

Inequity Disrupts Sustainable Transportation Progress

By [Josh Naramore](#)

THESE ARE UNPRECEDENTED TIMES. The COVID-19 global pandemic has affected us all in varying ways, exacerbating long existing systemic racial and economic inequities. It's vital to think about the future of mobility and the public realm with intentionality through the lens of equity.

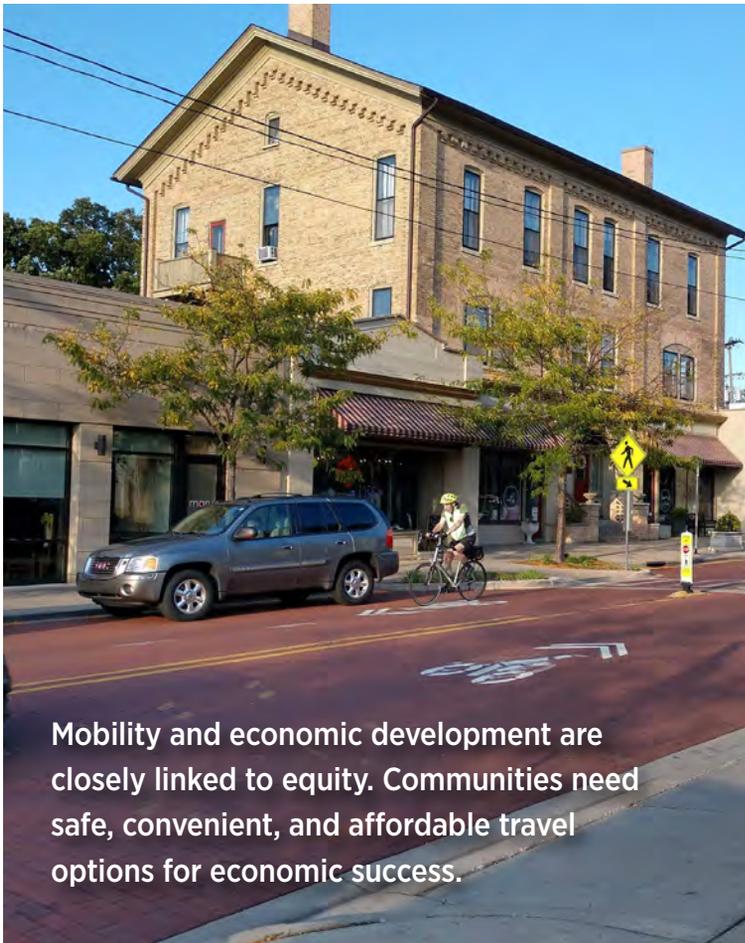
A great starting place is developing a strategic framework to understand what needs exist and identify the role local agencies can play in addressing mobility challenges and inequities. There is a need for a bold commitment to equity and planning for mobility that broadens opportunity and targeting initiatives to communities that have been left out of economic growth.

seven years, but most of the city's existing bicycle network is in mixed-traffic conditions and planned additions lack adequate funding for other treatments. A network that supports all users will require substantial investment in connected and protected bicycle facilities.

The city currently owns and operates 10,000 off-street and 4,000 on-street metered, public parking spaces in the downtown and neighborhood commercial districts. There is a perception of undersupply of parking and this threatens efforts to better manage the parking system through interventions designed to facilitate greater availability of parking in these locations and to generate revenue for the maintenance and operation of parking and mobility facilities, programs, and services.

The value of the city's significant parking investments and curbside infrastructure is significantly undermined by not pricing on-street parking at night and on weekends and by too-modest oversell rates for monthly parkers in garages. The lack of adequate parking regulation and the perception of a lack of capacity distract from other efforts to improving mobility and addressing inequities.

Community engagement often fails to include people who are unfamiliar with, unavailable to participate in, or wary of participating in community conversations. Transportation issues are primarily informed by those who are more inclined to participate or have a conduit to staff and decision-makers. The city's emphasis on customer service and a culture of speed/efficiency creates a reactive system that interrupts staff workflows and systems, perpetuates inefficiencies in resource utilization, and prioritizes the concerns of those who speak loudest and most often. This also creates an imbalance in how resources are delivered



Mobility and economic development are closely linked to equity. Communities need safe, convenient, and affordable travel options for economic success.



for basic transportation services such as neighborhood traffic calming, pedestrian crossings, and street repairs.

Framework for Change

The Grand Rapids Economic Development and Mobile GR & Parking Service departments completed an [Equitable Economic Development and Mobility Strategic Plan](#) in January 2020. The process was led by a steering committee comprised of approximately 35 community partners and stakeholders, along with a consulting team, in collaboration with city staff. The consultants facilitated focus groups which engaged hundreds of additional stakeholders and community partners to test strategies.

The plan sets out the following objectives:

- Align planning and capital investments to support economic development and promote equitable outcomes.
- Increase TDM.
- Management of on-street parking and curb space.
- Invest in staff and system capacity to meet the mobility needs of all of Grand Rapids.
- Develop an asset management approach that will support the long-term health of the city's mobility networks.
- Establish comprehensive communications, engagement, and education programs.
- Cultivate and capitalize upon strategic partnerships to achieve the city's equitable mobility goals.

Although the plan is established as a five-year plan, staff recognize the need to continually evaluate opportunities as conditions evolve and will update the Plan as necessary to respond to current conditions. The actions in the Plan will be tracked through metrics developed to evaluate progress and maintain accountability and transparency.

What's Next?

COVID has impacted municipal budgets across the country and with increased demands for services and declining revenues, a clear, prioritized vision for investment is paramount. It is essential for local agencies to ensure that inclusive and

accessible mobility options exist and are maintained. The city's plan helped us navigate recent budget cuts and still maintain funding for the near time priorities.

The COVID crisis also provides opportunity for experimentation and implementation that was previously thought to be difficult. With lower traffic volumes on major streets, it provided an opportunity to change traffic control and evaluate transitioning signalized intersections to all-way stops. Before COVID during one weekend, we deployed 25 temporary pick

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up/drop off zones. Pre-COVID, we had only a handful of parklets or outdoor dining areas permitted in on-street parking. We now have dozens of social zones across the city that repurpose parking and travel lanes for increased outdoor dining. All of these efforts were to help local businesses, but I hope they become part of the regular fabric of the city.

I witnessed what is possible when working so closely with the community. During I'm Often as professionals we are so focused on the work that we lose touch with the people that we serve. I'm hopeful that the tragedy and impact of COVID will serve as the impetus for the changes we desperately need. ♦



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Priority Near-Term Mobility Strategies

1. Implement a comprehensive communication strategy—Increase understanding and awareness of the resources available within the community and of the decisions that are being made on a regular basis about mobility systems. Educate to address the public perception about the lack of public parking.
2. Pilot expanded Transportation Demand Management (TDM) incentive programs
 - Bikeshare and e-scooter share pilot (shared micromobility)
 - Low-income transit pass program
 - Carsharing operation
3. Take a proactive and strategic approach to capital and safety investments, prioritizing projects that address safety and equity needs
4. Develop a parking expansion decision tool to guide on and off-street management

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