

# The Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy

Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy >> University of Michigan

Michigan Public  
Policy Survey April 2015

## Michigan local government leaders say transit services are important, but lack of funding discourages their development

By Debra Horner and Tom Ivacko

This report presents the opinions of Michigan local government leaders on issues in their communities related to public transit services, including satisfaction with transit options as well as factors that encourage or discourage transit development. The findings in this report are based on a statewide survey of local government leaders in the Fall 2014 wave of the Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS).

>> The Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS) is a census survey of all 1,856 general purpose local governments in Michigan conducted by the Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP) at the University of Michigan in partnership with the Michigan Municipal League, Michigan Townships Association, and Michigan Association of Counties. The MPPS takes place twice each year and investigates local officials' opinions and perspectives on a variety of important public policy issues. Respondents for the Fall 2014 wave of the MPPS include county administrators, board chairs, and clerks; city mayors and managers; village presidents, managers, and clerks; and township supervisors, managers, and clerks from 1,356 jurisdictions across the state.

For more information, please contact: [closup-mpps@umich.edu](mailto:closup-mpps@umich.edu) / (734) 647-4091. You can also follow us on Twitter @closup

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## Key Findings

- Overall, 71% of Michigan's local leaders report there are transit options—public, private, or both—currently available to residents in their communities. Dial-a-ride, bus, and taxi services are the most common types of transit options available to residents.
  - » While over 98% of larger Michigan jurisdictions (those with more than 10,000 residents) have at least some transit options available, so do 58% of the state's smallest jurisdictions (those with fewer than 1,500 residents).
- Just 34% of Michigan's local leaders are satisfied with the transit options currently available to residents in their communities. At the same time, only 21% specifically say they are dissatisfied with local transit.
  - » Local officials identify issues related to transit routes, frequency, and coverage as the most common problems with their current transit options. Connectivity with other communities, or the lack thereof, is another main source of dissatisfaction with today's transit services.
- Public demand is reported to be a key factor encouraging the development of transit in 30% of communities statewide, including in 54% of the largest jurisdictions (those with more than 30,000 residents).
- By contrast, the primary factors that are reportedly discouraging development of transit all relate to finances, including lack of local funding (46%), lack of state and federal funding (40%), and operation and maintenance costs (41%).
- Overall, 57% of Michigan local leaders say that a well-functioning transit system is either "somewhat" (38%) or "very" (19%) important to their communities' needs.
  - » Half (50%) of officials from the state's largest jurisdictions say transit is very important to the needs of their communities. Meanwhile, even in the state's smallest communities, a majority (51%) say transit is somewhat or very important.

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### Background

Transit can consist of a wide range of transportation options—from public services such as pre-scheduled train, bus, and light-rail services to private, on-demand options like dial-a-ride, taxis, or similar services like Lyft and Uber. These options can serve a wide range of community stakeholders, improving mobility for those without their own cars or those who are unable or simply prefer not to drive themselves. Transit services can help the elderly or disabled get to the store or to the doctor, help employees get to work, and help connect one community to another. However, many public transit services—such as public-sector bus systems—also require substantial resources, and may compete with other public priorities such as investing in road improvements, hiring more police officers or firefighters, and investing in water and sewer infrastructure.

At the local level, there are currently 79 public transit agencies serving Michigan residents in communities across the state,<sup>1</sup> many of them expanding their services. For example, the new Southeastern Regional Transit Authority (RTA)—covering Wayne, Oakland, Macomb, and Washtenaw counties—is launching a number of public transportation projects.<sup>2</sup> And although transit systems like the RTA are often associated with the state’s big cities—including The RAPID, which serves Grand Rapids and surrounding communities, or the Mass Transportation Authority in Flint—there are also 58 nonurbanized public transit agencies in Michigan.

An upcoming statewide ballot proposal on May 5, 2015 addresses transit funding as part of a wider set of issues related to road funding and other policies.<sup>3</sup> If approved by voters, Proposal 1 would generate approximately \$130 million for public transportation purposes, to be distributed by the state’s Comprehensive Transportation Fund (CTF).<sup>4</sup> This is in addition to Governor Rick Snyder’s suggested budget appropriation for public transportation for FY 2015-2016 of approximately \$341 million, which represents around 10% of the total recommended budget for the Michigan Department of Transportation.<sup>5</sup>

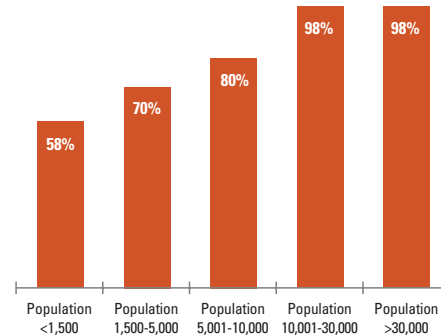
To learn more about the state of public transit in communities around Michigan, the Fall 2014 MPPS asked local leaders a range of questions on the topic. Are the transit options, both public and private, that currently exist in Michigan sufficient to address the needs of local communities? The survey asked local leaders specifically about the importance of transit options to their own communities, their satisfaction with current transit services among various groups in their communities, and the factors that are encouraging or discouraging the development of local transit services.



## Some kind of transit service is available in most Michigan communities, though options can be limited

Overall, 71% of Michigan local officials report there are transit services available to residents in their communities. While 98% of the state’s larger communities—those with more than 10,000 residents—report that transit options are available to residents, even in the smallest communities—those with less than 1,500 residents—a majority (58%) say some kind of transit service is available (see *Figure 1*).

**Figure 1**  
Percentage of local jurisdictions reporting transit options in their communities



The alternatives available to citizens vary significantly based on the size of the jurisdiction. The MPPS asked local officials to indicate whether members of their communities had access to a range of possible transportation modes beyond simply the personal automobile. According to local leaders, dial-a-ride services (on-demand, curb-to-curb van or bus service) are the most common transit options available in Michigan communities, with almost half (47%) of all jurisdictions reporting dial-a-ride services available locally, including 71% of the state’s largest—those with more than 30,000 residents—jurisdictions (see *Table 1*).

Overall, 28% of jurisdictions report residents have access to local or regional fixed-route bus services, and another 25% report access to private taxi services. Significantly fewer local leaders (12%) report that residents in their communities have access to private bus services (e.g., Greyhound or Indian Trails), while just 6% say van pool services are available, and 5% report local access to Amtrak train service. Among the 6% of local leaders who indicate their jurisdictions have other types of transit options not specifically listed on the survey, most frequently they refer to a variety of transit services specifically targeted for senior citizens or disabled citizens.

**Table 1**  
Percentage of local jurisdictions reporting current transit options in their communities, by population size

	Population <1,500	Population 1,500-5,000	Population 5,001-10,000	Population 10,001-30,000	Population >30,000	Total
Dial-a-ride/on-demand para-transit service	36%	46%	56%	69%	71%	47%
Municipal, county-wide, or regional fixed-route bus service	20%	24%	30%	54%	72%	28%
Taxi service	10%	23%	32%	59%	72%	25%
Greyhound, Indian Trails, or other private bus service	6%	11%	10%	24%	42%	12%
Van pool service	2%	5%	6%	17%	19%	6%
Amtrak	0%	4%	6%	15%	31%	5%
Other	3%	4%	3%	13%	5%	6%
None selected/don't know	42%	29%	20%	2%	2%	30%

## Tepid satisfaction reported with available transit options

Overall, 34% of Michigan’s local officials are either very (10%) or somewhat (24%) satisfied with the transit options currently available to residents in their communities, while 21% say they are either very dissatisfied (6%) or somewhat dissatisfied (15%).

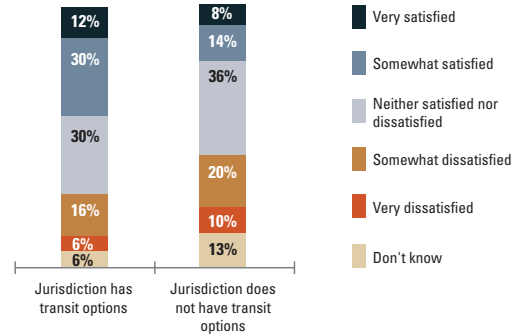
Looking at jurisdictions with at least some transit services available to residents (and excluding those that responded “not applicable”), 42% of officials say they are satisfied with the options available, while 22% say they are either somewhat or very dissatisfied (see *Figure 2*). Meanwhile, in jurisdictions with no reported transit options, 22% of local officials say they are satisfied with that lack of services while 30% are dissatisfied.

In jurisdictions where current transit options are available, local leaders believe there are relatively low levels of satisfaction with those services among a variety of stakeholder groups in their communities. For instance, 38% of these local leaders believe the majority of their jurisdictions’ board or council members are satisfied, while just 28% believe young people in their communities are satisfied with their transit options. The same percentage (28%) believes employers, employees, and job seekers are satisfied with their transit options. Even fewer—just 21%—believe visitors and tourists are satisfied (see *Figure 3*).

By comparison, local leaders in jurisdictions with existing transit options today believe that elderly and disabled residents in their communities are more satisfied than other stakeholder groups. In fact a majority (51%) believe the elderly and disabled are satisfied with their existing transit options. Less than a quarter (22%) of officials in communities with some kind of transit options say their elderly and disabled residents are dissatisfied.

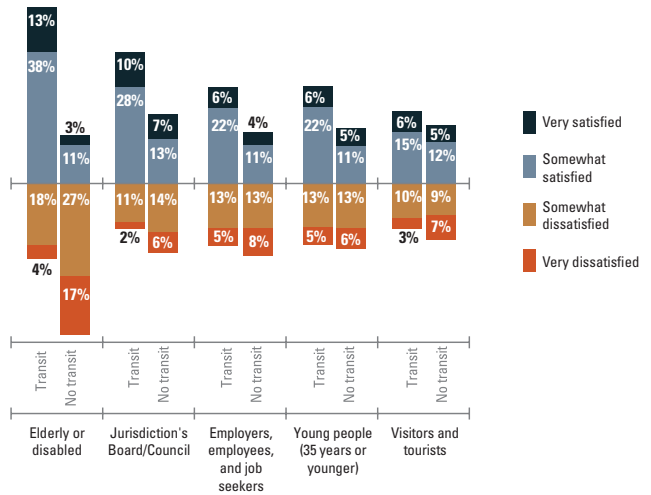
Conversely, among jurisdictions with no existing transit services today, the elderly and disabled are considered to be the most dissatisfied group, with 44% of officials saying these residents are dissatisfied with the lack of local transit, and only 14% believing these residents are satisfied.

**Figure 2**  
Local leaders’ satisfaction with the transit options currently available in their jurisdictions, by those communities with transit options and those without



Note: responses of “not applicable” are excluded from the analysis

**Figure 3**  
Local leaders’ reports of satisfaction among various groups with the transit options currently available in their jurisdictions, by those communities with transit options and those without



Note: responses of “not applicable” are excluded from the analysis; responses for “neither” and “don’t know” not shown



To better understand why some stakeholders may be dissatisfied with their current transit options, the MPPS asked local leaders to identify the factors that could be at play. The basic issue of availability—in terms of transit routes, frequency, and coverage—is the most frequently cited source of dissatisfaction among local officials who report there are groups dissatisfied with the current status of transit in their communities. Six in 10 (61%) local officials say that transit routes, frequency, and/or coverage contributes to local dissatisfaction with current transit options, including 88% of officials from the state’s largest jurisdictions (see *Table 2*). Local officials also identify connectivity with other communities as a fairly common source of transit dissatisfaction, including 64% of officials from the largest jurisdictions. Among the local leaders who indicate there are also “other” sources of dissatisfaction, the most frequently cited is frustration with the lack of transit options overall and residents’ limited access.

**Table 2**

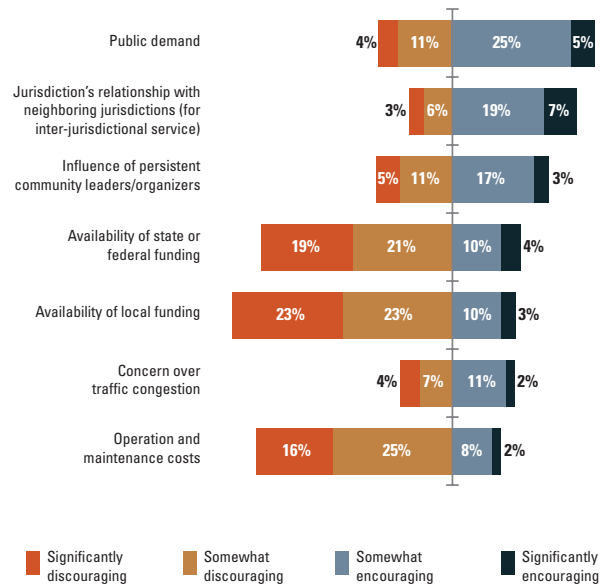
Percentage of local jurisdictions reporting dissatisfaction with specific aspects of the transit options currently available in local communities, by population size

	Population <1,500	Population 1,500-5,000	Population 5,001-10,000	Population 10,001-30,000	Population >30,000	Total
Routes, frequency, coverage, etc.	53%	56%	56%	82%	88%	61%
Connectivity to other communities	38%	51%	54%	52%	64%	47%
Cost	26%	42%	40%	21%	34%	32%
Reliability	19%	23%	18%	24%	42%	23%
Other	15%	8%	10%	10%	12%	11%

The MPPS also asked local leaders to identify the factors that are either encouraging or discouraging the development or expansion of transit services in their communities. According to local leaders, demand by residents is the most common factor encouraging the development of transit, as this is reported in 30% of communities (see *Figure 4*). It is a particularly common driver in the state’s largest jurisdictions, where over half (54%) of officials say it is encouraging transit growth. By comparison, this is also reported in 27% of the smallest jurisdictions. The other factors that are more commonly reported to be encouraging—rather than discouraging—the expansion of transit are relationships between neighboring jurisdictions (26% of local leaders report this is encouraging transit, vs. 9% who report it is a discouraging factor), the influence of persistent community leaders (20% encouraging vs. 16% discouraging), and concerns over traffic congestion (13% encouraging vs. 11% discouraging).

By comparison, officials identify three other factors—all related to transit finances—that are more commonly discouraging transit as opposed to encouraging its expansion. For example, while 46% of local leaders say the availability of local funding is discouraging transit, just 13% say it is encouraging transit growth. Somewhat similar breakdowns are reported in terms of the impact of state and federal funding availability, and the operations and maintenance costs related to providing transit services. These financial concerns are more common in Michigan’s larger communities than in its smaller ones. For instance, while 62% of local leaders in the largest jurisdictions say the availability of local funding discourages transit in their communities, the same is true for just 41% of leaders in the smallest jurisdictions.

**Figure 4**  
Factors that are encouraging and discouraging the development of transit within respondent’s jurisdiction



Note: responses of “not applicable” are excluded from the analysis; responses for “neither” and “don’t know” not shown



## A majority of local leaders statewide say that transit is important to the needs of their communities

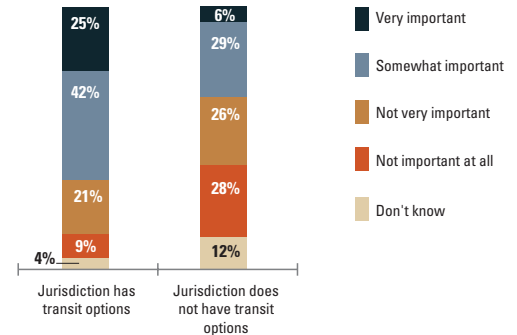
Proponents argue that a well-functioning transit system can support the needs of local communities in a variety of ways, such as by fostering economic development and environmental sustainability, improving residents’ mobility, and so on. When asked how important a well-functioning transit system is for the overall needs of their communities, 57% of Michigan local leaders say that it is either somewhat (38%) or very (19%) important.

Among those jurisdictions that currently have transit options available to residents, 67% of local leaders say that transit is somewhat (42%) or very (25%) important in their communities, while almost a third (30%) say it is not very important (21%) or not important at all (9%). By comparison, in jurisdictions that currently lack any transit services, about a third (35%) of local leaders say transit would be important, while over half (54%) say it would not be (see *Figure 5a*).

Officials from the state’s largest jurisdictions are most likely to believe a well-functioning local transit system is important in their jurisdictions, with fully half (50%) saying it is very important to their communities (see *Figure 5b*). Although officials from the state’s smallest jurisdictions are significantly less likely to rate the importance of transit highly, a majority (51%) say it is somewhat or very important to their local communities, while only 19% from these small jurisdictions rate transit as not at all important.

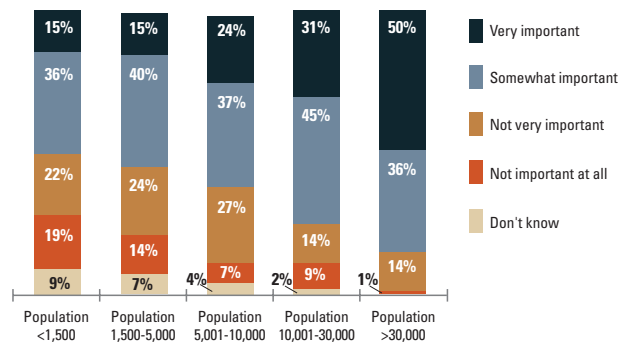
**Figure 5a**

Local leaders’ assessments of the importance of transit system to overall needs of their jurisdictions, by those communities with transit options and those without



**Figure 5b**

Local leaders’ assessments of the importance of transit system to overall needs of their jurisdictions, by population size



### Conclusion

Public and private transit services of all kinds can play an important role in the lives of citizens across the state of Michigan, and more than half of all local officials across the state (57%) say that a well-functioning transit system is important to the needs of their jurisdictions.

However, while most communities have at least some transit options available, local leaders are relatively ambivalent about how well those options are serving their constituents. Less than half of local leaders (42%) in jurisdictions with transit services available today say they are satisfied with the options their residents have. And in jurisdictions without any transit options today, only 22% of local leaders are satisfied with that lack of services. When it comes to specific sources of dissatisfaction with local transit, officials point to issues such as routes, frequency, and coverage as well as connectivity with other communities as main sources of dissatisfaction with today's transit services.

Financing is one primary barrier to development of transit in local Michigan communities, with over four in 10 local leaders statewide citing lack of local funding (46%), lack of state and federal funding (40%), and operation and maintenance costs (41%) as factors that discourage transit development. On the other hand, demand from residents is the most common factor encouraging the development of transit, with 30% of local leaders saying it is encouraging transit growth, including 54% of officials from the state's largest jurisdictions.

As Michigan tries to move forward with improvements to both roads and transit systems, the focus on how to provide the desired services while addressing cost concerns is a challenge faced by jurisdictions and service providers statewide.





## Notes

1. Michigan Department of Transportation. (2015). *Public transit providers*. Retrieved from [http://www.michigan.gov/mdot/0,1607,7-151-9625\\_21607-31837--,00.html](http://www.michigan.gov/mdot/0,1607,7-151-9625_21607-31837--,00.html)
2. Regional Transit Authority of Southeast Michigan. (2014). *Regional Transit Authority of Southeast Michigan annual operating budget and work program fiscal year ending: September 30, 2015*. Detroit, MI: Regional Transit Authority of Southeast Michigan. Retrieved from <http://www.rtamichigan.org/rta-budget-fiscal-year-2015.html>
3. Michigan Ballot Proposal 15-1, The Michigan Sales Tax Increase for Transportation Amendment (2015). Retrieved from [http://www.michigan.gov/documents/sos/Official15\\_1\\_482602\\_7.pdf](http://www.michigan.gov/documents/sos/Official15_1_482602_7.pdf)
4. Stansell, J., Hamilton, W., Desrosiers, A., & Jen, K. (2015). *Legislative analysis: Transportation funding package*. Lansing, MI: Michigan House Fiscal Agency. Retrieved from <https://www.legislature.mi.gov/documents/2013-2014/billanalysis/House/pdf/2013-HLA-HJR UU-53716F45.pdf>
5. Michigan Department of Technology, Management and Budget. (2015). *Executive budget Fiscal Years 2015 and 2016*. Lansing, MI: Michigan Department of Technology, Management and Budget. Retrieved from [http://www.michigan.gov/documents/budget/A\\_446646\\_7.pdf?20140205113903](http://www.michigan.gov/documents/budget/A_446646_7.pdf?20140205113903)

## Survey Background and Methodology

The MPPS is a biannual survey of each of Michigan's 1,856 units of general purpose local government, conducted once each spring and fall. While the spring surveys consist of multiple batteries of the same "core" fiscal, budgetary, and operational policy questions and are designed to build-up a multi-year time-series of data, the fall surveys focus on various other topics.

In the Fall 2014 iteration, surveys were sent by the Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP) via the internet and hardcopy to top elected and appointed officials (including county administrators and board chairs; city mayors and managers; village presidents, clerks, and managers; and township supervisors, clerks, and managers) from all 83 counties, 278 cities, 255 villages, and 1,240 townships in the state of Michigan.

The Fall 2014 wave was conducted from October 6 to December 11, 2014. A total of 1,356 jurisdictions in the Fall 2014 wave returned valid surveys (64 counties, 210 cities, 177 villages, and 905 townships), resulting in a 73% response rate by unit. The margin of error for the survey for the survey as a whole is +/- 1.4%. The key relationships discussed in the above report are statistically significant at the  $p < .05$  level or below, unless otherwise specified. Missing responses are not included in the tabulations, unless otherwise specified. Some report figures may not add to 100% due to rounding within response categories. Quantitative data are weighted to account for non-response. "Voices Across Michigan" verbatim responses, when included, may have been edited for clarity and brevity. Contact CLOSUP staff for more information.

Detailed tables of the data analyzed in this report broken down three ways—by jurisdiction type (county, city, township, or village); by population size of the respondent's community; and by the region of the respondent's jurisdiction—are available online at the MPPS homepage: <http://closup.umich.edu/mpps.php>.

*The survey responses presented here are those of local Michigan officials, while further analysis represents the views of the authors. Neither necessarily reflects the views of the University of Michigan, or of other partners in the MPPS.*

## Previous MPPS reports

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Local leaders say Michigan road funding needs major increase, but lack consensus on options that would raise the most revenue (February 2015)

Michigan local government leaders' views on employee pay and benefits (January 2015)

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Fall 2009 key findings report: educational, economic, and workforce development issues at the local level (April 2010)

Local government officials give low marks to the performance of state officials and report low trust in Lansing (March 2010)

Local government fiscal and economic development issues (October 2009)

All MPPS reports are available online at: <http://closup.umich.edu/mpps.php>

# The Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy

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The **Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP)**, housed at the University of Michigan's Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, conducts and supports applied policy research designed to inform state, local, and urban policy issues. Through integrated research, teaching, and outreach involving academic researchers, students, policymakers and practitioners, CLOSUP seeks to foster understanding of today's state and local policy problems, and to find effective solutions to those problems.

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