

ANNUAL REPORT 2019



LOOKING BACK • MOVING FORWARD



METROPLAN

SMART PLANNING MAKES SMART PLACES.

Letter from Leadership

On the cover

For Metroplan 2019 was a year of looking back. It’s rare for planners to review past plans, to see what worked and what did not. The Horizon 2020 report (described on pp. 2-3) did just that, evaluating twenty-five years of planning efforts inspired by the Metro 2020 Plan, formally adopted in 1995. Lessons we’ve learned since then can help guide us as we move forward and develop the next long-range plan.

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All photos are by Metroplan staff except where noted.

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Dear Reader,

After changing its structure in 2018, the Metroplan Board of Directors turned its attention to how the organization impacted transportation in our region. The board approached this issue a number of ways resulting in dramatic changes.

First, inside this Annual Report you will find a story on “Horizon 2020”, a deep report on successes and disappointments of Metroplan’s first Long-Range Metropolitan Transportation Plan “METRO 2020” on the eve of it twenty-fifth anniversary. The board had charged staff with a “warts and all” analysis of this 1995 planning document. While the analysis showed many successes at lower levels such as sidewalks, bike paths, and downtown revitalizations, it also revealed a failure to meaningfully impact those processes that drive transportation systems at the higher levels such as arterials and freeways. The board also looked at how the level and the direction of Metroplan grant funding (STBG funds) can make local impacts but struggle to make major regional impacts when dedicating those funds to roads.

Also, inside you will read of the board retreat to Bentonville, Arkansas and its benchmarking trip to Greenville, South Carolina. The trips confronted the board with new ideas and different ways of thinking. They had a profound impact on the board’s outlook and challenged them to consider some premises anew. The board returned to Central Arkansas from both these trips with more than they took.

Considering what it had learned from these efforts, the Board of Directors revamped its Surface Transportation Block Grant (STBG) funding format in 2019. No longer will these funds just be spent on major roads. While funding can still go to major road projects, the board determined to also score multi-use paths & trails and Jump Start-styled projects on an equal basis—but by different criteria—as road projects. Further, the board demanded what scarce funds that do go to street projects, go to those projects which combine need with the highest and best possible design standards. These changes constitute a radically different set of priorities for Metroplan funding.

Lastly, the reconstituted Board of Directors, including 2019’s twelve new mayors, acted with an emerging sense of cooperation. Regional cooperation was both led and best exemplified by the Southwest Trail planning project and its bold leadership from Judge Barry Hyde of Pulaski County and Judge Jeff Arey of Saline County. This cooperation has continued into 2020 with new initiatives you will read about in next year’s Annual Report. Indeed, the (Regional) Force is strong in this Board of Directors.

I hope you enjoy reading this Annual Report and find in it inspiration for the future of our region.



Mayor Joe Smith, City of North Little Rock
Metroplan President



Tab Townsell
Executive Director



Mayor Joe Smith
City of North Little Rock
Metroplan President



Tab Townsell
Executive Director

Horizon 2020

Way back in 1995, Metroplan adopted a new transportation plan named Metro 2020, an ambitious rethink of regional priorities. Like most plans, it had a target date—the year 2020. And suddenly the future was ... the present. So how good was the plan, did it make a difference?

At the direction of the Metroplan Board, staff pried through old file cabinets and clicked through digital archives to review records from the past, to write a report and study on the Metro 2020 Plan. This was the Horizon 2020 report. It came up with several major findings:

- The “trend” forecasts made under Metro 2020 were eerily precise. Total regional population in 2020 is within one percent of the figure Metroplan forecast back in 1994-1995. Metroplan’s forecasts for growth at the small-area (census tract) level were also broadly accurate.
- Regional freeways developed as foreseen. Major segments were widened from four lanes to six during the plan period. One exception was the North Belt Freeway, which was cancelled in 2014.
- Arterial streets saw only limited progress, despite the ambitious Regional Arterial Network (RAN) idea that developed from Metro 2020. A few segments have been built, but the RAN remains mostly a dream.



Reminiscing about past wins and losses. From left to right, former Judge Buddy Villines, newscaster Steve Barnes, former Metroplan Executive Director Jim McKenzie, former NLR mayor Pat Hayes, and former Little Rock mayor Jim Dailey.



On October 21, 2019, local newscaster Steve Barnes (left) led a far-ranging discussion of Metro 2020 with (left to right) former North Little Rock Mayor Pat Hayes, former Pulaski County Judge Buddy Villines, and former Little Rock Mayor Jim Dailey.

"We had a chance to lead our cities during a time when there were a lot of exciting things going on."
—Pat Hays

"We made it a point to always talk to each other."
—Buddy Villines

- Rock Region METRO has modernized its fleet and facilities, however the region has failed to provide the regional service and enhanced local service envisioned in Metro 2020.
- Investments in trails, bridges, and other forms of pedestrian access have yielded big improvements in regional pedestrian/bike access, but actual change to regional transportation flows and livability remains modest.

"It takes time to put things together—put the right people in place, find ways to fund it, come up with a plan, then implement it."
—Buddy Villines

Horizon 2020

"With the private sector, state involvement, and with the community coming together, we were able to accomplish things that we never would have. The power of this collective effort has made a difference in our community."
—Jim Dailey



Metroplan Deputy Director Casey Covington presents the Horizon 2020 look-back at the AMPO Conference in Baltimore in October 2019 (AMPO is the Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations).



Metroplan staff worked as a team to produce the Horizon 2020 document. It is available on the Metroplan website.

- Selected areas in and near downtown Little Rock, North Little Rock and Conway have undergone major transformations in land use. Metro 2020 played a role in this. Yet the bulk of new growth has been at low densities, with lack of transportation choice, and poor pedestrian access.
- Despite Metro 2020’s long-term outlook, actual implementation has typically happened on a short-term, project-by-project basis. Metroplan controls only a small percentage of the transportation funding spent in the Central Arkansas region.



Metroplan conducted video interviews with many stakeholders, past and present about the meaning of Horizon 2020. They are available on Metroplan’s YouTube channel.

"The merger of Little Rock Water and North Little Rock Water was one of the most challenging, the most difficult, and the most significant things that we accomplished."
—Pat Hays

"What the County adopted does put protections in the immediate [Lake Maumelle] watershed. It took about 14 years to get the watershed plan adopted. To make it last, we will always have to be vigilant."
—Buddy Villines

Horizon 2020 wasn’t really about the past, though. Its goal was to assist with understanding of the planning process, to evaluate what worked and what did not. Metroplan will soon begin a new plan with a target date around 2050. This new plan will be wiser thanks to the Horizon 2020 report, a reflection on the past that will help inform the future.



Fall 2019 Board Trip: Greenville, South Carolina

The Board picked Greenville because it's loosely comparable in size to the Little Rock region. Greenville has made an impressive comeback in recent years via cooperative regional planning. The Greenville region also somewhat resembles Central Arkansas in its cultural orientation; it felt familiar.

Mayor Knox White of Greenville led off the event with an account of the challenges he has met through a 24-year term, and the solutions he has used to address them. The visit included a "Mice on Main" scavenger hunt that helped demonstrate the value of kid-friendly public art for engaging people with each other in an urban setting. Several members of the Metroplan Board biked the 22-mile "Swamp Rabbit" trail which links Greenville with Travelers Rest, while others took a bus tour with stops along the trail. The trail helped earn Greenville the prestigious Bicycle

Friendly Community award in 2013. For the Metroplan Board, there were several key takeaways:

- While the Swamp Rabbit Trail was originally intended mainly for tourism, recreation, and economic development, an unintended consequence is that the trail is seeing considerable use for commuting.
- Travelers Rest got a major infusion of economic revitalization from the trail.
- Small communities nearby began wanting connections – as in "where's my Swamp Rabbit?"
- Trail development helped Travelers Rest with maintaining small-town charm.
- Working with GPATS (Greenville's version of Metroplan) the region made a plan, and they stuck to it.



"The Swamp Rabbit Trail is what can happen when cities work together toward a single goal!"
—Mayor Sammy Hartwick, City of Greenbrier



During a tour of Greenville County, the group visited a 19th century cotton mill re-purposed as an artists' enclave.



The Greenville, South Carolina metropolitan area has slightly more population than the Little Rock region but is similar in climate and demographic characteristics.

"I have participated in board fact-finding trips in the past. However, the South Carolina experience was a new level. I look forward to the next opportunity. I invited our City Engineer to attend, and he also came back excited, with a wealth of new ideas."
—Mayor Virginia Young, City of Sherwood



The Metroplan Board, including Judge Jim Baker, Mayor Sammy Hartwick, and Judge Barry Hyde in the foreground, enjoys a laugh on the tour bus.



Travelers Rest hosted Metroplan for a breakfast and interactive panel discussion. Topics included: advantages for small communities in regional cooperation and for pro-actively developing place-making through projects like the Swamp Rabbit Trail. Left to right: Mayor Sam Lee, the city of Fountain Inn, George Campbell, Greenlink Board Member, Butch Kirven, GPATS Chairman, and Travelers Rest Mayor Brandy Amidon.

"Greenville was beneficial. While there, I was able to see and hear first-hand what they did to turn around a city with a dying city center. I rediscovered that change does not happen overnight. It takes vision, buy-in from the community, and time. Small steps are ok and lead to more substantial things."
—Mayor Allen Scott, City of Bryant



Mayors Robinson (City of Wooster), Holland (Mayflower), Hartwick (Greenbrier), and Higdon (Guy) at the opening night dinner.



Greenville mayor Knox White welcomes visitors from Arkansas.

On the Road: Northwest Arkansas

In place of its monthly meeting, the Metroplan Board conducted a retreat in Northwest Arkansas. The Executive Committee and Small Cities Council met in Rogers, Arkansas on May 16–17. In addition, they met with officials from the Northwest Arkansas metropolitan region and toured several sites in this fast-growing region. These included the Razorback Greenway, a 36-mile system of off-road and shared-use trail that extends from Bella Vista in the north to Fayetteville in the south. The trail allows bikers and hikers to cut through the urban fabric of streets, parking lots and stoplights, for convenient low-stress transportation and recreation.

Members of the Small Cities Council enjoyed a lively exchange of ideas with panelists from Northwest Arkansas' small communities. Elected leaders and administrators from Siloam Springs, Bentonville, and Pea Ridge discussed commonalities among small towns and shared strategies for dealing with new challenges posed as communities grow and put pressure on existing infrastructure.

The Board also visited numerous other sites including downtown Bentonville, the new Wal-Mart campus, and several high-density mixed-use and urban residential developments.

"The trip to Northwest Arkansas was one of the best as far as meeting with the Mayors and City planners and listening to what the challenges have been trying to keep up with so much growth. And then driving around their towns where you could see what they were facing."
—Mayor Sammy Hartwick, City of Greenbrier



This underpass keeps bikes moving in a busy urban district in Bentonville..



The Razorback Greenway slaloms through parks, next to streets, under streets, and across Northwest Arkansas for 36 miles.

Census 2020

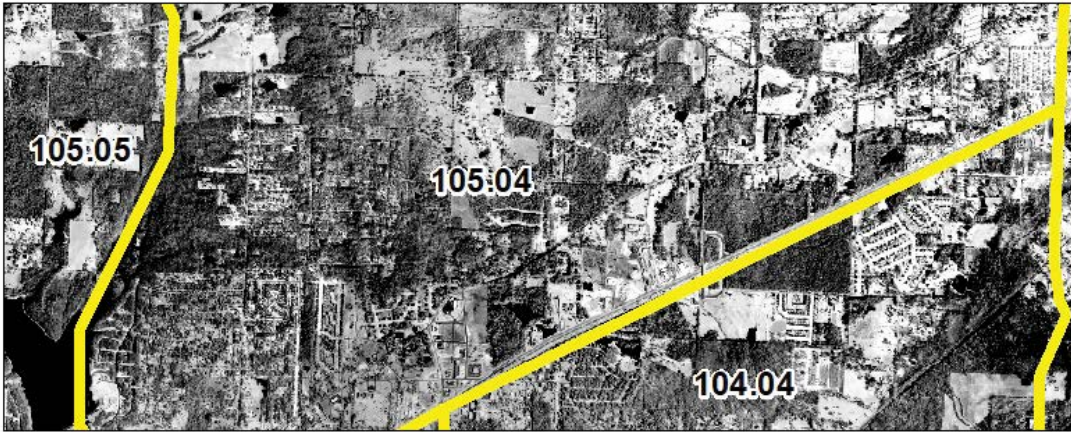
The United States Constitution requires a census, defined as an "actual Enumeration," every ten years.¹ Its primary constitutional purpose is Congressional apportionment, but it is used for much, much more. Metroplan uses census data extensively and assists with U.S. Census Bureau preparations for each decennial census.

At Metroplan, we use census data daily. Population and housing data are the raw material of traffic models, planning studies, forecasts of water demand, and much more. We also assist our member governments—and the general public—with using census data. School districts look at school-aged population to decide about school construction and attendance zones. Our member cities and counties work with census figures to determine boundaries for quorum court districts and city wards. Census figures also serve as a basis for forecasts that help us know future population.

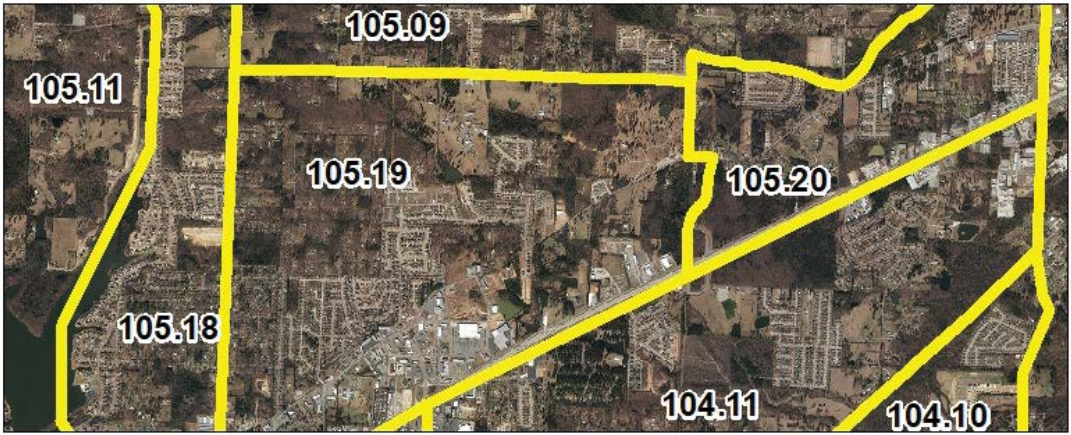
While not perfect, census figures are accurate. Attempts by private data firms to develop population counts from customer surveys and "big data" remain second-rate compared with complete counts we get from census figures. Most private data is still benchmarked upon census numbers.

During 2019, Metroplan worked with the Census Bureau to modify census tract and block group boundaries. Where population has grown rapidly, we often split existing tract boundaries to keep within the recommended thresholds. Sometimes tracts with population and housing decline must be consolidated into larger new tracts to fit the thresholds. All the while, we strive to keep boundaries reasonably consistent for comparison with past data. In early 2021, we will receive the 2020 census counts, telling us the amount and location of population change over the past decade.

Bryant Census Tract Maps, 1990 and 2020



In 1990, Census Tract 105.04 covered a sizeable area north of I-30 in eastern Saline County. It was mostly rural, with a few housing units. In preparing for the 2020 Census, old tract 105.04 had become four separate tracts in rapidly-developing northern Bryant, with plenty of commercial land use and far more population.



Rural to suburban: the 1990 tract map uses 2000 imagery and the 2020 tract map uses 2017 imagery.

¹ U.S. Constitution, Article I, Section 2, paragraph three.

"About 30 years ago all cities and towns in Northwest Arkansas started pulling together and abandoning turf battles, realizing that what is good for one area is good for all."
—Judge Jim Baker, Faulkner County



Left to right: Mayor Caleb Norris (Maumelle); Phillip Patterson, City Administrator for Siloam Springs; Mayor Sam Higdon (Guy); Mayor Jackie Crabtree, Mayor of Pea Ridge; Jessie Jones, ArDOT; Mayor Trae Reed, Lonoke.

Moving Benton Forward

Benton began updating its Comprehensive Plan in 2019 with Metroplan's help. *Moving Benton Forward* kicked off in late summer with community stakeholder meetings. Residents from several professions such as real estate, banking, health, land development and public services gathered to envision a better Benton in facilitated discussions with Metroplan staff.

Over three stakeholder meetings, two community surveys, and several discussions with city staff, Goals, Objectives, and Actions were established to provide a foundation for the plan. Metroplan presented the goals in four public feedback meetings across the city and finalized the set. Public outreach was tremendously successful and reached a diverse group of residents. After this direction, staff began drafting the plan. More public reaction will be sought for the plan document in 2020, with adoption set for mid-year.

"Keep it vintage! The downtown area is one of the reasons we chose to move here last year."
—Survey comment



In the future I want Benton to be "A community that allows people of all socioeconomic, class, race and backgrounds to thrive and succeed. Where all have access to all Benton has to offer."
—Survey comment

"Protect/refurbish/use existing historical sites and other existing buildings."
—Survey comment

Community Engagement

Three steering committee meetings with
30+
members

Two surveys with
~600
respondents



Four public meetings with
50+
participants

Outreach pop-ups
at community Events



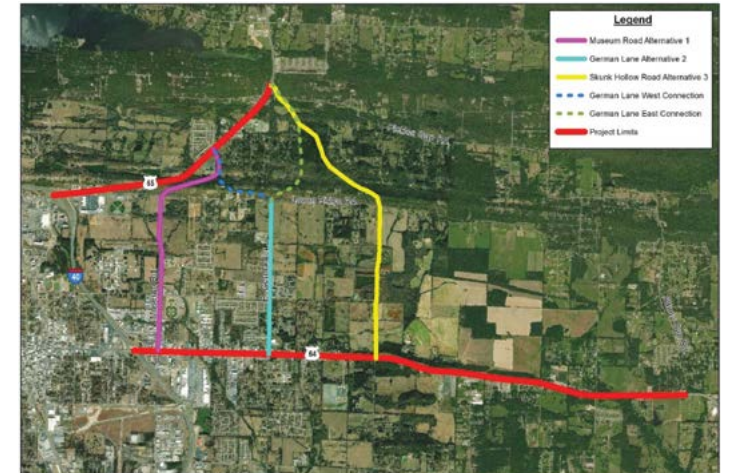
Stakeholders represent diverse residents and businesses during several public meetings.

Public participation is a crucial piece to the development of *Moving Benton Forward*. Meeting residents where they are and engaging them via social media encouraged optimum input and survey response.

Studies

Metroplan, in partnership with local jurisdictions, the Arkansas Department of Transportation (ArDOT) and Rock Region METRO, conducts multiple studies each year. During 2019 these studies assessed the feasibility of a regional freeway managed lane system, two corridor studies in North Pulaski County, and two studies in Conway. Metroplan staff provides technical support and travel demand modeling for each. Metroplan is also partnering with Rock Region METRO to develop accessibility standards to support improved access to transit facilities.

The **Hwy 64/Hwy 65 Connector Study** looks at a potential connection that would allow through travelers to avoid the most congested sections of both highways.



The study team used stakeholder/public input and the information in the Purpose and Need Report to develop a range of alternatives to address the transportation issues in the study area.



Pulaski County, Metroplan, and ArDOT are partnering on a study of the Hwy 107 corridor. The goals for the corridor include improved access to the "back gate" of the Little Rock Air Force Base, safety for Hwy 107, and a better connection for North Pulaski County residents. The study will inform improvements for the corridor for the next 20 years.

Dave Ward Drive between I-40 and Harkrider has the highest traffic volume of any arterial in Conway. **The Hwy 65B study** considered various improvements to this section of highway.



Dave Ward Drive, just east of Harkrider.

	Status	Expected completion
Regional Managed Lane Study	Nearing Completion	Mid 2020
Hwy 107 Study	Underway	Mid 2020
North Pulaski East-West Corridor	Beginning	2021
CARTS Accessibility Standards	Consultant Selection	Late 2020
Hwy 64 / Hwy 65 Connector Study	Nearing Completion	Early 2020
Hwy 65B (Dave Ward Drive) Improvement Study	Nearing Completion	Early 2020

These studies are expected to be completed in 2020. Recommendations from these studies will then be considered for construction funding.

Projects

Metroplan receives \$12 Million dollars a year that are allocated to regional transportation projects. The following projects are some that are funded by Metroplan.

Mayflower Overpass

This is one of the final projects in Metroplan's Rail Grade Separations project list, developed twenty-five years ago. This bridge will carry traffic over the UPRR tracks, making the connection across these tracks more reliable and safer.

Congo and Longhills Roundabout

The newly-constructed roundabout at Congo Road and Longhills in Benton will improve safety, reduce traffic congestion, and allow for easier turns from Longhills. Before the project began, the city had identified this intersection as one of its most dangerous with an average of five crashes each year. Roundabouts are becoming more popular for intersections, since they provide safety benefits and move traffic smoothly.



Mayflower's new railroad overpass, shown with the dotted line, will also improve east-west traffic flow. Construction is scheduled to begin in 2020.

White Oak Crossing Boulevard

In October 2019 a new I-40 interchange at White Oak Crossing was nearing completion. This much-needed third interchange was funded by the city of Maumelle, with Metroplan contributing \$1 million. Now that it's open, local residents are enjoying faster commutes.



By adding its own money from a local sales tax initiative, the city of Maumelle was able to move the White Oak project toward the front of ArDOT's funding priorities.

Adaptive Signal Control Technology

Dave Ward Drive, Maumelle Boulevard and University Avenue will have adaptive signal technology added in 2020. A long time coming, these projects will allow improved efficiency on these corridors by introducing a system that adapts to traffic volume in real time.



Updating a traffic signal to the current standard on Maumelle Boulevard. Photo courtesy of the city of Maumelle.



The new roundabout at Congo and Longhills can be expected to ease traffic flow and reduce collisions. Photo courtesy of the city of Benton.



On April 22, 2019, Rock Region METRO celebrated the new direct connection between Route 10 McCain Mall, the second most popular route in the METRO system, and Route 18 McAlmont, which serves Rose City and nearby neighborhoods. The new railroad crossing bridge on East McCain Boulevard made it easier to provide this east-west connection in North Little Rock.

Rock Region Transit Stop

The completion of the Fairfax Crossing railroad bridge on McCain Boulevard enabled Rock Region METRO to develop the new transit Route 10, which connects neighborhoods, shopping and employment. The route averages more than 700 passenger trips per weekday. The bridge construction was a partnership between North Little Rock and Metroplan.

Projects: Jump Start Update

Conway

Downtown Conway has been redeveloping for the better part of two decades. Metroplan gave it a boost when Conway's Markham Street area was named as one of four major Jump Start projects in 2013. This provided planning funding, as well as the promise of targeted infrastructure funding.

The Markham Street project is in a traditionally African American residential area. The project aims to strengthen the connection between the already-established economic nodes of Downtown Conway on the west and Hendrix Village to the east. A new roundabout at the intersection of Van Ronkle and Markham Streets serves as a symbolic entrance to the district, which the City of Conway has dubbed Markham Street Square. During 2019, Metroplan



The Markham Street Square District in downtown Conway is showing how private investment often follows well-planned public improvements.

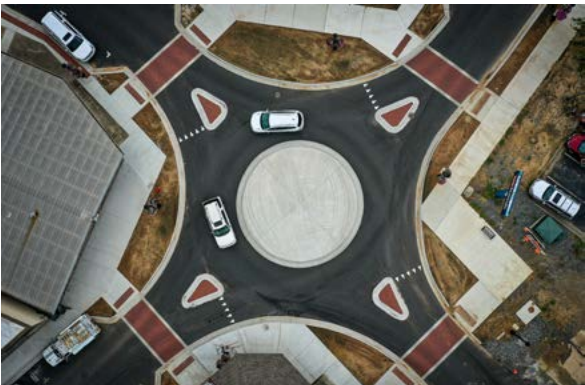
helped fund new sidewalks, improved on-street parking, and separated cycle tracks, bioswales and streetscaping as part of its Jump Start commitment.

Jump Start aims to help reclaim older urban districts, which are in central locations and benefit from existing utility and street infrastructure. This cuts expenses and yields better fiscal balance for

cities and developers over the long run. The small Jump Start investments, combined with zoning change and planning, have already spurred renewed private interest in the area. The J Loft Apartments on Spencer Street, completed during 2019, will be followed by another multi-story building on Van Ronkle Street during 2020. It's taken several years, but results are beginning to show in remaking Conway's urban core.

Other Jump Starts

Three other projects are moving along too. During 2019, the project in Little Rock's 12th street neighborhood saw engineering work wrap up on streetscaping near the police station and on Pine and Cedar Streets. In Levy, engineering work is complete after the city acquired right-of-way to remake the pedestrian environment. Park Hill is halfway through design work which will include larger sidewalks and other streetscape improvements.



Van Ronkle and Markham Street roundabout. Photo courtesy of the city of Conway.

Projects: Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP)

The Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) is used to fund projects that improve pedestrian and bicycle facilities. Following are several of the projects funded by Metroplan and constructed in 2019.

- Lonoke: Sidewalks that connect Lonoke Elementary, Lonoke Middle, Lonoke Primary and Lonoke High schools.
- Cabot: Sidewalks that connect surrounding neighborhoods to Cabot Central Elementary.
- Maumelle: Sidewalks along Edgewood Drive in Maumelle that provide new pedestrian access to the City Center and community center.
- Sherwood: Extended off of Hwy 107, sidewalks have been added to Kelso Road and Burns Trail in Sherwood.

Metroplan also provided additional funding for the design of the Southwest Trail and rehabilitation and reuse of the Old River Bridge in Benton.



Burns Trail in Sherwood



New sidewalks in Lonoke make it easier and safer to walk to school.

The trips we took provided visible proof of the importance of trails and pathways. Smaller communities may never have an Interstate highway nearby, or in our case even a state highway, but trails and pathways can provide economic stimulus and quality of life improvements that highways brought in the past. It emphasized to me the importance of the development of the Southwest Trail. It can be a highway for the future linking all of us.

—Mayor Mike Kemp, Shannon Hills

The decisions communities make about transportation have knock on effects throughout the community, as road design has a dramatic impact on land use and accessibility.

—Jeremey Chrysler,
RAC Transportation Systems Committee

I have become keenly interested in how high-quality development can enhance quality of life and encourage livable communities and how crucial efficient transportation systems are.

—Jeff Hathaway, RAC
Livable Communities Committee

Getting the RAC on Track

As part of its recent reorganization, Metroplan formed a new body, the Regional Advisory Committees (RAC) to assist with future planning and public engagement. During 2019, the Metroplan Board selected representatives from a pool of volunteers.

The Regional Advisory Committees are comprised of three different committees: Livable Communities, Economic Vitality, and Transportation Systems. All three committees work together, along with the Executive Committee, to ensure a comprehensive planning process.

In July, 2019 the RAC convened for an orientation meeting. It then met in September, October and November for presentations and group discussions. The main topic was Horizon 2020, a look-back at previous planning efforts. The meetings were often lively, and by year's end the RAC was ready to tackle future planning issues.



As a regular bicycle commuter since the 1990s, I have realized that commuting by bicycle is a viable transportation choice in our community.

—Coreen Frasier, Economic Vitality Committee



I believe that regional development is a vital part of that future, but even more important is the need to have diverse representation at the table during the decision-making process.

—Pam Jones, RAC Economic Vitality Committee

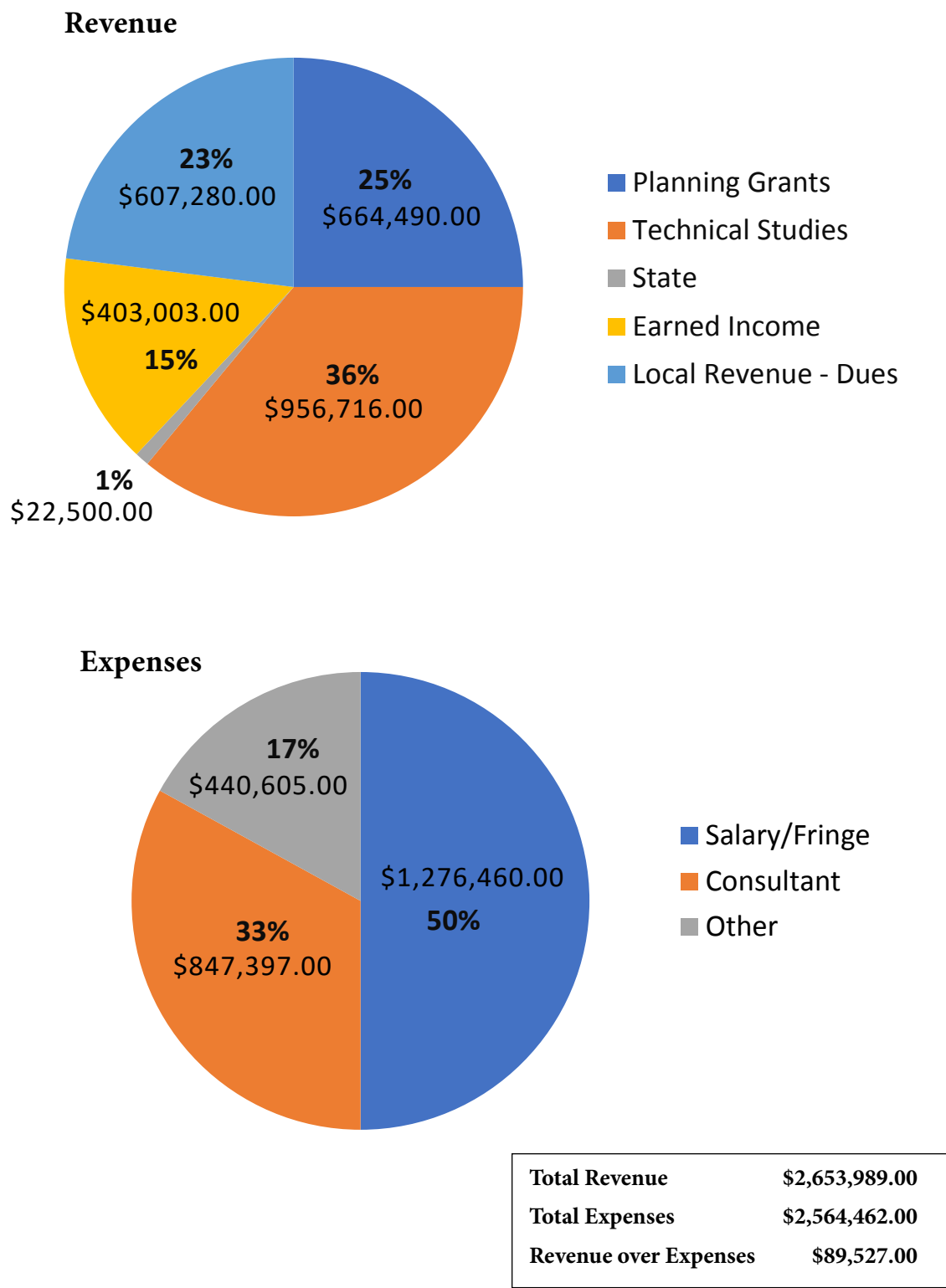
The mission of the Arkansas Chapter of the Sierra Club is, in part, to practice and promote the responsible use of the earth's ecosystems and resources. Working with the Metroplan advisory committees perfectly aligns with our work and that of the national parent organization.

—Patrick Stair, Livable Communities Committee



Metroplan 2019 Revenue and Expenditures

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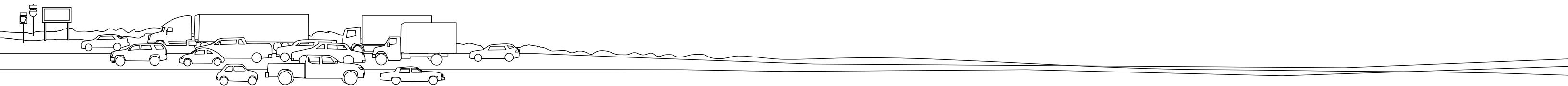
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