

INTEGRATING Context Sensitive Solutions In Transportation Planning

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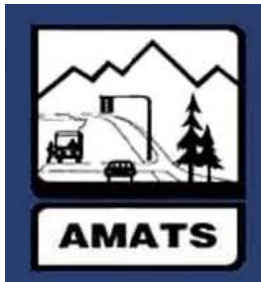
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Anchorage Bowl 2025 Long-Range Transportation Plan

Anchorage Metropolitan Area Transportation Solutions, Alaska



Introduction

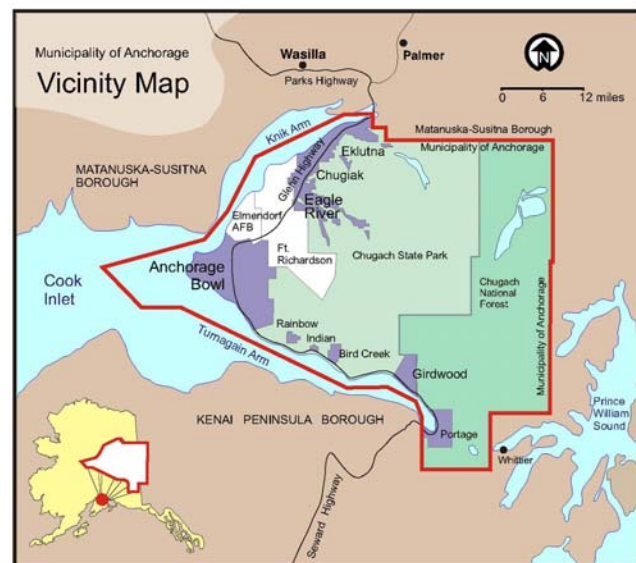
This long-range transportation plan (LRTP) addresses the current and future transportation needs for the City of Anchorage. The plan was developed by the Anchorage Metropolitan Area Transportation Solutions (AMATS), the metropolitan planning organization (MPO) serving Anchorage, and was adopted in December 2005. AMATS is somewhat unique in that it contains a small part of a single jurisdiction, the Anchorage Bowl area of the Municipality of Anchorage (MOA). Still, the LRTP must address some complex planning issues, and one of the central recommendations of the plan

is that a corridor be constructed to connect the existing major highways that carry traffic into and out of central Anchorage. Currently, the Glenn and Seward Highways are connected by the city's arterial system, where traffic signals and turning traffic, combined with heavy traffic volumes result in considerable peak-period congestion. Yet, constructing a major connector through existing neighborhoods while minimizing negative impacts to the city's trademark scenic vistas presents a major challenge.

The "Anchorage Bowl 2025 LRTP" proposes a highway-to-highway connection project to address congestion and lack of mode choice that is in keeping with many of the expressed desires of the community. Rather than simply recommending that the connector be built, the plan takes a proactive stance and addresses stakeholder concerns about project design and alignment from the outset.

One of the goals of CSS is to include stakeholders at all stages of the transportation decision-making process. Using a CSS approach at the early stages of the long-range transportation planning process initiates collaborative processes and relationships that can carry forward into the project development process. By addressing stakeholder concerns about how project design can affect communities at the long-range planning stage, AMATS showed a commitment to public involvement throughout the transportation decisionmaking process. The "Anchorage Bowl 2025 LRTP" offers the opportunity to investigate several key areas and highlights a number of ways that CSS can be integrated into long-range transportation planning:

- Can a plan strengthen the bridge between community vision and the early stages of project development?
- How can the plan document itself effectively convey community preferences in project design?
- How can a transportation plan help promote and support the use of CSS in project development?
- Can CSS play a role in streamlining processes?



Map courtesy of AMATS



U.S. Department of Transportation
Federal Highway Administration

For More Information on Integrating CSS in Transportation Planning [Insert Project URL]
January 2007
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The Planning Context

Some 40 percent of the population of the state of Alaska lives in Anchorage. The MOA is home to over 288,000 people, double the 1972 population. In recent years, development has shifted toward the Chugiak-Eagle River area and the Matanuska-Susitna (Mat-Su) Borough. The Mat-Su Borough is outside the AMATS jurisdiction, and little formal planning coordination exists between the Borough and AMATS. These two areas are expected to double the current number of households by 2025 and continue to strengthen their economic ties with the Anchorage Bowl area. Currently, all commuters from these areas must use the Glenn Highway to reach the Anchorage Bowl.

Most of the development in the Anchorage region has been at relatively low densities with only a few areas with housing densities of greater than 10 dwelling units per acre. Employment density is similarly spatially dispersed. The increase in and distribution of the rising population has led to stresses on the transportation network, including substantial peak-hour congestion and challenges for effective public transit service.

“Develop a balanced multi-modal transportation system based on Anchorage 2020 guidance (goals, policies, strategies, and maps) that serves as a catalyst to enhance the quality of life enjoyed by the current and future residents of Anchorage.”

L RTP Citizen Roundtable Committee Goal

Anchorage’s comprehensive plan, “Anchorage 2020,” was adopted in 2001. As part of the groundwork for “Anchorage 2020,” a survey of 1,500 residents was conducted, asking about the most important attributes of their city. Three of the highest ranked attributes related to the natural setting of the city: trails/parks/greenbelts/open space, outdoor and recreational opportunities, and accessibility to the wilderness. Clearly, Anchorage residents highly value the scenic assets of the region. Reflecting these values, the “Anchorage 2020 Community Vision” states that Anchorage is a “northern community built in harmony with our natural resources and majestic setting.” The plan directs a shift toward more concentrated land-use patterns with clusters of higher density employment centers.

Although “Anchorage 2020” focuses on land-use planning and development patterns, it includes some guidance for transportation improvements in recognition of the close linkage between land use and transportation. More importantly, the vision and goals articulated in “Anchorage 2020” became the foundation of the L RTP process, and basing the L RTP on “Anchorage 2020” was the overarching goal of the 2025 L RTP citizen roundtable committee. Goals more specific to the transportation system were developed through Transvision, the visioning process that kicked off the L RTP process. Each of the seven transportation planning goals is presented in the plan with a discussion of how it is linked to and in harmony with “Anchorage 2020.” Aside from the transportation plan goals, the projects included in the L RTP also drew from the “Anchorage 2020” plan. The high value the community placed on the city’s natural setting, which came out during the Anchorage 2020 process, was incorporated into the L RTP by carefully considering the viewshed impacts of any proposed projects as well as including consideration of improvements to the region’s extensive recreational trail/bikeway system.

CSS Principles Applied

- **Planning Products Feed Directly into Project Planning:** A key component of the L RTP is the completion of the Glenn-Seward Highway Connection. This project will address the major route into and through the city for commuters, freight, and visitors alike. The proposed Glenn-Seward Highway Connection recognizes the importance of addressing capacity issues, but emphasizes that the project should be designed in keeping with the priorities of the city and the nearby neighborhoods.

The plan states that the corridor be constructed as a new, high-capacity expressway, depressed and buried wherever the topography allows. The conceptual design of the corridor seeks to minimize residential and business displacement, maintain or re-establish local street and trail system





connectivity, and provide airspace for parks. The plan also emphasizes that the connector design must minimize negative effects on highly valued scenic vistas.

The plan includes considerable detail on how project design should be approached, including examples of alignments, cross-sections, and bridge/culvert design. Locations where the natural topography would allow the corridor to be constructed below the most important viewpoints to minimize visual impacts are identified. The LRTP recognizes one neighborhood's desire for revitalization and expansion of its commercial district through careful routing of the connector to support economic development plans and the associated land use/development. Specific surface street connections needed to maintain or re-establish neighborhood connectivity are identified. Including this level of detail in the LRTP gave assurance to the neighborhoods that their needs were recognized and that their concerns would shape the project from the start.

Initially, Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOT & PF) staff expressed some trepidation about including a relatively high level of project detail at such an early point. The concern was that making early decisions about alignment and design would place constraints on the project that would complicate engineering and design later on. This concern has been largely set aside as DOT & PF staff have recognized that addressing community concerns from the outset is an advantage. Carrying the project concepts that were developed during the LRTP process forward into project design and engineering will help ensure that their work will be supported rather than challenged. In fact, as the connector project concept has gained momentum, at least one senior DOT & PF engineer has decided to postpone his retirement for the opportunity to work on the project, recognizing that it will present an interesting and exciting challenge.

Including project details that will directly inform the project planning and development process, thereby reassuring nearby neighborhoods that their concerns were heard, was a critical factor in securing support for this important project outside the DOT & PF as well. The neighborhood support for the concept of the project that developed during the LRTP process led to the mayor's office lending support for the connector. The political support for the project brought financial support as well. In fact, it was one of the affected neighborhoods that lobbied the State legislature for funding, and secured \$7 million for preliminary engineering.

"CSS starts with the plan."

**Jon Spring, AMATS
Transportation Planner**

The initial part of the connector project scheduled to be built is the Bragaw Street/Glenn Highway Interchange. The concepts from the LRTP were carried forward into the project development process for the interchange. Some of those concepts are repeated in the vision for the interchange project: reconnecting communities that the corridor currently bisects, protecting neighborhoods by eliminating cut-through traffic, providing safe alternatives for pedestrian and non-motorized traffic, and involving the community in the design process. The request for proposal (RFP) that the DOT & PF developed for the interchange (i.e., the document that describes the final design and construction parameters that contractors will be required to meet) includes the concepts and ideas that were developed during the LRTP process and refined during a public outreach effort focused on the interchange project. The design-build contract is scheduled to be awarded in the spring of 2007, and the completion of substantial construction is anticipated for the fall of 2009.

Using a CSS approach to transportation planning meant close attention to community needs and goals in the LRTP, which led to including design concepts in the LRTP, which in turn have been fed into the project development process. In this way, the "Anchorage Bowl 2025 LRTP" provided a bridge between the community vision articulated in both the LRTP and "Anchorage 2020," and the design of the Bragaw Street/Glenn Highway Interchange.

"The input from our community has resulted in not only viable technical solutions, but livable, credible, responsive solutions for all of Anchorage."

"Anchorage Bowl 2025 LRTP"





- **Based on Comprehensive Public Involvement/Participation Plan:** The planning process began with a high-profile public forum that included transportation professionals, the mayor, and other speakers. A citizen roundtable committee was convened with members recommended by the mayor's office and the DOT & PF. Committee members represented business, academic, youth, institutional, environmental, and other interest groups. This committee was charged with representing and communicating with their constituencies. Additional input was gathered through formal and informal stakeholder interviews representing all modes, economic sectors, system users, and neighborhoods. A series of open house meetings was held, including one outside the AMATS jurisdiction in recognition that commuters from outside the boundary were also stakeholders. Local and State government officials were also kept updated and participated in work sessions.

Media campaigns used print and broadcast media to advertise events and relay information. A newspaper insert was distributed across the region that discussed transportation issues and advertised open house events. The citizen roundtable committee members were also involved in the publicity campaign, giving interviews and offering press statements.

- **Range of User-Friendly Tools for Communicating Options:** The "2025 LRTP" graphically presents the complex Glenn-Seward Highway Connection project on a single page with a full-color schematic diagram that combines photos and photo simulations with text to describe the opportunities to fit this major project into its urban context. An additional map notes the number of vehicles projected to be removed from surrounding streets, thus conveying how the project will improve conditions across the system. The recommendations specific to the Glenn Highway corridor are also presented by combining notes on site-specific elements with a corridor map. The various multimodal projects, transportation demand management (TDM) programs, and interchange and road improvements are shown mapped directly to the corridor. The range of presentation methods helps convey not only where projects will be located, but also how they will look and feel.
- **Based on Adopted CSS Policy:** AMATS is unusual among MPOs in that it has a formally adopted CSS policy (the policy refers to "context sensitive design" reflecting a past focus on project development). A grass-roots advocacy group, the Anchorage Roads Coalition, recognized CSS as a way to improve decision-making processes, and spearheaded a campaign to gain neighborhood committee support for an official CSS policy. In 2004, the technical advisory committee of AMATS signed a resolution requesting that the MOA Department of Public Works and the Alaska DOT & PF use a context sensitive approach to project design, promote fuller stakeholder involvement throughout the decision-making process, and review policies and procedures to implement CSS as an integral part of doing business. In the "2025 LRTP," AMATS further integrated CSS into its activities by applying CSS to the long-range planning process and product. The plan document supports AMATS' adopted CSS policy by promoting greater application of CSS among its partner agencies. For example, the plan states that the MOA's road classifications should be updated to reflect CSS best practices in planning, design, and operation.
- **Evaluates Multimodal, Operational, and Innovative Strategies:** Aside from the major construction project recommended to complete the Glenn-Seward Highway connection, the LRTP includes a number of non-construction projects. In fact, the first major plan recommendation is a "call to action" to effectively manage the existing system. The recommended strategies include improving signal timing and transit operations efficiency, responding quickly to resolve bottlenecks for transit and traffic, initiating corridor management plans, and upgrading the MOA signal system to include intelligent transportation system (ITS) technologies.

The existing Glenn Highway corridor is targeted for a number of programs and projects to manage congestion. The plan highlights the use of improved transit service, including express bus service and park-and-ride facilities, employer-based TDMs and van- and carpool programs, corridor and incident management programs for commuters and freight operators, phasing in high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes, and notes that the idea of commuter rail should be considered as a long-term possibility.





Outside the Glenn Highway corridor, other multimodal plan recommendations include developing a bike plan to address the needs of bike commuters. As mentioned above, Anchorage has an extensive recreational trail network that, while well-used, does not meet the travel needs of bike commuters. The commuter bike plan will focus on improving connectivity of on-street bicycle facilities. The plan also recommends a number of planning policy priorities for pedestrians. In many cases, recommended road projects in the plan include improvements to complete links for cyclists and pedestrians, on roadways, and on the trail system.

The importance of snow removal in maintaining accessibility to transit facilities is emphasized to better serve current transit riders and attract new riders. The wintry climate is also noted as a consideration in managing congestion. The construction season in Anchorage is brief, so the scale and number of construction projects underway at the same time can be large. The plan notes that more attention needs to be given to scheduling, construction zone management, and public information to ease construction-related congestion.

Since the adoption of the LRTP, AMATS has initiated a transit study that will focus on a high-performing transit corridor. The study will analyze bus delays and make recommendations for optimizing stops and prioritizing signals with the goal of demonstrating a 30-percent time savings over auto trips on the same route. The corridor slated for study also happens to be slated for a roadway reconstruction project, which should improve the potential for coordinating and implementing the study findings.

Lessons Learned

One of the components of the 2025 LRTP public involvement/participation process was the citizen roundtable committee. The office of the mayor of Anchorage and the Alaska DOT & PF appointed over 40 individuals to serve on the committee. While having many citizens interested in serving on an advisory committee is commendable, some of the committee members felt they had not had equal opportunity to speak and cited the large size of the committee as the reason. This points to the importance of balancing the need for keeping the size of the group small enough to allow all members to fully participate yet large enough to bring all perspectives to the table. It also highlights the need to adopt carefully structured ground rules for larger groups to ensure full and equitable participation.

Since the 2025 LRTP process, AMATS has begun a smaller-area plan for the Midtown area of Anchorage. Early in this planning effort, AMATS conducted one-on-one interviews with stakeholders to understand their perspectives and general attitudes. These interviews have proved to be an effective way to compile a list of committed individuals to serve on an advisory board, with a balance across various constituencies. A similar strategy might prove effective for convening citizen committees for future updates of the LRTP.

Challenges Ahead

Anchorage faces a number of significant transportation challenges in the future. The “2025 LRTP” repeatedly notes the pressing need to manage rising congestion levels, recommending a suite of policies and programs in addition to some major construction projects. Many of these programs rely on changes in individuals’ travel patterns to have any appreciable effect. Experience has shown that changes in travel behavior, especially shifts away from single-occupancy vehicles, are difficult to effect, and significant policy and planning coordination are required to bring them about. Certainly, the studies underway will provide AMATS with important insights into how to move plan recommendations for transit, bike, and pedestrian travel into implementation. Effectively managing congestion will also require a long-term commitment to the Anchorage 2020 comprehensive plan and to planning coordination.

The plan also faces a challenge in connection with the potential land-use changes related to the proposed Knik Arm Crossing, a two-mile, tolled bridge project that would directly connect Anchorage with substantial amounts of developable land on the north side of the Knik Arm waterway. The bridge could potentially trigger a massive shift in development patterns. The project can also expect environmental and community opposition and will likely



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require the formation of a public-private partnership to cover the financial costs. Without a doubt, if the Knik Arm Crossing project moves forward, the next update of the AMATS LRTP will face a very different planning context.

The increasing development and population growth in the nearby Mat-Su Borough and Chugiak-Eagle River areas present perhaps the greatest challenge to the region's transportation system. The LRTP notes the importance of regional collaboration. Instituting a collaborative planning and policy relationship would be an important step toward improving outcomes for the transportation system and lobbying for State funding for infrastructure projects. Regional cooperation should shape future transportation planning in the region, whether the Mat-Su Borough establishes its own MPO in the future or becomes part of AMATS.

In Closing

The "Anchorage Bowl 2025 LRTP" faces considerable challenges to its full implementation and the realization of all of its goals. By taking a CSS approach to long-range planning, however, the plan has laid a solid foundation for implementation. The efforts of the public and of the AMATS staff are already being carried forward into the project development phase of several major projects. For example, the concepts for the Glenn-Seward Connector will play an important role in shaping project outcomes that offer the most benefits possible to all stakeholder groups. More generally, the CSS-driven process used by AMATS during the 2025 LRTP shows a commitment to broad-based discussion of transportation issues in the region. Such discussion will serve the region well as it moves forward and continues to address complex transportation questions in the future.

For More Information:

[AMATS website](http://www.muni.org/transplan/index.cfm): <http://www.muni.org/transplan/index.cfm>

[The Glenn Highway Projects website](http://brooks-alaska.com/glennhighway/): <http://brooks-alaska.com/glennhighway/>

[FHWA CSS website](http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/csd/index.cfm): <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/csd/index.cfm>

[AASHTO CSS website](http://environment.transportation.org/environmental_issues/context_sens_sol/):

http://environment.transportation.org/environmental_issues/context_sens_sol/

[Online Resource Center for CSS](http://www.contextsensitivesolutions.org): <http://www.contextsensitivesolutions.org>

