

## Summary: Stakeholder Group Discussions

As an important component of the comprehensive engagement strategy supporting Walk Bike Jefferson County, the project team held a series of stakeholder focus group meetings. We connected separately with stakeholders representing key groups in the County: the elderly and people with disabilities, young people, tourism and economic development representatives, local government officials, and members of the bicycling community in Jefferson County. These targeted discussions ensure that key groups' unique and important perspectives are present in the plan.

Each of these groups met virtually to hear a short project update and engage in a guided discussion on the unique needs, perspectives, and challenges for the groups they represent. These discussions took place on July 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>, 2024. What follows is a summary of each group's discussion in paragraph form and a bullet list of detailed comments heard from participants during that discussion.

### Elderly & People Living with Disabilities

This discussion focused on the mobility experience of the elderly and those living with disabilities. Stakeholders from AARP, the Disability Resource Association, and Aging Ahead participated.

Access to transit stations is a key takeaway from this meeting, with last-mile connections being a real challenge, and the deviated route pick-up options are in high demand and fill up quickly. The need to connect to Metro in STL County is prevalent. Consideration for people who are homebound simply due to a lack of transportation is needed, including for their caregivers, who are generally able-bodied people who can walk and bike places but are also homebound due to caring for someone else who is homebound. Specific locations like senior apartments near the DRA office and a dollar store on the other side of 61/67 have places where seniors and people in wheelchairs are crossing 61/67 without any traffic control.

Seniors who bike as part of AARP's program stick to off-street trails, and crossings at major roadways for trails are an issue. Where sidewalks do exist, they sometimes do not complete an accessible crossing through an intersection, or do not connect to practical destinations, just a different residential neighborhood. Intergenerational considerations for walking and biking should be made, such as connecting an independent living facility with a playground, so grandparents can walk or bike with grandchildren to areas that children enjoy.

- People like the less urban, more local feel of Jefferson County compared to STL County. People feel like it's cheaper than STL County.
- People aging in place on a fixed income may experience economic hardship with an aging housing stock and accompanying unexpected costs.
- Jefferson County is beautiful and has unique geography. This is one of its greater strengths.

- Small businesses tie into walkability. If more people can walk there, small businesses may be better supported.
- People want to get out of the city to experience less crime and more open area.
- Audible pedestrian crossing signals are very helpful for low vision people getting around.
- Some people who are homebound are only homebound due to a lack of car transportation. If there's a safe way to walk to the store or pharmacy, some homebound people would be able to do that.
- JeffCo Express (OATS) has people who rely on it for doctor appointments or employment, so getting to those bus stops is important to have good walkways.
- A loop runs from De Soto all the way through Hillsboro, Festus up to the Arnold area and makes a loop two or three times a day.
- In Arnold, JeffCo Express runs a route through the city several times a day. That route may be getting eliminated due to funding, but the other longer loop route should be there for a while.
- Last-mile connections to public transit and needing to connect to Metro in STL County is getting harder with route cuts in Fenton. They only go to hospitals.
- People often feel unprotected on certain sidewalks, which are sometimes inaccessible due to light poles positioned in the middle, making navigation difficult even for those temporarily using crutches.
- Distances between some municipalities and where people live is a challenge.
- JeffCo Express deviated routes with pickups are helpful, but limited spots fill up quickly, so if people can't book them in time, they have to find a way to get to bus stops on their own.
- People aging who are no longer able to drive—or some who haven't had the opportunity to get a license or car—sometimes can't afford a vehicle to be able to drive.
- Some people drive only short distances (e.g. the doctor's office down the road) due to vision issues, limited reaction time, or discomfort being on the road for long periods.
- Caregivers could also utilize trips outside of a car; some are stuck because they are caring for their loved one, so they are homebound as well.
- There are decent sidewalks that end before connecting to destinations. They go nowhere, to another subdivision only, or end at the intersection with no crosswalk across streets.
- Outside the DRA office, senior apartments and family apartments are being built right across 61/67 from a dollar store. A man from the senior apartments in a wheelchair crosses the middle of 61/67 to get to the dollar store. It is scary watching him with cars speeding. No crosswalk, stoplight, or anything.
- House Springs Main Street has people in wheelchairs and electric wheelchairs going to stores, post office, banks, etc., wheeling in the road because there is no accessibility for them.
- AARP's strong cycling program uses only off-street trails and since there are no trails in Jefferson County must travel outside of the county. These cyclists don't even like it when they have to cross busy streets while on a trail.

- Some people come from Ste Genevieve County all the way to STL to use greenways. Missed opportunity for JeffCo. Need connections into STL County; greenways up there are great, but people need a way to get to them from JeffCo.
- A walkable, bikeable community is an intergenerational opportunity; grandparents caring for grandkids. Connecting an independent living center to a playground is a good idea.
- The MO 30 corridor feels forgotten. No sidewalks to Wicked Chicken, school, churches, retail, post office, Walmart.
- JeffCo Express used to have stops along the MO 30 corridor but not anymore.

### Youth (Jefferson College)

This discussion invited stakeholders at K-12 school districts and local colleges to share the mobility experience of young people. Attendees from Jefferson College participated, and much of the discussion focused on Jefferson College Hillsboro campus.

Most students are not seen biking, and most walk within campus, but some walk into Hillsboro. There is a desire by staff to be more connected by walking to Hillsboro. Some students who live on campus, especially international students, do not have a vehicle, so they walk into town more or rely on rides or delivery services to reach destinations farther away, including Walmart and Festus. The general public who lives nearby sometimes come to walk around campus recreationally. A major concern is the overpass across MO 21 to go into Hillsboro, since some students walk across it, and some at night. The public is also seen walking and biking along the outer road. The bus shuttles are well-utilized now, and there is a desire for more buses.

- Hillsboro campus is 400-acres with a wooden trail that the general public comes to the campus to use. A vision to have a walk and bike trail as well.
- There is a nearby Farm Road that people walk on, and people who live nearby come to campus for recreational walking.
- An estimated 25% of students do not have a car (about 200 live on campus, about 3000-3500 total students).
- A few students are seen walking along the outer road to the gas station and McDonald's.
- It would be great if students could walk to Hillsboro destinations, restaurants, gas stations, etc.
- Students are seen walking around campus, but fewer venture out beyond campus.
- There are international students who don't have vehicles.
- Some students feel safe on campus but don't feel safe off campus.
- Most students who walk, walk because they don't have a vehicle or a ride from someone else.
- Students get rides to destinations farther away, like Festus, Walmart, etc.
- Some use DoorDash because they don't have transportation to get very far.
- Some walk into town.
- Very few students bike, but some people who live in the nearby subdivisions bike on the outer road, and they sometimes come to walk around the track on campus or the farm road.
- Some students do use JeffCo Express/JC Transit.

- Students sometimes struggle with gas money or handling car breakdowns.
- The overpass over MO 21 to go into town is unsafe for people walking – busy and not much space to walk. Especially a concern at night and in the dark, after 5 pm athletes and students who work at McDonald's will be walking on the overpass in the dark.
- Most students come from Jefferson County (~80%).
- The shuttles are helpful right now, but they need more buses.
- No known bike parking available on campus.
- Wide range of student ages, a lot of traditional 18-24, but also adult learners.
- Students come from all walks of life in terms of age, background, income, etc.
- Potential to access students through announcements email that is sent out.

## Tourism & Economic Development

This discussion centered on how walking and biking can better support tourism and the local economy, and the current experience of tourists. Attendees included local Chamber of Commerce staff and Jefferson County Tourism, Growth, and Economic Development representatives.

There is a significant draw to Jefferson County, but not many walking or biking connections between the popular destinations or lodging accommodations. Increasing lodging and improving connections to festivals and wineries is a desire, and these destinations could be used as nodes in a future walking and biking network. Outside of the I-55 corridor, there aren't many lodging opportunities, and places like Hillsboro have tension between having lots to do nearby but no way of getting to those places by walking or biking. Hillsboro experiences an influx of people during business hours but empties out after hours, despite having several regional draws. Plans to generate and dedicate funds targeting tourism are in the works.

- It's difficult to reach many wineries and breweries by walking or biking.
- Businesses, scenery, and parks are among the great offerings in Jefferson County.
- Develop nodes first, then paths will follow.
- There is a question of how much the network should target tourists versus residents—both would benefit, as residents would have improved access and the ability to walk or bike comfortably, which would also attract tourists to popular destinations and scenic areas.
- The Mississippi River Trail along 61/67 is unsafe; people walk on the shoulder of the road.
- People want to access nearby destinations, like from a small neighborhood to a dollar store.
- The vision includes visitors coming to the county for wineries or festivals and being able to walk to stores or events from their Airbnb, whether for recreation or necessity.
- Hillsboro is often forgotten as it is in the middle of the county. As the county seat with Jefferson College, Hillsboro fills up during business hours but lacks safe walking or biking areas. There are several regional attractions within a 10-mile radius of Hillsboro, such as

wineries, a covered bridge, a garden preserve, the fair, and the college, but it's difficult for people to explore the community. There are limited retail, shopping, and restaurant opportunities, and the city struggles with resources due to many tax-exempt properties. Walking and biking connections near Hillsboro and De Soto are needed.

- There is a question of whether complete streets policies are on the books in Jefferson County cities—Arnold has one, but it seems others do not.
- A funding mechanism for tourism is in conceptual stage, including a countywide room tax.
- There are many destinations but limited lodging accommodations outside the I-55 corridor. Adding cabins or hotels in Hillsboro would be beneficial. Connecting these nodes (wineries, Jefferson College, etc.) via walking and biking is desirable.
- Efforts are underway to prepare Jefferson County for future federal funding opportunities.
- People are seen walking on Highway 21 in De Soto, many of whom are hearing-impaired.
- A biking connection between MO 30 and 21 would be great.
- At Walther Park in De Soto, trucks pass by closely, and people get hit by car mirrors when walking along Veterans. Increased safety measures are needed.
- People walk along Highway Y to get to Dollar General.
- Main Street in High Ridge could be better linked to the outer road and Wicked Chicken.

## Local Governments

This discussion was attended by city administrators and public works directors in Jefferson County's cities. This discussion included how projects should be prioritized when applying for federal grants and addressing jurisdictional boundaries. Consulting the Arnold plan will provide insight into where residents wanted recreational trails, and De Soto noted they are working towards a nature trail along the creek. Cities don't currently have a formal way of prioritizing projects, and most decisions are based on residents voicing concerns and desires at specific locations. Arnold currently has a complete streets policy implemented.

- There is a plan for a SUP on Missouri State Road; do we have that included?
- Discussion on what the county would want to submit for TAP grants in the future. Projects in this plan should score better because they are highlighted in a master plan for pedestrian and bicycling activity.
- Projects that border the county and city could have partnership opportunities.
- For projects solely within the city, the county's standpoint would likely be that the city, having the plan, could submit a better scoring application.
- If we have a transportation project that reaches the city's border, and it continues under the county plan, we can submit the countywide transportation plan to show the continuation.
- Question on which cities have complete streets policies – Arnold does.
- Cities don't generally have a process for prioritizing local bike/ped projects; it's mostly based on public requests in specific areas.

- People get inspired when they see pedestrian/bike improvements in another part of town and want similar improvements in other areas.
- Arnold's bike/ped plan was based on public desire for recreational trails, connecting to Arnold City Park, Kimmswick, and up to STL County.
- Not everyone considers ongoing maintenance needs.
- De Soto is working on a trail system along the creek, buying properties in the floodplain for dual-use stormwater detention and natural trails.
- Festus Special Road District should coordinate with projects near Festus. If a project in Festus reaches the city limits, they should go to the special road district before the county.

## Bicycling Community

This session met with avid bicyclists who frequently organize long group rides for recreation in Jefferson County. The attendees are considered community leaders for these recreational bicyclists.

The "strong and fearless" group of bicyclists noted that some roads feel unsafe, notably 61/67, which would provide an excellent north/south connection throughout the county, but is currently avoided. Discussion on signage for rural bike routes highlighted blind curves, hills, and low-traffic intersections where drivers travel at high speeds. Shoulders provide a more comfortable space for biking, but debris on shoulders often forces bikers into traffic lanes, so maintenance and sweeping of shoulders should be prioritized, especially on signed bike routes.

- Shoulders provide a more comfortable way to bike, even for the strong and fearless.
- 61/67 would provide an excellent N/S corridor and an easy way to reach STL County, but it feels unsafe even for the strong and fearless.
- The path to Crites Park stops at the top of the hill, leaving people with nowhere to go.
- Rapid changes in the built environment can abruptly turn a comfortable biking experience into an uncomfortable one. Highway interchanges are a barrier and can lead to this abrupt change.
- The strong and fearless enjoy the terrain challenges and scenery, but terrain can be surprising and hard to avoid when planning a biking route.
- Debris in shoulders is a significant concern, often forcing bikers into traffic lanes. Maintenance and sweeping are currently overlooked, even on signed trail routes like the MRT on 61/67.
- The elderly enjoy off-street trails on bikes and e-bikes in other areas, like Tucson. It's a great form of recreation for older active adults who don't like riding on roads.
- Question about dormant railroad corridors in Jefferson County – not aware of any right now.
- Simple measures like installing bike racks at destinations can increase biking. The same goes for trails – if you build it, they will come.
- Bike racks are scarce throughout the county, which is a significant barrier to biking for daily transportation needs.
- Kindergarten PE curriculum includes a bicycling unit in multiple schools.

- More kids bike to school in the northern areas of the county. The bike racks are full there, but empty at southern schools
- "Share the road" signs are desired by the strong and fearless bicyclists, even if they only remind everyone to watch for bikes and give them space.
- Activated flashing warning lights over blind hills or curvy areas, like a "bike in road" warning, could be helpful in rural areas.
- Many people say they will only ride in a park because they don't know how to ride on roads.
- Public Works will work with Tuesday Night Ride to identify their common routes and designate them as signed bike routes.