

Executive Summary

The WILMAPCO region is today in the midst of a major demographic shift. Slowing birth rates and longer life expectancies are expected to rapidly age our population. Whereas our older community constituted 11% of our total population in 2000, that figure is projected to soar beyond 20% by 2030. As the chances of becoming disabled increase with age, we too can expect a higher proportion of our population to suffer from a physical disability. How can we prepare for this shift as a region? Is our transportation infrastructure capable of handling the needs of our older community today or in the future? Does our infrastructure support the present and future needs of other Transportation Justice (TJ) groups—the disabled and households without an automobile? The present report initiates a process to address these concerns.

The report begins by identifying general concerns and problems faced by TJ groups, both nationally and regionally. Isolation—the undesired separation from family, friends, and services—is the most constant theme. This separation most often results from the lack of access to, or the ability to operate a private automobile. Short of calling for the distribution of private vehicles to all those without, the provision of a fleet of private drivers, or the continued expansion of big budget Paratransit services, WILMAPCO’s TJ Report tackles the issue from a “universal design” perspective. Practical, cost-effective measures, such as: improved access to bus stops, greater frequencies of fixed-route buses to and from key locations, and enhanced walkability within and around “targeted” neighborhoods will work best to improve mobility and combat isolation.

Using 2000 Census data, these “targeted” neighborhoods within our region (specifically, block-groups where significant portions of our three groups are found) are identified, mapped and analyzed. These targeted areas, deemed to support either “moderate” or “significant” concentrations of TJ populations, are the foundation of the study. Located along the I-95 corridor in our region’s north, they cut across class and racial boundaries. For example, the Trolley Square neighborhood in western Wilmington boasts no unemployment and a rate of poverty half of its county’s average. Eastside, however, suffers economically. Over half of its residents live below poverty and one out of five is unemployed. Racial diversity thrives. Significant TJ areas located in Wilmington’s Eastlake and Prices Run are predominately black (85-94%) whereas other neighborhoods, such as Richardson Park (94%) and South Elkton (87%) are overwhelmingly white. Populations within TJ areas also display wide ranging commuting types and average travel times. For example, 26% of Eastside’s residents commute to work via public transit, while 0% did in South Elkton. Travel times to work varied still more. While a few neighborhoods enjoy public transit commuting times less than 20 minutes, others top one hour.

The accessibility of bus stops within these TJ areas, measured as the percentage of households within walking distance to a stop, is then detailed. Overall, bus stops were, on average, much more accessible within TJ areas than outside. However, room for improvement does exist. Most significantly, two moderate TJ areas (Latimer Estates and Webster Farms) were found to fall below the regional average for accessibility. This analysis was also extended beyond our TJ areas to include existing and planned age-restricted communities in New Castle County. Significantly, we found that only one age-restricted community (“Crossings at Christina”) located south of Newark was within walking distance to a bus stop.

Observing first hand the infrastructure in place, practical recommendations for improving walkability within significant TJ areas were then made. These included measures to ease access to bus stops, retail outlets, and parks. Pedestrian and bicycle crashes between 2000 and 2005 were also provided for each neighborhood, with specific attention to intersections showing high crash rates. Consider, as an example, the Browntown neighborhood in Wilmington. It was noted that pedestrian movement across Maryland Avenue (SR 4), a busy commercial strip, was difficult and dangerous—impeding access to shops, schools, parks, and bus stops. In total, 47 pedestrian and bicycle collisions occurred across the area, most along SR 4. Recommended improvements ranged from the addition of signalized crosswalks at key intersections to the clearing of overgrown vegetation along a stretch of sidewalk.

Next, the frequencies and destinations of bus routes serving significant TJ areas were analyzed. Recommendations were made to consider improving frequencies for routes with slower frequencies and/or to provide direct service to a key regional destination, if it was not served. Prices Run and Eastlake in Wilmington, for example, were found to have fairly limited service regionally. Besides the consideration of upgrading frequencies on several lines, connections were recommended to: the Concord Pike commercial corridor, the Kirkwood Highway commercial corridor (beyond just Prices Corner), Newark, and the Christiana Mall. These locations represent key regional destinations that were not served directly from Prices Run or Eastlake—forcing patrons to utilize two or more buses to reach them.

In the final stage of our analysis, the results of a brief “Senior Transportation Survey” were provided. Findings from the survey supported our approach to the needs of TJ populations. Of respondents from New Castle County, for example, 44% felt improvement was necessary in the fixed-route bus service. Specifically, 26% faced difficulty reaching their fixed route stops. Reasons cited for difficulties reaching stops included: lack of sidewalks, deteriorating conditions of existing sidewalk, and busy intersections. Additional criticisms of the system were: the lack of Sunday bus service, poor transit linkages, and the tardiness of Paratransit services. Most troubling, however, was the quarter of our region’s seniors who were found to presently face transportation dilemmas.

Overall recommendations found within the TJ report can be found below:

- Practical, cost-effective measures, such as: improved access to bus stops, greater frequencies of fixed-route buses to and from key locations, and enhanced walkability within and around “targeted” neighborhoods will work best to improve mobility and combat isolation of TJ populations.
- Costs associated with DART’s Paratransit service may render it economically unsustainable. DART should consider restructuring the system. Alternatives to Paratransit should be explored.
- Identified TJ areas with high commuting times should become prime candidates for additional service.
- TJ areas, in which transit use or walking trips to work are low, should be examined for improvements.
- Target specific TJ areas where the percentage of households within walking distance to a bus stop is low for additional bus routes and stops.
- Expansion of fixed-route bus service in the central and southern portions of New Castle County should prioritize service to age-restricted communities and senior centers. As a pre-requisite, however, developers of these communities must include access points for service.
- Re-examine the layout of intersections with high numbers of bicycle and pedestrian crashes. A table of the identified intersections can be found in the appendix.
- Improve walkability and bus frequencies and destinations within significant TJ areas, via targeted recommendations made in Section 3. These recommendations can be found in tabular form within the appendix.
- Begin a dialogue to address the transportation concerns raised by respondents to our senior transportation survey. Specifically, these relate to issues of access to services and the adequacy of New Castle County’s fixed-route transportation infrastructure.

Following a summary of these recommendations, the report closes with a section devoted to funding options and another section which outlines future actions. These actions will ensure that TJ continues to influence the planning process at WILMAPCO in the years to come.