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Goals & Principles

Setting the Stage for a Bold Transportation Future

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Introduction

As we enter the second decade of the 21st Century, we find ourselves at a pivotal moment in the evolution of transportation. Technological advances like autonomous vehicles seem on the verge of widespread adoption. Demographic changes and shifting lifestyle preferences are leading to greater demand for urban, walkable development. And much of our infrastructure, built decades ago, is deteriorating and in need of rehabilitation or replacement.

In light of these ever-changing conditions, we are faced with the task of reexamining our current transportation system and reassessing our planned infrastructure projects, programs, and policies to ensure we build a future that meets the needs of *all* residents of Greater Omaha.

To proactively address our region's most pressing challenges and position the metro for continued economic growth, the Greater Omaha Chamber is partnering with Metro Smart Cities and Metropolitan Area Planning Agency (MAPA) to build a new regional transportation strategy. We are looking at all modes of transport, including public transit, freight, autos, biking and walking. Our focus is the Greater Omaha region, chiefly Douglas and Sarpy Counties in Nebraska and western Pottawattamie County in Iowa.

The first step of crafting a new strategy is setting the goals of the effort and defining the principles that will guide its development. This document begins by summarizing the research and outreach that has helped us to identify and prioritize our region's greatest needs before describing the overarching goals and principles of ConnectGO.

Summary of Outreach to Date

The initial phase of ConnectGO, which concludes with the release of this document, has involved outreach to the Greater Omaha Chamber member businesses as well as the broader community. We first worked with the Metro Smart Cities Advisory Group, a cross-sector committee of civic leaders, to evaluate and prioritize goals identified in past planning efforts throughout the region. The results of this exercise were vetted and expanded upon through a variety of means including the following:

- Presentations and facilitated discussions with **40+ groups** including **more than 1,500 participants**.
- **More than 3,300 responses** to three surveys.
- **6 focus groups** oriented around specific issues (freight, bicycling, public transit) or geographies (Omaha, Council Bluffs, Sarpy County).
- Ongoing work of **more than 60 volunteers** serving on ConnectGO working groups and committees.
- Numerous **1x1 interviews** with philanthropists, industry experts, social service providers, business leaders, and other key stakeholders.

Critical Issues Facing the Region

One fact stands out from our outreach so far: residents of the Greater Omaha region are generally pleased with the quality of life offered here. We have a strong economy, our schools are excellent, people have good access to the arts, and people largely feel safe from crime.

Our conversations with community members did lead to the identification of several systemic issues that will require our attention as a region in the coming years. Many of these issues are longstanding and rooted in larger state and

“As we think about the future, transportation will expand that connectivity, from the movement of freight to public transit options for our residents. These innovations will help us attract and retain the diverse, talented workforce Omaha needs to thrive.”

— Lance Fritz, President and CEO of Union Pacific and 2019 Chair of the Greater Omaha Chamber Board

national trends. Most cannot be solved through transportation alone, but transportation projects, policies, and programs can provide at least part of the solution.

Workforce Challenges

The Greater Omaha metro area is known for its perpetually low unemployment rate – presently at just 2.7 percent.¹ While low unemployment is often viewed as a sign of a healthy economy, the lack of available workers can make it difficult for businesses to grow and can present an unappealing picture to companies looking to enter the market.

Many civic leaders have warned of a looming crisis due to a gap between the number of available skilled workers and open jobs. It’s estimated that several thousand jobs in the Greater Omaha area will go unfilled in the coming years due to lack of available talent.²

¹ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, December 2019.

² Dr. Eric Thompson, University of Nebraska – Lincoln, Omaha Area Skills Gap Report, 2018.

A portion of the issue is caused by a mismatch between the skills required by jobs and the skills of available workers, and a portion is related to simply not having enough people here to do the work.

Improving access to education and creating an environment more attractive to talent are key to addressing this issue.

Lingering Racial Inequities

While the overall regional unemployment rate is incredibly low, there are pockets of the metro where unemployment is much higher, particularly in eastern Omaha and western Council Bluffs. Many of the census tracts where larger concentrations of Black or Latinx people live have significantly higher unemployment rates than the regional average (as high as 16 percent).³

The disparities in wealth and access between white people and people of color came up repeatedly in our outreach.

While many measures of racial inequity have seen improvements in recent years (such as unemployment), some have worsened. For example, over the period from 2007 to 2017, the gap between the median earnings for a white person and the median earnings for a person of color increased by about \$4,600 in Greater Omaha.⁴ This increase in the earnings gap ranks us 93rd out of the 100 largest metro areas, or eighth worst.

The inequality of income impacts our regional economy in a significant way. It is estimated that if there were no racial disparities in income in the Omaha-Council Bluffs region, our annual GDP would be approximately \$4.8 billion more, an increase of eight percent.⁵

Another key indicator of equity is lifespan. According to the Douglas County Health Department, there is a significant gap in life expectancy between people living the ZIP code with the highest average lifespan (82.8 years) and the ZIP code with the lowest average lifespan (71.3 years).⁶ The ZIP codes with the lowest average lifespans are also generally the ZIP codes with the highest concentrations of people of color.

At least a portion of the disparities in earnings and health can be explained by lack of access to vehicles, which limits access to employment, health care, and educational opportunities. In the Greater Omaha metro, only five percent of white households lack access to a vehicle, while 13% of households of people of color lack access.⁷

Land use also contributes to the disparities. The areas of highest job growth are often located far from the areas where the highest concentrations of people of color live.

Shifting Development Patterns

Many people we spoke to pointed to changes in development patterns. Specifically, residents and businesses stressed that while demand for development remains high on the periphery of the metro area, we are seeing tremendous growth in development activity in more urban areas.

These claims are backed by building permit data. Within Omaha, 51 percent of residential building permits in 2017 and 37 percent of residential building permits in 2018 were for projects east of I-680, compared to rates closer to 15 percent in the early 2000s.⁸ Omaha is also seeing a significant shift in housing preferences, issuing more building permits for multifamily housing units than single-family housing for five of the last six years.

³ U.S. Census, 5-Year ACS, 2014-2018.

⁴ Alan Berube, et al., Brookings Institution, Metro Monitor, 2019.

⁵ PolicyLink and PERE, Equitable Growth Profile of the Omaha-Council Bluffs Region, 2018.

⁶ Douglas County Health Department, State of Public Health, 2018.

⁷ PolicyLink and PERE, Equitable Growth Profile of the Omaha-Council Bluffs Region, 2018.

⁸ City of Omaha, 2018 Building and Development Summary, 2019.



“Transit is part of every discussion, every day, and it should be. Public safety, job growth, workforce training, development - all require a safe and future-oriented transportation system. The ConnectGO key survey data confirms many of our priorities, including the critical need for a long-term plan and funding solution to improve and maintain our road infrastructure. Safe, reliable roads are fundamental to a transportation system that achieves the ConnectGO goals of access to opportunity, talent attraction and retention, and economic growth.”

— Mayor Jean Stothert, City of Omaha

The boom in urban development is not confined to Omaha. Major redevelopments are planned or underway in Bellevue, Papillion, La Vista, Blair, Ralston, and Council Bluffs (among others).

With increased development in established urban environments, many people have expressed concern about the sometimes competing needs of historic and new land uses. In particular, we heard the following:

- High-capacity streets designed to move automobiles at high speeds between the urban core and suburban residential areas can have a detrimental impact on the historic areas they pass through, making them less walkable.
- Off-street parking is inefficiently used, leading to more land devoted to parking in urban environments than is necessary.
- There are opportunities for conflict between freight vehicles and people walking or biking in historically industrial areas seeing more retail or residential development.

Advancing Technologies

We are on the cusp of a technological revolution in transportation. After decades of hype, the widespread deployment of autonomous (i.e., self-driving) vehicles in the near future seems like an inevitability. Driver-assist technologies are already making driving safer and more convenient.

Outside of the vehicle, “smart” infrastructure like connected traffic signals and sensors may allow us to make better use of the infrastructure that we’ve already built.

Add all this to the app-based shifts in transportation habits like ride-hailing, mapping services, real-time transit information, and rentable electric scooters and bikes, and the immense scale of change becomes clear.

Without thoughtful consideration and preparation, the pace of innovation could negatively impact the shape of our communities and exacerbate disparities in access to transportation.

Deteriorating Infrastructure

Nationally, many of the highways, streets, and bridges that we rely on were constructed in the mid-twentieth century. Consequently, they are nearing the end of their useful lives and falling into disrepair due to a lack of maintenance or regular daily wear-and-tear.

Our local infrastructure is no exception. The severe freeze-thaw cycles that characterize the late-winter weather in our region exact a toll on the condition of our streets that compound the damage to the streets from vehicle traffic.

A 2017 study from MAPA and the Nebraska Department of Transportation suggests that significant investment will be required over the coming decades to get the transportation

infrastructure on both the Iowa and Nebraska portions of our metro to a state of good repair and keep it there.⁹

After decades of underinvesting in the condition of its streets, the City of Omaha estimates it needs a total of \$75 million per year for street maintenance and rehabilitation, approximately \$34 million more than it currently spends.¹⁰

Regional Fragmentation

While there are several organizations already working to consider transportation at a regional scale, many people consulted through our engagement identified a greater need to look at transportation infrastructure and policy across city, county, and state boundaries. Representatives from health care and social service providers also noted a possible duplication of transportation services and an opportunity to pool resources to more efficiently offer expanded transportation options.

Key Findings of Survey

We have conducted three surveys to date: one at the 2019 Greater Omaha Chamber YP Summit, one focused on employer perspectives, and one circulated in the community. The findings presented below come from the third survey, open from August to December in 2019, which garnered 2,861 completed responses.

The survey findings were combined with the other engagement methods listed earlier to craft the overarching ConnectGO goals and principles.

Demographics

The median age of people who responded is 39, slightly higher than the median age of 36 for people living in the metropolitan area.¹¹

The race/ethnicity breakdown of respondents follows:

A comparison to Census data shows that the respondent pool for the survey skews whiter than the actual population of our metro area, which should be kept in mind when reviewing the findings. Additional efforts will be made in future survey phases to address the shortcomings in representation.

“Great cities have great transportation, which is why MAPA is proud to be a partner in this important plan to connect all people in the Greater Omaha region.”

— Greg Youell, Executive Director of MAPA

“ConnectGo is a promising initiative that takes into consideration the entirety of our area’s transportation needs.”

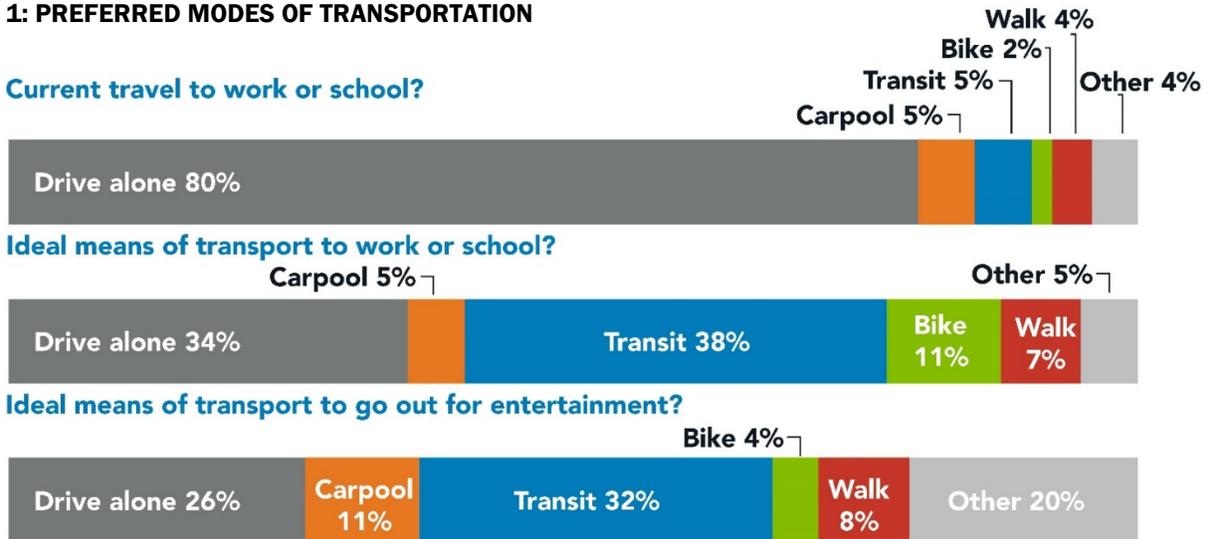
— Curt Simon, Executive Director of Metro

⁹ Nebraska Department of Transportation and the Metropolitan Area Planning Agency, MTIS Phase 2, 2017.

¹⁰ City of Omaha, Road Map to Better Streets, 2019.

¹¹ U.S Census, ACS 1-Year, 2018.

FIGURE 1: PREFERRED MODES OF TRANSPORTATION



Transportation Modes

When discussing transportation options in Greater Omaha, people often suggest that a change in culture is needed to increase the share of the population using public transit, walking, or riding a bicycle. As **Figure 1** displays, however, people already want the option of using modes of transportation other than driving alone.

When asked how people currently travel to work or school, the vast majority (80 percent) noted that they drive alone. The remaining 20 percent were fairly evenly split between carpool, transit, bike, walk, and other (which includes ride-hailing services, taxis, and working at home).

When asked about their *ideal* means of getting to work or school, the answers shifted significantly. Only 34 percent said they would prefer to drive alone. Thirty-eight percent of respondents noted they would prefer to use public transit versus only five percent who said they currently use it. Bicycling and walking also saw notable gains. The survey then asked people their ideal means of going out for entertainment. Driving alone fell further to 26 percent. Carpooling jumped up to 11 percent, transit stayed high, and “other” saw large increases.

There are two primary takeaways from responses to these questions:

1. Current travel patterns are probably more likely based on a lack of safe, comfortable,

and timely options than a true preference for driving alone. There is less of a need for “culture change” than a need to provide better transportation options.

2. There is a substantial gap between respondents’ current and preferred modes of transportation, which could lead them to consider moving to other cities that can meet their lifestyle preferences.

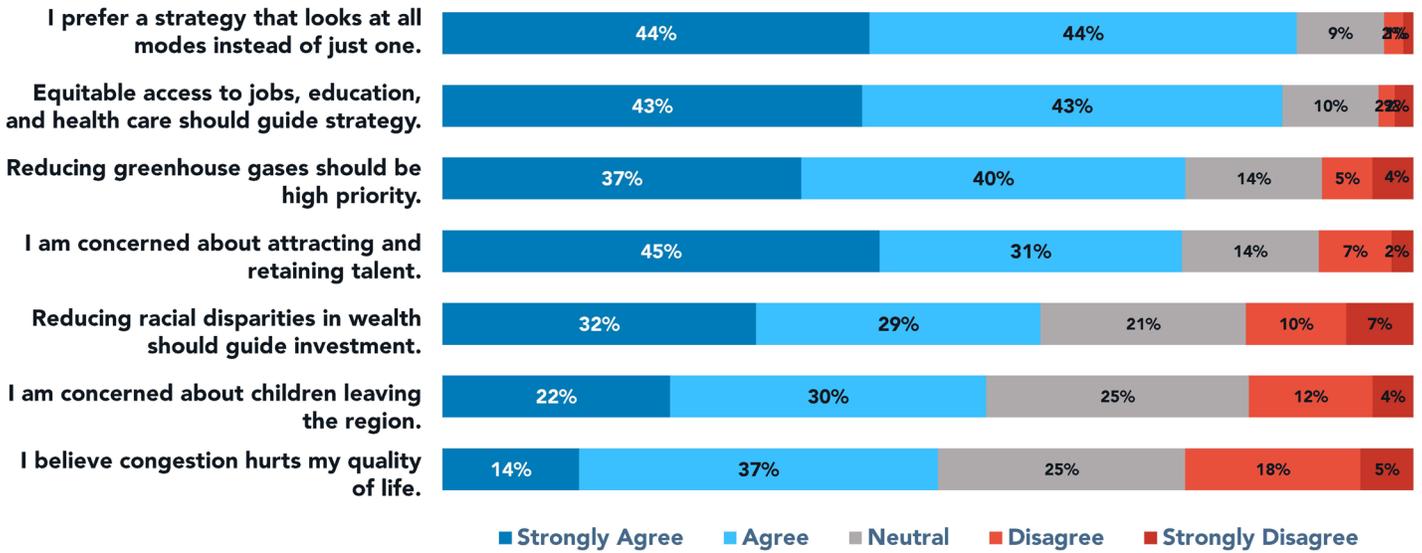
Community Priorities

The key underlying premise of ConnectGO is that we need to take a step back to reexamine our broader community goals and ensure that our transportation projects, policies, and programs help us address our greatest needs. Our survey attempted to help identify and prioritize our most pressing issues.

We asked people to identify whether they agree or disagree with a series of statements about our region. The statements were developed based on a review of previous plans and stakeholder input. **Figure 2** displays the findings.

Overwhelming majorities of respondents said they would prefer a transportation strategy that looks at *all* modes of transportation (88 percent) and that equitable access to jobs, health care, and education should guide development of our strategy (86 percent). Reducing greenhouse gas emissions and attracting and retaining talent also had more than 70 percent agreement.

FIGURE 2: HIGH-LEVEL PRIORITIES



Congestion issues were at the bottom of the priority list, though roughly 50 percent agreed that it hurts their quality of life. Congestion mitigation is often the leading factor in selecting projects, so reprioritizing projects around other goals could lead to a dramatic shift in the types of projects selected or policies put in place.

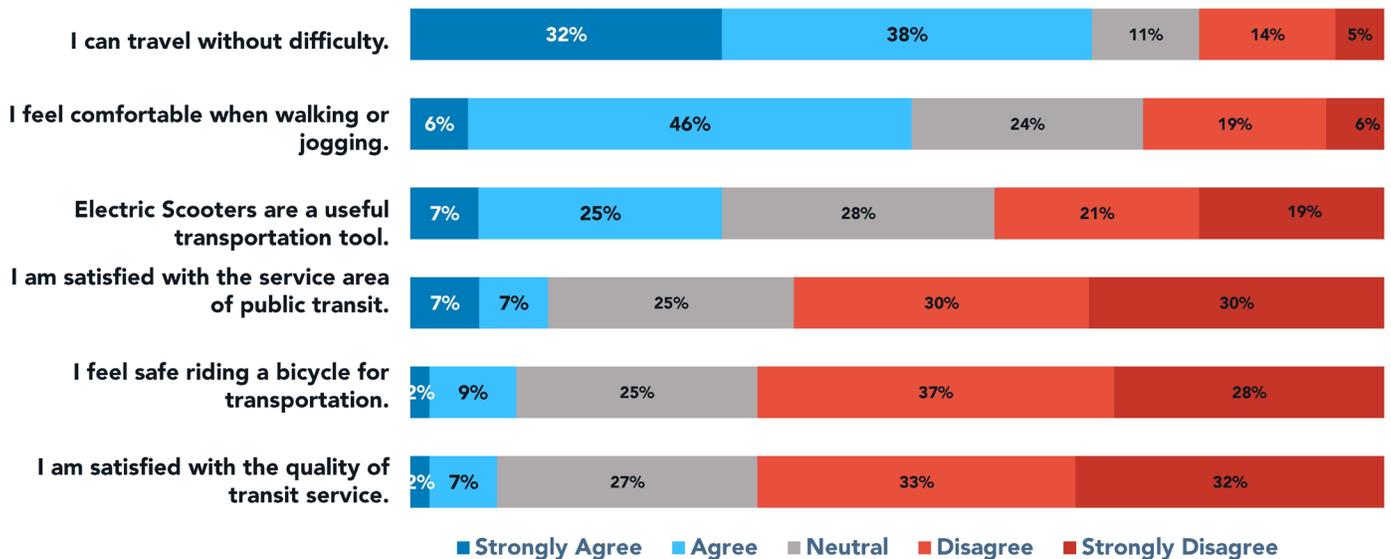
We also asked people about their specific transportation needs. As Figure 3 shows, the majority of respondents noted they can travel without difficulty (70 percent). People also largely reported comfort while walking or jogging.

Responses related to public transit or bicycling, however, show a strong dissatisfaction with the status quo. About 65 percent of people reported

lack of satisfaction with the quality of transit service in Greater Omaha, and 60 percent reported a lack of satisfaction with the current service area of public transit. These survey findings align directly with what we have learned through other public and stakeholder engagement. Additionally, 65 percent of respondents said they did not feel safe riding a bicycle for transportation.

The goals and principles described in the following sections pull from the entirety of the outreach efforts to date. Collectively, the survey findings, focus groups, facilitated discussions, and other engagement activities have set the stage for development of the full ConnectGO regional transportation strategy by allowing us to define our overarching goals and guiding principles.

FIGURE 3: TRANSPORTATION NEEDS



The ConnectGO strategy will reimagine and modernize our transportation system to ensure it helps to further four fundamental community goals. The goals were identified through public engagement, reviews of past plans and studies, and the collective expertise of people living and working across the region.

1 Access to Opportunity

- Our multimodal transportation system will enable people to reach their preferred destinations in a reasonable amount of time, regardless of age, ability, or neighborhood.
- We will maximize access to education, employment, and health care for people traveling by any mode.

2 Talent Attraction & Retention

- Our transportation system will contribute to a quality of life that is appealing to local residents and attractive to people living elsewhere.
- Greater Omaha will support a diverse range of lifestyles by offering a variety of enjoyable neighborhoods, from rural to urban.

3 Economic Growth throughout the Region

- Our transportation system will help us all prosper as individuals, as communities, and as a region.
- Our transportation system will safely and reliably move freight, as well as people.
- We will catalyze higher value real estate development and neighborhood revitalization through strategic infrastructure investment.

4 Stewardship of the Transportation System

- We will take pride in the condition of our existing transportation infrastructure, prioritizing its maintenance and rehabilitation.
- ConnectGO will account for long-term operations and maintenance costs when planning for future projects.

ConnectGO Principles

A set of five community-defined principles will direct the ways in which ConnectGO works to advance its goals. These principles will shape the projects, policies, and programs that will ultimately coalesce into a unified regional transportation strategy. The principles will also guide the process of developing the strategy.

Put People First

The quality and character of our built environment have a profound impact on people’s lives. ConnectGO will attempt to improve people’s lives through transportation strategies that support health, safety, fun, and economic security.

Ensure Equity

ConnectGO will strive for equity in both the process of the strategy’s development and in the outcomes proposed within the strategy. Together, we will build a transportation system that helps address the enduring impacts of inequity and includes options to serve people of all ages and abilities throughout the region.

Be Transformative

The ConnectGO initiative will take a holistic approach to tackling some of our region’s greatest transportation-related challenges, incorporating strategies related to land use, placemaking, and

workforce development in addition to more traditional transportation projects, policies, and programs. We will not shy away from bold, visionary actions.

Create Resilient Communities

ConnectGO will offer innovative approaches to transportation that promote fiscal, operational, and environmental sustainability. With an eye toward emerging technologies and a future-focused approach, ConnectGO will play a key role in our region’s competitive future.

Collaborate

Success at a regional scale is only possible when we work together. To build an implementable plan that stands the test of time, we will develop the ConnectGO strategy through community-wide input, preserving local decision-making while coordinating transportation strategies across city, county, and state boundaries.



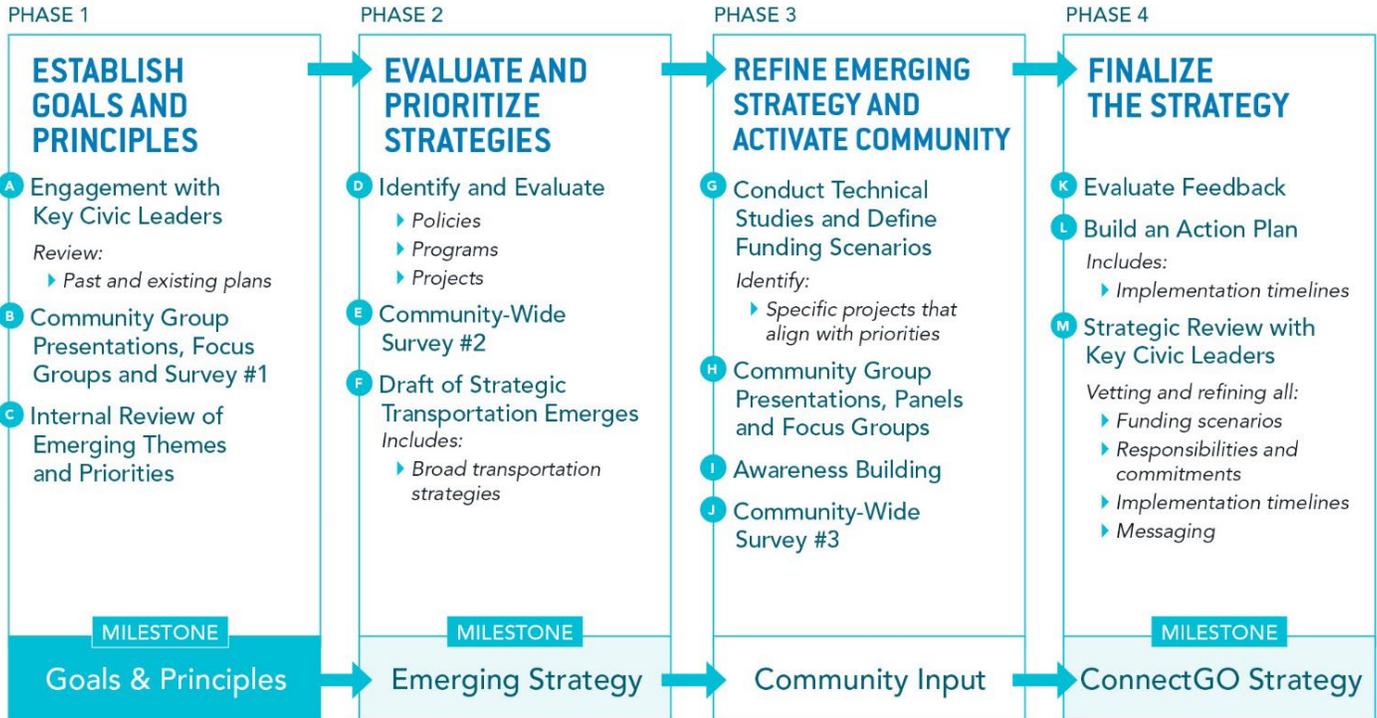
“The cross-sector partnership between the Greater Omaha Chamber, Metro Smart Cities, and MAPA has proven invaluable as we work to build a new unified regional transportation strategy. Transportation is the backbone of our community, and we are committed to working together to ensure our vibrant city is accessible to all.”

— David Brown, President and CEO of the Greater Omaha Chamber

Next Steps

Establishing the Goals & Principles is only the first step of ConnectGO. We'll continue to build and refine the strategy throughout 2020. There will be opportunities for the public to help shape the overall transportation strategy at every phase,

particularly after the Emerging Strategy document is released in late-spring of 2020. Please visit www.ConnectGO.org for the latest information and to sign up for the email newsletter.



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ConnectGO is an initiative of the Greater Omaha Chamber, Metro Smart Cities, and Metro Area Planning Agency (MAPA).

