

Case Study: The Wilmington Area Planning Council's Transportation Justice Initiative

The Wilmington Area Planning Council (WILMAPCO) has developed a nuanced approach to analyzing equity in the transportation system and planning processes throughout Greater Wilmington, Delaware. WILMAPCO's [2019 Transportation Justice \(TJ\) Plan](#) serves as a model for identifying and addressing transportation equity barriers and demonstrates ways for metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) to continually improve upon equity initiatives to better meet the needs of the communities they serve.

Background

WILMAPCO, the MPO for New Castle County, Delaware, and Cecil County, Maryland, is responsible for planning and coordinating transportation investments for the Wilmington region, which is home to more than 660,000 residents.¹ The MPO serves a diverse region, with varied racial and ethnic backgrounds, income levels, and transportation needs.

WILMAPCO's efforts to analyze equity began in 2003 with the release of its first [Environmental Justice \(EJ\) report](#). The MPO's initial analysis included rudimentary equity measures but has evolved over nearly two decades into the current TJ Initiative. The MPO ensures that the topic of equity remains at the forefront of its planning efforts by strategically incorporating EJ and Title VI into its Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) and related products.

Agency Challenges

Some populations benefit more from Greater Wilmington's transportation system than others. Decades of suburban sprawl and transportation spending programs focused on highway building have resulted in the reliance on private vehicles for travel. Walking, biking, and public transit systems are not a reasonable choice for most, since these systems are underdeveloped in the region.² More than half of the residents who live in households without cars report travel difficulties in the region,³ and many spend a higher proportion of their income on transportation.⁴

MPO OVERVIEW

- The Wilmington, DE region is diverse, and WILMAPCO as the MPO works to ensure transportation investments fit the region's varied transportation needs.
- The region's transportation system relies heavily on private vehicle travel; connectivity using alternate modes is limited, especially in the suburbs.
- WILMAPCO strategically incorporates EJ and Title VI in its RTP to ensure the topic of equity is continually addressed.
- WILMAPCO uses a project prioritization process to evaluate transportation projects and awards "points" for projects that advance goals and objectives in the RTP.
- WILMAPCO stresses the importance of public outreach when developing plans and works to ensure that community feedback is representative of the community at large.
- WILMAPCO's 2019 TJ Plan addresses Title VI, EJ, limited English proficiency, and ADA requirements in one document, creating a more comprehensive and manageable approach to meeting federal obligations.
- The TJ Plan analyzes connectivity and social inequities to identify disproportionately burdened communities, gaps in the transportation system, and opportunities for improvement.
- WILMAPCO's TJ Plan offers a total of 63 recommendations to advance its TJ initiative moving forward.

¹ Wilmington Area Planning Council (WILMAPCO) (2019). *Transportation Justice Plan*, page iii.

² WILMAPCO, *Transportation Justice Plan*, page vi.

³ WILMAPCO, *Transportation Justice Plan*, page vii.

⁴ WILMAPCO, *Transportation Justice Plan*, page viii.

The 2019 TJ Plan identified concerns for low-income communities as well as Black and Hispanic neighborhoods.⁵ WILMAPCO's [2018 Public Opinion Survey](#) found that almost half of families making less than \$25,000 annually had at least some difficulty reaching essential destinations like jobs, grocery stores, and parks. Low-income communities and Black and Hispanic neighborhoods had higher traffic volumes. More pedestrian and bicycle crashes occurred in Black neighborhoods than others. Also, Black neighborhoods received about 38 percent less funding for community-based transportation projects than white neighborhoods.⁶ Overall, these groups have less awareness of WILMAPCO.⁷

To address these and other challenges, WILMAPCO used robust data and spatial analysis in its 2019 TJ Plan to identify key social inequities in the region's transportation system and public engagement processes. With the insights gleaned, they offered recommendations for improvement.

Advancing Equitable Practices

WILMAPCO uses a [prioritization process](#) to evaluate transportation projects proposed for its Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) and RTP. Each goal listed in the RTP is assigned a similar point value that staff use to compare projects. The TJ Plan builds off this process and re-establishes performance measures for policy actions that address equity shortcomings. Using data from the TJ Plan, WILMAPCO can award additional points for projects located in neighborhoods with high concentrations of low-income, minority, and mobility challenged populations, thus prioritizing more equitable local project implementation.

The 2019 TJ Plan is the first of WILMAPCO's to bring together previously separate efforts—EJ, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, Language Assistance, and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)—into one plan. This comprehensive approach helps to illustrate overlapping themes and makes meeting federal obligations more manageable for WILMAPCO planners and clearer for WILMAPCO's Council and Committees. The TJ Plan consists of three core sections: Title VI and EJ Analysis (low-income and minorities); Language Assistance (limited English proficient and low literacy); and

IMPLEMENTATION HIGHLIGHTS

- WILMAPCO administered a public opinion survey to better understand how residents use the transportation system.
- WILMAPCO worked with the University of Delaware to analyze the region's transportation connectivity and identify gaps in the system.
- WILMAPCO performed a series of spatial analyses to identify communities and neighborhoods that face the greatest barriers and require more alternative modes of transportation.
- WILMAPCO uses a point system to technically evaluate transportation projects; to incorporate equity considerations into this process, points are awarded for projects located in neighborhoods with high concentrations of low-income, minority, and mobility challenged populations, thus prioritizing them.
- To encourage public participation in the planning process, WILMAPCO offers language assistance and supplemental outreach opportunities in neighborhoods where concentrations of residents with limited English proficiency and low literacy live and has used door-to-door outreach by paid locals in underrepresented communities.
- WILMAPCO works with community partners and local leaders to build coalitions with the goal of improving trust and awareness of the agency. This has allowed the MPO to act as a convener that connects communities to non-transportation resources.

⁵ WILMAPCO, *Transportation Justice Plan*, page ix.

⁶ WILMAPCO, *Transportation Justice Plan*, page ix.

⁷ WILMAPCO, *Transportation Justice Plan*, page ix.

Mobility Challenged Analysis. Each section includes information regarding demographics, spatial analysis, public outreach, and recommendations. Overall, the TJ Plan offers a total of 63 recommendations to advance this work and deliver a more equitable transportation system to all those living in the region. High level recommendations are found in the RTP and are subsequently measured in the [Regional Progress Report](#) WILMAPCO's performance measurement document.

Title VI and Environmental Justice Analysis

WILMAPCO's 2018 Public Opinion Survey found that attitudes about the transportation system differ significantly among Title VI and EJ communities. To better understand these differences, the MPO performed a series of analyses. WILMAPCO worked with the University of Delaware's Center for Applied Demography and Survey Research to analyze the region's transportation connectivity. The connectivity analysis measured reasonable connectivity on all modes of transportation (walking, biking, public transit, car) from each housing unit in the region to nine key destinations like libraries, grocery stores, and low-wage employment centers. Overall, WILMAPCO found that almost all homes were reasonably connected by car to destinations, but, on average, less than a quarter were reasonably connected to key places by alternative modes.⁸

WILMAPCO then performed a robust spatial analysis to identify where Title VI and EJ groups have settled in different neighborhoods across the Wilmington region. Using these maps as a foundation, WILMAPCO applied 13 transportation equity indicators to analyze various inequities of the transportation system and planning process. Doing so allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the needs and challenges residents in low-income, Black, and Hispanic neighborhoods face. Concerns were highest for residents of predominantly Black neighborhoods, followed by those living in low-income and Hispanic neighborhoods.⁹ Performance measures and methodologies for each indicator (e.g., related to neighborhood connectivity, traffic volumes) are detailed in the plan.

Language Assistance Plan

The Wilmington region is home to many residents who have limited English proficiency. To include this population in the transportation planning process, WILMAPCO has made a concerted effort to provide language assistance and supplemental outreach opportunities to those who need it. Again, using spatial analysis, the MPO identified neighborhoods with high concentrations of Spanish speakers, Asian language (Chinese, Gujarati, etc.) speakers, and low-literacy adults to ensure that language interpreters and visual and oral feedback opportunities are available to residents during local planning meetings and workshops.

Mobility Challenged Analysis

Older adults, people with disabilities, and people living in households without vehicles often encounter challenges using the transportation system since it is mainly designed to support private vehicle travel. Like the spatial analysis conducted for low-income and minority communities, WILMAPCO identified neighborhoods with high concentrations of mobility challenged residents and compared them to the regional connectivity analysis to identify areas with high alternative travel needs and low connectivity. Identifying transportation gaps like these enables WILMAPCO to improve the system.

Stakeholder Collaboration

Over the last decade, WILMAPCO has continued to strengthen its public outreach program. Its [2017 Regional Progress Report](#) found that the MPO achieved six of the nine outreach recommendations made in its [2013 Transportation Equity Report](#).¹⁰ However, general awareness of WILMAPCO and its

⁸ WILMAPCO, *Transportation Justice Plan*, page vii.

⁹ WILMAPCO, *Transportation Justice Plan*, page xi.

¹⁰ WILMAPCO, *Transportation Justice Plan*, page 106. The nine recommendations were: 1) Conduct specific outreach to LEP areas; 2) Do not limit outreach to traditional venues; 3) Reach more Hispanics. Participate in

role in the region's transportation planning remains sharply divided by race and class, and its Public Advisory Committee (PAC) lacks equitable representation of minorities.¹¹ To advance its goal of becoming a "culturally proficient" planning agency, WILMAPCO uses guidance from the American Planning Association, International Association of Public Participation, and the Urban Institute to better engage with diverse communities and communities impacted by trauma.

WILMAPCO has prioritized working with community partners and local leaders to build coalitions that improve trust and awareness of the agency. This has increased the MPO's understanding of the needs of traditionally underrepresented communities. Expanding the conversation beyond transportation activities (e.g., with housing partners) has allowed WILMAPCO to act as a convener that connects communities to resources outside its purview.

The MPO is also focused on improving its data collection methodology to ensure that the information collected represents the broader community. The MPO uses phone surveys to gather residents' opinions but finds that the results tend to be skewed due to lack of responses from certain demographics. To ensure representative sampling, WILMAPCO established demographic quotas. It found success using community door-to-door surveying and popup exhibit tables in underrepresented communities.

Like planning agencies across the country, the MPO used virtual public outreach methods during the pandemic. While virtual public meetings had high overall attendance, like pre-pandemic in-person meetings, attendance was not always inclusive of regional demographics. This led to the [2020 Urban Technology Deserts Report](#), which identified places with limited computer or internet access, generally due to poverty. The report helped the MPO target where to focus low-tech outreach, including in-person and popup meetings, and door-to-door sampling. This report also had other uses outside of the agency, including the State of Delaware and United Way use of the Report to support grant funding for supplying students with computers and Broadband connections during the pandemic. In addition to these efforts to engage the communities it serves, WILMAPCO makes all data and analysis publicly downloadable and available on its website.

In relation to the development of the TJ Plan, WILMAPCO organized a working group comprised of WILMAPCO staff, members of the WILMAPCO PAC, researchers from the University of Delaware, and officials from the Maryland and Delaware departments of transportation, and the Delaware Transit Corporation. The working group guided the development of the TJ Plan, offering insights and meeting five times between September 2018 and August 2019. MPO staff also delivered presentations to various WILMAPCO committees during this time.

Next Steps

WILMAPCO is working to implement the proposed recommendations and policy changes listed in the TJ Plan. An updated TJ Report is expected around 2023, which will include follow-up studies and analyses to measure progress, as well as additional communications to the region's communities that emphasize the importance of these efforts. The MPO continues to refine its data collection and

community festivals; 4) Engage Spanish media in an effort to cover our stories; 5) Reach out to the Chinese community. Identify an event to participate in and offer Chinese translation as required; 6) Do not rely on internet outreach. Strive for face to face, oral communications in EJ areas. Be wary of internet-based, on-the-fly, translation services; 7) Revisit the methodology for the public opinion survey; 8) Target air quality and growth management educational outreach to EJ areas; 9) All WILMAPCO planners should receive EJ awareness training, in step with other progressive planning practice.

¹¹ Per the 2017 Regional Progress Report (page 50), "[T]he percentage of minority PAC members increased from just 4% of the body in 2006 to 18% in 2012. Today, however, only 15% of PAC members are from ethnic or racial minority groups. That figure lags considerably behind the 36% of our region's residents from those communities."

analysis methodologies and intends to do a finer grained analysis below the census block group level. WILMAPCO is also leveraging its regional partnerships to identify subsidized housing locations and school feeder patterns and intends to incorporate housing price data as a next layer.

The MPO updates the criteria in its project prioritization process on an as-needed basis, and in 2020, added criteria for social determinants of health, awarding two points to projects located in areas of concern. Additionally, the MPO recently updated its [Public Participation Plan](#) to incorporate engagement strategies focused on low-income and minority communities that emerged from the TJ Plan. Through its work, WILMAPCO strives to be more thoughtful in its approach to equity and in its support of transportation projects that meet the needs of all the region's communities.

Contact Information

Bill Swiatek, AICP

Principal Planner

WILMAPCO

(302) 737- 6205 Ext. 113

bswiatek@wilmapco.org**Reena Mathews**

Transportation Specialist

FHWA Office of Planning

(202) 366-2076

reena.mathews@dot.gov

Resources

- [WILMAPCO Transportation Justice Video](#)
- [2019 Transportation Justice Plan: A Title VI, Environmental Justice, Americans with Disability Act, and Language Assistance Plan for the WILMAPCO Region](#) (Full Report)
- [2020 Urban Technology Desert Data Report for the WILMAPCO Region](#) (Full Report)
- [WILMAPCO Project Prioritization Process](#)
- [WILMAPCO 2020 Public Participation Plan](#)
- [WILMAPCO 2018 Public Opinion Survey](#)
- [WILMAPCO 2017 Regional Progress Report](#)
- [WILMAPCO 2013 Transportation Equity Report](#)
- [WILMAPCO 2020 Urban Technology Deserts Report](#)
- American Planning Association, Transportation Planning Division. "[State of Transportation Planning 2020 — Moving People Over Cars: Mobility for Healthy Communities](#)". April 2020. Pages 62-68.
- American Planning Association, PAS Report 593. "[Planning with Diverse Communities](#)." January 2019.
- The Urban Institute. "[Trauma-Informed Community Building and Engagement](#)." April 2018.