

Chapter 1 - RPA 2 LONG RANGE TRANSPORTATION PLAN

Plan Format

This Plan is divided into several chapters. Each chapter will look at specific elements of “transportation” in Region 2, from the area’s demographics, recreation, industry, roads, bridges, passenger transportation, freight, rail, airports, environment, economic development, etc. A basic format will be as follows:

Chapter 1 gives an introduction, format and overview or background of transportation planning requirements, the purpose of Regional Planning Affiliations, the structure of the Regional Planning Affiliation 2, regional issues and needs, its transportation planning goals, and current conditions influencing transportation planning as well as projected demands.

Chapter 2 provides a summary of demographic, commuting, economic, and land use trends in the RPA 2 Region.

Chapter 3 will be the largest chapter and will present the various modes and transportation elements in the region such as Highways, Bridges, Passenger Transportation, Non-motorized transportation/Recreation, Rail/Grain Handling/Freight, Airports, etc.

Chapter 4 examines the environment of the region and potential impacts of planned transportation projects on the environment, as well as discussing methods to avoid, minimize, and mitigate these impacts.

Chapter 5 will look at the safety and security of the transportation system, from crash issues in the region to preparedness for natural and manmade disasters.

Chapter 6 reviews the traditional sources of transportation funding for transportation projects in the RPA 2 Region.

Chapter 7 will provide a summary of the needs/issues of the region, proposed actions, short-term priorities/programming (RPA 2 TIP) ongoing actions, and the process by which funds are distributed or prioritized in the region.

Federal and State Legislation

Federal law has mandated transportation planning at the state and metropolitan (population greater than 50,000) levels for some time. The Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) in 1991 ushered in the era of transportation planning on the local level in rural areas. In the past, this planning was generally done at the state level. With the passage of the ISTEA legislation, the state of Iowa, which had largely done the transportation planning for rural areas, created the Regional Planning Affiliation (RPA) system.

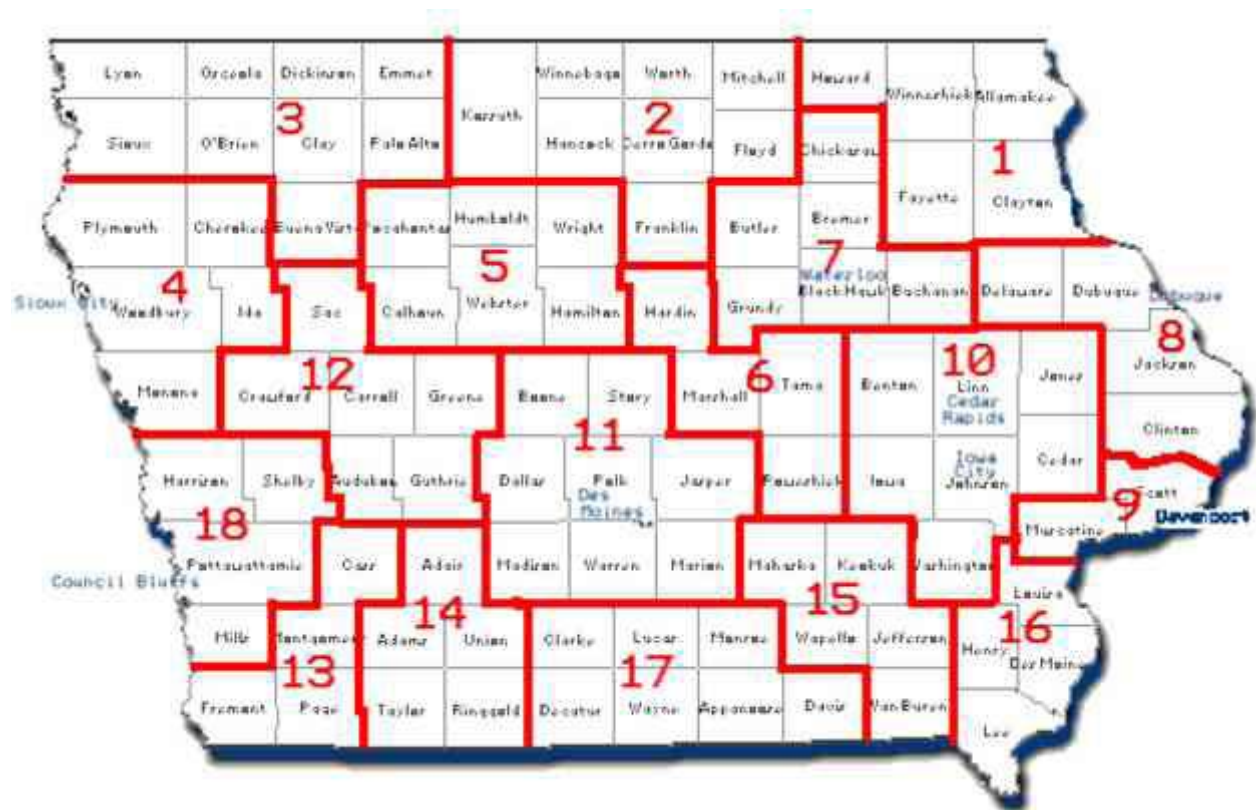
While ISTEA included a provision for the consultation of rural officials in the transportation planning process, it did not create specific planning agencies for nonmetropolitan areas. The State of Iowa went farther than the legislation required and through the development of the RPA system, enabled local, elected officials the opportunity to make transportation decisions based on

local, or regional needs, instead of a top down approach from the state. This has required cooperation between cities, counties, economic development officials, IDOT and the general public in order to most efficiently allocate funds for transportation needs in the region.

Similar guidelines for transportation planning were also included in 1998's Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA- 21) and 2005's Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) and now, Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century (MAP-21).

Regional Planning Affiliations

While federal law does not mandate specific transportation planning funding or requirements for nonmetropolitan areas, the State of Iowa has developed a system of Regional Planning Affiliations (RPAs) to carry out this planning on a regional level. Iowa has 18 RPAs that cover all the area outside of Iowa's nine Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs). The Iowa DOT provides funding through Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and Federal Transit Administration (FTA) sources to the RPAs to finance planning and to program for projects. In return, the RPAs conduct regional planning activities that mirror those required of MPOs. This includes completing several specific planning documents and processes. However, how those documents are completed is largely left up to local participants. Many examples of this will be demonstrated throughout the document.



Planning Process

RPA's are expected to complete the following transportation planning documents:

Transportation Planning Work Program (TPWP) – outlines the transportation planning activities RPA staff plan to conduct in the next fiscal year and its sources of funding; updated annually.

Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) – includes all projects programmed for federal transportation funding in the RPA in the next four years; updated annually.

Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) – reviews the current condition and future needs of the transportation system and provides guidance for transportation investment decisions; updated every five years.

Passenger Transportation Plan (PTP) – provides coordination between passenger transportation providers and human service agencies and recommends projects to improve passenger transportation; full document update every five years, but an on-going meeting and planning process to quickly address changing passenger transportation needs.

Public Participation Plan (PPP) – details the process the RPA will follow to involve the public in the transportation planning and programming process; updated as needed.

RPA 2 has of course created, approved, and amended these documents as necessary. As is the case with any document, they are only valuable if they are realistic and used.

Region 2 Planning Affiliation Administration

The Regional Planning Affiliation 2 (RPA 2) is located in north central Iowa and consists of the eight counties of Cerro Gordo, Floyd, Franklin, Hancock, Kossuth, Mitchell, Winnebago, Worth, and 67 cities within these counties. Regional Planning Affiliation 2 follows the same boundaries and includes the same counties and cities as the Region 2 Planning Area, or NIACOG Region. The North Iowa Area Council of Governments (NIACOG) serves as the designated regional planning agency for this area, with all eight counties and 67 communities, being members of NIACOG. Total population of Region 2 is 127,258 according to the 2010 US Census. These member local governments are involved in the decision-making process for the distribution of federal funds for transportation-related projects.

Description of Region 2 Committees

The various committees of RPA 2 follow the basic guidelines established with ISTEA including membership, purpose, and activities. While the federal transportation programs have changed over time, most of the basic elements have remained the same. i.e. STP, Transportation Alternative, Transit funding, etc. The passage of MAP-21 has swept in what could be major changes on how the regional processes and decisions are made. As MAP-21 is so new as well as “short” for a transportation bill, the changes may or may not stay. Therefore, the various committees described in the following paragraphs are described with what has happened in the past as well as what could be expected in the future.

The Region 2 Planning Affiliation has four committees which carry out the requirements of MAP-21. The committees involve citizens, staff persons, technical professionals, local elected officials, and staff from the Iowa Department of Transportation. The involvement of these persons has been crucial, and successful, in implementing the previous transportation processes and will also be in the future.

The ***Transportation Policy Board*** consists of seventeen voting members comprised of local elected officials from the eight counties and cities within. The Policy Board is responsible for determining policy and to approve the Long Range Transportation Plan, and to annually approve the Transportation Improvement Program, Transportation Planning Work Program, as well as other required documents. It is the charge of the Policy Board to foster a regional vision for the next twenty years and to guide the other committees in the direction of that vision. With that mission, the Policy Board has the final say over all planning and programming decisions for Region 2.

The ***Regional Technical Committee*** is comprised primarily of city and county engineering professionals and public works officials, but also includes the transit directors of the Region 2 Transit System and Mason City Transit. As the Technical Committee members are most intimately involved with constructing and maintaining their respective systems, it is this Committee that invites, submits and review applications for regional STP funding. The Technical Committee is responsible for review of technical aspects of all projects which are proposed for the TIP, and to make recommendations to the Policy Board. These committee members are aware of each county's and city's ability to maintain the current transportation system, and can assess future needs within the context of future financial ability. MAP-21 has changed the funding levels given to the states. How the State of Iowa has handled these funds impacts the distribution to the regions, which has impacted the counties and cities as well. While this Plan is not project or programming year specific, MAP-21 changes will most likely affect all levels of transportation planning and programming.

In addition, historic funding of STP and Transportation Enhancements, has now been changed to STP, Transportation Alternative (TA) and Transportation Alternative Flex (TA Flex) as allowed by the State DOT under MAP-21. While STP is the same, TA takes the place of Enhancements, while TA Flex could be either STP or TA. TA Flex can be seen as additional funds for STP type projects, transit projects, additional TA funds, etc. The decision of how to use these funds has been purposely left up to the local regions as the State did not want to try to dictate local priorities. As the primary standing committee, as well as those most involved in transportation infrastructure issues, the Technical Committee needs to have a voice as to how these funds are spent.

The Technical Committee has also recognized the importance of transit services to Region 2. Rural transit has also been identified as an important element to the efficiency of the transportation system and as such, the Technical Committee has allocated regional STP dollars to buy expansion vehicles. With MAP-21, STP is still a source of funding, but now TA Flex could be used instead, if the respective Committees choose to use the funds in this manner.

The transit directors provide valuable expertise on the operation of the respective transit systems and further illustrate the need for multiple modes in creating an effective and efficient transportation system.

In the beginning of the Regional Planning Affiliation process, the RPAs were to determine methods of allocating funds to projects that were addressing regional priorities. The Regional Technical Committee developed a list of factors to be considered when prioritizing highway projects for the Transportation Improvement Program. The factors included the following:

Pavement Condition	Economic Development
Travel Efficiency	Bridge Management
Quadrennial Needs Study	Cost/Benefit
Land Area	Safety

Preserving the rights-of-way for future transportation projects will occur during the project discussion and design phases.

As the process has progressed, ***RPA 2 has fostered an understanding that the entities that make up the RPA 2 Region all have very similar needs and resources.*** To that end, they have also developed a way of distributing funds that also takes into consideration “equity”. The listed criteria, while still considered in project selection in general sense, are less important to the regional process, while fair share and equity have assumed a far greater role.

While programming projects at the regional level, it has become abundantly clear that an asphalt overlay project in one county is generally no more or less important than that same type of overlay project in another county. It is a given that if a county is willing to expend a great amount of federal and local funds on a road project, one would have to assume it is a needed or necessary project. While some argue that this equity or “sub-allocation” of funds does not allow for priority projects to be funded, RPA 2’s project list and funding levels show just the opposite. There is not enough funding to meet all of the region’s needs, however RPA 2 has created a process that enables cities and counties to do larger projects with more federal money, yet still allow everyone an opportunity at the funds. RPA 2 has provided funds to Region 2 Transit, IDOT projects, small cities, and had entities complete projects with a majority of federal funds, knowing that they likely would not get federal funds for several years while other entities completed their priority projects. This flexibility allows for the Committee members to better financially plan for their proposed improvements. Knowing they will eventually get a “share” of the regional funds, they can put off a project that is not as urgent as another county’s may be.

This cooperation of the Technical Committee sets the tone for the entire RPA 2 cities and counties. It also clearly demonstrates how federal transportation funds are viewed over a long term period, not just on a yearly basis. How this RPA functions has to be understood to get the view of this Long Range Transportation Plan and the Vision and Goals.

The ***Transportation Alternatives Committee*** involves the greatest percentage of citizen volunteers. County Conservation Board Directors comprise the largest portion of this committee because of their knowledge of plans for recreation and conservation areas in each of their

counties. Other members are from local interest groups involved with historic preservation, bicycle organizations, tourism and environmental preservation. This is the former Enhancement Committee, but since MAP-21 has eliminated Enhancements as a standalone program and consolidated it with Scenic Byway and Safe Routes to Schools, the composition of this committee may change as well. It seems participation in this committee, beyond Conservation Directors fluctuates based on whether or not someone has a pending application.

The ***Transportation Advisory Group (TAG)*** consists of passenger transportation providers, transit agencies, Area Agency on Aging, United Way of North Central Iowa, Mercy Medical Center-North Iowa staff, RPA 2 staff, IDOT staff, school districts, private business, members of the public, and anyone interested in passenger transportation. The TAG is the primary group that evaluates needs and gaps in the existing passenger transportation service and develops action plans to address those needs. The TAG meets monthly to evaluate the effectiveness of new services identified in the PTP and plot strategies to meet the needs and gaps in delivery of passenger transportation in the RPA 2 area.

All committees described above, and those special committees convened periodically, hold public meetings to discuss the transportation system in the region and to encourage public comments.

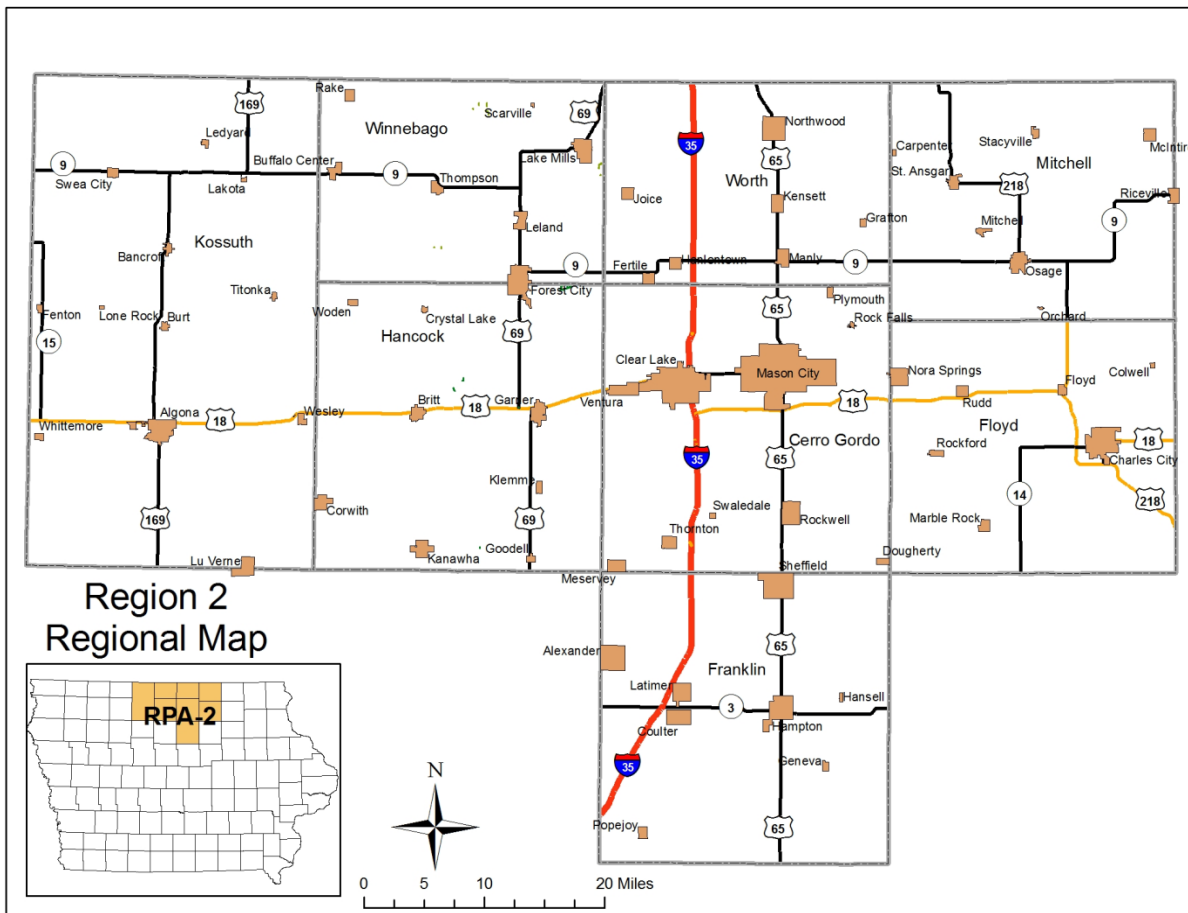
NIACOG staff is involved with facilitating the MAP-21 program in Region 2 by preparing all documents, setting up and facilitating meetings, acting as a liaison to the Iowa Department of Transportation, providing guidance to committees in all matters pertaining to the MAP-21 program, as well as being a resource for all member cities, counties and residents of the NIACOG/RPA 2 Region..

REGIONAL PLANNING AFFILIATION 2 (RPA 2) TRANSPORTATION

North Iowa traffic is generally created by a commuting work force, agricultural activities, industry, and retail business. Many people in the work force choose to live in bedroom communities and commute to larger economic hubs in the area. These bedroom communities provide desirable housing, neighborhoods, streets, schools, and an excellent quality of life in general. These areas are able to sustain a solid workforce and therefore need good transportation connections to work centers and retail outlets.

Region 2 is divided by two major thoroughfares, Interstate 35 traveling North and South, and State Highway 18 traveling East and West. State Highway 18, in RPA 2, comes from Kossuth County on the west to Interstate 35 on the east where it turns into the Avenue of the Saints and exits the region in Floyd County on the east. The Avenue of the Saints, aptly named as it stretches from St. Paul, Minnesota, to St. Louis, Missouri, is four-lane divided highway. These primary roads are considered by the Long Range Transportation Planning Committee to be the most important thoroughfares for the region. With these routes, any area of the region has easy access to interstate transportation within relative close proximity. Future transportation and economic development arriving in North Iowa will most likely be centered around the traffic on these routes.

The Mason City/Clear Lake area, located on the crossing of Interstate 35 and Highway 18, will most likely remain the retail/medical center of the region in the future. The major health facility in the area exists in Mason City, and a large industrial base exists in both cities. The county seat towns of Charles City, Garner, Forest City, Osage, Hampton, Northwood and Algona have industrial and commercial centers as well. They are located along state highways. Cities surrounding the Mason City/Clear Lake area will supply a labor force and affordable housing. County seats and communities with strong educational facilities have been found to be areas which will maintain business and industry.



Organization

While NIACOG provides staff and administrative support, the decision making and programming authority of RPA 2 lies within its two main branches, the Policy Board and Technical Committee. The Policy Board consists primarily of local elected officials and is the governing body of RPA 2, with the final decision making authority.

LONG RANGE TRANSPORTATION PLAN

Purpose of the Plan

This document has been prepared in response to the federal requirements outlined in previous federal transportation programs and continuing with the recently passed Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century (MAP-21) under the authority of the FHWA, FTA, and Iowa DOT. NIACOG, as the delegated transportation planning authority for the eight county region, has the obligation to develop a Long Range Transportation Plan as one product of the RPA 2 transportation planning process.

The Long Range Transportation Plan serves as a mechanism for the RPA to examine its current transportation networks, including highway, transit, air, rail, and non-motorized modes, and to assess their adequacy for the existing population and economy. Moreover, it gives area officials the chance to explore the future transportation needs of the community based on anticipated population and economic growth.

This endeavor is conducted through a review of existing system conditions, coordination with several modal focus groups, a series of discussions with the RPA Technical Committee, and the solicitation of input on the current status and future needs of the transportation system.

This document will provide a framework upon which local jurisdictions can base transportation project selection during the annual TIP process. Given a constrained financial future, regional officials must be able to prioritize and select projects which best meet the needs of the region, and whose costs do not exceed the revenue projected to be available. With its long timeframe and broad view of the transportation system, the Plan is a way to chart how transportation policies can be turned into future investments in the system.

Overview of Plan Development and Future Updates

Input for the Plan has been derived mainly from the Transportation Alternatives Committee, Technical Committee, Transportation Advisory Group and the Policy Board, as these persons and committee represent not only the public, or their customers and clients, but also have primary expertise in the actual systems being evaluated.

Additionally, the Iowa DOT's *Iowa in Motion – Planning Ahead 2040* plan and other source documents from the Iowa DOT, FHWA, and FTA were utilized.

This Plan will be updated on a five year cycle, which will enable RPA 2 to review the trends it discusses and verify if they are still applicable, address changes in transportation legislation at the state and federal levels, update the specific projects slated for the first five years of the Plan, and determine if the Plan is still valid for guiding the transportation planning and programming process.

RPA 2 has developed the following vision statement to guide them in the development of the Regional 2 Planning Affiliation Long Range Transportation Plan:

VISION STATEMENT:

SEEK TO MAINTAIN AND ENHANCE EXISTING AND FUTURE TRANSPORTATION SYSTEMS FOR THE SAFE AND EFFICIENT MOVEMENT OF GOODS AND PEOPLE IN THE MOST COST EFFECTIVE MANNER WITHIN THE REGION AND STATE.

In order to accomplish this vision stated above, the following Goals and Objectives have been developed:

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES:

- 1. Identify essential roads, bridges and corridors that will have the greatest community and economic development impact on the Region 2 area.***
 - a. Focus funding to maintain essential existing systems.
 - b. Identify potential future systems and ways of financing those systems.
- 2. Prioritize funding for transportation systems.***
 - a. Maintain and increase reliable funding sources for transportation improvements such as the state road use tax, federal and local resources.
 - b. Keep informed of current and new funding sources.
 - c. Utilize innovative funding sources such as Tax Increment Financing (TIF).
- 3. Provide for the safety of transportation system users.***
 - a. Utilize technology and data to identify unsafe elements of the transportation system.
 - b. Investigate new techniques and technologies to improve safety for the movement of people and goods.
 - c. Work with railroad companies to improve safety for at grades crossings through improvements such as grade separation, gates, lights, or other strategies as appropriate.
 - d. Encourage projects that address safety issues for all modes.
- 4. Maintain and enhance the movement of product and people.***
 - a. Encourage coordination between cities and counties within the region.
 - b. Encourage projects that improve transportation links to other regions or states.
 - c. Maintain and improve efficient connectors between major generators.
- 6. Improve major transportation elements designated for economic development areas.***
 - a. Work with cities, counties and economic development professionals to identify suitable areas for future development that can be served by the existing transportation system.
 - b. Utilize local, state and federal resources to fund improvements.

7. ***Provide responsive passenger transportation services.***
 - a. Expand public transportation to meet the changing needs of riders.
 - b. Partner with employers for transportation of employees.
 - c. Coordinate with human service agencies to identify needs.
 - d. Partner with human service agencies to fund services to meet the identified needs.

8. ***Promote the development of adequate multi-use trail facilities for commuting and recreation.***
 - a. Acquire and develop abandoned railroad corridors for trail development.
 - b. Develop trail/pedestrian facilities in conjunction with road projects where feasible.
 - c. Expand existing facilities.
 - d. Utilize any funding sources available.

CURRENT ISSUES

As discussed throughout this document, there are a host of issues affecting the quality of the transportation system. The RPA 2 Region is primarily rural and caters mainly to the agricultural economy. There are six ethanol processing plants in the area, two biodiesel plants, multiple grain elevators, in addition to very large manufacturing plants. Mason City is home to Mercy Medical Center-North Iowa, a major health care hub for the area. Mason City is also home to North Iowa Area Community College (NIACC). Several cities in the region are also major employment centers for manufacturing including Algona, Forest City, St. Ansgar, Osage, Garner, Hampton, and Charles City as well as having satellite medical clinics and schools. While other communities do not have the large manufacturing base, they are home to smaller scale manufacturing.

As there are many small cities in the region that are lacking even a convenience store, residents rely on the transportation system to be able to travel for employment, education, healthcare, entertainment, retail services and groceries.

While this is not a new trend in the area, the consolidation of schools, closing of small town grocery stores and lack of employment opportunities in the community people live in, has resulted in higher traffic and increased wear and tear on the county road system. Add to that, the loss of buying power of today's construction dollars, major issues with being able to maintain the current system are starting to arise. The increased amount of trucks delivering grains to biofuel plants, the industrialization of livestock production and the use of waste as fertilizer has also taken its toll on the rural transportation system. Some counties in the area have resorted to fining road users for damage caused by their activities. One example that is becoming common is the hauling of liquid manure for land application. Depending on the season, the rural gravel roads cannot withstand the heavy load and deep rutting and other damages that occur. City and county budgets are stretched as it is, so damage like that mentioned above, places and even higher burden on the county road departments.

Due to increased freight and heavy farm equipment, roads and bridges are deteriorating at a faster rate than ever before. Some bridges in the region are structurally deficient or functionally

obsolete and will require repair, replacement, or closure in the near future. Passenger transportation service needs via public transit will increase, all the while rural transit expenses are going up and funding is decreasing. Improved intermodal facilities may enhance the flow of freight between modes; and more connections via recreational trails, on-road bicycle facilities, and sidewalks are needed to increase walking and bicycling for recreation and commuting.

All of these concerns and more are examined throughout this Plan. As discussed below, there are also several overriding factors that will affect how transportation planning moves forward.

Economy

This plan has been developed while the nation has been recovering from a major economic recession. Gas prices have fluctuated over the past several years, and had risen to almost \$4.00 per gallon nationally at times in 2011 and 2012. Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT) decreased throughout the recession, though they have started to level off as the economy has begun to recover. A stagnate or decreasing rate of VMT is a major concern in transportation planning, as it means less funding for transportation maintenance and improvements due to less revenue from the gas tax. Decreasing revenue is also impacted by better fuel economy of today's vehicles. In order to protect the environment as well as reduce the nation's dependence on foreign oil, car makers are striving to meet higher fuel economy standards. This raises quite the dilemma for policy makers as traditional sources of funding will be less in the future. As the economy improves, people generally travel more. However, they likely will buy less fuel than they had in the past.

Transportation Funding

At the local, state, and federal levels, lawmakers are grappling with how to fund transportation infrastructure as construction prices increase and revenues fall.

Several counties in the RPA 2 Region have been able to take advantage of the construction of several wind farms in the area through the creation of Tax Increment Financing (TIF) districts. Winnebago, Mitchell and Worth counties have all been able to invest in transportation infrastructure improvements because of revenue generated through TIF and Urban Renewal programs.

At the state level, several steps have been taken to address deficiencies in transportation infrastructure funding, some more successful than others. In 2007, the Iowa Legislature created the Transportation Investment Moves the Economy in the 21st Century, or TIME-21 fund. Ideally, this fund would generate \$200 million per year that would be distributed to the state, counties, and cities. In 2008, the legislature approved increases in registration and other fees that will eventually generate about \$160 million per year. Throughout this time, the amount of additional funding needed per year to address critical shortfalls was estimated to be between \$200 and \$267 million per year.

In 2011, Governor Branstad appointed the Governor's Transportation 2020 Citizen Advisory Commission to assist the Iowa DOT with assessing the condition of Iowa's roadway system and evaluating current and future funding options to best address system needs. The Commission's report made several recommendations, including increasing the state's fuel tax by eight to ten

cents, increasing the fee for new vehicle registrations from 5% to 6%, and developing a funding mechanism to apply to alternatively fueled, hybrid, and high fuel efficiency vehicles. While these recommendations did not move forward in the legislature in 2012, the Governor did charge the Iowa DOT with identifying \$50 million in efficiencies. In 2014, the State of Iowa passed legislation that increased the state fuel tax by ten cents (\$0.10) per gallon. This increase is seen as both a positive and negative. Supporters of the increase say the funding increase was sorely needed to just keep up with existing needs. However, opponents felt a tax increase was not necessary and that there is too much waste that could be eliminated instead. Surprisingly, to some at least, members of each party, seemingly knowing the end result, voted opposite their respective party affiliation's position. Democrats voted yes and no, while republicans voted also yes and no. This isn't a commentary on which party or vote was right or wrong, but how politics and the political environment at the State and Federal levels affects the transportation funding process at this period in time.

At the national level, SAFETEA-LU expired on September 30, 2009. Continuing resolutions and infusions of General Fund dollars into the Highway Trust Fund kept federal transportation dollars flowing. A new two year reauthorization bill, Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century, or MAP-21, was passed in July 2012. The short time period and requirements of MAP-21 have not lessened the lack of stability in federal transportation funding programs. This instability is somewhat reflected in this plan. Transportation funding requirements have changed many times over the years, but the needs in RPA 2 are relatively the same. Whether it is under SAFETEA-LU, MAP-21, or whatever incarnation the future brings, the planning outlined in this document is based on the needs and resources available now. As MAP-21 is so new, and the plan is not project specific, elements in the plan are very broad in scope and not project or funding specific.

Planning Considerations

Transportation planning is no different from other types of planning. Communities that have done proper planning seem better prepared to handle issues that have come on over a period of time, or pop up suddenly. Planning also enables local governments to take advantage of unexpected opportunities as well. In rural Iowa, many city and county jurisdictions are struggling just to maintain existing transportation infrastructure, rarely discussing building a new road. The heavy traffic on rural roads due to increasing production of biofuels, livestock operations and, more recently, farm chemical and fertilizer production has necessitated counties in particular, to target resources to infrastructure improvements to accommodate these industries. A county must have employment opportunities to attract residents. In Region 2, it is quite common for residents to travel 30 to 40 miles for employment, healthcare, entertainment, and shopping. Mason City is certainly the retail, healthcare, and post-secondary education hub in the region. However, cities such as Forest City, with Waldorf College, Winnebago Industries and associated companies; St. Ansgar with Grain Millers; Osage with the many employers and Valent BioSciences Corporation; Charles City with Mitas Tire and other major employers; Algona with Pharmacists Mutual Insurance, Hormel, Snap-On Tools, just to name a few. Clear Lake, with the addition of the McKesson facility and being a recreational and tourist destination, all offer residents of the entire region employment, commercial and recreational opportunities. Many of these companies rely on a sound transportation system, not only for their operations, but also for their employees to get to and from work.

A positive characteristic of RPA 2's many rural communities is that mobility within and between communities can help drive economic growth, therefore a well-planned transportation system can provide rural areas with access to regional jobs and services, and enable them to attract and retain residents. However, users of the transportation system need to understand what it takes to maintain that system that allows them to live in a community forty miles from their place of employment, education, or retail services. Better passenger transportation services, more flexibility in transit operations, coordination amongst service providers and human service agencies can certainly make the lives of those that do not have access to a private automobile far better. Increasing fuel, vehicle and insurance costs make now the perfect time to explore van pools or car pools. They decrease the demand for fuel, decrease traffic and the number of vehicles on the road and decrease the maintenance expenses for the roads and bridges. The Region 2 Transit system has tried to start van pools in the past, but has not been successful. What has been successful is the North Iowa Commuter Express (NICE) shuttle service from Mason City to employers, mainly Winnebago Industries and CDI, in Forest City. This service was originally designed as a van pool, but the employee needs weren't able to be accommodated. By switching to a shuttle service, there is greater flexibility for employees. The shuttle is truly a win-win situation. The Region 2 Transit service supplies needed employees, which would otherwise not be able to get to the employer and the employer, has the needed employees to be able to produce the product they sell for a profit.

It is impossible to know what will happen with regard to transportation in the next 20 years. As just stated, this plan is to provide a realistic look at the transportation system in all its glory or lack thereof with the very clear understanding that the main focus expected for at least the near future will be maintaining what is on the ground, crossing the waterways and improving the transportation system that is serving the region's residents, businesses, cities and counties. Regardless of whether the current trends in gas prices, legislation, weather, and planning are short-term or long-term, personal vehicles will likely remain the dominant form of transportation in the region over the life of this plan, and planning for roads and bridges will likely remain the foremost transportation concern of local officials. Maintaining and improving that system, along with other transportation modes – transit, rail, air, bicycle, and pedestrian – will be critical to ensure a positive future for the RPA 2 Region.