

# Missoula Connect and Transit Strategic Plan Executive Summary

**August 2024**



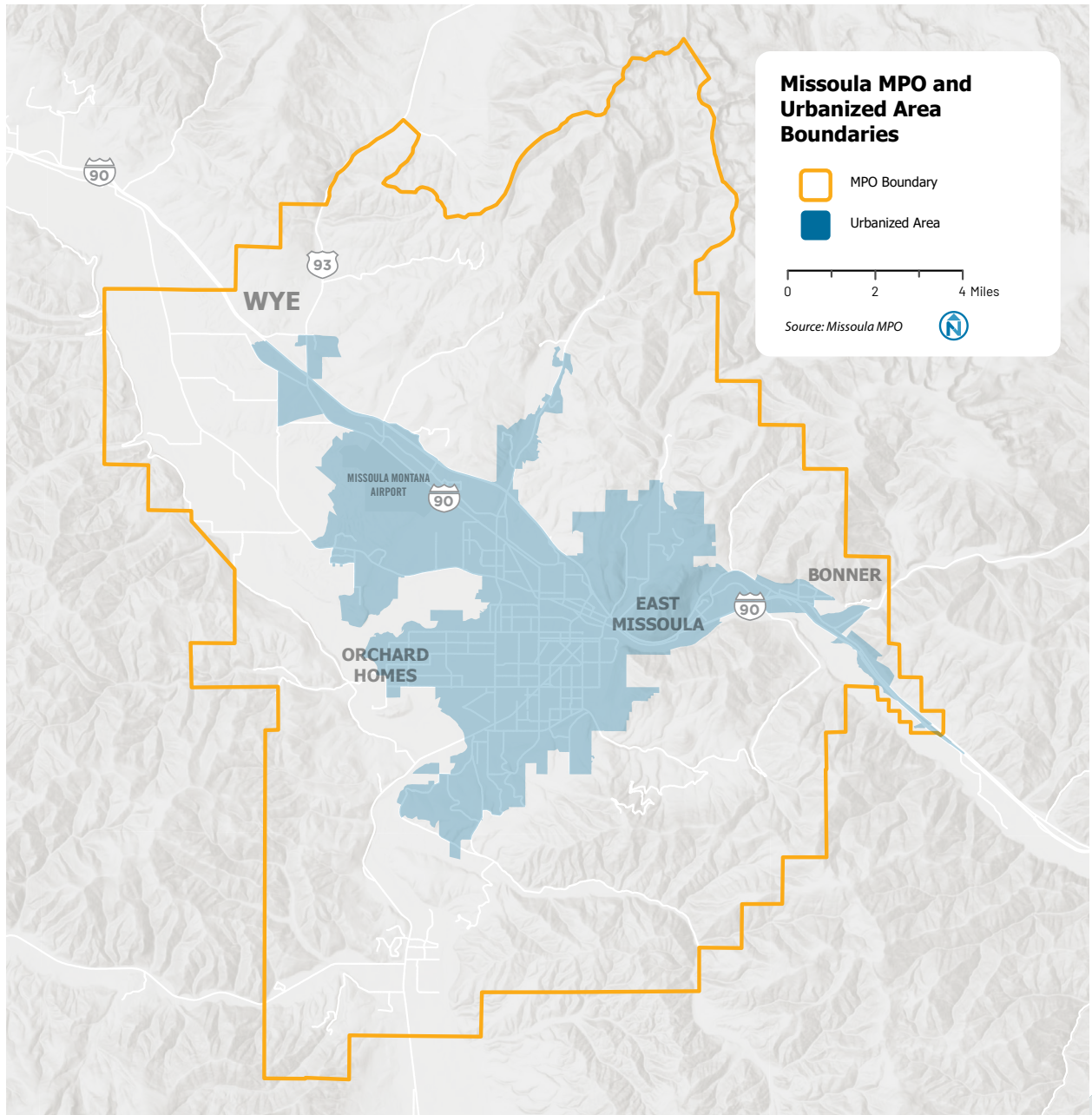


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## Introducing the Organizations

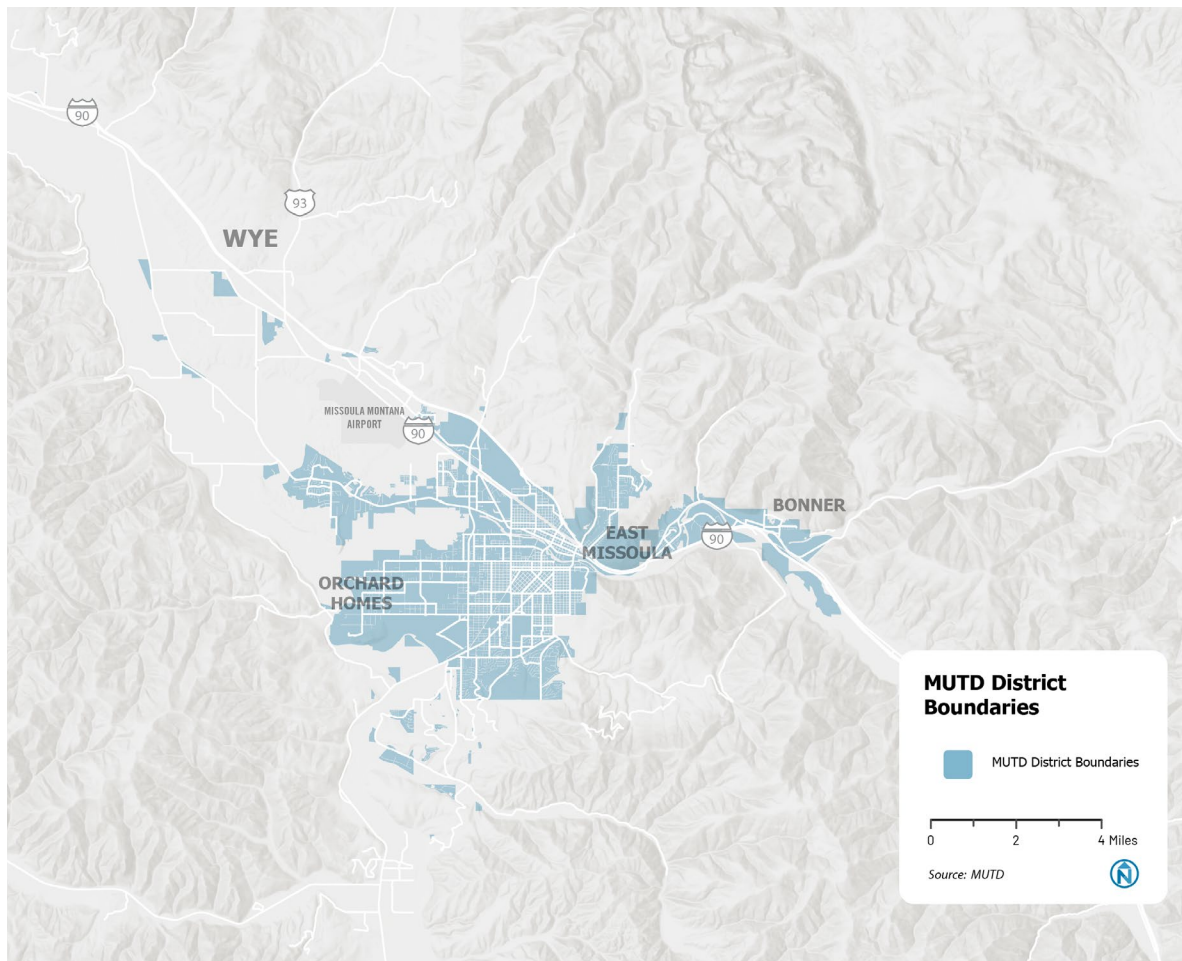
### Who is the Missoula MPO?

The Missoula Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) works to plan a safe transportation network for the Missoula area to ensure our region has comprehensive, cooperative, and connected transportation systems. The Missoula MPO was formed over 40 years ago, after the region surpassed more than 50,000 residents following the 1980 Census. Today, the MPO is responsible for long-range planning and programming of federal transportation funds within the Missoula area.



## Who is MUTD?

The Missoula Urban Transportation District (MUTD) operates Mountain Line, the Missoula region's transit network. MUTD was established in June 1976 by voters who authorized the creation of the district. Service operating under the Mountain Line brand began on December 12, 1977. MUTD operates both fixed-route and paratransit services within its service area. The service has continually evolved over the years including the introduction of fare-free service, expanding weekend and evening service, transitioning to an electric fleet, and improving frequencies on the highest ridership routes.



# Introducing the Plans

## Missoula's Long-Range Transportation Plan

One of the Missoula MPO's primary planning projects in 2024 is an update to our Long-Range Transportation Plan (LRTP), which we're calling Missoula Connect. Missoula Connect is a 30-year plan that looks at all modes of transportation and identifies future priorities for projects and funding.

This action plan helps to steer our community toward a healthier, safer, and more sustainable future while preserving and expanding mobility for all residents. Relying on previous planning work and extensive community outreach, Missoula Connect integrates existing plans and projects to create a sustainable transportation future that improves mobility and access across all modes for all Missoula area residents, workers, and visitors. A strong transportation plan is critical to the success of Missoula's growth policy, and Missoula Connect will knit together our land use and transportation goals.



## Missoula's Transit Strategic Plan

One of MUTD's planning efforts for 2024 is to update their Transit Strategic Plan (TSP). The last plan update, adopted in 2018, laid out a set of phased short-term network changes, along with a longer-term network vision. Three out of the four phases of the short-term network have been implemented. Changes in travel patterns brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, continued development in the community, and other concurrent planning efforts (e.g., the Brooks Street BRT project) necessitate an update to the TSP.

# About This Document

**The existing conditions effort serves as a foundation for the development of the recommendations and future improvements for both plans.**

This document serves as an executive summary of the larger existing conditions report. Key aspects of Missoula's regional planning context and the existing transportation network are synthesized in this document, including:



## Demographics

Key demographic and employment information.



## Transit System

The transit system in Missoula (fixed-route transit and paratransit services), including ridership trends and productivity.



## Multimodal Snapshot

A multimodal snapshot of transportation conditions in Missoula, which includes the roadway, bicycle, and pedestrian networks.



# Why Do The Plans Matter?

The LRTP and TSP are a locally approved roadmap for desired transportation infrastructure improvements and include both prioritized projects based on forecasted available funding and illustrative projects for future consideration if additional funds become available. The Missoula area, despite having a relatively small population, has leveraged previous plans to secure significant amounts of federal funding to improve transportation in the local community.

**Since the last LRTP in 2021, the MPO has secured \$62 million in federal funding for major projects, which includes funding for:**



DowntownSAM



South Avenue  
Safe Streets



Highway 200  
Improvements



Lolo Street  
Bridge



Reserve Street  
Safety Plan

**MUTD has had similar successes. Since the last TSP in 2018, MUTD has:**



Secured a \$10 million Low or No Emissions federal grant in July 2022 to purchase an additional 10 battery-electric buses



Secured a \$39.1 million Low or No Emissions federal grant in summer 2023 to build a new, fully electric facility that will allow MUTD to acquire more vehicles to expand service

Given continued local and regional population and employment growth, updating the LRTP and TSP will help Missoula continue to leverage additional funding opportunities. One of the primary reasons for combining the MPO and MUTD planning processes was to have a consistent, coordinated approach to identify and prioritize solutions that improve mobility in the region.

# Plan Goals

There are five goals that are applicable to both the LRTP and TSP efforts. These goals reflect today's needs and priorities, as well as the outcomes our region must achieve over the next 30 years. The goals are consistent with federal requirements and form the basis of the project evaluation/prioritization process.

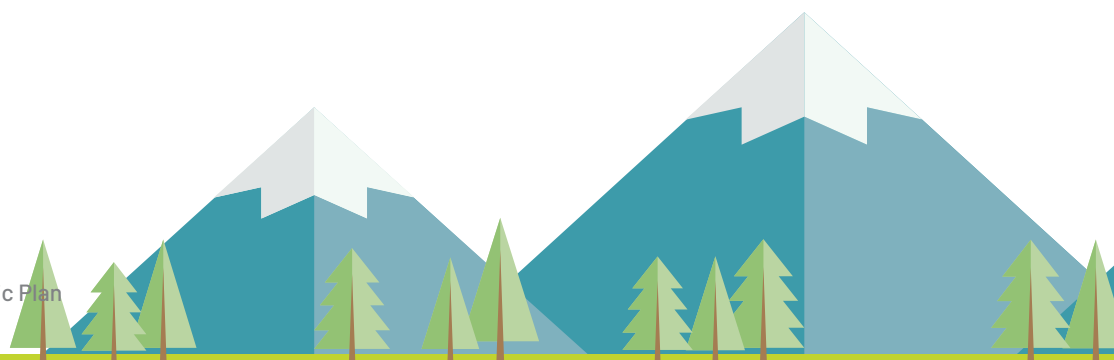
## Improve safety and promote health to enhance quality of life

- Eliminate traffic-related fatalities and serious injuries
- Improve safety for people, walking, biking, and rolling
- Enhance active transportation and transit linkages to lower-income neighborhoods
- Increase physical activity and human connections by making walking and biking convenient modes of travel
- Improve access to recreational facilities and trails to support healthy lifestyles



## Advance sustainability and community resilience to protect natural resources and address climate change

- Improve climate resilience and advance toward carbon neutrality
- Reduce transportation-related air emissions
- Minimize sediment, nutrients, and litter entering surface water
- Expand the urban canopy and green stormwater infrastructure
- Protect and enhance natural, cultural, and historic resources, including agricultural lands
- Create adaptable and resilient infrastructure to respond to changing needs





## Expand mobility choices to improve efficiency and accessibility for people and goods

- Build complete streets and increase access to multimodal options
- Increase street, trail/greenway, and sidewalk network connectivity for all ages and abilities
- Optimize the efficiency and accessibility of the transportation system
- Reduce person hours of delay for people driving and improve freight movement
- Improve access to high-quality and high-frequency transit stops and routes



## Connect and strengthen communities to create a more equitable region

- Increase affordability and reduce overall household transportation costs
- Develop an integrated mobility system that connects destinations with sustainable travel options
- Integrate land use and transportation planning to support infill development and create complete neighborhoods
- Improve access to schools, jobs, parks, essential services, affordable and senior housing, and basic life needs
- Engage with and invest in historically disadvantaged areas and in neighborhoods that have been adversely impacted by transportation decisions



## Maintain assets and invest strategically to boost economic vitality

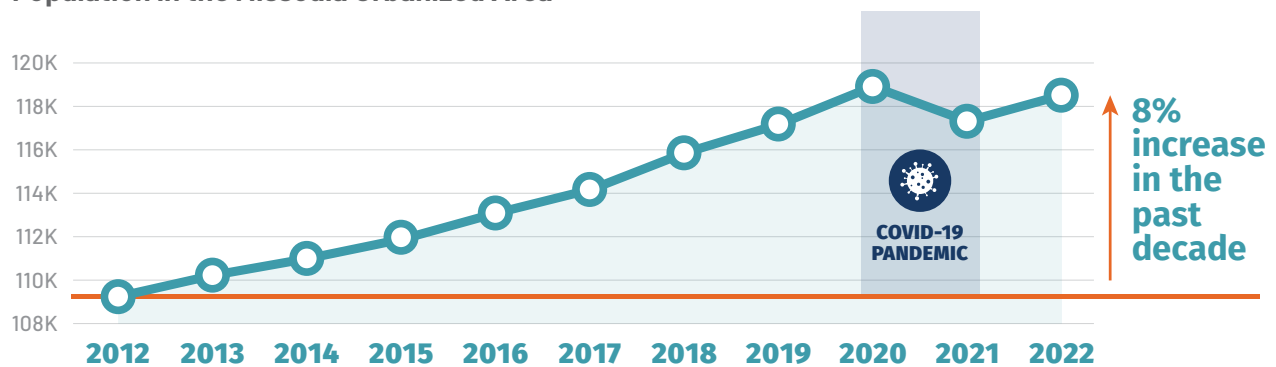
- Bring existing infrastructure and transit assets into a state of good repair to support the regional economy, local industry, and goods movement
- Balance cost-effective, implementable projects with high-impact projects
- Plan for a transportation system that makes the best use of public financial resources
- Provide a network that targets growth inward to support existing centers and mixed-use development
- Support access to businesses and commercial and industrial centers to enhance economic recovery and growth
- Explore more equitable and sustainable funding sources for transportation projects and programs



# The Missoula Area is Growing

With more people come new opportunities and new challenges. Population in the Missoula area has increased by eight percent in the past decade except for a dip in 2020 and 2021, most likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As our population grows, demand for transit service and active transportation investments, like trails and sidewalks, is increasing. This means we need to find creative ways to use our existing infrastructure to move more people and goods. New development is also occurring farther from the city center, which requires additional transportation resources as well.

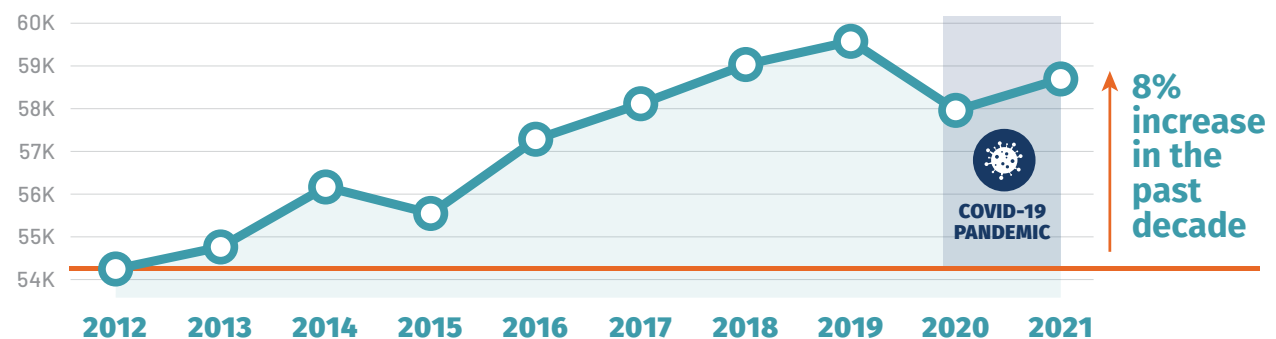
## Population in the Missoula Urbanized Area



Source: American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates, 2022

Jobs also increased by eight percent in the past decade except for a dip in 2021. The industries with the most jobs are health care and retail trade, which account for about one-third of all jobs in the region.

## Jobs in the Missoula Urbanized Area



Source: Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD), 2022

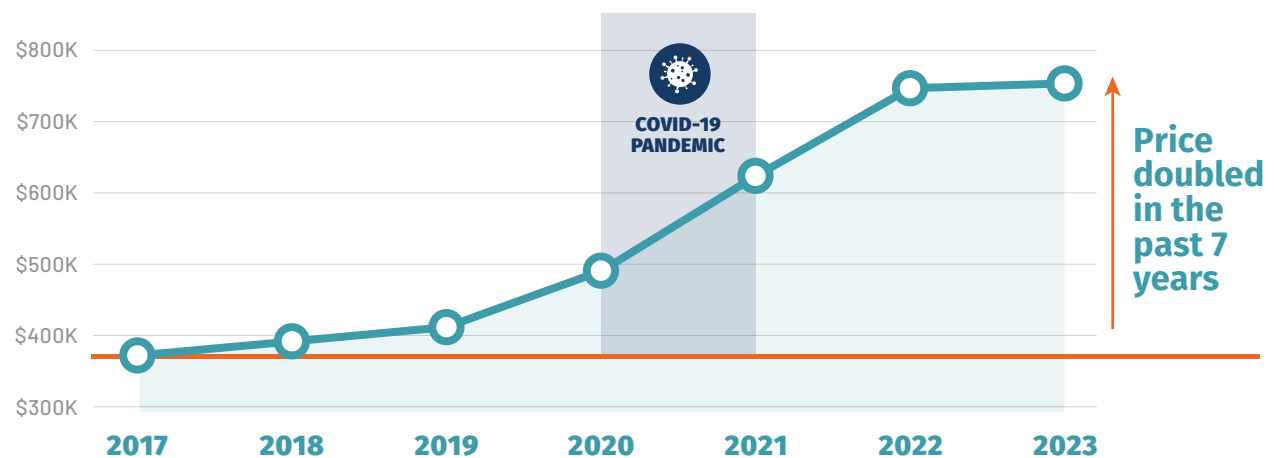
# Housing Affordability is a Challenge

Like many desirable metropolitan areas throughout the United States, housing costs in the Missoula region are climbing faster than wages, making it difficult for many residents to find housing that they can afford. Since 2017, the median home sale price in the Missoula area has doubled, posing a challenge for residents to live comfortably. This reinforces the need for accessible, affordable, and reliable transportation options that connect Missoula area residents with jobs, schools, services, and recreation.

**About half of our residents make less than \$40,000 per year**

As we grow, we must ensure that everyone in the Missoula area has access to high-quality transportation options that connect us to the places we go. About half of our residents make less than \$40,000 per year and transportation is typically a household's second highest expense. Compared to the United States which has just over 11% of the population living below the poverty line, 14.6% of residents in the City of Missoula live below the poverty line. The number is slightly lower for Missoula County as a whole, where 9.2% live below the poverty line. Reliable transportation is one of the biggest factors in escaping poverty, and providing affordable transportation options—like Mountain Line, which is fare-free—can increase access to jobs, schools, and services for everyone.

**Median Home Sale Price, 2017-2024**



Source: Montana Regional MLS, 2024

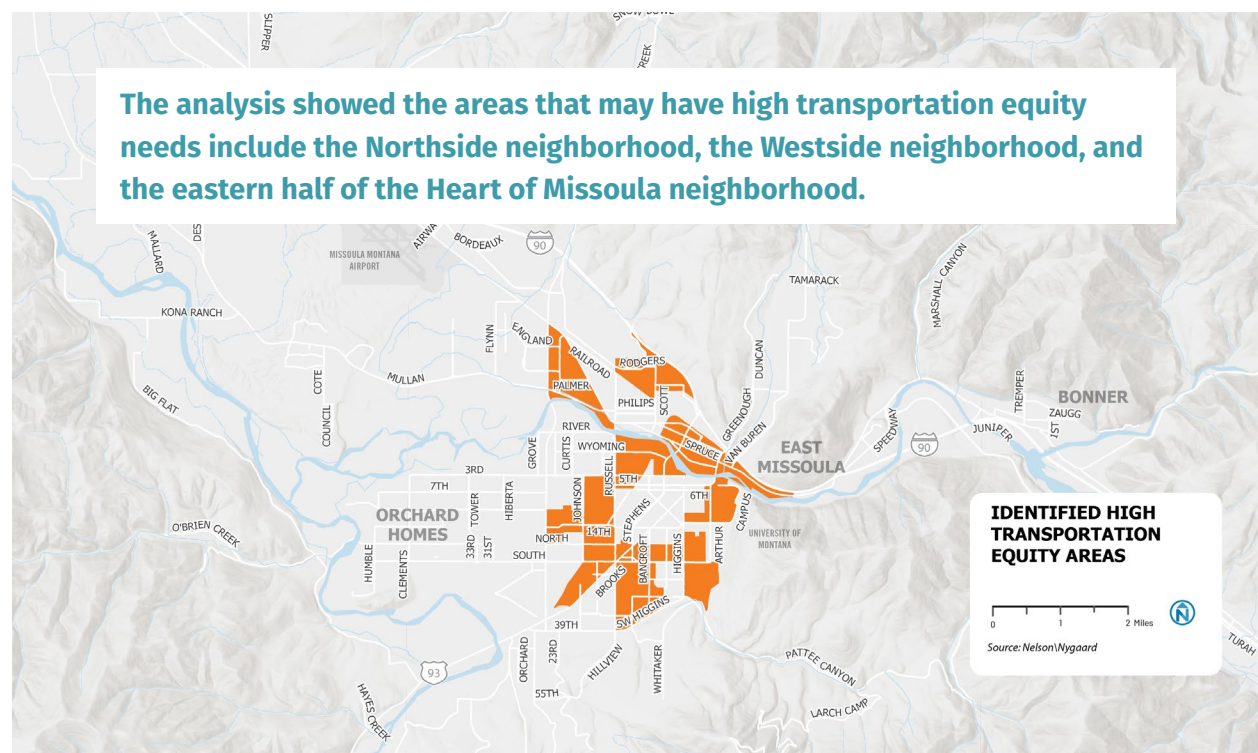
# Importance of Equity

Equity is an important tool for analyzing people's access to transportation and planning future transportation investments. Planning within an equity framework charges decision-makers with the responsibility to invest in places where transportation projects and programs can support historically underrepresented communities that may have fewer transportation options.

Providing people with affordable, reliable, and safe transportation options can enhance their economic stability and create a safety net for the most vulnerable in our community. Some steps the region is taking to better serve historically underrepresented communities include providing fare-free public transportation and improving multimodal access to affordable housing, parks, schools, health care facilities, and social services.

An analysis was conducted to identify areas in the greater Missoula region that may have high transportation equity needs. Using the latest Census block group data, three variables with strong indicators for high transportation equity needs were examined. These variables were:

- Households with annual income of \$25,000 and below (Low-Income)
- Non-white population (Black, Indigenous, People of Color 'BIPOC' Population)
- Zero-vehicle households

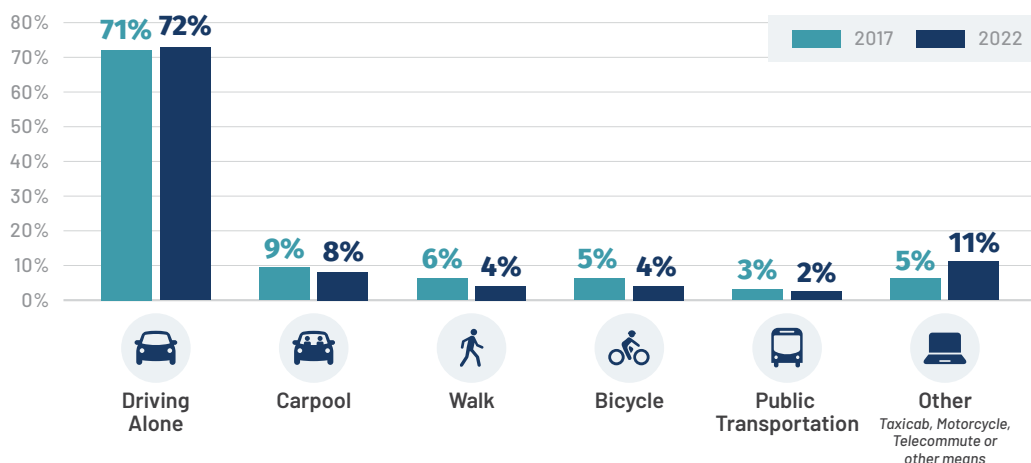


# How We Travel

How are Missoula area residents getting around the region today? Well, mostly by driving. Given our relatively low density and large area—and our role as a regional economic, educational, and tourism hub—driving is often the fastest and most convenient way to travel. This is especially true for longer trips.

However, drive-alone rates among Missoula area residents are less than the state average, while active transportation modes such as biking and walking are well above what we see in the rest of the state and among the highest rates in the country. Residents who live in urbanized areas drive even less and ride transit, bike, and walk more than people who live in rural areas. Notably, flexible/remote work opportunities brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic have increased telecommuting in the region.

## How People in the Missoula Area Commute 2017 vs. 2022



About two-thirds of Missoula area residents commute by driving alone.

Source: ACS, 2017 and 2022

## What are our mode split goals?

In our 2016 Long-Range Transportation Plan, we set some important mode-share goals:

-  Reduce drive-alone commute share to **34% by 2045**
-  **Triple** bike and walk shares and **quadruple** transit share by 2045
-  Reduce drive-alone commute trips by **20,000 by 2045**
-  Achieve a **small increase** in carpool and work from home

# Transit as a Community Connector

Mountain Line has 12 routes and offers Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) paratransit service within  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile of existing routes. Historically, service hours and the frequency of service have made it challenging for people to rely on Mountain Line as their primary transportation mode. However, Mountain Line has been continuing to improve service to make it a more competitive and reliable transportation option.

In 2012, Mountain Line launched and then expanded 15-minute frequency BOLT! service and added later evening service. In 2015, Mountain Line implemented zero-fare service, which boosted ridership almost 50% in one year. In 2022, service was expanded to include new Sunday service, longer Saturday service, and more weekday service, resulting in a ridership increase of about 30%.

Like many agencies, MUTD experienced a drop in ridership due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Ridership is slowly recovering, with MUTD's 2023 annual ridership at roughly 70% of 2019 ridership, which is consistent with other systems nationwide.

## Bus Stop Amenities

Out of the 346 bus stops around the Missoula area:

**66**  
bus stops have seating (Bench or Simme-Seat)

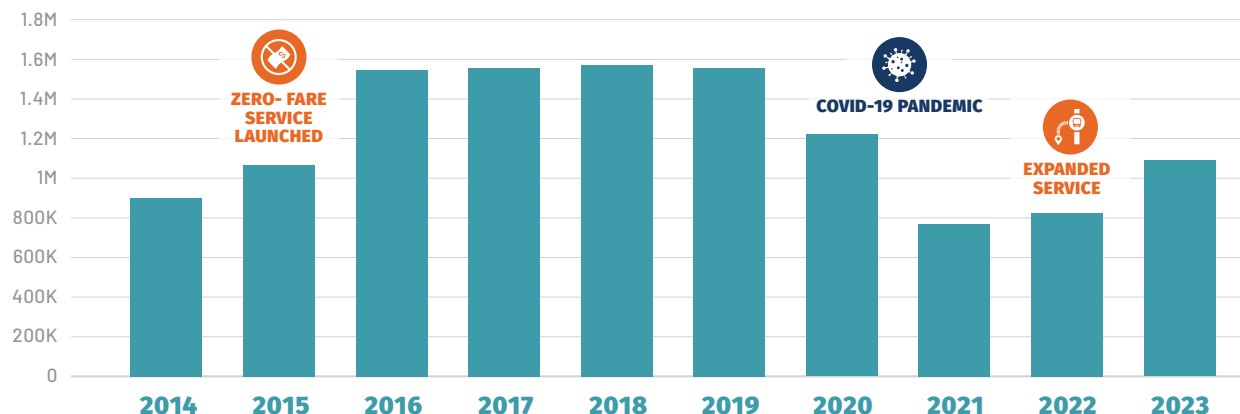


**56**  
bus stops have a shelter



Source: MUTD, December 2023

## Annual Fixed-Route Ridership



Source: MUTD, 2023



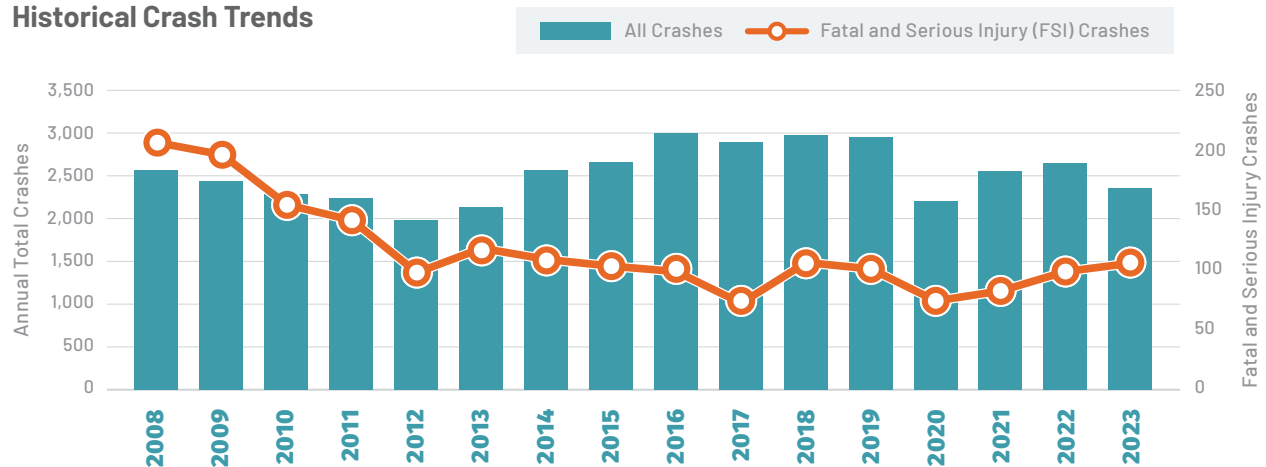


# Transportation Safety

One of our highest priorities as we plan for the future is keeping people safe on our streets. Prior to the pandemic, total crashes had been increasing since 2012, while Fatal and Serious Injury (FSI) crashes had begun to decline. However, after the overall decline in crash activity during 2020, both total crash numbers and FSI crashes are increasing.

Between 2019 and 2023, there were almost 12,600 crashes involving only motor vehicles, 23% of which resulted in a fatality or some level of injury. During that same time, there were 268 collisions involving people walking or biking, 73% of which resulted in some level of injury or a fatality. While a relatively small percentage of the total number of collisions, people walking, biking, and rolling are our most vulnerable travelers. They face a high risk of injury or death, particularly when hit by a vehicle traveling at speeds greater than 25 miles per hour.

## Historical Crash Trends



Source: MDT Crash Data

Note: 2023 data has not yet been verified by MDT

## Vehicle Travel Speeds and Pedestrian Injury



Source: Tefft, Brian, 'Impact speed and a pedestrian's risk of severe injury or death' (Accident Prevention Analysis, 2013)

# Key Takeaways

We have summarized the state of the current transportation conditions, which will be the foundation for updating the recommendations and improvements in Missoula Connect, the Long-Range Transportation Plan (LRTP), and the Transit Strategic Plan. These plans will help the region to prioritize limited funding for projects that improve mobility in the greater Missoula area. Key findings from our assessment will inform the new plans' recommendations to include a focus on affordability, mode shift, and safety.

## Affordable, accessible, and high-quality transportation is essential to maintaining a thriving community.

The population of Missoula has increased by 8% in the past decade, and the median home sales price has nearly doubled. Many households in the Missoula area spend over 45% of their income on housing and transportation costs, causing people to move farther out from the city to have affordable housing options. The tradeoff with moving farther away is increased transportation costs. Transportation investments can help relieve some of the financial burdens by increasing access to jobs, schools, and opportunities for everyone.



## MUTD ridership on fixed-route service is slowly recovering from the pandemic.

The region continues to make investments to improve service, with the most recent improvement being operating on Sundays. The strongest ridership corridors have high-frequency service with buses coming every 15 minutes. At the same time, commute mode share in Missoula, except for telecommuting, has not changed since 2017. Driving alone remains the most common mode of transportation for commuting to work for many residents and has remained the same since the 2017 Missoula Connect LRTP. Continued investment in transit service will be important to reduce the drive alone mode share and mitigate the impacts of additional growth.



## Safety on streets is among the highest priorities to address with the LRTP.

After an overall decline in crash activity during 2020, total crash numbers and Fatal and Serious Injury crashes are increasing. The rate of serious injury and fatalities from collisions in Missoula in 2023 was higher than the target Montana DOT set in 2020, and it is vital to take steps to address this. Increased transportation safety will have far-reaching benefits across our entire transportation landscape.

There is much work to be done to achieve the Missoula region's transportation vision, but there is a strong foundation on which to start for Missoula Connect and the Transit Strategic Plan.

