

Greater Portland Council of Governments: Building Leaders, Building Knowledge

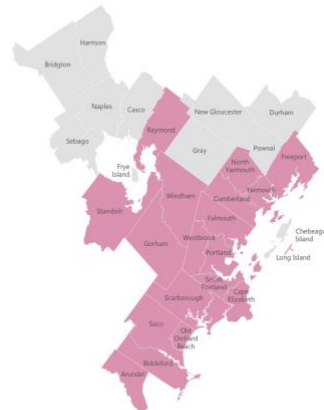
The [Greater Portland Council of Governments \(GPCOG\)](#) – the lead planning organization for Greater Portland Maine – formed an inclusive committee that created a regionally implemented [Inclusive Transportation Planning Toolkit](#) for the Portland Area Comprehensive Transportation System (PACTS). Additionally, [a community transportation leaders training program](#) was created that further enabled people with disabilities, older adults, and immigrants, an opportunity to learn and be involved in larger transportation decision-making processes.

Local Context

GPCOG is the regional municipality membership organization for 25-member communities in York and Cumberland counties and staffs the PACTS: the metropolitan planning organization distributing federal planning and transportation dollars for Greater Portland. GPCOG offers support and guidance to members in economic development, public health, and regional planning, as well as houses the Regional Voice committee that determines the GPCOG’s advocacy work with state lawmakers and policymakers. PACTS was designated in 1975 as the MPO for Portland and covers 18 municipalities, convening the region’s seven transit agencies. These seven transit agencies consist of



GPCOG’s PACTS Service Area



GPCOG’s Member Municipalities

Cumberland and York counties in Southern Maine account for [just over half a million Mainers](#), more than a third of the state’s population. Being that such a large percentage of people live in the region – along with Maine’s largest city, Portland, being Cumberland county’s seat – it has an interest in making sure greater Portland’s residents are able to move freely and safely around the region.

In [demographic terms](#), the communities:

- have around 43,000 residents living with a disability
- have more than 80,000 residents over the age of 65
- have higher housing costs than the rest of Maine (median gross rent is around \$1,000 dollars in the region compared to \$831 statewide)
- are a boon of economic activity (more than a third of Maine’s retail sales occur in Cumberland and York counties & are home to about 40% of Maine’s employment opportunities)
- generally, are more racially and ethnically diverse than the rest of the state (18% non-white, non-Hispanic in Portland compared to 7% statewide)
- speak a language other than English at home at a higher rate than the rest of the state (14% in Portland, compared to 6.3% statewide)

GPCOG wanted to incorporate inclusivity into future transportation planning initiatives through PACTS and allow those who use their services to be more involved in the processes that impact them. Getting a greater number of older adults, people with disabilities and people of color in the planning & decision-making process would lead to better transit and mobility outcomes in greater Portland.

Implementing Inclusivity in Regional Transportation Planning

GPCOG has a history of working with diverse groups regarding transportation policy. Through their [Mobility for All program](#), there are a number of [Mobility Liaisons](#) – volunteers who have experience with transportation barriers, such as by language, ability, or age. These liaisons directly interact with GPCOG staff to describe challenges faced by themselves and their peers, providing a human face to discussions on inclusion. As they have already worked towards inclusion on an individualized level, by having Mobility Liaisons as champions, GPCOG in their first round of funding worked to identify systemic ways to actively and consistently include participants in the regional transportation planning and decision-making process. As well, they wanted to work towards securing support for Inclusive Transportation Planning strategies from PACTS leadership, elected and appointed municipal staff.

In setting up a steering committee to guide the work of the grant, the GPCOG fortunately had their Transportation & Community Well-Being Network in addition to their Mobility Liaisons. The network includes more than 80 older adults and people with disabilities, as well as stakeholders from sectors impacted by transportation barriers, from which members were selected. PACTS staff selected individuals from both the Mobility Liaisons group and Transportation & Community Well-Being Network to serve as members of the steering committee.

The committee looked at the operations of PACTS and how inclusion is acted on within the organization. Important details such as the make-up of committees within PACTS and how participants are selected to serve were reviewed as well.

Outcomes, Successes, and Challenges

Over the course of several monthly meetings, the Steering Committee determined to prepare a document to inform the 2019 update of the PACTS Public Involvement Plan and the update to the PACTS Title VI and Non-Discrimination Plan. Six focus group meetings involving underrepresented groups were conducted. A survey of transit users and a public workshop on the topic reached over 400 participants

and provided an opportunity to voice their opinion. The end result was six recommendations for PACTS to follow regarding inclusion in transportation planning:

1. Develop protocols and guidance for inclusive engagement in PACTS-funded plans and studies.
2. Strengthen partnerships with local organizations to provide ongoing connections with underrepresented communities.
3. Cultivate champions who can represent the interests of underrepresented communities in transportation planning.
4. Explore approaches for supporting meaningful involvement by underrepresented communities on PACTS Governance Committees.
5. Adjust the PACTS funding decision process to consider the needs of underrepresented communities.
6. Engage PACTS members in opportunities to learn more about the transportation needs and experiences of underrepresented communities.

Additionally, GPCOG partnered with Mobility Liaisons to develop and pilot the [Community Transportation Leaders Training Program](#). This program engages members of the Greater Portland area, predominately made up of underrepresented groups, who rely on public transportation to facilitate their movement across the region. Mobility Liaisons and GPCOG staff collaborated on the curriculum for the program. The program goals are as follows:

- Supporting community members to gain the knowledge and tools needed for meaningful participation in transportation planning and decision-making.
- Providing a peer-to-peer network to assist participants in acting on the goals they set.
- Enabling decision-makers to hear directly from participants about the transportation needs and experiences of underrepresented communities.
- Acting as a gateway for participation in transportation decision-making

23 participants of varying backgrounds were selected for the first cohort of the program. The participants were chosen based on their enthusiasm to be involved in transportation decision-making and willingness to present their concerns and ideas in front of PACTS leadership. Participants prepared presentations on a variety of topics including the importance of expanding frequency for certain bus routes, improving pedestrian facilities region-wide, and how to expand transit service outside Portland in an inclusive manner, among others.

The end result was the public presentation of these topics by teams of Community Transportation Leaders and Mobility Liaisons in front of 28 decision-makers, including the mayor of Portland and the Federal Transit Administration's Region 1 administrator. Ideally, these decision makers will keep these presentations in mind when considering new services changes and development of initiatives. While it was developed as a one-time program, its impact has led to PACTS working towards making one of its permanent programs. 23 participants reported increased knowledge of transportation planning, *and* strengthened skills in communication, facilitation, and advocacy. Due to its success, its training curriculum is available for replication.

The greatest result of the steering committee's efforts has been the [Inclusive Transportation Planning Toolkit](#). It's a culmination of findings from meetings with the steering committee and the eventual end results, as well as an interactive, electronic resource that was published as an appendix of [PACTS 2019 Public Involvement Plan](#). It points to what's out there, through already enacted policies and activities regarding inclusion across the country.

It's best used as an electronic resource, as hyperlinks to relevant sites and documents are threaded throughout. Primarily targeted towards PACTS staff, consultants, and member communities, the Toolkit is useful for anyone interested in an array of tools and resources for use in integrating inclusive practices into transportation planning and decision-making.

What's in the Future?

PACTS will be hosting a training workshop on the Inclusive Planning Toolkit in 2020 and will incorporate it into work with outside consultants, as well as PACTS' normal operations. Consultants already practicing inclusion in their work will be prioritized and those chosen for bided projects and initiatives must be inclusive and use the toolkit as a guidebook in the process. Making sure that these outside groups have a focus on inclusion

Community Transportation Leader Training program graduates are getting involved with PACTS projects, studies and plans. Some graduates are already looking to work with PACTS on particular projects. PACTS is committed to advancing this work by funding ongoing peer-to-peer engagement of the training participants – and is exploring Committee participation.

Lessons Learned: Inclusive Results

In terms of inclusiveness, participants felt their involvement and engagement in the transportation planning process grew over the course of the grant. Starting at a level of informing and occasionally consulting participants about relevant programs the end result had participants feeling actively involved in the decision-making process and occasionally taking a leading role in the development and facilitation of programs.

When working with people from varied backgrounds and cultures, some things came to light. Foremost, a shared understanding of inclusion and equity cannot be assumed. It must be developed. Creating a cohesive, uniform language to work off of, can greatly inform the work that's to be done. As such, teambuilding and teaching across different languages, cultures, and physical/mental abilities works when universal design is used and adjustments are constantly. An additional finding focused on the built environment. Physical barriers exist relentlessly inside and outside of buildings, requiring support and openness to constant feedback from those who are impacted.

A focus on inclusiveness has led to PACTS actively involving underrepresented populations in the transportation planning and decision-making processes and in an advantageous position going forward. When regional decision-makers understand the value of inclusivity (and act on it), everyone benefits.