



Regional Transit Authority  
Of Southeast Michigan

2024  
Regional Transit  
Master Plan

# Executive Summary



[RTAmichigan.org](https://RTAmichigan.org)



The Regional Transit Authority of Southeast Michigan (RTA) has spearheaded and led regional transit planning efforts in the Detroit and Ann Arbor metropolitan area since the authority was created in 2012. Working alongside transit providers and local governments, the RTA explores new strategies for improving transit coverage and service, secures and oversees funding and increases accessibility to transit offerings.

Part of RTA's ongoing planning work includes annual updates to the Regional Transit Master Plan (RTMP). RTA's [Regional Transit Master Plan \(RTMP\)](#) and [Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility \(IDEA\) Roadmap](#) are two guiding documents which help the RTA achieve its vision of a Southeast Michigan region where advances in transit create greater prosperity for all.

RTA revises the RTMP annually to provide status updates on recent regional transit accomplishments, to identify any trends in the national transit industry, and to summarize recent public feedback received on the strengths, areas for improvement, and opportunities for public transit in the region. The updated 2024 RTMP document fulfills the requirements to annually update the regional transit plan as outlined in the Regional Transit Authority Act, Public Act 387 of 2012.

The previous 2023 RTMP included a consolidated list of the top ten regional transit investment priorities for RTA to focus its efforts on. This 2024 update of the RTMP now includes a categorization of those top ten priorities into three focus areas:



**Move  
People**



**Strengthen  
Access**



**Enhance  
Experience**

Further updates also include revisions of many of the implementation activities included for each of the ten priorities. Each implementation activity also has newly added supporting activities in the [RTMP priorities matrix Appendix](#), which will help to identify clear next steps towards successful implementation, including high-level cost estimates, prospective initiation timelines, RTA's role, and regional partnerships.

## RTA's Role

**RTA's mission is to create new and better ways to move and connect people in Southeast Michigan, with a vision of a region where advances in transit create greater prosperity for all.**

Leaning on its values of creativity, empathy, and opportunity, the RTA plans, funds, coordinates, and implements regional transit services, projects, and programs in the region, which comprises all of Macomb, Oakland, Washtenaw, and Wayne counties, including the City of Detroit. In addition to planning, RTA also pilots new transit services, applies for grants, and secures new regional funding sources for public transit. RTA annually allocates over \$95 million in federal and state funding to the region's transit agencies and community transportation services.

Serving a unique role in the region, RTA pools resources and generates ideas to solve decades-long public transit challenges in Southeast Michigan and tackles difficult shared problems that riders have identified as deficiencies in the regional network. To achieve its vision for transit in Southeast Michigan, RTA must pursue new projects and programs through both short-term and long-term funding opportunities. A new infusion of dedicated, long-term funding is required to sustainably expand transit services and improve mobility infrastructure that can support the existing and future growth of the region's population, businesses, and communities.

While working towards a long-term regional funding source, RTA is also committed to pursuing short-term - or one-time - funding opportunities to pilot and advance key regional transit priorities. Through this focus on short-term projects, planning studies, and

pilot programs, RTA can showcase new services to riders, regional stakeholders, and elected officials. Successfully building and transitioning these short-term projects into sustainable services helps to make a case to the public and regional stakeholders for additional long-term funding to further advance transit in Southeast Michigan.



### Fund Transformative Mobility

Position Southeast Michigan for economic success by increasing funding and aligning regional policy advocacy.



#### Improve Existing Services

Upgrade the frequency, reliability, comfort, safety, and speed of existing transit services, including fixed-route and demand-response services.



#### Expand Transit Coverage

Connect more people to more destinations in Southeast Michigan through an expanded regional transit system with a focus on expanding access for equity populations.



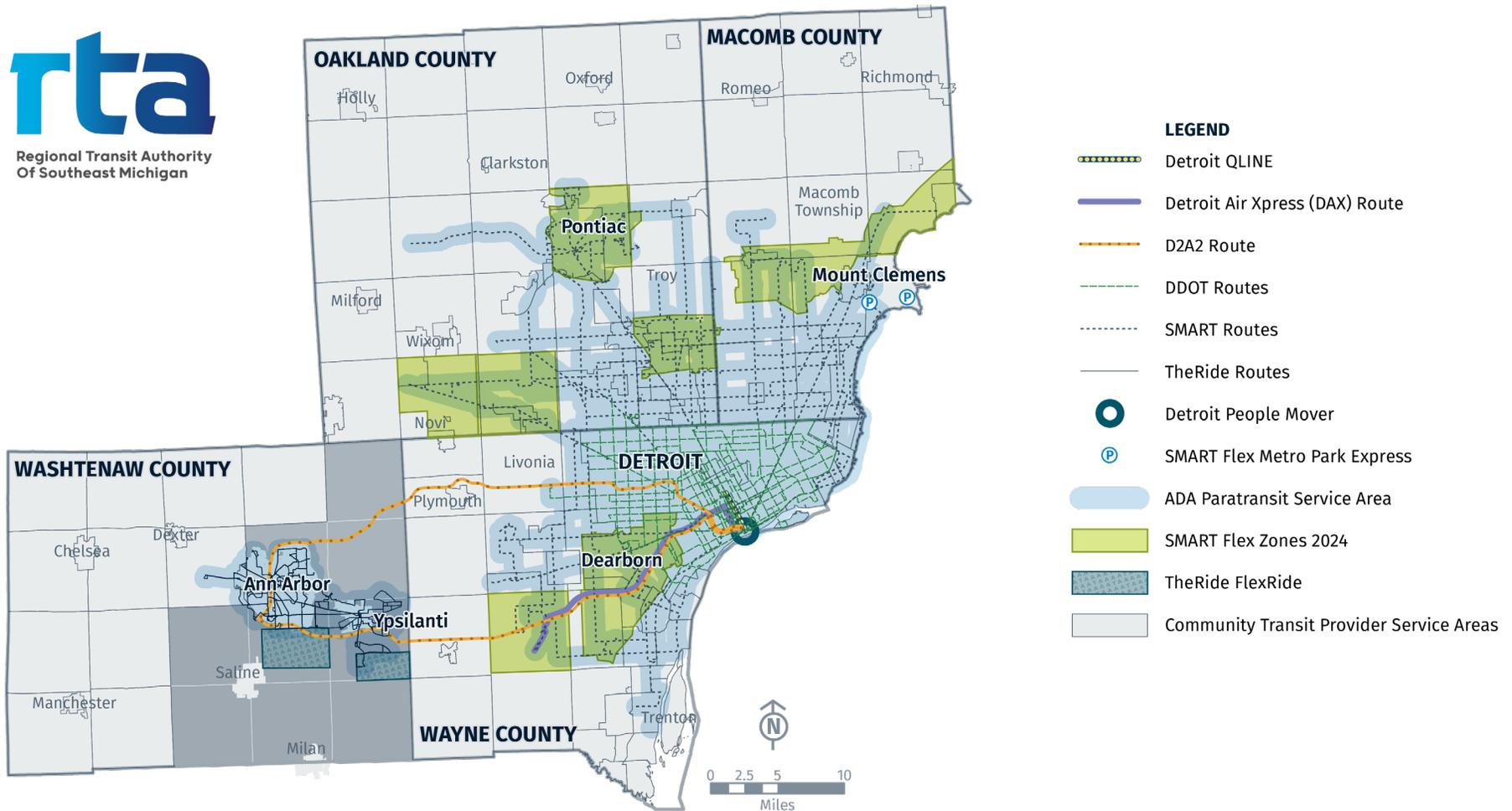
#### Innovate Resilient Projects

Implement expansion programs through active coordination and partnership with local transit providers and nonprofits.



#### Sustain Future Programs

Implement innovative programs and pilot projects to improve transit, increase flexibility, and encourage transit providers to adopt new technologies.



## The Region's Transit System

Southeast Michigan has a large, public transit network that covers the majority of the region, although there are some gaps where transit service is not available or where it is restricted to certain population groups, such as seniors or people with disabilities.

Five larger public transit agencies operate fixed-route bus or rail service in the region: the Ann Arbor Area Transportation Authority (AAATA, also known as TheRide), Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT), Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional

Transportation (SMART), Detroit Transportation Corporation (DTC, operating as the Detroit People Mover [DPM]), and RTA's QLINE streetcar. (RTA owns and operates the QLINE as of October 2024 following the acquisition of the QLINE from the previous owner and operator, M-1 RAIL).

Over 80 community-sponsored transit providers also serve the region, in addition to several other organizations and companies that supplement transportation and mobility services.

## Trends, Accomplishments, and Opportunities

Each annual update to the RTMP includes summaries of national transit trends, recent regional transit accomplishments, and future opportunities for transit in Southeast Michigan. These updates help to inform the public and stakeholders about the progress achieved by RTA and local transit providers while also defining the region's top transit priorities.



### National and Regional Trends in Transit

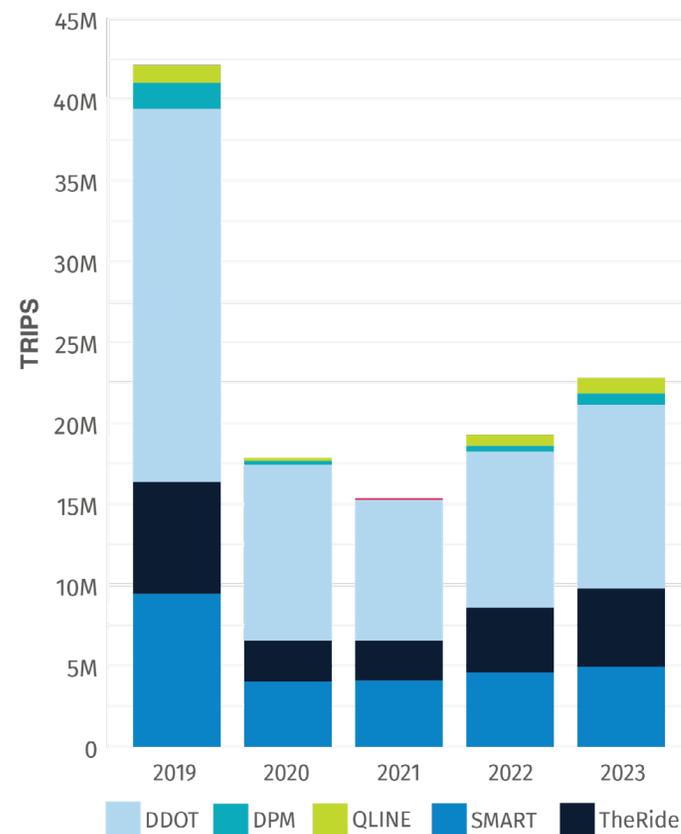
Understanding public transit trends, both nationally and regionally, can help to guide future transit priorities and investments. By reviewing these trends annually, RTA and regional transit providers can track progress and identify best practices from peer agencies and regions that can be appropriately applied within the context of Southeast Michigan.

- ▶ Post-Pandemic Ridership Impacts
- ▷ Workforce
- ▷ Funding
- ▷ Low/No Emissions Vehicles
- ▷ Transit Oriented Development
- ▷ Bus Rapid Transit
- ▷ Mobile Applications
- ▷ Barriers to Transit Accessibility

### Post-Pandemic Ridership Impacts

Beginning in 2022, Southeast Michigan transit ridership has been trending upward from pandemic lows in 2021. In 2023, people rode transit over 22.8 million times, 54 percent of pre-pandemic ridership. At the time of this report publication, 2024 regional transit ridership was on track to surpass 2023 ridership total, further continuing the upward trend in public transit use.

Both nationally and regionally, transit ridership has not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels, though it is gradually recovering. National ridership stands at 79 percent of pre-pandemic levels, while regional transit ridership continues to grow, as seen in the chart to the right.





## National and Regional Trends in Transit

- ▷ Post-Pandemic Ridership Impacts
- ▶ Workforce
- ▶ Funding
- ▶ Low/No Emissions Vehicles
- ▶ Transit Oriented Development
- ▷ Bus Rapid Transit
- ▷ Mobile Applications
- ▷ Barriers to Transit Accessibility



### Workforce

Transit agencies in Southeast Michigan and across the country continue to face hiring and retention challenges.

### Funding

Transit agencies across the country are struggling with short- and long-term operational funding challenges. While Covid relief funding has helped bridge operational deficits, those funds are not replenishable or sustainable.

### Low/No Emissions Vehicles

Transit agencies are exploring or adopting alternative fuel technologies for their fleets, such as electric batteries, hydrogen fuel cells, compressed natural gas, and propane.

### Transit Oriented Development

Cities and communities across the country continue to implement land use policies to encourage more walkable and people-oriented places, which are in increasingly high demand.



## National and Regional Trends in Transit

- ▷ Post-Pandemic Ridership Impacts
- ▷ Workforce
- ▷ Funding
- ▷ Low/No Emissions Vehicles
- ▷ Transit Oriented Development
- ▶ Bus Rapid Transit
- ▶ Mobile Applications
- ▶ Barriers to Transit Accessibility



### Bus Rapid Transit

Implementation of bus rapid transit (BRT) continues in cities and regions across the United States, including in peer Midwest cities such as Indianapolis, Cincinnati, and Columbus.

### Mobile Applications

The rise of smartphone apps has changed how passengers expect to access and pay for transportation services. Some transit agencies have developed their own public apps, while others are working with and integrating with private technology providers.

### Barriers to Transit Accessibility

Transit agencies across the region and the country have a renewed focus on supporting access to jobs, services, and goods by implementing transit infrastructure improvements and better integrating micromobility services.



## Recent Regional Transit Accomplishments

In the past year, RTA and its partners have achieved a number of accomplishments, including transfer of the QLINE to RTA, developing new and expanded services, undertaking planning initiatives, and proceeding and completing capital projects that will improve transit and help advance RTA's vision and goals.

- ▶ QLINE Ownership Transfer
- ▶ New, Improved, and Expanded Services
  - ▷ Micromobility
  - ▷ Expansion of Low-and No-Emissions Transit Vehicles
  - ▷ Mobile Technologies and Fare Payment System Integration
  - ▷ Planning Initiatives
  - ▷ Major Capital Projects



### QLINE Ownership Transfer

In September 2024, the QLINE transitioned ownership from M-1 Rail to the RTA following board approval. The transition of the QLINE to public ownership was always considered as the long-term plan for the system. With the transition to RTA ownership, the QLINE can now access critical public funding resources. This includes eligibility for MDOT (Michigan Department of Transportation) capital match funding, federal funding programs, and the state Comprehensive Transportation Fund. This change positions the QLINE for long-term success by ensuring sustainable investments that will enhance and expand the system for years to come.

### New, Improved, and Expanded Services

The recent success of new transit services and pilot transit services provides an example of how expanded transit services can positively impact residents and communities across Southeast Michigan. New and expanded services over the last year include D2A2 (Detroit to Ann Arbor), Detroit Airport Express, Oakland County transit expansions, Washtenaw Avenue Express, and fare-free pilot programs for QLINE and DPM in Downtown Detroit.



## Recent Regional Transit Accomplishments

- ▷ QLINE Ownership Transfer
- ▷ New, Improved, and Expanded Services
- ▶ Micromobility
- ▶ Expansion of Low-and No-Emissions Transit Vehicles
- ▷ Mobile Technologies and Fare Payment System Integration
- ▷ Planning Initiatives
- ▷ Major Capital Projects



### Micromobility

In 2024, people took almost 100,000 rides on MoGo, the bikeshare provider in Detroit. A system expansion will be implemented in 2025 and will add up to 20 new station locations and up to 60 e-bikes.

### Expansion of Low- and No-Emissions Transit Vehicles

Regional efforts are underway to deploy low- and no-emission vehicles to work towards the State of Michigan's and SEMCOG's Healthy Climate Plan goals, which include increasing access to clean transportation options by 15 percent annually as well as reaching net zero emissions by 2050.

In July 2024, both DDOT and TheRide received FTA Low/No Emission grant awards to fund alternative fueling infrastructure and vehicles, with DDOT receiving \$36 million and TheRide receiving \$25 million.



## Recent Regional Transit Accomplishments

- ▷ QLINE Ownership Transfer
- ▷ New, Improved, and Expanded Services
- ▷ Micromobility
- ▷ Expansion of Low-and No-Emissions Transit Vehicles
- ▶ Mobile Technologies and Fare Payment System Integration
- ▷ Planning Initiatives
- ▷ Major Capital Projects



### Mobile Technologies and Fare Payment System Integration

In Southeast Michigan, transit riders and micromobility users can access several apps to look up trip information and pay fares, however there are differing systems used by the region's transit and mobility providers. To address this issue, the RTA will pilot a mobility wallet to enable users to pay for public transportation trips through a single shared system.

Through a \$1 million grant from MDOT and the Office of Future Mobility and Electrification (OFME), RTA has selected a contractor to lead the Mobility Wallet pilot, with a planned kickoff of the second phase of the pilot in January 2025.



## Recent Regional Transit Accomplishments

- ▷ QLINE Ownership Transfer
- ▷ New, Improved, and Expanded Services
- ▷ Micromobility
- ▷ Expansion of Low-and No-Emissions Transit Vehicles
- ▷ Mobile Technologies and Fare Payment System Integration
- ▶ Planning Initiatives
- ▷ Major Capital Projects



### Planning Initiatives

DDOT, SMART, and TheRide all have ongoing or recently completed service planning initiatives.

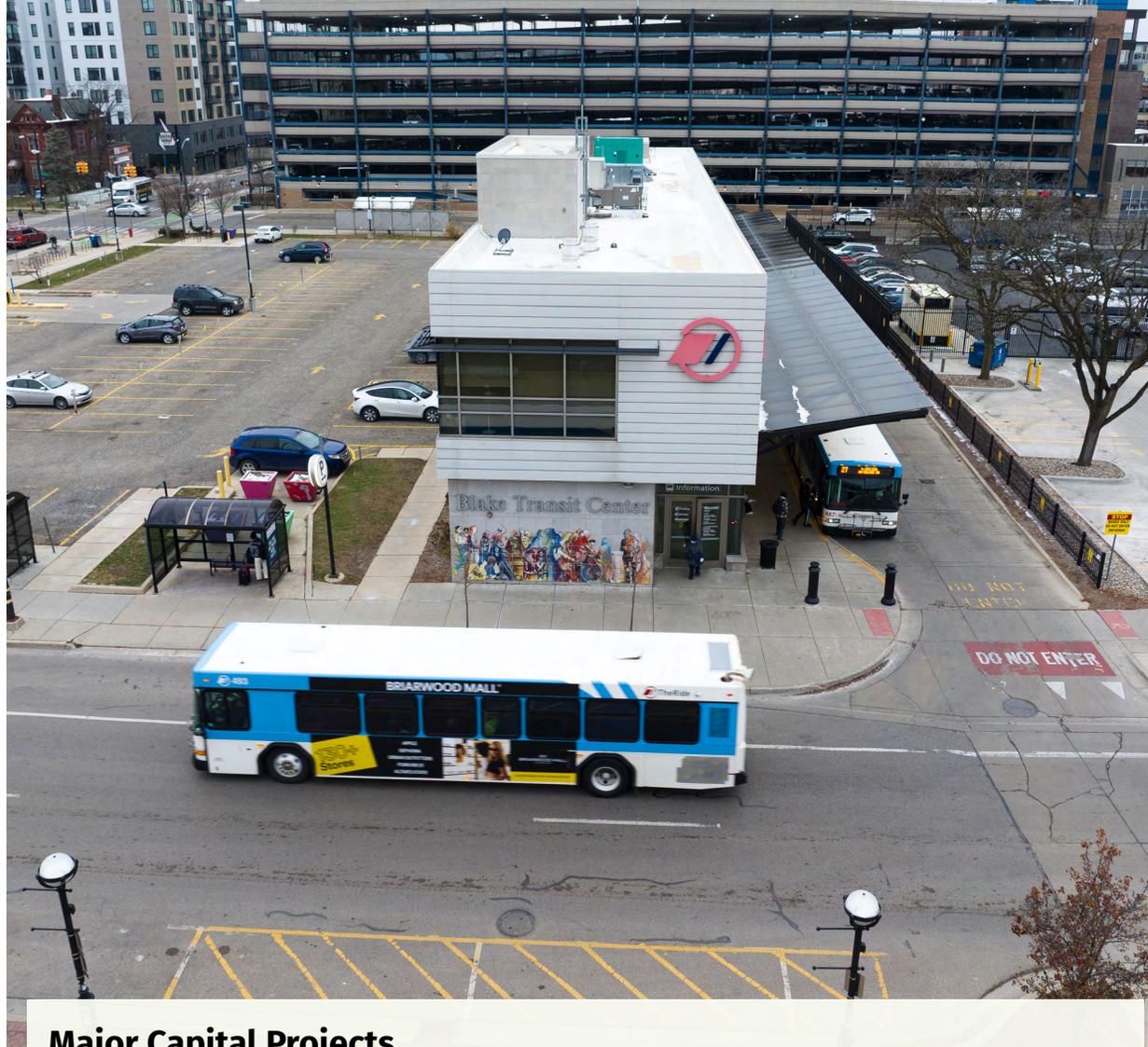
- In 2022, TheRide adopted TheRide2045, a long-range plan for the transit system.
- DDOT Reimagined is a draft plan (pending City Council approval) for redesigning DDOT's bus network and identifying improvements to better connect Detroiters to opportunities.
- SMART's SMARTer Mobility Program is an effort to evaluate existing services in order to expand and integrate services, create a mobile app, and make SMART Flex a permanent service. A draft SMARTer bus network is anticipated to be released in early 2025.
- DPM will be kicking off two planning studies in 2025. Included will be a post-pandemic planning study, a comprehensive long-range system plan, and a downtown mobility study.

There have also been various corridor planning studies for all or some of the segments along many of the region's major transit corridors, including Michigan Avenue, Washtenaw Avenue, Gratiot Avenue, and Woodward Avenue. As the "owner" of the roads, MDOT has recently prepared or begun more detailed comprehensive studies of sections on several of these corridors. These new plans describe options that consider the needs of motorists and trucks but also focus on improving use and safety for pedestrians, cyclists, and transit users. All of the plans describe how transit reliability and infrastructure can be improved (transit signal priority, exclusive transit lanes, queue jumps, pedestrian crossings along the roadways, etc.).



## Recent Regional Transit Accomplishments

- ▷ QLINE Ownership Transfer
- ▷ New, Improved, and Expanded Services
- ▷ Micromobility
- ▷ Expansion of Low-and No-Emissions Transit Vehicles
- ▷ Mobile Technologies and Fare Payment System Integration
- ▷ Planning Initiatives
- ▶ Major Capital Projects



### Major Capital Projects

Major capital projects underway or recently completed across the region include:

- DDOT's Coolidge Terminal ( under construction)
- DDOT's Jason Hargrove Transit Center (opened in May 2024).
- TheRide's Ypsilanti Transit Center (projected 2027 opening)
- TheRide's Blake Transit Center (projected 2027 or 2028 opening)
- DPM's Track Improvement Project (completed in 2024)



## Regional Opportunities

There has been significant progress toward improving transit in Southeast Michigan through capital projects, programs, service expansions, and planning studies in recent years. These successes can also lead to new and additional opportunities that can be pursued by RTA and local transit providers as a way to further improve, expand, innovate, and sustain transit across the region.

- ▶ Improve and Expand Transit and Mobility Services
- ▷ Innovate and Modernize Infrastructure & Technologies
- ▷ Grow and Sustain Partnerships and Coordination



### Improve and Expand Transit and Mobility Services

RTA's regional vision includes new and expanded transit services across the region's communities, including further integration of micromobility services. The continued growth of pilot services and the expansion of transit services through recently passed transit referendums in Oakland and Washtenaw counties have shown that new services and expanded services can be successful, provided that funding is identified to launch and sustain these services. This presents additional opportunities for fixed route improvements, new regional express services, and expanded micromobility services.



## Regional Opportunities

- ▷ Improve and Expand Transit and Mobility Services
- ▶ Innovate and Modernize Infrastructure & Technologies
- ▶ Grow and Sustain Partnerships and Coordination



### **Innovate and Modernize Infrastructure & Technologies**

The need to modernize transit infrastructure and technology is a key issue facing transit operators, both nationally and regionally. RTA has several programs underway to prioritize infrastructure and technology improvements. This includes ongoing and upcoming RTA initiatives such as the Rapid Transit Corridors Framework, the Access to Transit Program, the Strategic Technology Plan, and continued investment in modernized vehicles, facilities, and equipment.

### **Grow and Sustain Partnerships and Coordination**

As a regional authority, the success of RTA's programs, policies, and projects is heavily dependent on regular coordination and cooperation with the regional partners and stakeholders. There are many shared issues and challenges facing local transit providers - such as workforce recruitment and retention - which provide opportunities for shared learning and shared resources to address these challenges.

Additionally, RTA must closely coordinate with non-transit partners - including MDOT and municipal and township transportation departments - who have jurisdiction over the roadways where transit services operate. Further strengthened partnerships and ongoing coordination can create new opportunities for regional transit improvements.

## Public Engagement

From August to November of 2024, RTA set up booths at 12 events across the four counties and spoke with residents, riders, and transit providers. Staff efforts focused on gathering feedback about the RTA's new program Mobility 4 All (M4A), a regional initiative to improve transit solutions in Southeast Michigan, with a particular focus on assisting people with disabilities, older adults, and those with limited incomes. RTA engaged with the public at popular community events and through an online survey. Surveys were shared at public events, distributed to transit providers, and made available on RTA's website. Over 500 people participated in the survey, providing input that will help shape the region's Coordinated Human Services Transportation Plan (CHSTP).

DDOT, TheRide, and SMART all continue to engage the public through their ongoing planning processes as well. TheRide's public engagement in 2024 has been focused on future improvements to the Ypsilanti Transit Center. SMART has continued to engage the public around its ongoing SMARTer Mobility Plan, with the next round of engagement planned in early 2025. Much of DDOT's engagement for the DDOT Reimagined plan was conducted in previous years, with 2024 focused on implementation of the community-driven plan.

RTA also coordinated with local transit agencies to ensure that the RTMP is aligned with their goals and initiatives, and with what they have heard from the public in recent engagement around their plans and projects.



## Key Findings

The data collected to date indicates that the public and stakeholders want and need more transit flexibility and options. With respect to flexibility, questionnaire respondents and those we engaged in person at events wished for more service availability on weekends and evening hours. Stakeholders also desired access to more locations and to have more and better regional connections.

## Regional Transit Priorities

In the previous RTMP update, RTA reviewed the strategies and actions in previous versions and consolidated them into ten regional transit priorities for investment based on public input, transit industry trends, recent accomplishments, and ongoing projects in Southeast Michigan. RTA's goals guided the development of these regional transit priorities. Each priority supports aspects of RTA's overarching regional goals and serves as a crucial step toward achieving them.

This update of the RTMP includes a simplified categorization of those top ten priorities into three focus areas: **Move People**, **Strengthen Access**, and **Enhance Experience**. Additionally, this update revises some of the previously identified Implementation Activities, while also adding additional supporting actions that outline a clear path for each identified Implementation Activity.

RTA has three strategies for its goal to Fund Transformative Mobility that are organized around different funding levels:

- 1. Current Funding:** Execute a multi-year budget and business plan to align with advocacy for advancing regional policies.
- 2. One-Time Funding:** Collaborate on regional grant applications and support provider funding initiatives.
- 3. New Ongoing Funding:** Elevate per capita transit spending for greater services in Southeast Michigan.

RTA sets out to lead, guide, and support the accomplishment of these ten regional priorities through activities that plan, fund, coordinate, and accelerate them in the region.



## REGIONAL TRANSIT PRIORITIES

### Move People



- Increase Frequency, Reliability, and Hours on Fixed-Route Services
- Build On and Coordinate Demand-Response Services
- Grow Mobility Access to Local Communities and Regional Destinations

### Strengthen Access



- Invest in and Implement a Rapid Transit Network
- Advance Accessibility, Comfort, and Well-Being at Transit Stops
- Upgrade Multimodal Connections To and Between Services
- Regionalize Trip Planning and Fare Payment Systems

### Enhance Experience



- Enhance Ride Quality and Promote On-Board Safety
- Modernize and Maintain Infrastructure in a State of Good Repair
- Recruit, Develop, and Retain a Thriving Workforce



# MOVE PEOPLE

## Increase Frequency, Reliability, and Hours on Fixed-Route Services

Develop a core network of transit routes with frequencies of at least every 15 to 30 minutes for 18 hours every day of the week and increase the number of 24-hour bus and rail routes. Implement improvements that increase reliability and on-time performance, such as dedicated lanes, traffic queue jumps, streamlined boarding, and transit signal priority (TSP).

## Build On and Coordinate Demand-Response Services

Improve mobility for people who rely on demand-response transit services by offering same-day services, increasing hours of operation, expanding eligibility to more people, and streamlining transfers between services.

## Grow Mobility Access to Local Communities & Regional Destinations

Ensure transit service that is tailored to local needs is available in every community in Southeast Michigan. This can include demand-response and microtransit services in lower-density areas, new or extended fixed-route services in higher-density areas, and express services that serve major regional destinations and provide access to other regions.



## STRENGTHEN ACCESS

### **Invest In and Implement a Rapid Transit Network:**

Plan, design, fund, and operationalize rapid transit services along regionally significant corridors that support TOD, and work with local communities to develop mobility-oriented development (MOD) plans that encourage equitable economic growth.

### **Advance Accessibility, Comfort, and Well-being at Transit Stops:**

Ensure transit stops meet ADA standards and have amenities and security features to help all riders feel healthy and comfortable waiting for their vehicle. This can include improving sidewalks and curb ramps and providing seating, shelters, lighting, real-time signage, and greenscaping.

### **Upgrade Multimodal Connections To and Between Services:**

Increase access to and from public transit by improving pedestrian and cyclist infrastructure at and near transit stops, promoting complete street designs, enhancing park-and-ride services, and increasing the availability of microtransit and micromobility options.

### **Regionalize Trip Planning and Fare Payment Services:**

Implement a regional multimodal fare collection system that simplifies payment and transfers between services and modes, and streamlines fare policies across providers, creating a seamless navigation experience. Deploy a trip planning platform that helps riders plan and schedule trips, and that is integrated with the regional fare system.



## ENHANCE EXPERIENCE

### **Modernize and Maintain Infrastructure in a State of Good Repair:**

Maintain transit infrastructure, including buses and trains, passenger and maintenance facilities, and service vehicles, in a state of good repair to ensure continuous and safe operations. When replacing infrastructure, integrate innovative technologies and best practices that improve operational efficacy and environmental impacts.

### **Enhance Ride Quality and Promote On-Board Safety:**

Enhance the rider experience by addressing real and perceived safety and cleanliness concerns through marketing campaigns, staff training upgraded onboard technologies, and a transit ambassadors' program that is focused on customer service, community outreach, rider support, and a sense of security.

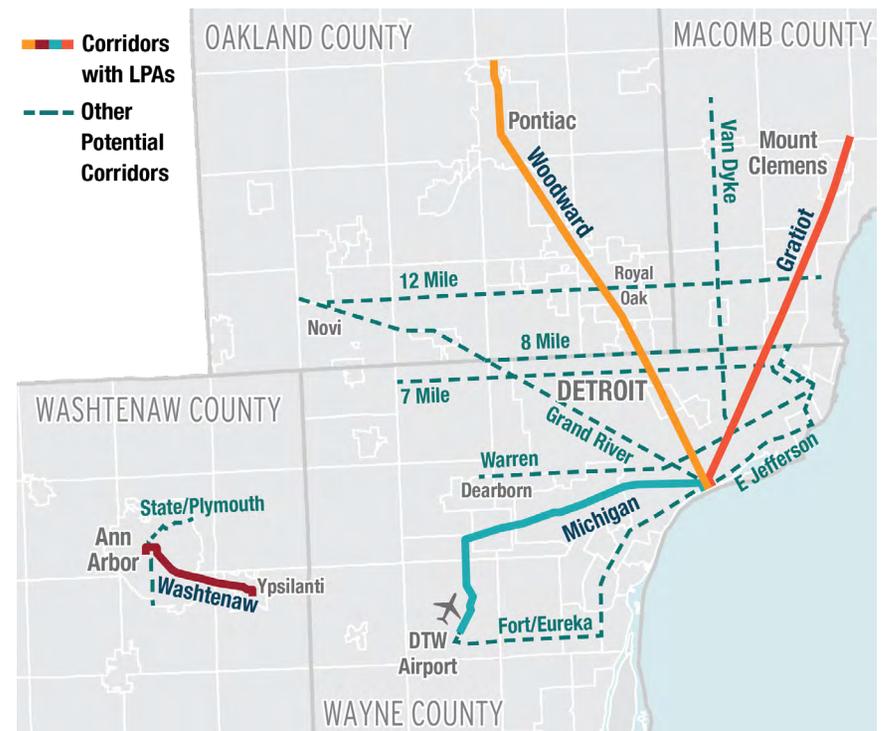
### **Recruit, Develop, and Retain a Thriving Workforce:**

Engage, support, and sustain a diverse and talented workforce to continue reliable operations of current service and the ability to expand services in the future. Ensuring competitive compensation and benefits packages, providing training on new technologies and career advancement, and updating recruitment practices will attract new employees while helping current employees grow and thrive.

## The Path Forward

Together, RTA and its partners can carry out implementation activities and supporting actions outlined in this plan to improve, expand, innovate, and sustain transit services in Southeast Michigan. While RTA will continue to pursue and execute new programs and projects that are funded through short term funding and grants, a stable regional funding source is required to sustainably invest in the region's long-term transit priorities in order to further transform mobility in the region.

RTA is authorized to collect a property tax millage and a vehicle registration tax in Southeast Michigan, subject to voter approval. If and when RTA runs a ballot initiative, it would develop an expenditure plan that proposes a multi-year program of projects that can be carried out with projected revenues. The planning process involves considering different project scenarios (for example, which routes to increase frequency on or where to construct rapid transit corridors). Through public engagement, RTA will determine which scenario to adopt and then create referendum language for a property tax and/or a vehicle registration tax to support the preferred scenario, which could then be voted on by the public. In the interim, RTA will work with state and local stakeholders to pursue competitive grants and develop alternative funding options for priority projects.



### Stay Engaged!

RTA cannot achieve its vision alone. The priorities outlined in this plan will require engagement, coordination, support, leadership, and action from RTA's regional partners, including you! Upcoming opportunities for community engagement include the RTA's [IDEA Roadmap](#) goal for planning a community engagement guide in 2025. **Tune in to participate!**

You can support RTA and its vision by signing up for newsletters, following RTA on social media (@rtamichigan), attending public meetings, or applying to join RTA's Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC). Information on public meetings is available on RTA's website. Most importantly, you can support RTA by riding public transit and talking to your friends, families, and colleagues about how important it is to you and to the region.