

METROPLAN



2020

ANNUAL REPORT

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METROPLAN

SMART PLANNING MAKES SMART PLACES.



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All photos are by Metroplan staff except where noted.

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This notice is available from the ADA/504/Title VI Coordinator in large print, audiotape or braille.



Letter from Leadership

Dear Reader,

During 2020 the pandemic utterly transformed work, meetings, public engagement, and even commuting, but it could not stop Metroplan from taking radical new steps toward making a future Central Arkansas a better place.

First, the Board of Directors adopted as formal policy the dedication of half of Metroplan’s annual allocation of Surface Transportation Block Grant (STBG) monies for the next ten years to create a regional multi-use path system for active transportation. The Board’s decision will dedicate at least \$55 million in regionally oriented bicycle and pedestrian greenway facilities to be matched by \$13.75 million in local dollars. This will yield a Regional Greenways Plan, a bike-ped network with a broad regional impact.

Secondly, the Board of Directors implemented its new STBG grant application process and scoring criteria, making its first annual grants under this program. The new project scoring criteria equates roadway projects with new bike-ped projects and, critically, gives higher scores to better-designed projects. This means Metroplan will only fund projects that include facilities for pedestrians, bicyclists, and, where appropriate, transit. In the first round of grants awarded in 2020, over \$9 million dollars were awarded to bike-ped projects. This new grant program, which complements the Regional Greenways Plan, is generating serious interest and interlocal cooperation with cities and counties around the region. That indeed is planning regionally.

As always the credit must go to 2020 President Joe Smith and the Board of Directors. They are Metroplan, not staff. And as Metroplan, they wholeheartedly adopted and implemented major changes this past year. It is their leadership we highlight in this report.

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.” In 2020, Metroplan left the broad path and started forging a new trail for the region to follow.

Come join us. We’ll see you on the Greenway.



Judge Doug Erwin
Lonoke County
Metroplan President



Tab Townsell
Executive Director

Judge Doug Erwin, Lonoke County
Metroplan President

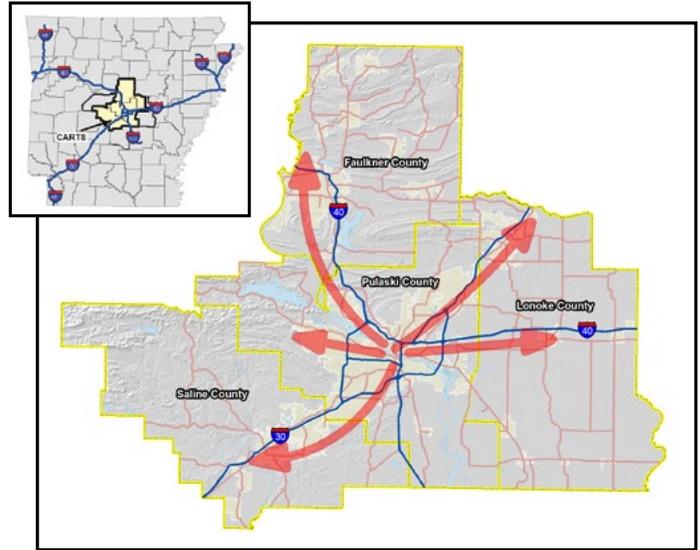
Tab Townsell
Executive Director



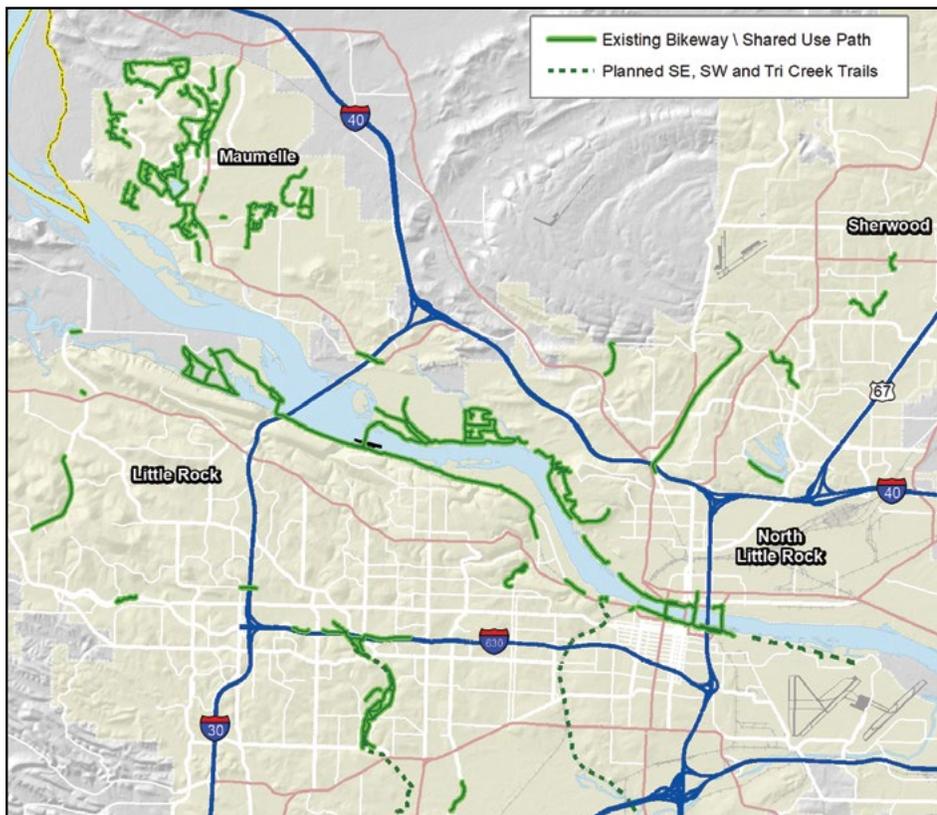
The Regional Greenways Plan

On February 26, 2020, the Metroplan Board announced the Regional Greenways Plan (RGP), a commitment to put \$55 million—roughly half of Metroplan’s anticipated revenues over the next ten years—into building a regional trails system.¹ Connectivity is a key theme. It builds on existing city trails, including the popular and heavily-used Arkansas River Trail. RGP aims to weave existing stand-alone trails into a hub-and-spoke system from the region’s center to its fringes. The map at right shows five possible vectors the proposed RGP may follow, although exact alignments are still being determined.

The RGP is a major investment commitment. To ensure the dollars are well spent, RGP requires Metroplan to engage engineering and planning firms to work with the Metroplan Board and staff to develop a regional trails master plan, with standards for trail development. Public participation will, of course, be instrumental to the project.



Metroplan’s goal is to create a regional trail network for transportation as well as recreation.



This image shows existing trails in and near the core of Central Arkansas, as well as a few connections already planned. This is just a starting point; the RGP will build internal and outward connections from this base.

“This trail initiative is innovative, it is trend-setting, and it will succeed because we are committed to it over the long term.”

North Little Rock Mayor Joe Smith,
Metroplan Board President



The Regional Greenways Plan will expand upon and better connect an already extensive trail system.

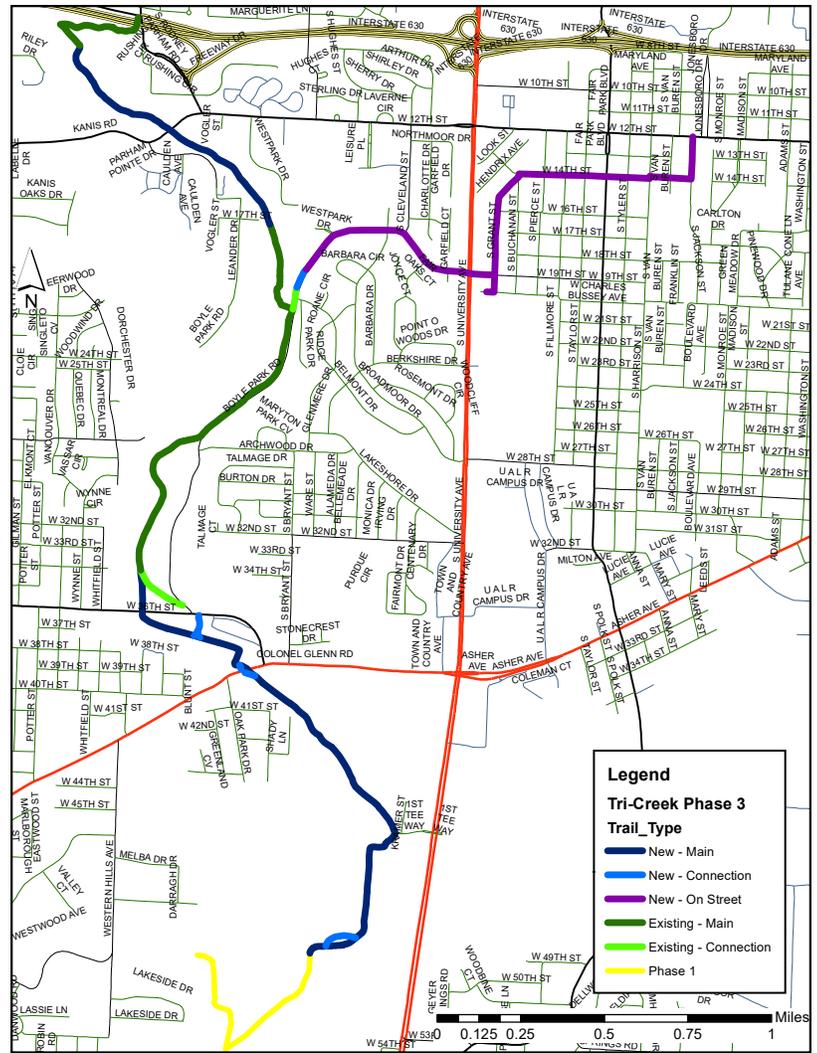
¹ It commits half of Metroplan’s STBG (Surface Transportation Block Grant) funding, or about half of Metroplan’s infrastructure investment over the next ten years toward building a regional path system.

The Regional Greenways Plan was announced on February 26th. Within two weeks offices, stores and restaurants were closing due to the Covid-19 crisis. This once-in-a-lifetime pandemic understandably diverted media attention, and the RGP faded into the background. Ironically, the pandemic only underlined the need for trails. With other recreational opportunities shut down, public use of local trails and sidewalks surged around the globe, and Central Arkansas was no exception. Strong pedestrian and bicycle connections are vital components of a resilient region.

The Regional Greenways Plan is already opening possibilities. In November 2020, Metroplan awarded \$3 million to the City of Little Rock to assist with the Tri-Creek Greenway in southwestern Little Rock. This ambitious project will yield about 5.8 miles of trail in total from I-630 to Stagecoach Road, about 4.2 miles of new trail in addition to 1.6 miles existing. It will provide passage over and under busy streets, and connect existing sidewalks, trails, and Rock Region METRO routes. And it is only a beginning. Expect more trails soon in a neighborhood near you.



Photo credit: Dave Roberts.



The Tri-Creek Greenway will connect five parks and improve safety and access to shopping and transit.

“The trail would create a network of bicycle connectivity to a portion of the community that has been greatly underserved. The Tri-Creek Greenway would also create a safe pedestrian crossing in the third most dangerous corridor in Central Arkansas.”

Stacy Tierney, President, Bicycle Advocacy of Central Arkansas (BACA)

“We are in full support of this grant application, and ultimately any north-south routes that allow cyclists (and other trail users) to connect through Little Rock and to the Arkansas River Trail.”

Dave Roberts, Little Rock Bicycle Friendly Community Committee



Unified Development Ordinance

“Planning for the future of any size town is difficult at best with all the different moving parts. For smaller cities, the challenges are even greater as most cannot afford an in-house planner. Because of this, outdated zoning laws and subdivision regulations are seldom updated or modernized to reflect the latest practices. Metroplan’s Model Codes are the perfect answer for small town leadership. Utilizing the expertise of Metroplan, small towns in Central Arkansas will be able to take the Model Codes and use them as a template for updating their plans. This is a game-changer for smaller towns.”

Those are the words of Mayor Charles Gastineau of Ward, Arkansas. Mayor Gastineau is an active member of Metroplan’s Small Cities Council (SCC), which was established in 2018 as a standing committee of Metroplan’s Board of Directors. The goals of the SCC are to address the unique needs of smaller cities regarding transportation and planning, and to develop a common forum for cities to aid each other with best practices in governance.

Through its work with the Small Cities Council, Metroplan learned that many communities were using land use regulations developed in the 1990s or earlier. While appropriate for their time, many regulations were no longer meeting cities’ needs as they grew and evolved.

In mid-2020, Metroplan staff began drafting a *Unified Development Ordinance*, which combines model land use and subdivision regulations for small cities, “model codes” for short.

Alexander	Lonoke
Austin	Mayflower
Bauxite	Mount Vernon
Cammack Village	Shannon Hills
England	Traskwood
Greenbrier	Vilonia
Guy	Ward
Haskell	Wooster
Hot Springs Village	Wrightsville



METROPLAN
SMALL CITIES
COUNCIL

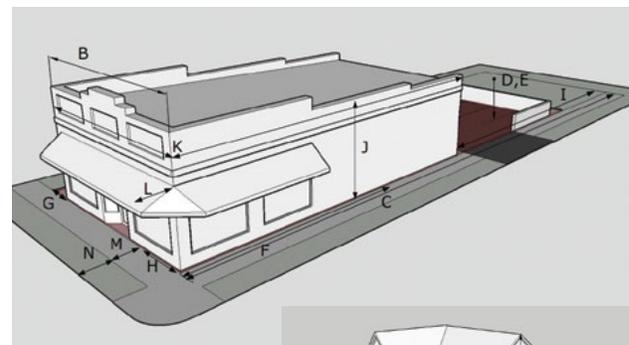
The goal is to combine SCC members’ priorities with best planning practices, creating practical and straightforward ordinances that city staff and planning commissioners can administer confidently.

Anyone who has seen a zoning ordinance knows they can be convoluted. Meeting our guiding principles of clarity, ease of use, and flexibility will take research, revision, and review. Achieving the further goals of safety, connectivity, sustainability/resilience, and equity/choice will nudge the status quo and challenge city leaders to balance conventional development trends with their long-term visions.

A group of SCC member cities have stepped forward as potential early adopters of the codes. Metroplan staff will be working closely with these cities throughout 2021 on the path to adoption.

The model code development process is highly collaborative. Metroplan members and partners who wish to participate in the review process are encouraged to contact Bernadette Rhodes, Metroplan Community Planner, at brhodes@metroplan.org.

- Guiding Principles for Metroplan’s Model Codes**
1. Clarity
 2. Ease of Use
 3. Flexibility
 4. Safety
 5. Connectivity
 6. Sustainability and Resilience
 7. Equity and Choice



The model code will incorporate diagrams and photos to illustrate and clarify requirements. The diagrams above and right show potential developments in the Neighborhood Center and Neighborhood Residential zones. Each development standard will be labeled and explained in the code.



RAC Starts New Long-Range Plan

Metroplan’s Regional Advisory Committees began working out the basics for a new Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP) during 2020. The three committees staged their kick-off meetings during February, before the pandemic put public meetings off limits. The RAC committees began meeting via Zoom during June 2020—a big adjustment at first but committee members and staff adapted.

By late 2020 the three committees had agreed on primary themes for the new plan, for which the Metroplan Board granted approval during its November 2020 meeting. These themes will help determine how we invest in and improve our transportation infrastructure and land development practices. Further committee input and public outreach in the next two years will help define concrete strategies to achieve those goals.



Central Arkansans desire a region with a high-quality transportation system that connects well planned, vibrant communities. Five insightful themes arose through Metroplan’s outreach to guide the region’s evolution over the next 20 years and beyond.



The RAC Economic Vitality Committee (above) and Transportation Committee (at right) held meetings in February 2020, shortly before the pandemic limited in-person meetings.

Public Outreach Phases





Important Completions

During 2020 four important road and trail projects were completed. The largest was the Geyer Springs railroad overpass in southwestern Little Rock. Costing about \$12 million, it is one of the final projects in Metroplan's Rail Grade Plan, passed by the Metroplan Board in 1997 to prioritize replacing twelve at-grade railroad crossings with bridges. Work is moving forward for two final rail grade separation projects in Jacksonville and Mayflower.

The new Oneida Street bridge over Kellogg Creek cost about \$1.2 million. The previous bridge here was completed in 1975 but had become structurally deficient. It serves as a critical connection between two Metroplan communities, Sherwood and Jacksonville. Prior to the bridge's completion, school buses

weren't allowed on the bridge for safety reasons, resulting in long detours.

Allsopp Park Trail was also completed in 2020. The half-mile trail provides a safe bicycle/pedestrian route from the Hillcrest neighborhood to Allsopp Park, and sets the stage for connecting to the Arkansas River Trail. Metroplan contributed \$160,000 to the project.

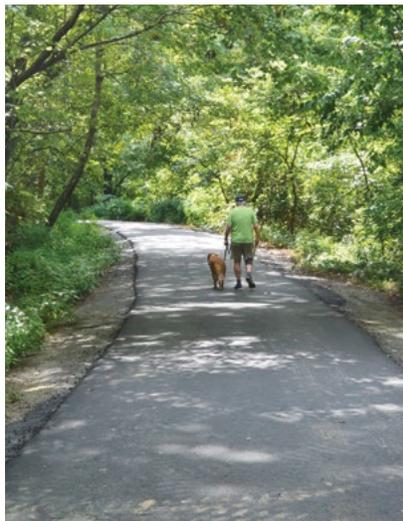
During 2020 a new roundabout at Congo Road and Longhills Road was completed in Benton. The intersection here had problems with congestion, and there were many collisions. The roundabout format will ease congestion and reduce both the severity and frequency of accidents.



Metroplan's Deputy Director, Casey Covington, joined the City of Little Rock on December 2, 2020 to open the new railroad overpass on Geyer Springs Road. Metroplan provided \$12 Million in federal funds towards the project.



The Oneida Bridge connecting Sherwood and Jacksonville.



Allsopp Park Trail

"The citizens of Benton have been so positive about how extremely well the roundabout allows the traffic to flow freely. They have actually bragged about how much time it saves them today compared to what they faced a couple years ago. Thank you Metroplan for continued support for the City of Benton."

Benton Mayor Tom Farmer



Ribbon cutting for the new Benton roundabout.



In 2020, the Port of Little Rock completed work on the Port Mobility Hub, a project partially funded by a \$50,000 TAP grant from Metroplan. The hub is located on the Fourche Dam Pike portion of the Southeast Trail. In addition to providing shelter for transit riders and bicyclists in the area, it features bike racks and a bicycle fix-it station.

The Port of Little Rock completed work on the Port Mobility Hub in 2020.
Photo credit: Little Rock Port Authority.

Jump Start Projects

The Markham Street project in Conway is rolling along quickly. In 2020, overhead powerlines were moved off the corridor and the first phase from Van Ronkle St. to Mill St. was reconstructed with new sidewalks and bike lanes. Work continues on the stretch from Mill Street to Harkrider Street with the entire corridor set to receive its final layer of pavement in 2021.



Markham Street, Conway

In the Levy neighborhood of North Little Rock, the Camp Robinson Road project received bids for its construction. The area will be more pedestrian friendly and reconfigure a dangerous intersection at Pike and Camp Robinson. The Levy project is largely funded with \$2.3 million in grants from Metroplan.



On December 18, 2020 the City of North Little Rock held a long-awaited groundbreaking ceremony for the Levy Jump Start project.

“They are going to have nice streets, nice sidewalks. It’s going to be a beautiful area that we hope can continue to grow.”

Robert Birch, Director of Development with the City of North Little Rock

In Little Rock, the 12th Street neighborhood started to see sidewalk and streetscape improvements on Cedar and Pine Streets. The project is intended to connect pedestrians from the I-630 corridor to the 12th Street police station and is expected to be completed in 2021.



New sidewalks being constructed along Cedar Street in Little Rock. Photo credit: Little Rock Public Works.



Smaller Cities

Metroplan supports our small and medium jurisdictions by funding projects such as sidewalks, bike paths and intersections. The following examples from Greenbrier, Lonoke and Shannon Hills and Jacksonville improve safety and connectivity.



Proposed location of the new Greenbrier sidewalk



The new sidewalks in Lonoke connect neighborhoods to the school. Photo credit: Mayor Trae Reed and Provision UAS.



Jacksonville sidewalk on Military Road



Shannon Hills sidewalk

Project Partnering

An efficient way to advance projects is to partner with multiple agencies. The Arkansas Department of Transportation (ARDOT) has been a major collaborator in the Mayflower Railgrade Separation and the Hwy 319/Hwy 367 Interchange and Signal. Both obligated at the end of 2020 and will begin construction in 2021 and include a substantial amount of funding from the state, Metroplan and locals.



ARDOT and the City of Bryant partnered on the new Bryant Parkway Interchange. Metroplan's grant will be used to extend the road and multi-use path.

TAP and STBG Recipients

In February 2020, the Metroplan Board approved funding for the 2020 Surface Transportation Program (STP) and 2020–2021 Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) grants in Central Arkansas.

STP and TAP are federal-aid programs that Metroplan awards on a competitive basis to its member jurisdictions. STP provides

flexible funding that may be used for projects to preserve and improve the conditions and performance on any federal-aid highway, bridge and tunnel projects on any public road, pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure, and transit capital projects. Six projects were selected to receive over \$6.3 million in available funding. A complete list is available at metroplan.org.

2020 STBG Program

Jurisdiction	STBG Project	Funding Amount
Pulaski County/Little Rock	Southeast Trail (12-ft multi-use)	\$700,000
Little Rock	Bowman Road	\$2,000,000
Conway	Markham St. (Jump Start)	\$1,500,000
Bryant	Bryant Parkway	\$1,500,000
Ward	Hwy 319/367 Intersection	\$525,000
Cabot	Signal System Upgrade	\$100,000



Metroplan's grant will be used to complete the widening of Kanis and the first segment of Bowman Road.

2020 TAP

Jurisdiction	TAP Projects	Funding Amount
Pulaski County	Southeast Trail (12-ft multi-use)	\$200,000
Conway	Stone Dam Creek and Harkrider	\$200,000
Lonoke	Lincoln St. Sidewalks, Palm to Woodlawn	\$90,000
Benton	Sidewalks Downtown to BHS	\$180,000
Bryant	Multi-use Path, Bryant Pkwy to Alcoa Park	\$195,000

In October 2020, the Metroplan Board approved funding for the 2021 Surface Transportation Block Grant Program (STBG). Metroplan awards funding to qualifying projects based on applications from member jurisdictions and a rigorous review process. Below are some of the 12 projects that were awarded

during this current program cycle. The list of awarded projects reflects the Metroplan Board's commitment to investments in a regional trail system for Central Arkansas. The projects also address a number of safety and congestion issues at intersections.

2021 STBG Program

Local Sponsor	Project	Federal Funds*	Phase
Bryant	Bryant Parkway	\$2,500,000	Construction
Cabot	Main Street (Hwy 89)	\$1,200,000	Construction
Conway	Salem Road Bridge over Kinley Trail	\$3,000,000	Construction
Little Rock	Tri-Creek Greenway Phase III	\$3,000,000	Construction
Maumelle	White Oak Crossing Roundabout	\$1,275,000	Construction
Pulaski County	Kanis, Denny and Stewart Roundabout	\$1,425,000	Construction
Saline County	Southwest Trail	\$3,000,000	ROW
Austin/Cabot/Ward	NW Lonoke Co Multi-use Pathway	\$200,000	Design
Benton	Congo & Shenandoah Rd Roundabout	\$100,000	Design
Jacksonville	West Main Street Realignment	\$100,000	Design
Sherwood	Power-Line Trail	\$100,000	Design
Wooster	Hwy 25 and Hwy 285 Roundabout	\$100,000	Design

*Allocated by Metroplan



Horizon 2020 Wins Double Award

During 2020, Metroplan’s Horizon 2020 study was bestowed not one but two awards by the Arkansas Chapter of the American Planning Association. These were awards for (a) Unique Contribution to Planning and (b) Achievement for Media or Journalism. APA President-elect James Walden explained: “We don’t normally provide two awards to one project but this was such an outstanding project, we really felt like it was appropriate.”

Horizon 2020 reviewed Metroplan’s planning efforts from the early 1990s through the present. With vivid graphics the study chronicled successes and failures, adjustments, and shifting priorities in regional planning during these years.



Arkansas APA Awards:
Achievement in Media or Journalism,
Unique Contribution to Planning

It was a time of win and loss for planning, in which long-term plans were repeatedly thwarted by short-term priorities. The era that saw continued widenings of streets and freeways, and rapid suburban housing and population growth. At the same time mixed-use urban revitalization took hold, bike and pedestrian facilities improved markedly, and there was greater public involvement in the planning process. More than just a written report, Horizon 2020 included Facebook and YouTube videos and public panel discussions. It was more candid than self-congratulatory. This proved popular. There is a lesson in that.

It’s not often that you get an agency or a plan really willing to take a post-mortem look. And so for staff, for the Board of Directors that is a very brave look.

James Walden, President-elect of Arkansas APA Chapter

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. Engage the public earlier, more often, and meaningfully—not only during development, but especially after plan adoption.
2. Awareness of regional goals must extend to local councils and commissions.
3. Cities must commit to local policies that support regional goals.
4. Funded projects should closely align with the long-term vision, even if driven by immediate need.
5. Metroplan cannot mandate. All regional partners must embrace a genuinely collaborative spirit to achieve any vision.



During the Horizon 2020 period, freeways were widened, and traffic levels kept increasing...

.... While urban revitalization also took hold.



Our staff continues to amaze me when they put out a product and you look and you go “Wow.” That is over-the-top good and this right here just proves it. Kudos to everybody.

2020 Metroplan Board President Joe Smith



Susan Markman Retires



SUSAN MARKMAN, AICP, CGF
Master of Arts in Community Planning/
Historic Preservation
American Institute of Certified Planners
(AICP)
Certified Group Facilitator (CGF)

Susan Markman retired from Metroplan on July 10, 2020 after twenty-eight years of service. Susan played a key role connecting with people both inside and outside the organization. Susan never met a stranger, and used her gift for making personal connections as she oversaw public outreach and worked closely with regional planning committees. Metroplan Board members will fondly remember Susan for leading and corralling them on fact-finding trips to many grand places.

capacities in the region as a member of the City of Jacksonville Planning Commission and Capital Area Zoning District Commission. Several years ago, Susan completed a rigorous course and became a Certified Group Facilitator, which further enhanced her ability to facilitate public outreach.

Susan has been a constant influence for progress, a champion of the underserved and underrepresented, and an ever-ready advocate for citizen involvement in the planning process. All Metroplan staff members will remember her as a mentor and advisor, and for the cheerful and optimistic attitude that she brought to Metroplan.



In 2020 Susan Markman received the Professional Planner Award from the APA AR chapter for her significant contribution to the planning profession in Arkansas. Metroplan staff nominated Susan for the award, citing her many years of planning experience and dedication.

Metroplan appreciates the hard work, dedication and leadership Susan has provided. We wish her well as she begins her next chapter. She will be missed.

Thank you, Susan!

During her lengthy service, Susan assisted with developing *Metro 2020*, the region's first Long-Range Metropolitan Transportation Plan, and subsequent updates, including the most recent, *Central Arkansas 2050*. One of her specialties was conducting walkability assessments for Metroplan communities.

Susan received multiple planning awards for work on projects like Walkable Cabot, Operation Bottleneck, and *The Glossary of Transportation Terms*. She has further served in local planning

Bernadette Rhodes Joins the Team

Bernadette Rhodes joined the Metroplan team in August 2020 as a Community Planner. Bernadette serves as the liaison to Metroplan's Small Cities Council, providing coordination and technical assistance to Central Arkansas's smaller communities on a variety of planning goals. She currently manages Metroplan's model code development project, which is drafting updated zoning and subdivision codes to help small cities in need of updated regulations. Bernadette earned her Bachelor's degree from Middlebury College in Vermont and her Masters of Public Administration from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. She lives in North Little Rock with her husband and two young sons.





The Year that Went Abnormal

Covid-19 was a distant news story in January of 2020. In February it started getting closer and more alarming, and then suddenly it seemed like the whole world shut down around March 12, 2020. Metroplan moved all its meetings to electronic format, mostly using the now-famous Zoom software. Metroplan's offices were locked down, and staff were advised to work from home as much as possible. When in the office they stayed distant from one another and wore masks.

It seemed strange at first, then people began getting their footing. Work continued, and—strange as it seemed—people at home got a lot of work done. The Metroplan Board held several meetings via Zoom, then later moved to socially-distanced public meetings in Jacksonville and North Little Rock. 2020 was a crazy year, and sometimes a lonely one. But somehow it all worked.



Bernadette Rhodes met with the Small Cities Council in Jacksonville on November 18, 2020. Social distancing was practiced at all in-person meetings.



Metroplan staff held a socially-distanced retirement picnic for Susan Markman at Allsopp Park. Susan is wearing a celebratory tiara.



The Metroplan Board often met via Zoom during 2020.

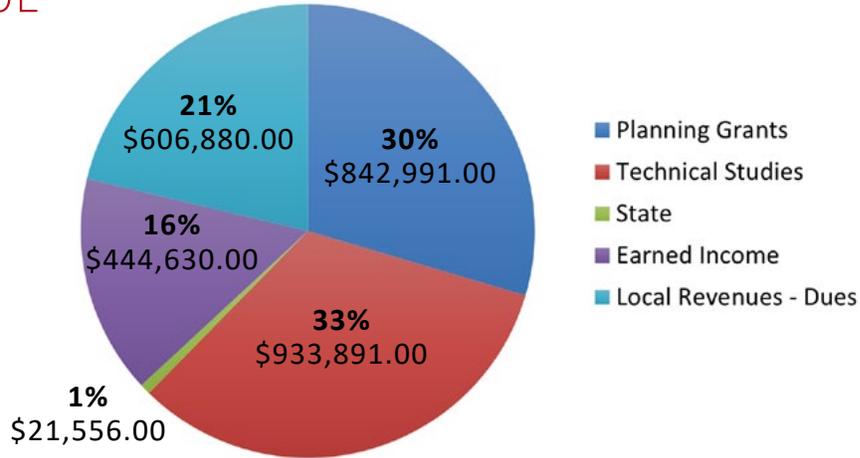


Tab Townsell addressed the Metroplan Board at the North Little Rock Community Center on October 28, 2020.

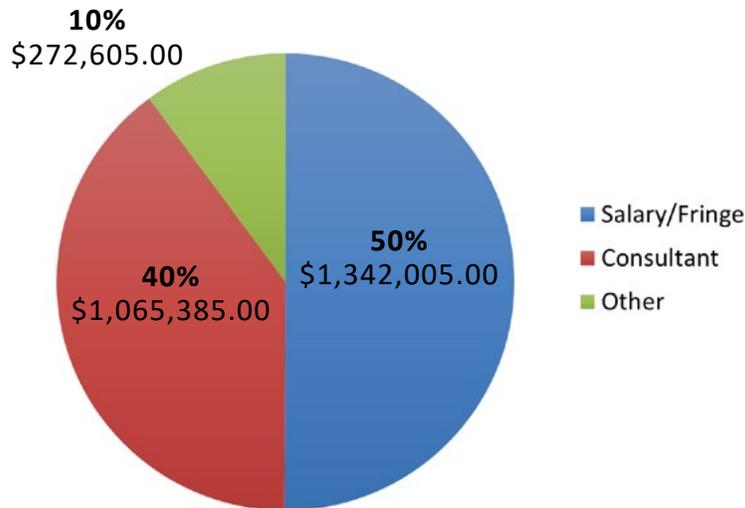


Metroplan 2020 Revenue and Expenditures

REVENUE



EXPENSES



Total Revenue	\$2,849,948.00
Total Expenses	\$2,679,995.00
Revenue over Expenses	\$169,953.00



2020 Metroplan Board of Directors

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City of Austin

Mayor Eddie Jones
City of Bauxite

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Mayor David Graf
City of Cammack Village

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Clinton National Airport



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