

NILES/BUCHANAN/CASS AREA TRANSPORTATION STUDY



LONG RANGE TRANSPORTATION PLAN 2009-2035

A Comprehensive, Coordinated, and Continuing Urban Area Transportation Planning Process

Prepared by:

Southwest Michigan Planning Commission

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 6

 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION7

 TRANSPORTATION GOALS8

 NATS DEVELOPMENT ISSUES9

INTRODUCTION 11

 HISTORY OF THE REGION/COUNTY11

 GEOGRAPHICAL AREA13

 HISTORY OF TRANSPORTATION PLANNING14

 PURPOSE OF THE PLAN.....18

 LEGISLATION19

LONG-RANGE TRANSPORTATION PLANNING PROCESS 20

THE COMMITTEES 23

 NATS TECHNICAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE23

 NATS POLICY COMMITTEE24

 AMENDMENT PROCEDURES26

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION..... 27

GOALS, OBJECTIVES, AND STRATEGIC ACTIONS 36

 GOAL I: ENHANCE THE ECONOMIC VITALITY OF SOUTHWEST MICHIGAN37

 GOAL II: PROMOTE SAFETY CONSCIOUS PLANNING AND SYSTEM SECURITY37

 GOAL III: ENSURE THE EQUITABILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY OF THE SYSTEM38

 GOAL IV: PRESERVE THE REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM39

 GOAL V: PROMOTE LIVABLE COMMUNITIES AND ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY IN SOUTHWEST MICHIGAN40

 GOAL VI: EFFICIENTLY AND EFFECTIVELY MOVE PEOPLE, GOODS, AND SERVICES WITHIN SOUTHWEST MICHIGAN41

 NATS GOALS AND SAFETEA-LU PLANNING FACTORS41

SOCIOECONOMIC DATA AND TRAVEL DEMAND MODEL..... 43

 TRAVEL DEMAND MODEL DEVELOPMENT43

 PHASE 1: SOCIOECONOMIC DATA COLLECTION50

 PHASE 2: TRIP GENERATION.....51

 PHASE 3: TRIP DISTRIBUTION52

 PHASE 4: TRAFFIC ASSIGNMENT.....54

 PHASE 5: MODEL CALIBRATION/VALIDATION55

DEFICIENCY ANALYSIS 56

 NATS DEFICIENCIES57

OTHER TRANSPORTATION ISSUES/CONCERNS..... 59

 AREAS OF CONCERN59

 INTELLIGENT TRANSPORTATION SYSTEMS.....60

INTERMODAL CONSIDERATIONS..... 68

 INTRODUCTION.....68

 NON-MOTORIZED TRANSPORTATION.....68

STATE TRAILWAY EFFORTS	69
REGIONAL TRAILWAY EFFORTS	70
AVIATION	72
RAIL	72
THE FUTURE OF HIGH-SPEED RAIL	75
TRUCKING	77
PUBLIC TRANSIT	79
PUBLIC TRANSIT PROVIDERS.....	82
FINANCIAL ANALYSIS	85
SOURCES OF TRANSPORTATION FUNDING	85
DETAILS OF FEDERAL HIGHWAY PROJECTED REVENUES	86
DETAILS OF FEDERAL TRANSIT PROJECTED REVENUES.....	88
DETAILS OF LOCAL TRANSPORTATION FUND REVENUE.....	89
DETAIL OF PLANED EXPENDITURE.....	89
REVENUE AND EXPENDITURE SUMMARIES	92
DEMONSTRATION OF CONSTRAINT	94
ENVIRONMENTAL MITIGATION	95
ASSESSING IMPACT: DEFINE AND INVENTORY ENVIRONMENTALLY SENSITIVE AREAS	97
FINDINGS	97
MITIGATION GUIDELINES.....	98
PLANNING AND DESIGN GUIDELINES.....	98
CONSTRUCTION AND MAINTENANCE GUIDELINES.....	99
CONSULTATION	101
ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE	103
METHODOLOGY TO IDENTIFY ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE POPULATIONS.....	103
CONCLUSION	105
AIR QUALITY CONFORMITY.....	106
CASS- MI AIR QUALITY CONFORMITY	106
AIR QUALITY ASSESSMENT CRITERIA.....	108
BACKGROUND.....	109
MODELING PROCEDURES.....	110
NATS URBAN TRAVEL DEMAND MODEL.....	111
STATEWIDE TRAVEL DEMAND MODEL.....	111
HIGHWAY PERFORMANCE MONITORING SYSTEM (HPMS) DATA	112
MODEL VEHICLE MILES OF TRAVEL (VMT).....	112
CONFORMITY ANALYSIS	114
CONFORMITY DEMONSTRATION	115
MPO ACTION.....	116
COORDINATION WITH THE STATE LONG RANGE TRANSPORTATION PLAN	117
STATE LONG RANGE PLAN	117
METROPOLITAN LONG RANGE PLAN.....	118
COORDINATION	119

APPENDICES.....	121
APPENDIX A. AMENDMENT PROCEDURES	121
APPENDIX B. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AFFIDAVITS	123
APPENDIX C. LRTP GOALS AND OBJECTIVES PUBLIC NOTICE	127
APPENDIX D. LRTP PROJECT PUBLIC NOTICE	128
APPENDIX E. LRTP DRAFT PUBLIC NOTICE	129
APPENDIX F. LEVEL OF SERVICE.....	130
APPENDIX G. VOLUME TO CAPACITY RATIO	131
APPENDIX H. RAIL SYSTEM	132
APPENDIX I. TRANSIT SYSTEM	133
APPENDIX J. ENVIRONMENTAL MITIGATION MAPS AND TABLE	134
APPENDIX K. ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE.....	148
APPENDIX L. CONSULTATION CONTACTS	154
APPENDIX M. AIR QUALITY SUMMARY REPORTS	161
APPENDIX N. RESOLUTIONS	165
APPENDIX O. BERRIEN - MI AIR QUALITY CONFORMITY	169

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Southwest Michigan Commission (SWMPC) is the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) for the Niles-Buchanan-Cass Area Transportation Study (NATS). The MPO is responsible for convening the communities within the study area and engaging them in a comprehensive transportation planning process. The jurisdictions involved within the defined study area boundaries collaborate to set regional priorities for all modes of movement in the transportation network and determine their formula for producing the local, non-federal match required for federal assistance in planning and transportation-related activities. The Southwest Michigan Planning Commission board reviews and confirms the decisions of the NATS Policy Committee. Together, the SWMPC, through the expertise present in the NATS Policy and Technical Advisory Committees (TAC) produce the following document: an annual Unified Work Program (UWP, which describes the planning work to be accomplished during the year), a four-year Transportation Improvement Program (which prioritizes all transportation improvement projects in the four-year period), and a Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP, which covers a twenty-five year period and is revised every four years).

The plan contained herein is an update of the previous Long Range Transportation Plan adopted by the SWMPC. It is revised every four years and constitutes a twenty-five year look at the issues and needs of the Niles-Buchanan-Cass Area. This long range plan reflects an expansion of the area in which the travel demand model has been constructed and run. This expanded area is an indication of the expanded influence of the areas abutting the NATS study area boundary to the north on the transportation network within the study area.

In June of 2004, the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) declared Berrien County as a base non-attainment area for 8-hour ozone standards. This required air quality conformity determinations for all capacity expansion and "regionally significant" transportation projects. It also required modeling for conformity with each significant change to the Transportation Improvement Program or the Long Range Transportation Plan. The committees were obligated to assure that their plans and projects were not detrimental to air quality standards. However, on May 16, 2007, the EPA approved a request from the State of Michigan to re-designate Berrien County, among others, to attainment of the 8-

hour ozone National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS). The NATS area is in two different levels: basic non-attainment and attainment-maintenance. The Berrien County portion of the NATS area is an "attainment-maintenance" area for ozone emissions. The Cass County portion was declared a "basic non-attainment" area for ozone emissions.

Public Participation

Each program administered by the SWMPC must implement a process for ensuring public involvement in its activities. This process may vary from program to program. All go well beyond federal and state requirements, while meeting the SWMPC goals and objectives. In transportation, participation involves the inclusion of a number of partners in touch with under-represented populations. The process also incorporates daily contacts made with local municipalities and citizens regarding roads, services, and non-motorized activities.

The SWMPC must monitor and evaluate the efforts and effectiveness of the plans and processes to generate interest in and give input to the entire planning process. This ongoing review and evaluation of the effectiveness of the public participation for NATS programs is important to the mission of the entire organization.

The NATS public participation strategy follows the 2006 *Public Participation Plan*, approved by the SWMPC. Accordingly, the transportation planning process must seek to obtain public input on the list of goals and objectives, on the list of proposed priority projects, and on the LRTP draft document as a whole. The participation plan promotes the development of a breadth of public outreach strategies to tap into the embedded knowledge of the widest possible cross-section of the NATS study area. In addition to the steps set out in the plan, each municipal member of NATS engages with local citizens on an almost daily basis. Whether there is an established complaints/comments procedure, or a less formal way of hearing what the public has to say, this is a valuable source of opinion for NATS public participation.

Attending the meetings is the best way to become part of the planning process. The NATS transportation planning process is designed to be open to the public. Each month, on the fourth Tuesday, the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) and Policy Committee meet at 1:30 and 3:00 p.m., respectively, to discuss projects and other items related to

transportation in the region. Both committees meet at the City Council chambers in Niles, and the meetings are always open to the public.

Agenda packets and announcements for regularly-scheduled NATS meetings are distributed to all members approximately seven calendar days before the meeting. Meeting information is also posted on the SWMPC website at <http://www.swmpc.org/nats.asp> or by contacting the SWMPC at:

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In the event that a member of the public is unable to attend meetings, the transportation staff at the SWMPC is available to discuss transportation issues by e-mail, letter, telephone, or in person.

Transportation Goals

There are six broad goals that have driven the work of this plan.

- Goal one is to enhance the economic vitality of southwest Michigan.
- Goal two is to promote safety-conscious planning and system security.
- Goal three is to ensure the equitability and accessibility of the system.
- Goal four is to preserve the regional transportation system.
- Goal five is to promote livable communities and environmental responsibility in southwest Michigan.
- Goal six is to efficiently and effectively move people, goods, and services within southwest Michigan.

It is by design that the NATS goals align with the eight planning factors specified in the governing federal transportation legislation the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU). Therefore, by implementing projects, strategies, and services that are consistent with the goals, NATS municipalities and

agencies are, by default, addressing the planning factors specific to the existing federal transportation legislation.

NATS Development Issues

The issues facing the jurisdictions within NATS have changed in their complexities over the years. Some are a result of continuing efforts for economic development, improvements in our roads, and connections to other parts of our region and beyond. Others have resulted from outside influences such as changes in air quality emission standards. Each of those changes point to an increasing need for efficient, predictable, and reliable transportation. Some of the area developments likely to have significant impacts are as follows:

- The Southeast Berrien County Landfill (on Chamberlain Road) and its effects on the truck transportation system. US-12 tapers to two lanes near the landfill and carries a significant volume of truck traffic.
- Increased traffic volume on Portage Road due to increasing retail development in Indiana.
- The St. Joseph Valley Parkway (US-31) development and implementation of the *St. Joseph Valley Parkway Corridor Preservation Study* completed in 2004. (Corridor preservation involves planning for land uses that are adjacent to and can be viewed from U.S. 31.)
- Bertrand Crossing (a new technical park in the City of Niles) expansion and the effects on surrounding land use.
- Hospitals and other medical facilities, their locations, and the traffic that they generate. A new healthcare facility is slated to open in Mishawaka in 2009.
- Improved routes for commercial traffic accessing the Niles Industrial Park.
- Commercial traffic and its effects on residential and agricultural development, and the preservation of agriculture and open space. The preservation of open space and of the agriculture industry hinges on property owners' decisions and local implementation of state land use policy. These land use decisions bear directly on the road network.
- The lack of direct north-south routes in Cass County.

- Traffic on the existing north-south routes including, but not limited to, Gumwood Road, Fir Street, M-62/SR 23, and Ironwood, moving to and from the University Park Mall, individual strip malls and large retail stores in the Mishawaka area (Indiana).
- Access management. In terms of a smoothly-functioning road system, consistent land use and access management techniques throughout the individual jurisdictions protect the road's capacity and improve safety.