TheRide 2045

What We Heard
Round 2 Engagement

December 2021

Left Turn Right Turn

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Executive Summary

TheRide 2045 is a long-range plan for the Ann Arbor Area Transportation Authority. It will guide our decisions and investments over the next 25 years toward a vision that works for everyone. This report summarizes what we heard from our second round of public and stakeholder engagement in the fall of 2021. We spoke directly with almost 700 people through online meetings or in-person events and received over 400 responses to our survey. What we heard is summarized in the table below, organized by a few key themes.

Desire for transformational change

- The resounding message that we heard was a desire for a major enhancement to our transit system that will transform the way people move around our community.
- We heard that people wanted to be able to get around without a car.
- People wanted to improve social equity through transit service enhancement, providing access to jobs, school and housing for those who need it most.
- People value our environment and want to address our climate goals with a cleaner way to travel.
- There is an understanding that transformation will require significant investment, and people are generally willing to pay if the benefits are clear.

Desire for convenience, reliability and dependability

- People clearly wanted more high frequency routes across the service area.
- Customers want better off-peak service with more frequent buses for evenings, weekend.
- We heard a desire for fast, reliable Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) and express service on major corridors.
- Customers want better connections between central locations across the service area.
- Beyond our service area, customers would like better connections to other destinations in the region.

Considerations when making transit better

- We need to collaborate with other organizations in the area, like municipal governments, the University of Michigan, and the Regional Transit Authority.
- Some people will be adversely affected by an increase to local millage, and so costs must be carefully weighed against the benefits they provide.
- Transit priority features, especially dedicated bus lanes, will require road space that is already in high demand.

Feedback by Member Municipality

- We heard in the City of Ann Arbor the need to focus on climate change and providing equitable service for those who need it most.
- In the City of Ypsilanti, we heard the need for equity in how we design and operate our services.
- In the Township of Ypsilanti, we heard the need to make sure our plan is affordable.

TheRide2045 Long-Range Plan

The Plan (phases, timeline)

TheRide 2045 Long-Range Plan is creating a comprehensive and long-term vision for public transit in the Ann Arbor-Ypsilanti area. Work on TheRide 2045 began with initial public and stakeholder engagement in Fall of 2019. Due to the pandemic, the plan was delayed. We restarted in February of 2021 and are scheduled to finish in June of 2022. The project is taking place over four phases; we are currently in phase 3.

Phase 1:
Guidance
(Feb-July, 2021)

Phase 2:
Analysis
(Mar-Aug, 2021)

Phase 3:
Development
(July 2021-
Feb, 2022)

Phase 4:
Finalization
(Jan-Jun, 2022)

Public and stakeholder engagement plays a crucial role in guiding the content of the Long-Range Plan. This report summarizes the key findings from the second round of public and stakeholder engagement, from October 18 to November 24, 2021. The next round of public engagement is scheduled to take place in the late winter of 2022.

Round 2 Engagement

The first round of public and stakeholder engagement took place in the spring of 2021, drawing upon findings from previous engagement activities held in 2019. The feedback from that first round of engagement helped us to establish the goals and values to guide our analysis. This led to the development of four scenarios based on levels of service enhancement, which we used to spark the conversations around the second round of engagement. See Appendix A: Scenarios Presented for more details.

The intention for this round of engagement was to:

1. The gauge the level of service enhancement the community would be willing to support over the next 25 years.
2. Identify the key areas to focus that service enhancement.

Public Advisory Group

Our Public Advisory Group (PAG), comprised of 12 individuals of diverse backgrounds, helps us ground our key decisions in the community. The PAG was established with a demographic split to reflect the customers of TheRide. They have helped us to frame our public engagement material and review the feedback.

Round 2 Engagement PAG Meeting Dates
Aug 11, 2021
Sept 22, 2021
Dec 1, 2021

PAG Meeting, December 1, 2021, with staff and some PAG members (some absent in photo).

Public and Stakeholder Meetings

The second round of public and stakeholder engagement was open for comment from October 18 to November 24, 2021. During that time, we received over 50 emails, phone calls and contacts through social media, and spoke to almost 700 people through direct in-person or online engagement and received 427 responses to our survey. For a more details on the specific events, please see Appendix B: Engagement Activities.

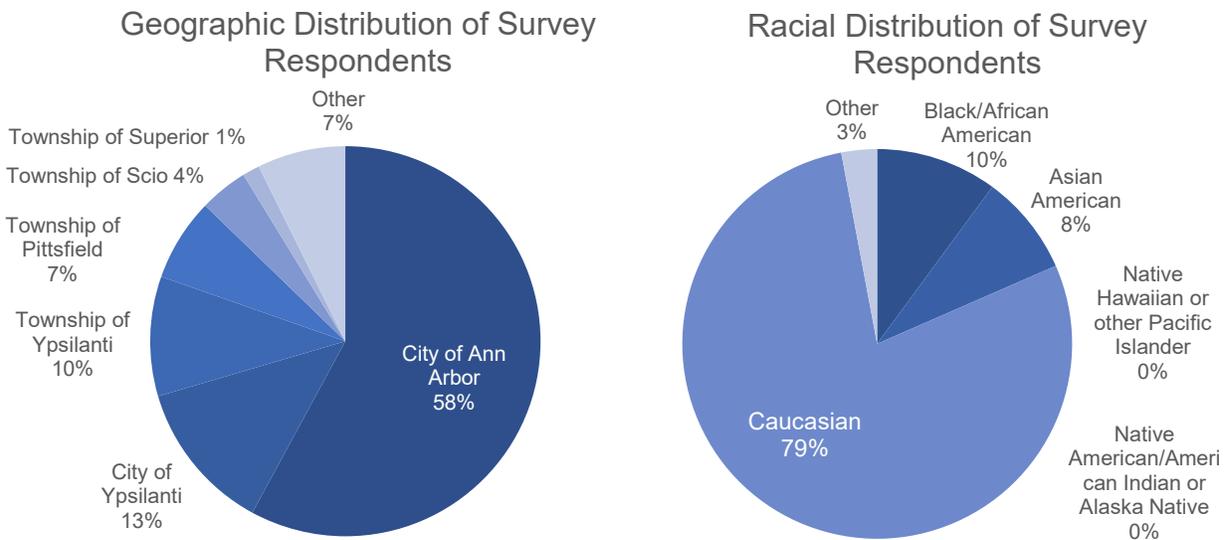| Oct 18 – Nov 24	People
Online Survey	427
Online Meetings • Public • Stakeholder • Staff	290+
In-Person Sessions	400+
Email, phone and social media contacts	50+

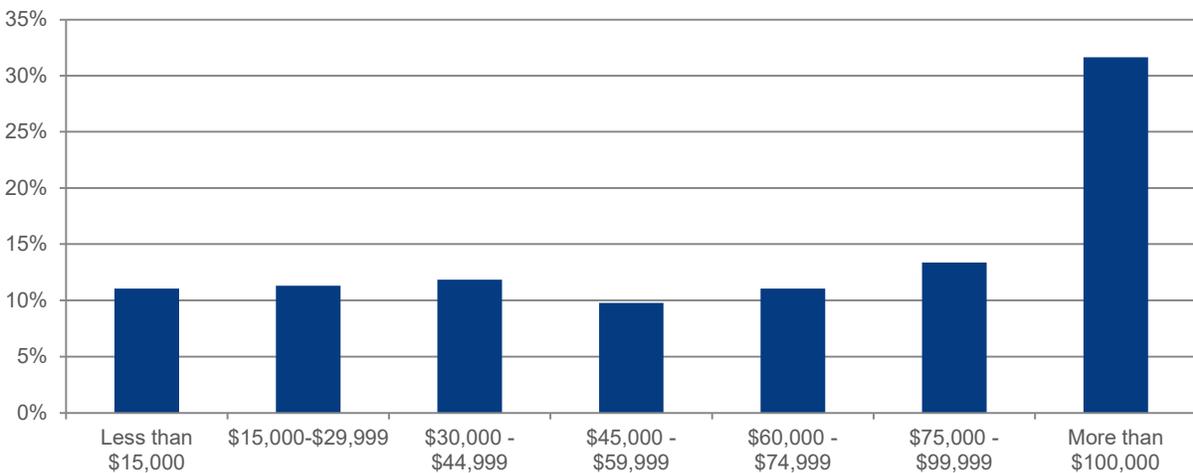*Ypsilanti Transit Center Public Engagement November 8, 2021*

Who We Heard From

As part of the engagement, we ran a public survey to collect community feedback. We received 427 responses representing various viewpoints. However, as we integrate the feedback from this survey, we must keep in mind the voices that we heard and the voices that we did not. The respondents to the survey were mostly Caucasian with a higher household income. Not all of them are frequent transit users, but people likely do self-select to participate if they have some interest in transit.

Our in-person engagement feedback at the transit centers and particularly the Ypsilanti Transit Center (YTC), represented a higher proportion of African Americans and frequent transit riders. We included all feedback in the What We Heard section but we acknowledge that the results of the survey are not a full representation of the demographics in our service area.

Geographic Distribution of Survey Respondents

- Other 7%
- Township of Superior 1%
- Township of Scio 4%
- Township of Pittsfield 7%
- Township of Ypsilanti 10%
- City of Ypsilanti 13%
- City of Ann Arbor 58%

Racial Distribution of Survey Respondents

- Other 3%
- Black/African American 10%
- Asian American 8%
- Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander 0%
- Native American/American Indian or Alaska Native 0%
- Caucasian 79%

Annual Household Income Distribution of Survey Respondents

(Bar chart showing income distribution with y-axis 0% to 35%)

- Less than $15,000: ~11%
- $15,000-$29,999: ~11%
- $30,000 - $44,999: ~12%
- $45,000 - $59,999: ~10%
- $60,000 - $74,999: ~11%
- $75,000 - $99,999: ~13%
- More than $100,000: ~32%

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What We Heard

The survey results echoed the what we heard through our on-line and in-person engagements. See Appendix C: for more details. This section represents all feedback received and is grouped into a few key themes.

Transformational Change

The resounding message that we heard was a desire for a major enhancement to our transit system that will transform the way people move around our community. We heard that people wanted to be able to get around the area conveniently and quickly. Providing a better transit service for people who need it most improves the access to jobs, school, and housing. This was a very common reason why people felt we should transform our transit system. Another major reason was to reduce our carbon footprint; better transit leads to fewer car trips, which mean less emissions, which is good for our climate.

Most of the people that we spoke to understood that transformational change will have a cost associated with it, but they indicated a willingness to pay the increased millage when the benefits are clear. However, we also heard concerns, especially from Ypsilanti Township, about the effect higher tax rates will have on people, particularly those with lower incomes.

Scenario Choice

The feedback was structured around four scenarios, as described in Appendix A: Scenarios Presented. Many people were very excited about the idea of high-frequency network, transit priority features, and Bus Rapid Transit in Scenarios 3 and 4 as major selling features and saw coordination with municipal governments' land use planning as a key to the project success. Once successful, scenario 4 especially will mean the best results for our desired outcomes of improving equity, achieving our climate goals, and stimulating our local economy. The desire for transformational change was the same for frequent and infrequent transit users among survey respondents.

Scenario Choice by Transit Usage
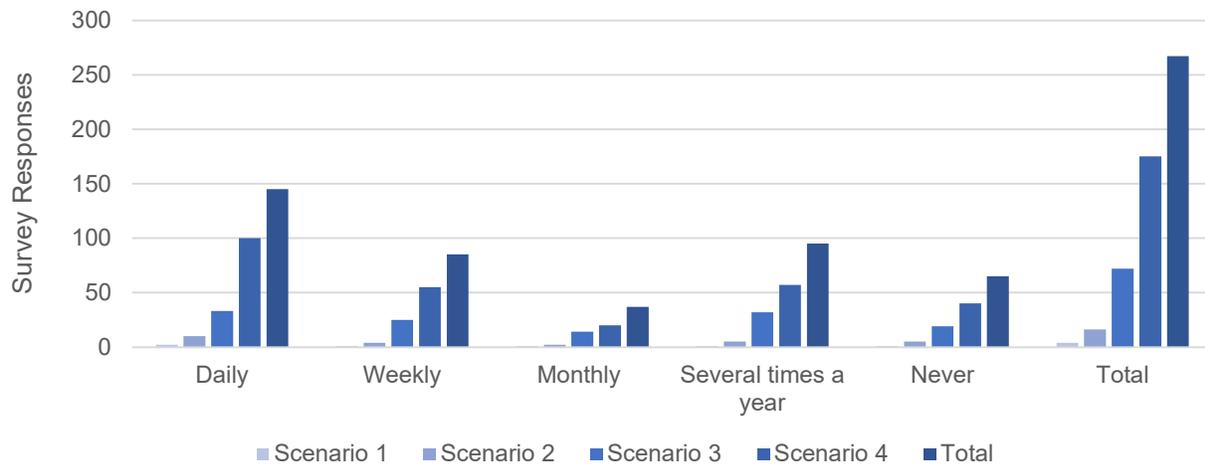
Survey respondents from the City of Ann Arbor, the City of Ypsilanti, the Township of Ypsilanti, the Township of Pittsfield, and the Township of Scio are supportive of scenario 4. Respondents from the Township of Superior are more supportive of Scenario 3.

Survey respondents who are African American, Asian American, retired, over the age of 65, or under the age of 19 were still generally in favor of Scenario 4 but with a less clear preference than other groups.

In total 64% of respondents preferred Scenario 4, 29% preferred Scenario 3, 6% preferred Scenario 3 and only 1% preferred Scenario 1. We must keep in mind that the people most interested in transit are the most likely to participate in this kind of engagement.

Convenience, Reliability and Dependability

The people we spoke with generally would like to see high frequency network across the entire service area for longer hours each day, and on weekends. They are interested in shorter, more reliable trips and not just to the downtown centers, but also connecting anywhere across the service area. They saw the importance of local partnerships, like the University of Michigan and municipalities both in the service area and in the broader region.

High Frequency Service

A major topic of interest is high frequency service, meaning routes with 15 minute or better service. Different demographics in the survey often had different priorities. However, when asked to choose their top three priorities, almost everyone across race, income level, work situation, age, transit usage, and municipality of residence included high-frequency network making it the most common choice by a wide margin.

We heard that people want faster service with less waiting time. Many people said that frequency is a key driver to making transit easier and more convenient to use. This is not only important for those travelling into the downtowns, but also to those travelling across town outside of the centers. See section Multi-Directional Connecti, below.

> *I went to Kerrytown by bus 65 at Noon today. The bus comes every 30 minutes, but 30 minutes felt too short for my errands plus getting to and from the bus… I ended up waiting 20 minutes at the bus stop. The errand ended up taking like 1 hr 20 mins when it could've taken less than an hour total, say if the busses came every 20 minutes. So this would incentivize me to take the bus more, if I knew I didn't have to rush for a bus in 30 mins at Noon or have to spend 1+ hours on my errands.*

Off-Peak Service

Many people talked about the need for more service on the evenings, and weekends. We heard a desire for 30-mintue service in off-peak times, expanding the hours of operation into the morning and evening. While some people did request more NightRide service, including better availability and expanding it to cover the entire daytime service area, it was overall less of a

priority to most people. We saw from the survey respondents that off-peak service was the second most common priority after high frequency service. Off-peak service was ranked very highly for people in most age brackets and work situations except for students and people under 19, who ranked it much lower. African Americans also rated it much lower than other races, favoring FlexRide instead.

We heard that someone planning a trip outside the peak times needs to plan a lot more to coordinate travel. This includes work and leisure. If someone's time obligation is within the regular service hours but it ends when there is infrequent or no service, they may not choose transit at all.

> *As someone who relied on AAATA for over a decade to get to and from my job as a food service worker, because of the winding routes and where I lived, it took over an hour to get downtown, and often on weekends I would be forced to use cabs instead of the bus because of the short hours… I know it's easy to focus resources toward the 9 to 5 crowd, but we must center those who rely on the bus exclusively for transport.*

Express and Bus Rapid Transit Service

The people we spoke to were generally interested in the idea of integrating faster routes with fewer stops that use transit priority features along major corridors. Many of the concerns that we heard about present service were related to long trip times and reliability, indicating a desire to resolve these issues. Many customers said that BRT services were needed on high demand corridors, especially between Ypsilanti and Ann Arbor along Washtenaw Avenue, with a focus on the downtown areas.

When respondents to the survey chose their top 3 priorities, Express and BRT services were very close in number, with a slight preference toward BRT. There may have been some confusion among respondents about the difference between these services, but even together they rank lower than the desire for high frequency service. Express and especially BRT services were less important to people with an annual household income between $30,000 and $60,000; all other income groups ranked them much higher. This may be due to where these people live in relation to the proposed routes.

A frequent concern was about a BRT competing for space on a busy roadway. To make a BRT project successful, we will need to align the interests of many different stakeholders. Even while acknowledging the benefit of a BRT, there was some pessimism about the feasibility.

> *Some of the attributes of BRT such as signal prioritization, queue jumping and limited stops could be implemented on any major transit route.*

Regional Connections

Many survey respondents cited that we need better regional connections, however it was not often the top priority. Infrequent transit users, and those from the Township of Ypsilanti ranked Regional Connections much higher than other groups. This is consistent with what we heard

from other conversations, where connections from Ypsilanti to Western Wayne County were raised as priorities. Stronger regional connections would improve access to jobs for people in a broader area, with an emphasis on local connections to SMART. We heard a need to access to other areas such as U of M medical facilities, Scio Township and Ann Arbor Township, Superior Township, and Dixboro.

There was some mixed discussion on the need for new or larger park and ride lots across the region with service to Ann Arbor or Ypsilanti. Some people felt that bringing people in from a broader catchment area will mean more fare revenue and ultimately better service. Others felt that a large expansion of park and rides would be a poor return on investment and may detract from ridership growth. Generally, park and ride expansion was not a high priority for survey respondents, particularly current riders.

Ann Arbor needs a connection to western Wayne County, not just downtown Detroit or the airport. Needs a connection to SMART in particular. The gap needs to be closed.

Multi-Directional Connectivity

We heard that when customers travel, it is not always to downtowns but across town outside of the centers. For these diverse trips, High Frequency Service on two routes that cross means less waiting and faster transfers.

It is easy to get in and out of downtown from all around A2. But it is really cumbersome to get to another part in town without having to go downtown. E.g., from my house, if I want to go 75 degrees to the left or right, it would be nice to get there straight instead of having to go downtown and transfer to a second bus to get me where I want. It takes way too much time for a short distance. We need transit for people outside of downtown who just want to go a couple miles radius in their own neighborhood without having to go downtown

Things to Consider while making Transit Better

The need for better collaboration came through as a theme in many of the conversations that we had about the future of transit in the area. Collaboration with the University of Michigan to coordinate planning and operations was consistently raised.

The municipal governments were mentioned as a key player, for both new projects and daily operations. The success of transit priority features, especially fully dedicated bus lanes depends on the municipal, County and State partners to support changing the streetscape. There was concern that such a big change would not be supported by the whole community or the local and State governments. Land use planning can also encourage denser development around transit nodes and major corridors.

The municipalities have a major role in ensuring good pedestrian connections to TheRide's services. If there are more buses and the same number of cars, it may become more dangerous for pedestrians or cyclists without safe street design. This includes the repair and snow clearing of the sidewalks and bus stops. Poorly cleared bus stops and sidewalks can render otherwise accessible transit service unusable for people with mobility issues.

Another concern was the burden of the increased millage on those who are least able to pay for it. It makes it more difficult that those are also the people who often need good transit service the most. To gauge this problem, we turn to the elected officials that we spoke to. There was a mix of skepticism and optimism about whether the service would improve in time to justify the tax increase for those affected most. Each politician had different concerns, but most were supportive of the more transformational changes proposed in scenarios 3 and 4 and the benefits that those changes will have on their constituents in the long-term.

> *I am loving the idea of one of the top budget plans. As a rider most of everything proposed will benefit me. I do have a concern though with a millage increase and property taxes go up, how will this impact rent prices and home prices and the cost of living in Washtenaw County. The cost of living is already way too extreme. I am a food service worker downtown and I believe I make a fair wage and I work for a small business who is just barely getting by.*
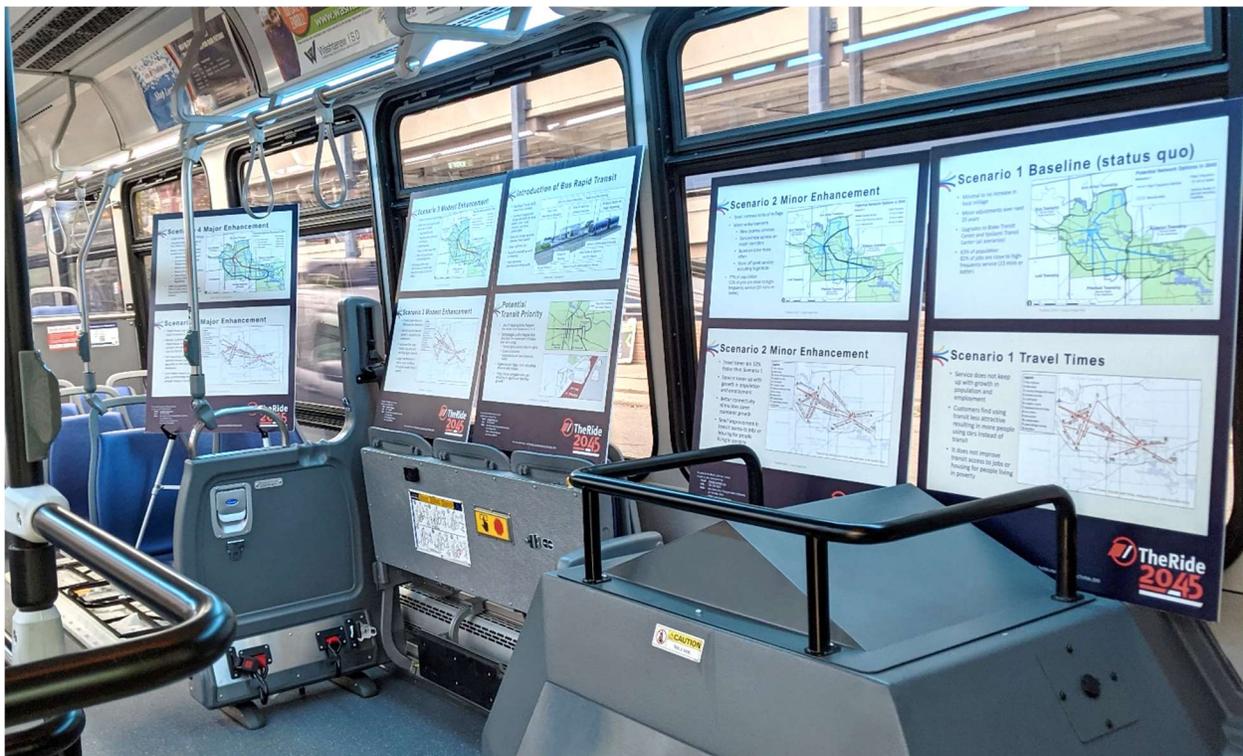
Engagement material used in November 2021 public events.

Using Your Feedback

Voices We Did Not Hear

While using the feedback we received, it is always important to keep in mind who it is coming from and recognize the gaps in our knowledge. As we take the next steps in presenting a single plan, we must use our professional judgement to interpret the data with this context in mind.

The respondents to the survey were mostly Caucasian with a higher household income. This is not reflective of the transit users in the area. As a result, we place more emphasis on in-person engagement feedback at the transit centers and particularly the Ypsilanti Transit Center, where we spoke with a higher proportion of African Americans. We also acknowledge the need to hear from non-transit riders, who were probably less interested in participating our public engagement are underrepresented in our feedback.

Creating a Plan That Works for Everyone

We heard through many conversations the need to serve those in our community who need it most. The importance of equity came through in many of our conversations and helps us to frame our approach, see section Next Steps for more details. We found that most of the priorities for low-income survey respondents lined up with the general trends. See Appendix C: Important Features.

We are able to review some of the survey responses in detail when we look at specific demographics and use our conversations to help put that feedback in context. For example, most demographic groups did not prioritize increasing FlexRide except for African and Asian Americans. This seems to run contrary to the most other feedback, where we heard that people would generally prefer a fixed route rather than on-demand service. These groups favored the idea of first and last mile solutions, and mobility as a service more than other groups. This may be due high housing prices in the centers forcing demographics that tend to have lower incomes to the outskirts where they are less served by transit.

The connection thread is probably a lack of access to transit. By providing easily accessible high frequency routes to the places identified in the Opportunity Index, we can hopefully address the reason for the responses from these groups in particular. The Opportunity Index is an important tool for identifying which communities have access to structural privilege and which do not. The index can guide future decisions about where to invest our collective resources and how to consider policy changes to advance equity.

We also heard that switching to zero-emission buses was very high priority among most survey respondents. While there is a parallel propulsion study being undertaken by TheRide, it helps to tell us that many people felt the need to have a positive impact on the environment.

Funding

Once we understand the appetite of the community to invest in transit, we can add the features that are most important to the community. Gauging that level of investment is therefore the key to our next step but we do not have enough information on the people who did not participate in our engagements. Since a significant portion of transit funding in the Ann Arbor-Ypsilanti area comes from local millage, a successful transit plan must be accepted by the whole community, not just transit users.

Understanding the level of investment that the entire community supports will determine the breadth of the plan that we put forward. Being most in touch with their own voters, we are using our conversations with elected officials to help us understand their perspective. While there was some concern over the impact of a tax increase, the feedback was largely supportive.

As we develop a single plan from here, we must work closely with the board of TheRide, who makes decisions on future tax rates, to make sure our plan is feasible.

Where Should We Start?

The scenarios as presented were examples of how features could be packaged. Based on this feedback, we will start with the most popular scenarios as a base and adjust from there. We will make those adjustments based on what we learned from the feedback.

Many people liked scenario 4 because it creates transformational change to the system that achieves our desired outcomes. Elements that were most important were high frequency network, off-peak service, faster and more direct connections to variety of locations, not just the downtowns. All of these services work together and cannot be achieved without a significant level of investment. This scenario has the greatest benefits to our goals of equity, the environment, and the economy, which resounded with the community.

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Next Steps

This concludes our second round of engagement. The next and final round is scheduled to occur in late winter of 2022. As we put the feedback we received into context, we will spend the next several weeks working on the implementation staging and financial plan for a single scenario. The final round of engagement will focus on tweaking this draft plan.

The next steps in the process will be:

Further Analysis	Further anaylsis on the concepts that people found most important, especially how the plan relates to equity and the environment.
Develop draft plan	Based on the analysis and the feedback, keeping in mind the voices we heard and the voices we did not.
Implementation and Financial Planning	Here we break draft plan down over time so we know how much to spend and when
Public Engagement Round 3	Final round of public engagement based on staged plan.
Final Plan	We will adjust the plan based on the final round of engagement. Once adopted, it will guide our decisions for the next 25 years.

Round 3 Engagement would include drop-ins and pop-ups at Stations, webinars with stakeholders, online public meetings, and an Online survey. **Check out our website at Theride.org for updates, to sign up for our newsletter or leave a comment at any time.**

2021				2022	
Winter	Spring	Summer	Fall	Winter	Spring
	Round 1				
		Round 2			
				Round 3	
Ongoing: Public Advisory Group meetings, website comment form, emails to TheRide					

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Appendix A: Scenarios Presented

Scenario 1 Baseline

Scenario 1 was presented as the baseline or status quo scenario with minimal to no investment and stagnant or declining ridership.

There is minimal to no increase in local millage, meaning there is minimal to no investment and stagnant or declining ridership. In scenario 1 there are minor adjustments over the next 25 years. In all scenarios upgrades to Blake Transit Center and Ypsilanti Transit Center are made.

In this scenario, 63% of the population and 82% of jobs are close to high frequency service (15 minutes or better).
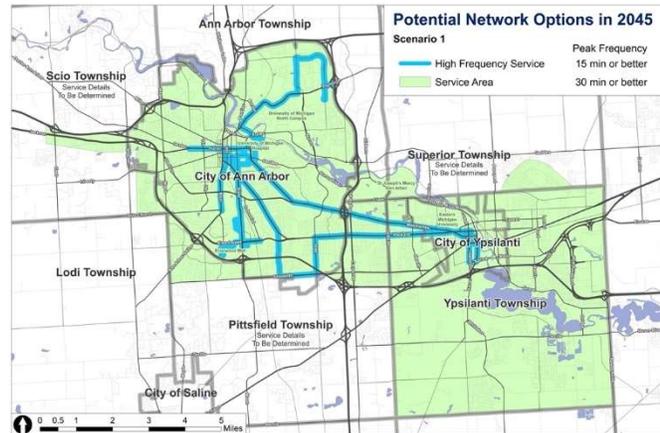

Scenario 2 Minor Enhancement

In scenario 2, there are minimal investments made resulting in limited ridership increase.

There is a small increase to local millage. Minor enhancements in scenario 2 include:
- New express services
- Concentration of service on major corridors
- Buses are on time more often
- More off-peak service including NightRide

In this scenario, 77% of the population and 93% of jobs are close to high-frequency service (15 minutes or better).
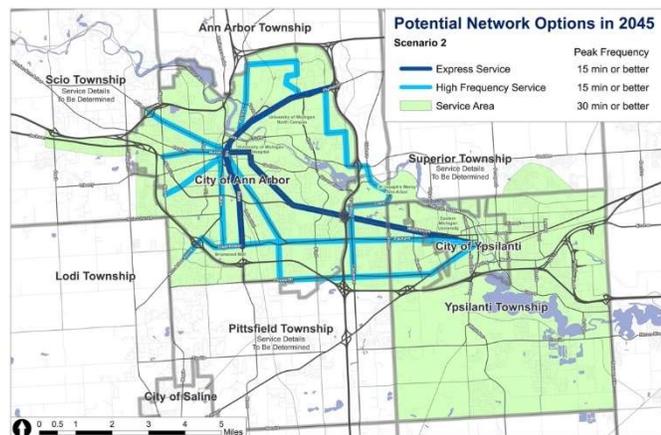
Scenario 3 Modest Enhancement

In scenario 3, there is a modest increase to local millage. Here, we present better service all around, with new types of transit such as:

- Bus Rapid Transit (BRT)
- High frequency service in more places
- Better transfers
- Buses are on-time, more often
- More off- peak service including NightRide

In this scenario, 86% of the population and 96% of jobs are close to high-frequency service (15 minutes or better).
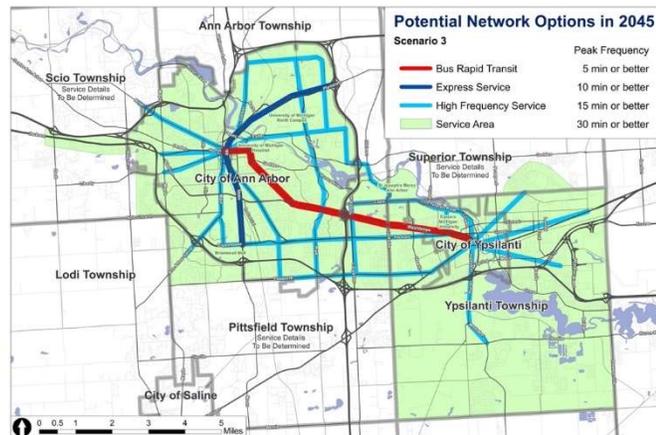
Scenario 4 Major Enhancement

In scenario 4, there is a large increase to local millage. With this investment, scenario 4 sees a transformational change of the entire transit system. Better services change how people get around the area:

- More Bus Rapid Transit
- Broad network of high frequency service
- Better transfers
- Buses are on time, more often
- Even more off-peak service including NightRide

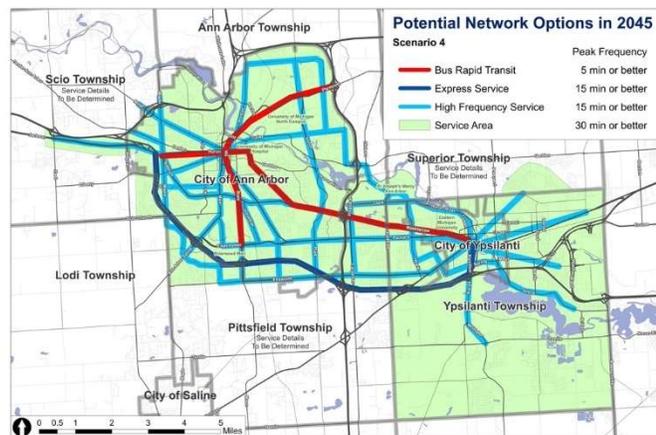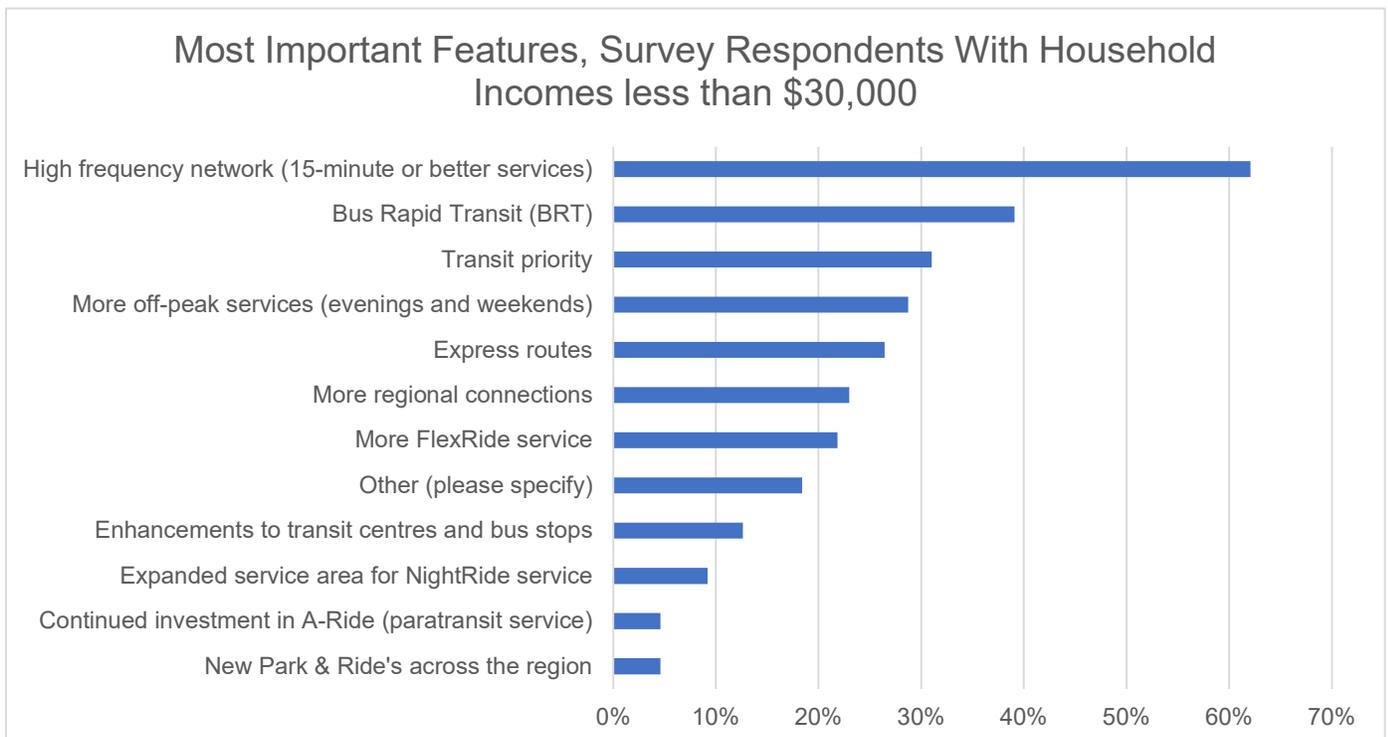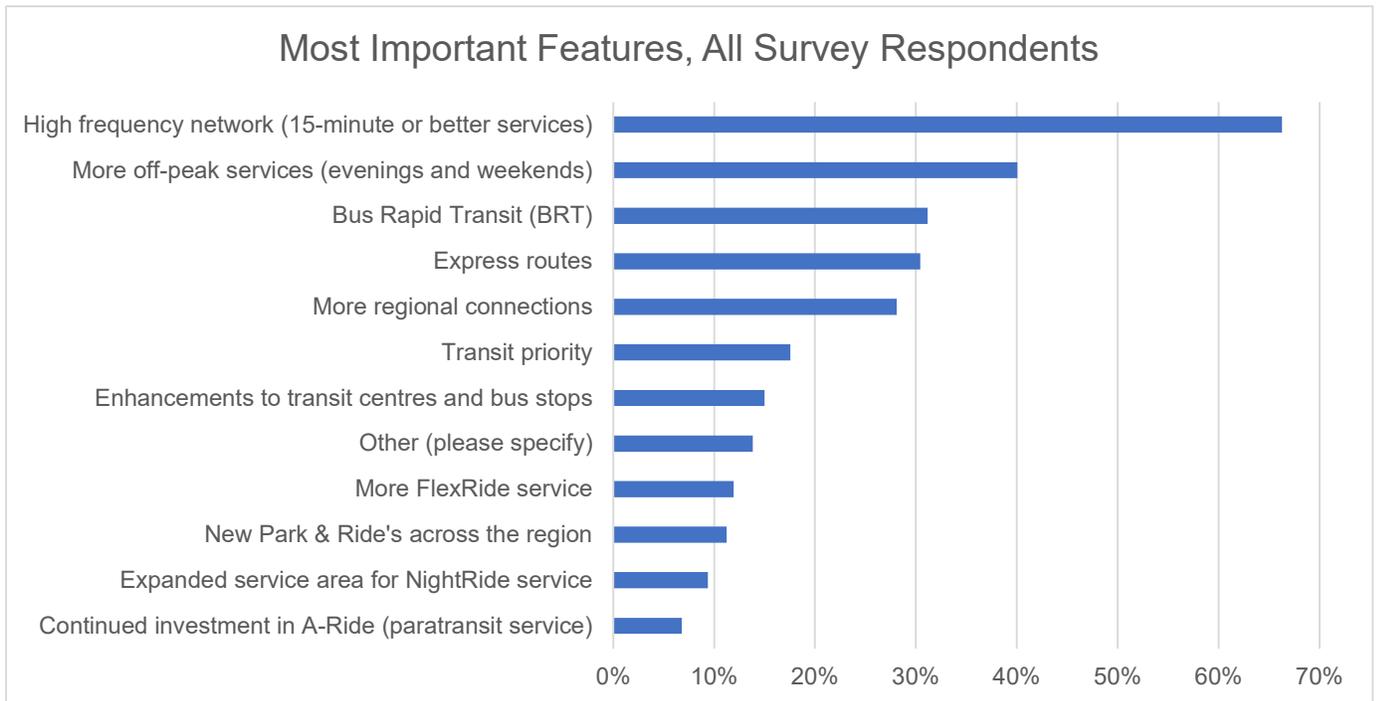In scenario 4, 93% of the population and 99% of jobs are close to high-frequency service (15 minutes or better).
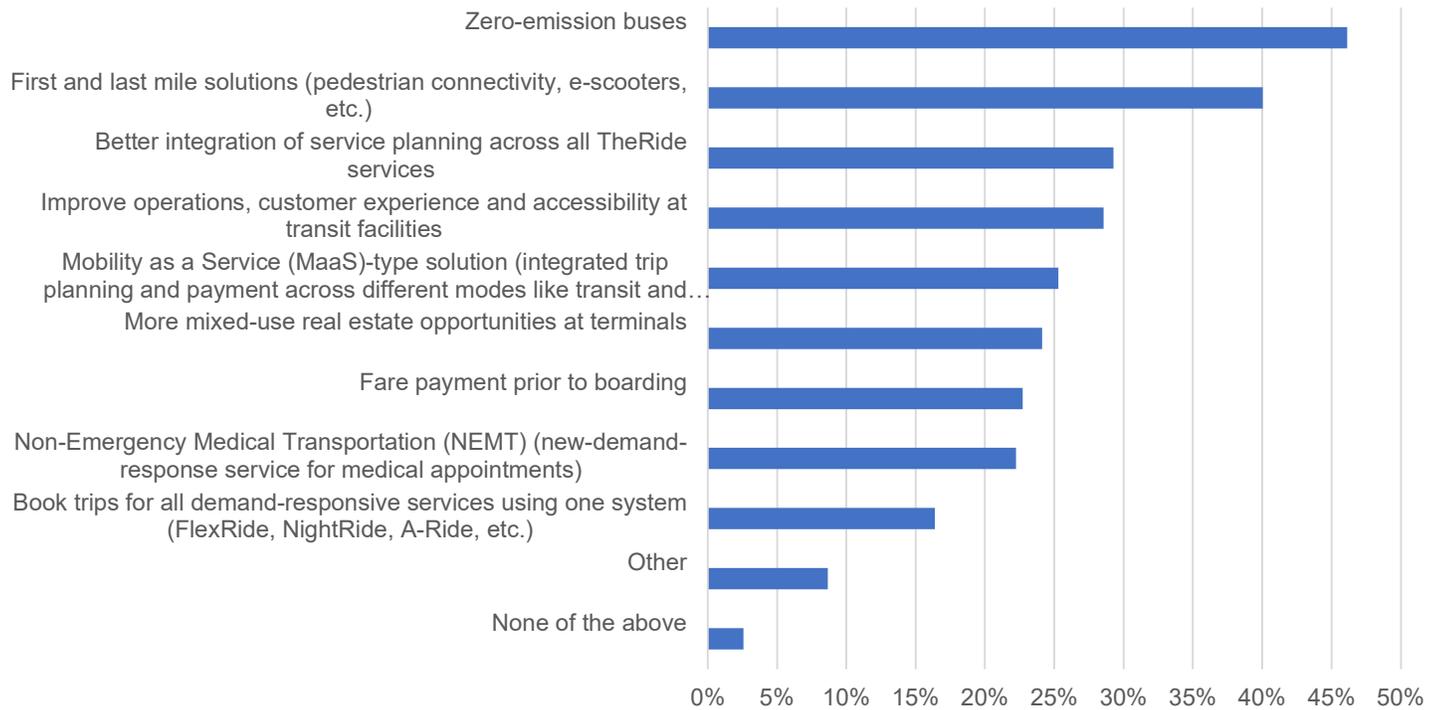
Appendix B: Engagement Activities

Stakeholder Group	Date
Board Meeting	6-Oct
Staff Town Hall 1	14-Oct
Staff Town Hall 2	14-Oct
Local Advisory Council	9-Nov
Stakeholder Webinar 1	20-Oct
Stakeholder Webinar 2	25-Oct
Ann Arbor Transportation Commission	20-Oct
Ann Arbor Transportation and Planning	19-Nov
A2ZERO Ambassadors Transportation Instructors Follow up	22-Oct
DDA Affordable Housing and Econ. Dev. Comm.	10-Nov
Ypsilanti City Council	19-Oct
YDDA Board	16-Dec
Ypsilanti Township Leadership Team	4-Nov
Ypsilanti Township Board	16-Nov
Scio Transportation Alternatives Planning Committee	10-Nov
Pittsfield Township Board	10-Nov
Washtenaw County Commission	20-Oct
WATS Policy Committee	17-Nov
WATS Technical Committee	3-Nov
RTA staff/consulting team	17-Nov
WCC Webinar	16-Nov
Online Public meeting #1	26-Oct
Online Public meeting #2	28-Oct
Online Public meeting #3	3-Nov
Online Public meeting #4	4-Nov
In-person Session: Ypsilanti Transit Center	8-Nov
In-person Session: Blake Transit Center	9-Nov
In-person Session: Ypsilanti District Library	10-Nov
In-person Session: Central Campus Transit Center	10-Nov
In-person Session: Eastern Michigan University	11-Nov
In-person Session: University of Michigan North Campus	12-Nov

Appendix C: Important Features

Most Important Features, All Survey Respondents

Feature	Value
High frequency network (15-minute or better services)	~66%
More off-peak services (evenings and weekends)	~40%
Bus Rapid Transit (BRT)	~31%
Express routes	~30%
More regional connections	~28%
Transit priority	~17%
Enhancements to transit centres and bus stops	~15%
Other (please specify)	~14%
More FlexRide service	~12%
New Park & Ride's across the region	~11%
Expanded service area for NightRide service	~9%
Continued investment in A-Ride (paratransit service)	~6%

Most Important Features, Survey Respondents With Household Incomes less than $30,000

Feature	Value
High frequency network (15-minute or better services)	~62%
Bus Rapid Transit (BRT)	~39%
Transit priority	~31%
More off-peak services (evenings and weekends)	~29%
Express routes	~27%
More regional connections	~23%
More FlexRide service	~22%
Other (please specify)	~18%
Enhancements to transit centres and bus stops	~13%
Expanded service area for NightRide service	~9%
Continued investment in A-Ride (paratransit service)	~5%
New Park & Ride's across the region	~5%

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Other Ideas By Importance, All Survey Respondents

Other Ideas By Importance, Survey Respondents With Household Incomes less than $30,000