways at certain times of day. Another asked for additional public transit to take more drivers off the road, while another suggested additional toll lanes. When asked how community leaders could make it easier to get around, one participant noted that transit service on Galveston Island used to extend as far as League City, and that local officials and business leaders should work together to find funding and restore this service. They also suggested that elected officials and community leaders should use transit themselves, to show leadership and set an example for the people they serve. Another suggested that essential workers should be given incentives to use transit, while a third suggested expanding Houston's existing light rail service. Another participant agreed with this, asking in particular for a rail option for their commute, while another suggested better connectivity for people in rural areas.

Analysis

Participants in this group sought additional transportation options in the region, despite the fact that most of them travel primarily by car, and express qualified satisfaction with that choice. While some expressed interest in using transit for themselves, transit was most commonly brought up by participants as an option for other people: they saw it

both as a way to help people gain access to jobs and services, and also as a way to get other drivers off the road, to reduce congestion and clear more space on the road for them. Congestion and road work were major concerns for participants in this group, as these issues not only made their travel experience more frustrating and time-consuming, but also made it feel less safe. Road conditions and other drivers were the biggest safety concerns for participants in this group, though the majority reported feeling safe on the road at least some of the time.

Focus Group #8: General Public

Multiple participants in this group reported not having any cars. One reported getting around primarily via bike and public transit, with occasional Lyft rides as well. The other participant described a recent decision to purchase an electric tricycle, which enabled them to get to destinations in their community like a corner store and church. They explained that they have no access to destinations further away than a mile or so: they rely on delivery services for groceries and other basic needs, and cannot otherwise get around except on rare occasions when they are able to get a ride from friends or family members. Participants were then asked how their travel patterns have changed in the past year. One participant reported that prior to the start of the pandemic, they had access to a subsidized ride service to get access to medical care, but that this had been discontinued in the first weeks of the pandemic, leaving them unable to get to the doctor since then. Another participant reported traveling to Houston less often, as the transit service they had relied on to get to Houston changed its services during the pandemic, which meant it no longer met their needs. A third participant reported driving less because they take fewer overall trips as a result of the pandemic.

When asked about the factors they consider in their mode choice decisions, one participant explained that they make very few trips because there is no mode of transportation available to them for most of the trips they want to take. This participant described using their stimulus money to get an electric tricycle which allows them to take short trips and prevents them from being completely stuck at home, but noted that a lack of bike lanes or other safe accommodations near their home prevents them from traveling much further than that. Another participant described wanting to use modes

other than driving, but that having no bus service within five miles of their home makes it too time-consuming to use, and that it primarily serves downtown destinations which are of little interest to them. Another participant explained that they recently moved to a new home within biking distance of shops and basic services, but that the hot summer conditions made it not a useful option for them. They also described a lack of local transit service within their community, with only commuter service provided, making transit unworkable for most people at most times.

Participants were then asked to talk about the advantages and drawbacks of the mode they use most often. One participant explained that even if they did have access to a car, they would still prefer to use their bike, because the bike is cheaper and provides them fresh air, exercise, fun, and additional social opportunities. They cited weather and limited range as the downsides of this mode choice. Another participant described choosing a bike over a car for similar reasons, noting additionally the environmental benefits of cycling and the dangers associated with driving as reasons for preferring cycling. They noted as a disadvantage that cycling does have a more limited range than driving, but explained that they have the means to rent a car on the rare occasion that one is necessary for them. Another participant described their use of a car to get around as not a choice, but a requirement, given the lack of other options in their community. They expressed frustration with this, explaining that particularly in recent months, they had experienced a notable uptick in people driving dangerously. "It's murderous, it's the worst driving I've ever seen in my life," they said, "so I wish I didn't have to drive." One participant echoed an earlier point about the time cost associated with trying to get around the region by modes other than car and noted that this made it difficult to get from central Houston to any outlying area without driving. They pointed to Galveston as an example of this issue, noting that it is impossible to bike over the bridge to Galveston Island, and bus options are extremely limited. Another participant added that they, too, feel like they have no other choice but to drive, given a lack of alternatives in their community, and that they would strongly prefer to be able to walk or use transit to get to work.

When asked about their sources of information about their transportation options, several participants mentioned Google Maps, with one noting that it is easy to get directions for several different modes with this service, and, for the trips they take by transit, several different routings and trip times. Another participant explained that they use Waze instead, because they find the information on it more up-to-date. A participant noted that they appreciate the real-time transit arrival information provided in Google Maps, while another mentioned using METRO's text-based service for this purpose. Participants were then asked what might help them get more information about the transportation options available to them. One expressed satisfaction with their current sources of information. Another participant talked about the limitations of Google Maps' bike directions, noting that it doesn't differentiate based on the quality of the cycling infrastructure available along a given route, making it difficult to ensure that the suggested route is actually safe. They suggested that the city of Houston should publish up-to-date information about the quality of the bike infrastructure it provides, asking for a clear differentiation between signed routes with no specialized infrastructure, specialized but unprotected infrastructure, and protected cycling infrastructure. One participant pointed to a service they had recently experienced in another city where individual vehicle owners could rent their car to others on a short-term basis, asking how local leaders can better raise awareness of emerging transportation services like this to help people learn more about their transportation options and potentially choose those solutions over personal vehicle ownership. Another participant suggested that both Google Maps and METRO's trip planning tool should be better integrated with intercity bus and rail services and suggested that METRO should also provide links on its website to transit providers in neighboring areas as well as those in other Texas cities, to help the people who frequently travel around the state. One participant pointed to their experiences in other cities where bikeshare systems are better integrated with Google Maps, and that the bikeshare system in Houston should be similarly integrated.

Participants were then asked about their transportation safety concerns. One participant stated, "poor driver behavior makes me feel unsafe every day, no matter what mode I use, unless I'm on a bus or in a train." They explained that this bad behavior is a regionwide problem and occurs on both freeways and local streets. Another participant

suggested that overly wide streets encourage drivers to travel at unsafely fast speeds, noting that this combination of wide streets and fast drivers make those streets unsafe to cross on foot as well, and referred to north-south arterials through central Houston as particularly problematic in this regard. A third participant agreed that poor driver behavior has been a problem and has gotten worse since the beginning of the pandemic, pointing to a major arterial in their community as a place where speeding cars make them feel particularly unsafe. Another participant suggested that roads are built for rush-hour traffic volumes, and that the combination of wide roads and lower volumes outside of peak periods can lead to poor driver behavior. Another participant said, "I fear for my life every moment I'm on the road." They described being the victim of road rage from drivers who are frustrated that they have to share the road with a cyclist, but the lack of cycling infrastructure requires them to take the general traffic lane and went so far as to predict that they would someday sustain serious injuries from being hit by a car while riding in their community. Another participant pointed to Interstate 45 as a particularly dangerous travel experience, especially at merge points. They also noted that when they try to walk around their community, it's very uncommon for drivers to stop to let pedestrians cross and suggested that better signage would get more drivers to stop for pedestrians. Another participant agreed that crossing roads on foot is often dangerous in the region, suggesting that drivers making right turns on red often don't stop at all before turning, making it unsafe to cross even for pedestrians obeying traffic signals. They also discussed their experiences on their commute home from work: their office is located on a freeway access road, and getting out of their office's parking lot requires a turn from a complete stop into traffic moving at freeway speeds.

When participants were asked about what they find easiest and most difficult about getting around the region, one pointed to the easy availability of parking, though also noted some ambivalence about whether the abundance of parking was necessarily a good thing. Another mentioned the convenience of driving in the region as a positive. One participant noted that the region is mostly flat and warm all year, making it relatively easy to bike all year round. Another participant pointed to issues related to medical transportation as something particularly difficult: people who have to undergo medical

procedures requiring anesthesia have limited options if they don't have a friend or family member who can drive them to and from their doctor's office. One participant also mentioned as a difficulty the lack of good public transit options for people trying to travel to or from the region's airports, and another agreed, pointing to the rail connection between Dallas' airport and its downtown as an example of a place that does airport transportation better.

Participants were then offered the opportunity to wave a magic wand and change one thing about transportation in the region. One suggested better public transit options in the Energy Corridor, noting that it has more jobs than downtown San Diego and almost no alternatives to drive. Another participant suggested lower speed limits, more traffic signals, and more protected bike lanes. Another participant seconded the suggestion about bike lanes, and also asked for wider and better-maintained sidewalks. Another participant expressed a desire to change the political situation in the region: "Right now, whenever there's a lot of cars on a street, the answer is, 'make a bigger road!'," they said, "and we need our politicians to embrace new, creative solutions." Another participant asked for better transit connections between non-downtown destinations in Houston and its northern suburbs, as well as bus service between The Woodlands and Huntsville. One participant responded to this by noting that a pilot service had previously been implemented between those two locations, as many students and staff at Sam Houston State University live in Montgomery County, but it hadn't been successful. To wrap up, participants were then offered one final opportunity to comment on transportation-related issues. One noted a lack of public restrooms regionwide, seeing this as one of many disincentives to using transit in the region. Another asked for even a limited amount of bus service in their community, saying, "it would change my whole life."

Analysis

Every participant in this group sought safe and useful alternatives to driving in the region for both work and non-work trips. Even those participants who regularly drive described doing so only because they lacked useful options, and participants who don't have cars described limitations on their travel caused by their lack of a car. Participants

discussed their issues with travel in the region as explicitly political concerns: they saw the region's elected officials as unwilling to consider providing transportation options other than cars and suggested that elected officials make choices that actively disincentivize transit use. Participants in this group noted that the regional transit system's focus on getting peak-hour travelers into and out of central Houston was a barrier preventing them from using transit more, as they mostly sought to travel to places outside the center of Houston. Multiple participants in this group regularly use cycling as a mode of travel, and they noted insufficient cycling infrastructure, and insufficient information about the cycling infrastructure that does exist, as concerns that made this mode of travel difficult and unsafe. Participants in this group all described unsafe driver behavior as their key safety concern, pointing to excessive speed as a danger to other drivers as well as pedestrians and cyclists, with one going so far as to suggest that they expected to die from being hit by a driver while cycling in their community. Notably, they connected this poor behavior both to poor roadway design as well as to changes in travel patterns brought on by the pandemic.

Key Takeaways

- Existing services for persons with disabilities often do not meet their needs. These services can be slow, unreliable, and often subject their users to unsafe conditions. Additionally, these services can make travel across jurisdictional boundaries difficult, limiting access to jobs, education, and medical care.
- While traveling across jurisdictional boundaries is especially difficult for individuals with disabilities, able-bodied participants also cited this issue as a barrier to using transportation services in the region.
- Most focus group participants, including many of those who exclusively drive themselves and are satisfied with that choice, expressed interest in more and better alternatives to driving, both to enable them to make different personal choices as well as to expand access to services for those who can't drive.
- Participants who don't drive, as well as those who provide social services to individuals without access to an automobile, repeatedly described a lack of

automobile access as a major barrier to accessing food, jobs, medical care, and education.

- Participants most commonly described getting information about transportation from Google Maps, Apple Maps, Waze, or other mobile apps. Participants generally saw adding more information to these sources as the best way to expand their access to information about transportation options, with participants citing transit schedules, information about transit vehicle accessibility, and information about the quality of bike facilities as additions they would like to see.
- Road conditions and driver behavior were repeatedly cited as key transportation concerns. Some participants regarded these as merely an inconvenience, while others believed them to be creating unsafe conditions on the road. A few participants saw a direct connection between road conditions and unsafe driver behavior.
- While participants generally appreciate the automobility offered by the region's extensive network of freeways and toll roads, these roads were also sources of concern for many participants. Road work on them was commonly cited as making it more difficult to get around, while these roads were also frequently noted as locations where participants felt particularly unsafe.

Appendix 5A: Focus Group Moderator's Guide

Background

H-GAC is in the process of updating its Regionally Coordinated Transportation Plan, which identifies key gaps in the transportation network and offers cost-effective approaches to close those gaps and create a more connected regional transportation network. Public outreach is a key piece of this process: these focus groups follow up on a previous round of outreach, which included both qualitative and quantitative components.

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to deepen planners' understanding of regional transportation need and barriers to transportation use in the Houston region. This research will complement quantitative and spatial analyses to provide a more complete picture of the region's transportation landscape, as experienced by end users. Focus groups are targeted to key communities to ensure that these communities' needs and concerns are taken into account.

Objectives

- Understand participants' travel patterns
- Learn more about the factors that motivate mode choice
- Illuminate the opportunities and barriers people experience traveling within the region

Guide

Introduction (5 minutes):

My name is [firstname], and I'm running this focus group to learn more about your travel choices. Thank you all for joining me today! Just so you know, this focus group is being recorded, but those videos will not be shared publicly, and your comments will be kept anonymous in our report. I'd like to start by defining a couple of transportation terms that we'll be using here: while these may be terms that you're already familiar with, it's important that we make sure everyone starts out on the same page.

- A trip refers to any journey between any two places, no matter where you're going, how far you're going, or how you're getting there. If you're just walking around the corner to get a quart of milk, that's a trip. If you're driving 20 miles to your job, also a trip. If you're getting on a Greyhound bus and going all the way to Dallas to see a relative, that's also a trip.
- A mode of transportation is how you make a given trip. So driving yourself is a mode of transportation. Using a taxi service is a mode of transportation. Getting on a bus is a mode of transportation.

That said, let's move on to our ground rules:

- Please feel free to speak up whenever you have something to say, but please avoid interrupting your fellow participants as much as possible.
- It's vital that you listen to what your fellow participants are saying, and try to respond to what they're saying, not just my questions.
- There are no stupid questions, and no bad comments. As long as you're being respectful of everyone else in the room, we want to hear what you have to say.

With that out of the way, let's move into introductions. I'd like you each to tell the group:

- Your first name
- Where in the region you live
- How many cars your household has

Great! Let's have some fun.

Opening Questions (10 minutes):

Here, we are trying to help people settle in and feel comfortable in the conversation, asking them relatively simple questions that help us understand the basics of how they get around. Try to make sure everyone speaks at least once in this section: Question 1(b) offers an opportunity to call on people to talk about the modes of transportation they use. If all else fails—you get someone who always drives themselves, who hasn't

changed their travel choices at all in the past year—try asking them how often they have a family member, friend, or co-worker in their car with them.

1. Show of hands: How many of you always use your car to get around?
 - a. Ok, how many of you sometimes use your car to get around?
 - b. For those who indicated that they sometimes or always use transportation other than cars: how do you get around?
2. Have you changed either your trip destinations or your trip modes in the past year? If so, how?

Travel Options (15 minutes):

In this section, we are trying to build on our knowledge of how focus group participants get around, by understanding why they choose the modes they do. The first two questions in this section will provide lots of opportunity for follow-up questions: you may think you know what words like “convenience” or “ease of use” mean, but you need to be sure you know what they mean to the participant who is using those terms. The final question is more closed-ended: it’s likely that people who are responding to it will go beyond a simple yes or no to explain their reasoning, but don’t hesitate to prompt them if they don’t offer that explanation on their own.

3. When you make a trip, what factors do you consider when deciding what mode of transportation you will use?
4. For this question, I want you to think about the mode of transportation you choose most often. What are the advantages of that mode for you? Does it have any drawbacks?
5. Is the mode of transportation you choose most often the one you like the most?

Transportation Needs and Barriers (25 minutes):

In the previous sections, we learned about how participants get around and why they make the choices they do. In this section, we want to learn more about specific opportunities or concerns that may affect their transportation choices. You may not have time to get to every question in this section, and that’s okay. Some groups will have

more to say about some of these topics than others. Let the energy of the group guide you through this section.

6. When you look for information about your transportation options, where do you look first? What about that source of information makes it useful for you?
7. What would help you learn more about the transportation options available to you for a given trip?
8. How often do you feel unsafe while traveling from one place to another?
 - a. For anyone who answers something other than “never”: What causes you to feel unsafe while traveling? Are there locations or mode choices that make you feel particularly unsafe?
9. What do you find easiest about getting around the region?
10. What do you find most difficult about getting around the region?
11. If you could wave a magic wand and change one thing about transportation in the region, what change would you make?

Closing Questions (5 minutes):

This section provides participants one last opportunity to highlight issues we may not have thought of, or to raise concerns that may not have been discussed in the focus group up until now.

12. What is one thing your community’s leaders or elected officials could do to make it easier for you to get around?
13. Is there anything else you would like to share with us about your experiences getting around the region?

Conclusion (1 minute):

Thank you for your valuable input! As a small thank-you gift, we will be providing \$10 gift cards to each of you. We are providing three options for gift cards: Amazon, Target, and Starbucks. Please post in the chat your email address and which of those options you prefer.

Appendix 5B: Sample Focus Group Promotional Social Media Graphic

How Can We Make Public Transportation Better in Your Community?

The Houston-Galveston Area Council needs to hear from YOU in a virtual focus group to understand how public transportation can be more inclusive & better connect you with where you need to go!

WHEN
October 18, 2021 at 2 p.m.

WHERE
The focus group will be held via Zoom.

FOR MORE INFORMATION
Visit engage.h-gac.com/RCTP or scan the QR code.

Walker
Montgomery
Waller
Austin
Colorado Valley Transit
Colorado
Wharton
R. Transit Matagorda
METRO Harris
Fort Bend Transit
Fort Bend
Galveston
Connect Transit
Brazoria
Liberty
Chambers
Brazoria Transit District
No Transit Service
Island Transit

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