

2011 Annual Report



Planning for Greater Akron
The Akron Metropolitan Area Transportation Study

Special Publication

Annual Report 2011

A Look Back at 2011 by Chairman Pfaff

Each year poses its unique challenges and opportunities. 2011 was no exception. I had the privilege of serving as the chair of the AMATS Policy Committee during a time of tremendous accomplishments by the agency.

2011 saw the agency complete its update of the Greater Akron area's Transportation Improvement Program (TIP), a \$625 million four-year program of highway, transit and bicycle and pedestrian improvement projects. The new TIP prudently sets a priority for preservation of the area's existing transportation system rather than expansion projects due to the increasing scarcity of project funding. Also on the TIP front, in December AMATS approved \$8 million in federal funding for 25 badly needed resurfacing projects.



PFAFF

I was delighted that, as the agency prepares a Regional Bike Plan for the area's network of bike trails, it is actively seeking the insights of the cycling community. AMATS officials hosted two public bike meetings in Akron and Kent and were pleasantly surprised by the high level of enthusiasm among participants. Safety and improved on-road amenities were frequently cited as the greatest needs of the area's network by attendees. As executive director of METRO, I am pleased that the agency recognizes the need to coordinate bike and transit use.

Another effort to promote regional connectivity – the Connecting Communities Planning Grant Program – had a successful sophomore year. The program awards two \$50,000 grants for the study of potential improvements such as bicycle, pedestrian and transit-oriented projects. Work continued throughout 2011 on the city of Akron and METRO's *Downtown Akron Connectivity Study* and the Village of Richfield's *Crossroad of Commerce & Community Study*, the first recipients of these grants. These studies are expected to conclude this year as work commences on the city of Ravenna's *Safe Alternatives: Less Traffic (SALT) study* and the Village of Boston Heights' *Comprehensive Land Use and Transportation Plan* - the recipients of grants in 2011.

The Northeast Ohio Sustainable Communities Consortium (NEOSCC) – of which AMATS is one of 31 members – began in earnest. With AMATS Director Jason Segedy's election as chairman of the consortium, the interests of the agency and the Greater Akron area will be well represented.

Last December, as I prepared to turn the reins of the committee over to Ravenna Mayor Joe Bica, I felt a profound sense of accomplishment by the agency that was only matched by my sense of optimism for the coming year. AMATS will meet the challenges of 2012 just as it has met every challenge in previous years - with dedication, diligence and vigor.

Robert Pfaff
METRO Executive Director
2011 AMATS Policy Committee Chairman

Planning

Cycling Initiatives

In early 2011, AMATS launched several initiatives to address the growing cycling needs of the Greater Akron area. Among these initiatives was an outreach to the area's cycling community as part of its development of a Regional Bike Plan. The agency felt that the community's insights would help the area develop a bike network that presents a viable, sustainable transportation option.

Public Bike Meetings – In April, AMATS launched its cycling outreach by hosting two Public Bike Meetings in Akron and Kent. Improved safety and more on-road facilities were frequently cited by attendees as the area's greatest biking needs. Another suggestion that was pursued by the agency during the development of the Regional Bike Plan was the idea of 'benchmarking' the area's efforts with what comparable communities and regions are doing to promote biking in other parts of the country.



Agency personnel gained valuable feedback from participants regarding the early drafts of the Regional Bike Plan and Bike User Map. They also heard about what features and services that attendees would value on Switching-Gears.org, AMATS' new web site devoted to cycling. The meetings drew a mix of residents and representatives from various cycling groups including policy makers such as Summit County Council Member At-Large Sandra Kurt, Kent Service Director Jim Bowling and Green Ward 4 Councilman John Summerville.

Bike User Map – Throughout the year, AMATS continued crafting a map to assist cyclists in planning safe routes for travel based on input from the cycling community. Released in March 2012, the *Bike User Map* rates major roads in the Greater Akron area as *Easy*, *Moderate*, *Difficult*, or *Very Difficult* based on such conditions as road width, speed limits, and traffic levels. Cyclists may use the map to choose the best routes for them according to their ability. The map isn't just a resource for cyclists. The agency, communities and project sponsors will use it to identify locations for bike-related improvements.

Switching-Gears.org – The agency continued its development of a new web site dedicated to promoting cycling in the area as a viable transportation option – Switching-Gears.org. Launched in March 2012, the site is proving to be a significant resource of information and dialogue, not only for the cycling community, but the entire Greater Akron area. The new site provides ample opportunities for blogging and sharing information. Now visitors can help shape public policy by sharing their thoughts as to what AMATS can do to improve the area's roads and trails to make them more bike and pedestrian friendly.



Bike Week – AMATS actively promoted May's National Bike Week. The agency sponsored *Commuter Challenge*, a competition among city of Akron employees to get on their bikes in mid-May in celebration of National Bike Week. The agency gave away prizes donated by local bike shops to the top six commuters who logged the most time commuting to work on their bikes and registrants received free *Switching-Gears Bike Week 2011* water bottles. During the week, AMATS also established *Energizer Stations* at various locations throughout Akron to present information about the agency's various biking initiatives.

Connecting Communities Planning Grant Program

The Connecting Communities Planning Grant Program concluded a successful second year. The program provides \$100,000 worth of grants to help communities develop transportation plans that focus on livability practices identified in *Connecting Communities*. Under the program, the agency accepts applications for planning studies, such as sidewalk or transit-oriented development plans.

Work continued throughout 2011 on the city of Akron and METRO's *Downtown Akron Connectivity Study* and the Village of Richfield's *Crossroad of Commerce & Community Study*, the first recipients of these grants.

The Akron-METRO study concluded in early December and presents strategies to improve connectivity, accessibility and mobility between Akron's neighborhoods and districts located in the downtown area.

The Richfield study will be a comprehensive land use plan for the area surrounding the intersection of Interstates 77 and 271. Both studies are expected to be completed in 2012.

In December, AMATS awarded grants to the Village of Boston Heights for its *Comprehensive Land Use and Transportation Plan* and the city of Ravenna for its *Safe Alternatives: Less Traffic (SALT)* study.

Boston Heights will develop a comprehensive land use and transportation plan that will include a development strategy for the village's state Route 8 corridor. The plan will analyze all aspects of traffic – vehicular, transit, bicycle and pedestrian – to develop traffic management strategies.

The plan will also address how to connect the village's residential, commercial and municipal areas, including potential pedestrian and bicycle access to the nearby Cuyahoga Valley National Park, the Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath Trail, and the Metro Parks Bike & Hike Trail.

Ravenna – in concert with the townships of Ravenna and Rootstown – will pursue its SALT study of the state Route 44/Prospect Street Corridor, which extends through central Portage County. The study will present options to promote transit use and safe pedestrian and bicycle traffic within this five-mile, heavily travelled corridor.



Northeast Ohio Sustainable Communities Consortium (NEOSCC)

The NEOSCC was established in January 2011 and is a three-year planning program funded largely by a highly competitive, first-of-its-kind, \$4.25 million federal grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) as part of the new federal Partnership for Sustainable Communities Initiative. The Sustainable Communities Initiative is an interagency collaboration among HUD, the U.S. Department of Transportation, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.



The consortium is developing a coordinated and integrated approach to planning efforts for land use, transportation, economic and workforce development, and infrastructure investments for a 12-county planning area comprised of Ashtabula, Cuyahoga, Geauga, Lake, Lorain, Mahoning, Medina, Portage, Summit, Stark, Trumbull and Wayne counties. AMATS is not only one of the consortium's 32 members, but it is one of the group's founding members. The NEOSCC has attracted over 120 organizations throughout Northeast Ohio to participate in its work.

In 2011, the consortium hired personnel and opened its project office in downtown Akron and satellite offices in Cleveland and Youngstown. Among the other organizational tasks accomplished by the consortium were the election of officers and board members. AMATS Director Jason Segedy was elected to serve as vice chairman of the NEOSCC Board during 2011 and was later elected to serve as chairman during 2012.



SEGEDY

In April 2011, the consortium identified five committees or "work streams" to focus on certain issues facing the region. (The term "work stream" is used to indicate that the work will flow through the group as part of the overall planning initiative.) The consortium work streams encompass Economic Development, Environment, Housing & Communities, Connections, and Quality Connected Places. The work stream members had their first meetings in September and began the process of collecting existing conditions and trends data.

One of the first deliverables was the development of a first-ever 12-county regional existing land use map. In October, a consortium team led by the Stark County Regional Planning Commission and the Stark County Area Transportation Study began development of the map along with members from AMATS, Eastgate and the Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency and other organizations. Completed in early 2012, the map details the location of specific land uses such as industrial, commercial, and park lands. Because the map is based on current real estate data, it provides a real-time picture of vacant urbanized land throughout the region.

Engineering

Transportation Improvement Program

AMATS is responsible for preparing and maintaining the Greater Akron area's Transportation Improvement Program (TIP), a four-year program of over 104 highway, public transit, and bicycle and pedestrian improvement projects that are scheduled to receive \$625 million in federal funds. Of this total, the agency provides \$71.5 million in funding for over 70 projects.

In 2011, \$91 million in federal funds were expended on area highway and public transit projects. Of this total, \$61.5 million was for highway projects and more than \$29.5 million for transit projects. Another \$1.9 million was spent on bicycle and pedestrian improvement projects.

In June, the Federal Highway Administration and the Federal Transit Administration approved a new TIP for the area that spans Fiscal Years 2012 through 2015. The new program sets a priority for preservation of the area's existing transportation system rather than expansion projects due to funding constraints.

The latest program provides about \$470 million to maintenance-type projects over the next four years, a near tripling of the previous program's four years of projects. In contrast, funding for expansion-type projects has been adjusted to nearly \$75 million, which is about half of the total programmed in the old TIP.

While the TIP is grounded in today's funding reality, it is not void of significant, new projects for the area. Among them are:

- Multi-million dollar improvements to the **Central Interchange** area in **Akron**.
- Construction of **Seiberling Way**, one of the final pieces of the Goodyear redevelopment project in **Akron**.
- An \$11 million capacity and safety improvement project on **East Summit Street** in **Kent**.
- Construction of **The PORTAGE Hike & Bike Trail** in **Kent** and the **Freedom Secondary Rail Trail** in **Akron** and **Tallmadge**.

A unique aspect of the new TIP is its increased investment in the area's bicycle and pedestrian facilities to more than \$13 million over the next several years. The program emphasizes regional connectivity and includes the construction of bike lanes on State Road in Cuyahoga Falls and Aurora Road in Macedonia and Twinsburg.

One likely result of the agency's focus on system preservation in 2011 is that resurfacing projects will continue to be increasingly important elements of the TIP well into the future. In December - following a comprehensive funding review - AMATS selected 25 projects to receive \$8 million in federal Resurfacing funds. Among the new projects selected were much-needed improvements at Ghent and Cleveland-Massillon roads in Bath Township, Riverview Road in Boston Township and Tallmadge Road in Rootstown Township.



Existing Congestion Study

In July, AMATS completed the *2010 Existing Congestion Study* which measured the capacity of the area's freeways, arterials and intersections to accommodate traffic volume during busy travel times. This analysis documents a marked improvement on Greater Akron area roadways when compared to a similar study compiled just four years earlier.



The area saw significant declines in congestion compared to 2006. A combination of people driving less and the completion of a number of major improvement projects, such as state Route 8 in northern Summit County, may be the reasons for the improving numbers. These findings are consistent with other agency analyses including crash studies and volume trends.

This development means that communities must devote more of the area's increasingly scarce funding resources to maintaining what they have rather than taking on costly expansion projects

Although the Greater Akron area saw improvements, the study does not mean that the area does not have its share of congestion problems. The analysis identified a number of freeway and arterial segments as deficient. While congestion improved overall, it will likely continue to be an issue in some locations into the foreseeable future.

Unique to the *2010 Existing Congestion Study* was the inclusion of "weave" analyses of 19 area freeway segments. The agency believed that the analyses were necessary because of the high number of vehicle lane changes in these locations due to closely spaced entrance and exit ramps. The two most closely spaced interchanges, Wolf Ledges/Grant Street and Main Street/Broadway in Akron, were among the segments analyzed. These segments, together with the Central Interchange, rank as the region's top congestion and safety concerns.

Traffic Crashes 2008-2010

Traffic crashes on the Greater Akron area's roadways and intersections showed a slight increase from 2009 to 2010, according to the latest three-year analysis released by AMATS in August.

The 2008-2010 analysis identifies high-crash roadway sections and intersections in the area. The agency uses this information to identify and plan for safety improvements throughout the region. The analysis is based on more than 52,000 crash records from the Ohio Department of Public Safety. AMATS identifies and ranks high-crash roadways, intersections and freeways by a composite score based on number of crashes, crash rate and severity.



The analysis shows that the total number of area crashes increased by 2 percent to 16,873 in 2010 from 16,471 in 2009. It should be noted that the 2010 total is still roughly 6,200 fewer crashes than in 2002. Crashes have been on a downward trend for the last decade due to a combination of things, such as the completion of much-needed safety improvements, fewer vehicle miles traveled because of the weak economy and safer vehicles.

Freeway locations are ranked by the Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT). It should be noted that the department only studies the top 100 freeway locations statewide that have a higher-than-predicted crash frequency. ODOT's analysis is done using methodology from the latest Highway Safety Manual. Four Greater Akron area freeway locations – three on state Route 8 and one on Interstate 77 - are on the department's list.

Traffic Counting Program

On-Road Counts

The collection of traffic count data is integral to sound transportation planning. During the summer, the agency compiles data regarding traffic volumes on Greater Akron area roadways and intersections for use in many of its analyses and the evaluation of new projects.

According to findings compiled by the agency during the 2011 traffic counting season, the volume of traffic in the Greater Akron area continues its downward trend although there are indicators that this trend is slowing.



The agency conducted 445 counts at various roadway segments and at three intersections and found that overall count volumes were down 7 percent compared to the previous year's count. 2011 is the sixth consecutive year for declining traffic volumes in the area; however, it is also the second consecutive year that the agency has not recorded a double-digit decrease in traffic volumes.

Bike and Pedestrian Counts

The summer of 2011 marked a first for AMATS in its nearly 50-year history as a metropolitan planning organization. In June, the agency conducted its first series of bike and pedestrian counts in downtown Akron and a second series during September in downtown Kent.

The counts were AMATS' first attempt at collecting detailed information about the travel patterns of the area's cyclists and pedestrians. These initial efforts laid the groundwork for the agency to conduct more extensive counts in 2012. AMATS will use the data collected from these counts for use in planning the area's developing bike network and related pedestrian improvements that promote connectivity.



Outreach

Annual Meeting

In October, more than 160 people attended the 2011 AMATS Annual Meeting at the Sheraton Suites in Cuyahoga Falls. The meeting’s theme was “collaboration” - a strategy that will likely grow in prominence to Northeast Ohio communities and planners as they must find new, innovative approaches to pursue improvements in the face of shrinking government funding.

The Civic Commons – a new regional, non-profit civic organization that strives to bring citizens and communities together through events and social media – assisted AMATS with the meeting. The organization’s personnel hosted question-and-answer sessions with the meeting’s featured speakers - state Rep. Kathleen Clyde (D-68) and Congressman Tim Ryan (D-17) - and facilitated several discussion groups among attendees. The Civic Commons facilitators encouraged attendees to share their experiences and insights regarding interagency and institutional collaboration during the day’s activities.



CLYDE



RYAN

Collaboration and a pooling of resources by communities may become a standard practice rather than the exception. Congressman Ryan - a member of the House Budget Committee - told meeting attendees that Congress may begin considering a new federal transportation spending authorization that could curb or cut spending.

New Media

In the latter months of 2011, AMATS began planning to tap into today’s social media and the opportunities that they present. Agency personnel decided that it was time to post pages on The Civic Commons, Facebook, Patch, Twitter, and YouTube as part of AMATS’ ongoing community outreach. Below are brief descriptions of AMATS’ social media pages:

The Civic Commons – A unique public engagement utility that fosters dialogue among participants on many issues facing Northeast Ohio. Agency personnel frequently participate in online discussions.

Facebook – [facebook.com/AMATSPPlanning](https://www.facebook.com/AMATSPPlanning) allows AMATS to post info and photos about agency-related events and topics in a user-friendly format while providing the public a free, convenient forum for online conversation.

Patch – A community-specific news and information platform. The agency maintains a blog on sites dedicated to Cuyahoga Falls, Fairlawn-Bath, Kent, Stow and Twinsburg.

Twitter – [@AMATSPPlanning](https://twitter.com/AMATSPPlanning) is the agency’s new Twitter page, which offers social networking and microblogging services for followers of the agency.

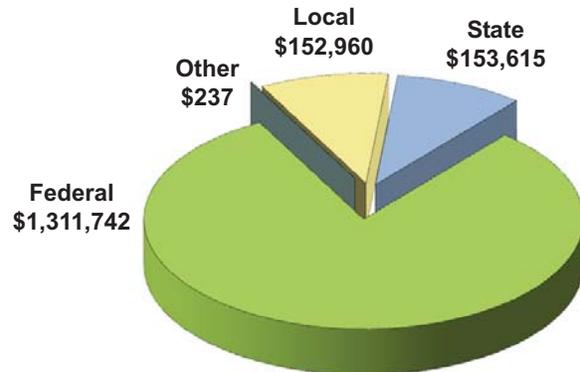
YouTube – [AMATSPPlanning](https://www.youtube.com/AMATSPPlanning) is the agency’s channel on YouTube, the video-sharing website. The agency has posted features on topics such as the Buckeye Traffic System, Kent’s Crain Avenue Bridge Project and its Connecting Communities Planning Grant Program.

AMATS Financial Data for Fiscal Year 2011

Expenditures by Type



Revenues by Type



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Mayor Joe Bica, Jr.

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- PORTAGE COUNTY COMMISSIONER** - Mr. Christopher Smeiles
- PORTAGE COUNTY ENGINEER'S OFFICE** - Mr. Michael Marozzi

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