# 2023 ANNUAL REPORT

The Yearly Chronicle of the Akron Metropolitan Area Transportation Study

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# **MY VANTAGE POINT**

2023 marked my 17th year with the Akron Metropolitan Area Transportation Study (AMATS) and my eighth year as its director. As I look back on 2023, I see an agency that continues to strive to make the region a better place. AMATS took on new challenges and, as a result, has found new opportunities to improve our region's access to funding.

AMATS continues to pursue maintenance of the area's existing transportation systems rather than costly expansions, a greater emphasis on complete street principles and active transportation modes, and, increasingly, safety as a consideration at the outset of project planning rather than an afterthought.

The year just passed was another significant step in the agency's ongoing evolution. In May, the AMATS Policy Committee approved the \$938.5 million *Transportation Improvement Program for Fiscal Years 2024 Through 2027* (TIP). The latest TIP continues to emphasize system preservation by providing \$721.2 million or about 77 percent of the program to maintenance-type projects for the area's highway and public transportation systems.

Also in May, AMATS adopted its *Safe Streets for All (SS4A) Action Plan for the Greater Akron Area,* marking the beginning of a concentrated regional effort to improve safety on area highways, streets, and roadways. This plan was the culmination of an eightmonth planning process that involved significant collaboration with a taskforce comprised of many AMATS members, numerous stakeholders, and the general public. A key component of the SS4A planning process involved a greater focus on locations with the area's most serious crashes — those resulting in fatality or serious injury — and establishing a High Injury Network web application for the public and AMATS members to visualize crash trends in their community. The *SS4A Action Plan* details various proposed infrastructure investments and policy strategies to promote safe travel throughout the region. Its adoption was also a necessary step before the region and its member communities may seek implementation grant funding from the new federal SS4A Grant Program.

In September, the agency approved changes to the AMATS Funding Policy Guidelines, which provide detailed eligibility and scoring criteria for project applicants seeking funding from various programs. While many of these changes appear relatively minor, they will have ramifications for the area with regards to project selection and funding in the coming years.

In the latter half of 2023, the agency began accepting and screening applications for project funding from several programs administered by AMATS, including a new federal Carbon Reduction Program. The agency ultimately received and reviewed 114 applications totaling more than \$162.3 million from project sponsors across the region.

The staff also commenced work on other, upcoming key elements of the region's ongoing transportation planning process. Development began on a new first-of-its-kind comprehensive roundabout study, a new *Active Transportation Plan*, and an update of the area's *Coordinated Public Transit-Human Services Transportation Plan*. While these products won't be completed until 2024, the foundations for these items began during the year.

The AMATS Connecting Communities Program had its share of achievements during the year as well. In October, development of the *Living in Lakemore Connectivity Plan* got underway with a communitywide survey and a successful public meeting. Preparation of the plan is funded by a grant from the program, which provides resources for the crafting of connectivity studies.

As the calendar changes from 2023 to a new year, I foresee an agency poised to lead the region into a safe, healthy, and prosperous future.

Curtis Baker AMATS Director

#### **AKRON METROPOLITAN AREA TRANSPORTATION STUDY - 2023 ANNUAL REPORT**

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# PLANNING

The Greater Akron area made tremendous strides in transportation planning during 2023.

During the year, AMATS forged a new path to regional safety with the completion of the Safe Streets for All (SS4A) Action Plan for the Greater Akron Area. As part of its development of the SS4A Action Plan, the agency conducted two online surveys to gather public insights regarding safe travel within the region.

In other planning arenas, the agency continued to promote regional connectivity among the area's roadway, bicycle, and pedestrian networks through its Connecting Communities and Bike-N-Brainstorm programs.

# Safe Streets for All (SS4A) Action Plan for the Greater Akron Area

In May, the AMATS Policy Committee adopted the Safe Streets for All (SS4A) Action Plan for the operational initiatives to prevent deaths and serious injuries among pedestrians, cyclists, public Greater Akron Area marking the beginning of a concentrated regional effort to improve safety on transportation users, and motorists on the nation's roadways. area highways, streets, and roadways.

The SS4A Action Plan details various proposed infrastructure investments and policy strategies to promote safe travel throughout Portage and Summit counties and the northeastern portion of Wayne County.

Areas and communities must have an approved action plan before seeking funding from the newly created federal SS4A Grant Program. The program funds planning, infrastructure, behavioral, and



The Policy Committee agreed that the agency should be the lead body in crafting a regional action plan rather than individual communities creating their own plans in a piecemeal fashion. AMATS officials believe that a cooperative planning approach will lead to area projects landing funding through the SS4A program.

The recommendations of the SS4A Action Plan are divided into three sets: project, strategy, and transit. Project recommendations are grouped into short-term, mid-term, and long-term

> scheduling timeframes and consist of various federally recognized proven safety countermeasures, Countermeasures include roadway departure signs and markings to indicate lane edges and alignment changes to help drivers navigate. Speed management changes, intersection improvements, and bike and pedestrian projects are among the other viable countermeasures identified in the plan.

> The plan's strategy recommendations urge regional policymakers to consider enforcement, education, and engagement approaches in their oversight of the area's transportation networks based on seven areas of concern. These areas are speed, distracted driving, impairment, seat belts, motorcycles, railway crossings, and bike and pedestrian issues.

> The plan's transit-related recommendations chiefly concern the Greater Akron area's transit authorities - METRO RTA of Summit County and the Portage Area Regional Transportation Authority (PARTA) - and urge continued and increased support and coordination for area transit services among all levels of transportation planning. Bus rapid transit service within Akron and surrounding communities, improved pedestrian access to transit stops, and various enhancements to stops, shelters and related facilities are among the recommendations.

> The plan's short-term project recommendations may become reality soon as they are scheduled to be completed between now and Fiscal Year 2027. These recommendations include reconstruction and sidewalk improvements on Darrow Road in Stow, intersection upgrades on Valley View Road in Northfield Center Township, and significant improvements on state Route 59 (East Main Street) in Kent.

For more information about the SS4A Action Plan, please click here.

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## SS4A Surveys

In February, two AMATS-sponsored online surveys drew to a close. The surveys provided useful information for the agency in the compilation of its *SS4A Action Plan*. The interlinked surveys polled respondents on two separate safety-related topics: One survey asked respondents to explain how they make transportation-related decisions while travelling in the AMATS region while the other survey asked respondents to identify safety-related issues unique to their local communities.

Between November 2022 and January 2023, the agency collected 301 online survey responses through its website – <u>amatsplanning.org</u>. Survey findings show that there is broad-based public support for investment in active transportation modes such as bike lanes, sidewalks, and shared-use paths throughout the region's existing transportation network.

Among the more surprising findings was that adding capacity to area roadways to accommodate vehicular traffic was ranked dead last among possible safety strategies. Adding capacity seems to be out of style, which is a surprising change from 10 to 15 years ago, according to agency officials.

In contrast to capacity improvements, roundabouts are one infrastructure investment that appear to be gaining public support within the AMATS area. Nearly 60 percent of poll respondents indicated that they view roundabouts as safer than traditional intersections.

Attitudes regarding cycling and public transit are revealing too. A mere 12 percent of cyclists responding indicated that they felt safe biking throughout the Greater Akron area. In contrast, a whopping 65 percent of cyclists responding indicated that they do not feel safe cycling in the area. An impressive 83 percent of cyclists responding indicated that they would make greater use of the network if there were additional safe places to do so.

With regards to public transit, 62 percent of respondents indicated that transit stops are well located throughout the region yet 73 percent said that they would rely on transit more often if service was more convenient. AMATS officials note that these responses don't mean that service is inconvenient in the Greater Akron area, but they do reflect the reality that buses can't be everywhere and that there are service constraints.

Notably, 87 percent of respondents agreed that distracted driving is a growing problem in the

region. AMATS also identified 130 location-specific concerns through its dual surveys. Akron, particularly portions of the city's eastern, northwestern, Highland Square, and Kenmore neighborhoods, were cited by respondents as specific areas of concern with regards to safety.

The agency used the survey data to craft the SS4A Action Plan, which was approved by the agency in May.

# *Connecting Communities Planning Grant Program*

2023 marked another successful year for the AMATS Connecting Communities Planning Grant Program and its efforts to promote regional connectivity in the Greater Akron area. The program helps communities strike a balance between their land use decisions and transportation investments by providing financial grants for the development of plans and studies that promote vibrant, livable communities.

Development of the *Living in Lakemore Connectivity Plan* in the Village of Lakemore and Springfield Township got underway in 2023. Funded by the program, the study will allow the village to identify connectivity improvements between its residential neighborhoods and commercial and recreational areas.

In July, the consultant, Envision, began compiling the study. Envision hosted several steering committee meetings, a communitywide survey that generated 117 responses, and an October public engagement meeting. In the fall, Envision presented a set of draft study recommendations to the Lakemore Planning and Zoning Commission, the Lakemore Village Council, and the Springfield Township Trustees.

Key draft recommendations include:

- Turning several streets into one-way streets to allow for either a pedestrian walkway or on-street parking in the current right-of-way.
- Installation of a separated six-foot sidewalk on the south side of Sanitarium Road from Flickinger Road to Canton Road.
- The addition of a walkway along Lakeside Road and James B. Dodds Lakefront
  Park and a proposed Lake Road Connector.

To learn more about the *Living in Lakemore Connectivity Plan* and other studies funded by the Connecting Communities Planning Grant Program, please click <u>here</u>.



At left, as part of the Village of Lakemore and Springfield Township's pursuit of connectivity, the ribbon was cut on a new portion of the Spartan Trail in October. The trail links key destinations in the village and now provides access to Springfield Junior and Senior High School. At right, following the ceremony, village, and township officials, in partnership with AMATS, hosted a public engagement meeting as part of the development of the *Living in Lakemore Connectivity Plan*.

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## **Bike-N-Brainstorms**



During 2023, the AMATS Switching Gears Program hosted a successful Bike-N-Brainstorm event in Akron's Middlebury Neighborhood. Bike-N-Brainstorms are public meetings that include a bike ride and brainstorming session. Following rides, participants share their insights on how to improve biking and pedestrian access in a community.

AMATS and several sponsors marked the agency's 11th anniversary of hosting Bike-N-Brainstorms by gathering for a September event in the Middlebury Bike-N-Brainstorm neighborhood. The Middlebury Bike-N-Brainstorm included a four-mile bike ride through the neighborhood. The event gave AMATS officials an

opportunity to gauge how well the new bike lanes on Arlington Road and East Exchange, the new Freedom Trail extension, and Jewett Park improvements are functioning.

Among the event's sponsors were the Akron Food Works, Blimp City Bike & Hike Shop, and Summit Cycling. Other partners joining AMATS in hosting this event included the city of Akron, The Well CDC, the East Akron Neighborhood Development Corporation, Habitat for Humanity of Summit County, and the Summit County Public Health Department.

Public feedback collected by agency and city officials following this Bike-N-Brainstorm will be used to identify active transportation strategies for the area in the future. The agency will use feedback from the Middlebury event in planning for upcoming area projects such as the Rubber City Heritage Trail and potential improvements on East Market Street.

For more information about the agency's Bike-N-Brainstorms, please visit Switching-Gears.org.













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# ENGINEERING

While AMATS had many engineering accomplishments during 2023, its most significant was the completion of a new four-year Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) of highway, public transit, and bike and pedestrian projects. Completion of the TIP was followed by needed changes to the AMATS Funding Policy Guidelines and the beginning of the region's funding application process.

Along with these three key accomplishments, the agency completed various data collection activities necessary to its mission as the region's federally designated metropolitan planning organization.

# Transportation Improvement Program for Fiscal Years 2024 Through 2027 (TIP)

In May, the AMATS Policy Committee approved a new four-year TIP of regional infrastructure improvements.

Spanning Fiscal Years 2024 through 2027, the new \$938.5 million TIP includes approximately \$523.1 million for highway projects, more than \$399.4 million for public transit needs, and \$16 million for bike and pedestrian projects throughout Portage and Summit counties and a portion of northeastern Wayne County.

A significant portion of the program – \$721.2 million or about 77 percent of the program - is devoted to maintenance-type projects for the Greater Akron area's highway and public transportation systems rather than costly expansions of existing transportation networks.

Capacity projects to add travel lanes on highways are among the most expensive to build, which is why they only account for about 15 percent of this latest program. As an agency, AMATS wants the region's available funding to be invested in communities based on need given today's fiscal realities.

While much of the highway portion of the program consists of resurfacings, among the larger projects scheduled in the TIP are a more than \$132 million, six-lane widening of Interstate 77 in Bath and Richfield townships and a \$10.7 million reconstruction project on Wooster Road West in Barberton.

Other notable improvements include a more than \$19.1 million reconstruction of East Main Street (state Route 59) in Kent and a \$2.9 million reconstruction of the intersection of state Routes 14 and 43 in Streetsboro. A nearly \$41 million improvement project on state Route 21 in Chippewa Township is also in the program.

The area's transit operators, METRO RTA of Summit County and the Portage Area Regional Transportation Authority (PARTA), will receive \$64 million and nearly \$14 million respectively in federal funds for various capital projects over the next four years. These projects include vehicle replacements, facility maintenance, and bus stop improvements.

The TIP included projects to improve the region's active transportation networks. The Phase 4 construction of a portion of the Freedom Trail in Akron will receive \$700,000 in federal Transportation Alternatives Set-Aside (TASA) Program funds. Another \$700,000 TASA grant will be used to build a connection on the Stow Hike & Bike Trail linking the communities of Cuyahoga Falls, Silver Lake, and Stow. Additional TASA funds are also scheduled for engineering and construction for a portion of the Heartland Trail in Chippewa Township.

For more information about the TIP, please click here.

## AMATS Funding Policy Guidelines Update

Funding policy changes approved by AMATS in 2023 may lead to more funding opportunities for Greater Akron area communities and other project sponsors in the years to come.

In September, the AMATS Policy Committee approved a slate of changes to the AMATS Funding *Policy Guidelines*, which provide detailed eligibility and scoring criteria for project applicants seeking funding from various programs. The agency had to update its guidelines before selecting which area projects would receive support from these programs.

Updating these guidelines is part of AMATS' responsibilities in leading the regional transportation planning process within Portage and Summit counties and northeastern Wayne County. The agency must update its policies to reflect ever-changing transportation needs within the region. While these changes are relatively minor, they still have ramifications for the area.

The most recent changes include an increase in the number of projects that may be awarded to sponsors seeking assistance from the federal Carbon Reduction Program (CRP), Surface Transportation Block Grant (STBG), and Transportation Alternatives Set-Aside (TASA) programs. Sponsors may now seek funding for three projects rather than two for each program. Additionally, the limits or "caps" on the funding amounts that sponsors may seek were increased for the agency's Resurfacing and TASA programs, from \$700,000 to \$800,000 and \$700,000 to \$1 million, for both programs respectively.

Notably, in a reflection of today's environmental concerns, the Greater Akron area now has a firstof-its-kind federally funded Carbon Reduction Program (CRP) complete with scoring criteria and an application process. Applicants to this program may seek up to \$2 million in federal funds for projects that emphasize carbon emission reductions while improving traffic flow.

## **Funding Applications**

In September, AMATS began accepting applications from project sponsors seeking funding from the federal CRP, Resurfacing, STBG, and TASA programs. By November, the agency's deadline, AMATS received 114 funding applications totaling more than \$162.3 million from 26 area sponsors. Each funding program supports projects suited to meet different transportation needs.

The 2023 project applications herald a new era for the Greater Akron area in that they were among the first to seek CRP funding. AMATS received 17 applications totaling nearly \$23.7 million for projects seeking CRP funds.

The Resurfacing Program funds projects to extend the service life of an existing highway and enhance highway safety. This includes the placement of additional surface materials and other work necessary to return an existing roadway to a condition of structural and functional adequacy. AMATS received 42 applications totaling more than \$32.3 million for projects seeking Resurfacing funds.

The STBG Program supports projects to preserve and improve any federal-aid highway, pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure, and transit capital projects. AMATS received 26 applications totaling

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more than \$85.6 million for projects seeking STBG funds.

The TASA Program aids projects such as pedestrian and bicycle facilities that provide transportation alternatives to motor vehicles. The similar TASA Supplemental Program commits TASA funds to pedestrian and bicycle projects if TASA funds become available. AMATS received 23 applications totaling nearly \$17.7 million for projects seeking TASA funds. The agency received six applications for projects seeking more than \$2.9 million in TASA Supplemental funds.

These projects will be considered by the AMATS Policy Committee for funding in 2024.

# **Engineering Activities**

#### **Traffic Counting Program**

Traffic count data is a key component of transportation planning. AMATS collects data regarding traffic volumes on Greater Akron area roadways and intersections for use in various regional analyses and evaluations of new projects. This data is collected using radar counters.

The agency conducted 327 traffic counts at various area roadway segments during 2023.

# OUTREACH

The give-and-take of ideas and information between a metropolitan planning organization (MPO) and the public which it serves is an integral component of regional transportation planning. Public insight aids planners and engineers in identifying the needs of various communities and populations. 2023 was a year of solid achievement by AMATS with regards to its public outreach activities. The agency hosted a successful annual meeting and heightened its use of virtual meetings.

## **Annual Meeting**

The topics of safety and equity in planning dominated the 2023 AMATS Annual Meeting in October. The day's featured speakers, Michelle May, the Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT) Highway Safety Program manager, and Dan Rice, the president and chief executive officer of the Ohio & Erie Canalway Coalition (OECC), described how their respective agencies have met the challenges stemming from these issues over the last several years.

In his opening remarks, AMATS Director Curtis Baker summarized the agency's accomplishments as the Greater Akron area's MPO over the last year. Baker listed implementing a new Carbon Reduction Program, starting a new Traffic Signal Inventory, and seeing several ambitious regional projects become reality as some of the agency's key accomplishments. Baker also touted AMATS' continued emphasis on funding roadway preservation projects while pursuing an active transportation network of new walking and biking trails throughout the region. The agency's pursuit of safe pedestrian and biking infrastructure earned praise from May during her subsequent presentation.

During her address, May described how the department is grappling with still stubbornly high post-pandemic fatality rates on Ohio's roadways and the issues of distracted driving and pedestrian deaths. May explained how ODOT is shifting its strategies to projects that: focus on reducing fatalities and serious injuries; pursue proactive equitable safety investments; provide more resources for vulnerable road users; and reduce vehicle speeds.

Another aim of ODOT is to promote equity by awarding more points and providing 100 percent project funding for applications from those communities with higher poverty rates based on U.S. Census data. Equity is an issue that the OECC is tackling too.

In his presentation, Rice described the OECC's engagement of previously overlooked communities and populations as part of its development of the 101-mile multi-use Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath Trail and the Ohio & Erie Canalway National Heritage Area. Rice described the coalition's role as the convener for Akron Reimagining the Civic Commons, a \$40 million investment in public space, park and trail improvements along the trail in Akron. Through the Civic Commons, the OECC has vigorously pursued public engagement efforts particularly in neighborhoods surrounding the Summit Lake NorthShore Park Project.

To view the presentations made by Baker, May, and Rice, please visit the AMATS YouTube channel – <u>AMATSPlanning</u>.



# Virtual Meetings

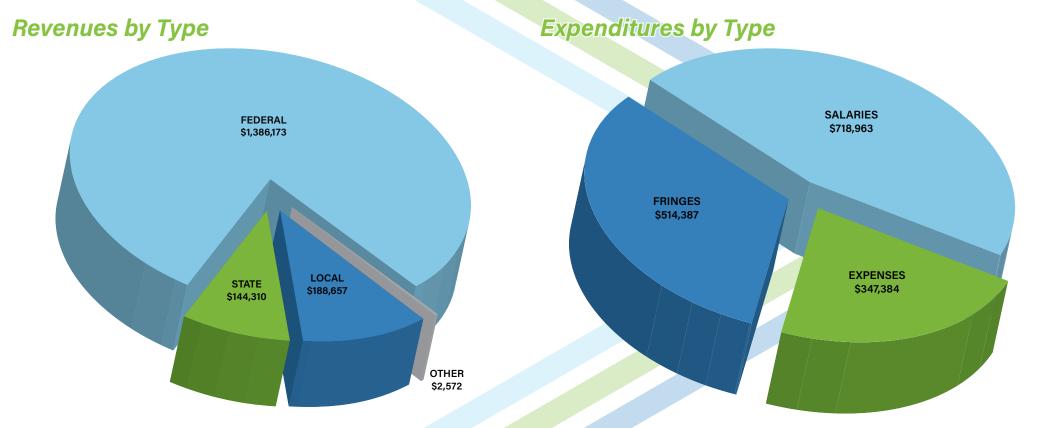
2023 heralded a significant change for the AMATS Citizens Involvement Committee (CIC), the agency's forum for public comment and engagement. The agency decided to transition all of its CIC meetings to a virtual meeting format. The agency adopted the virtual format for the convenience of its CIC members and the public.

Meeting announcements are promoted through the agency's social media and in regularly scheduled newspaper advertisements, both of which include information about how to register for meeting login information from the agency. AMATS opted to pursue the virtual meeting format to provide greater access to the public.

Would-be CIC attendees occasionally experienced difficulties getting to meetings due to adverse traffic and weather conditions. Access to meeting venues and available parking posed additional challenges. With the transition to virtual online meetings in January 2023, average CIC meeting attendance has been steadily increasing.

# **FINANCIAL DATA FOR FISCAL YEAR 2023**

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# **POLICY COMMITTEE AND STAFF** 2023 Policy Committee Members

OLIAIDMAN		Operated Managehouses		Diversite	
	Mayor	Gerard Neugebauer	Curtis Baker	Director	
			Cath Duch		
Akron		Dan Horrigan	Seth Bush	GIS Coordinator	
Aurora		Ann Womer Benjamin			
Barberton		William B. Judge, Jr.	Martha Chandler	Accounting Technician	
Boston Heights		Bill Goncy			
Clinton		Clarissa Allega	Heather Davis Reidl	Mobility Planner	
Cuyahoga Falls		Don Walters			
Doylestown		Terry L. Lindeman	Jeffrey Gardner	City Planner	
Fairlawn		Russell Sharnsky			
Garrettsville		Rick Patrick	Phyllis Jividen	Transportation Planner	
Green	-	Gerard Neugebauer			
Hiram	Mayor	Lou Bertrand	Matt Mullen	Transportation Planner	
Hudson	, ,	Thomas J. Sheridan			
Kent	City Manager	David Ruller	Eugene Paczelt	City Planner	
Lakemore	Mayor	Richard Cole, Jr.			
Macedonia	Mayor	Nick Molnar	Amy Prater, P.E.	TIP Coordinator	
Mantua	Mayor	Linda S. Clark			
METRO		Dawn Distler	Kerry Prater	Public Information Coordinator	
Mogadore	Mayor	Michael A. Rick			
Munro Falls	Mayor	Allen Mavrides	Wali Rahim	Planning Aide	
New Franklin	Mayor	Paul Adamson			
Northfield	Mayor	Jenn Domzalski	Matt Stewart	Planning Administrator	
Norton	Administrative Officer	Philip Turske			
ODOT		Gery Noirot			
PARTA		Claudia Amrhein			
Peninsula	Mayor	Daniel R. Schneider, Jr.			
Portage County Commissioners		Anthony J. Badalamenti			
		Mike Tinlin			
		Sabrina Christian-Bennett			
Portage County Engineer		Michael Marozzi / Larry Jenkins, Jr.			
Ravenna	Mayor	Frank Seman			
Reminderville	Mayor	Sam Alonso			
Richfield	Mayor	Michael Wheeler			
Rittman	City Manager	Bobbie Beshara			
Silver Lake		Bernie Hovey			
Stow	Mayor	John Pribonic			
Streetsboro	Mayor	Glenn M. Broska			
Sugar Bush Knolls	Mayor	John Guidubaldi			
Summit County	, ,	Diane Miller-Dawson			
2		David Lukas			
Summit County Engineer		Alan Brubaker			
Summit County Executive		Ilene Shapiro			
Tallmadge	Mavor	David G. Kline			
Twinsburg	5	Sam Scaffide			
Wayne County Commissioners					
Wayne County Engineer	. Presidente indición indición	Scott A. Miller			
Windham	Mayor	Deborah Blewitt			
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Editorial comments are welcome.

This report was prepared by the Akron Metropolitan Area Transportation Study (AMATS) in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Transportation, the Ohio Department of Transportation, and the Village, City and County governments of Portage and Summit Counties and a portion of Wayne County.

The contents of this report reflect the views of AMATS, which is responsible for the facts and accuracy of the data presented herein. The contents do not necessarily reflect the official view and policies of the Ohio and/or U.S. Department of Transportation. This report does not constitute a standard, specificaton or regulation.