

Letts Road Connector Study

Transportation Planning Process Overview

What is the Transportation Planning Process?

- A **cooperative** process designed to foster involvement by **all users** of a transportation system, including, but not limited to, the business community, residents, community groups, environmental organizations, the traveling public, and the general public.
- It includes a **proactive public participation** process conducted by the local Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), state Department of Transportation, county Road Commission, and other local agencies.

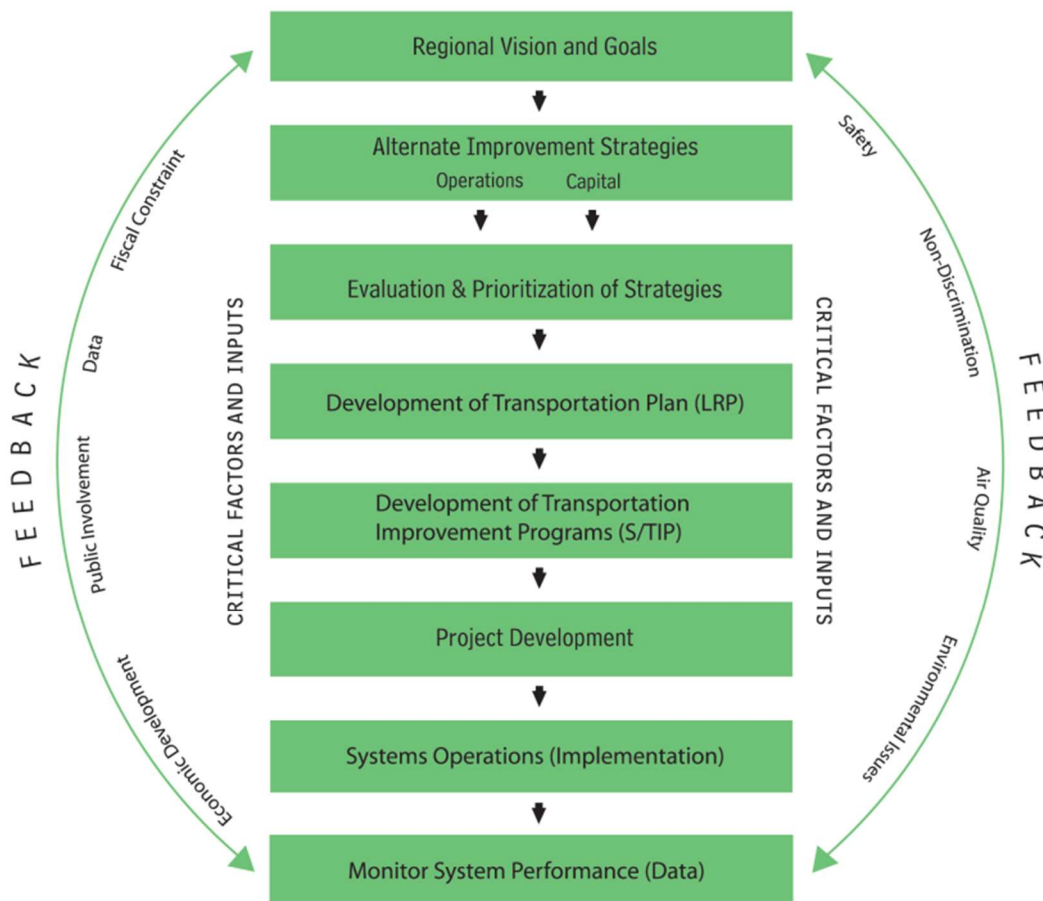


Figure 1: Transportation Planning Process (FHWA)

In Midland County, the local MPO is the **Midland Area Transportation Study (MATS)**. Other local government agencies include:

- Midland County Road Commission
- City of Midland
- Larkin Charter Township
- Michigan Department of Transportation

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What are the steps of the Transportation Planning Process?

- **Monitoring** existing conditions.
- **Forecasting** future population and employment growth, including assessing projected land uses in the region and identifying major growth corridors.
- **Identifying** current and projected future transportation needs.
- **Analyzing** various improvement strategies to address those needs.
- **Developing** long-range and short-range programs of improvement alternatives.
- **Estimating** the costs of recommended improvements, both financially and environmentally.
- **Developing** a financial and environmental plan for securing sufficient funding and mitigating impacts of implementing strategies.

What are the Federal Planning Factors established by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA)?

1. Support the economic vitality of the metropolitan area, especially by enabling global competitiveness, productivity, and efficiency.
2. Increase the safety of the transportation system for all motorized and non-motorized users.
3. Increase the ability of the transportation system to support homeland security and to safeguard the personal security of all motorized and non-motorized users.
4. Increase accessibility and mobility of people and freight.
5. Protect and enhance the environment, promote energy conservation, improve the quality of life, and promote consistency between transportation improvements and State and local planned growth and economic development patterns.
6. Enhance the integration and connectivity of the transportation system, across and between modes, for people and freight.
7. Promote efficient system management and operation.
8. Emphasize the preservation of the existing transportation system.
9. Improve resiliency and reliability of the system.
10. Reduce or mitigate stormwater impacts on surface transportation.
11. Enhance travel and tourism.

These factors guided MATS in crafting the long-range transportation plan.

What is an MPO?

A Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) is a transportation policy-making body made up of representatives from local government and transportation agencies with authority and responsibility in metropolitan planning areas. Federal legislation passed in the early 1970s required the formation of an MPO for any urbanized area (UA) with a population greater than 50,000. MPOs were created to ensure that existing and future expenditures for transportation projects and programs were based on a continuing, cooperative, and comprehensive planning process. Federal funding for transportation projects and programs is channeled through the MPO.

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The Midland Area Transportation Study (MATS) was established in January of 2013. The MATS boundary includes all of Midland County, the City of Auburn and Williams Township in Bay County and Tittabawassee Township in Saginaw County. MATS is Michigan's newest MPO and covers the smallest population.

MATS is governed by a Policy Committee that includes elected and appointed officials within the MATS area and representatives from the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT). MATS also includes a technical committee who includes transportation, planning, and engineering professionals and standing non-motorized and administrative subcommittees.

There are five core functions of an MPO:

- Establish and manage a fair and impartial setting for effective regional decision making.
- Identify and evaluate alternative transportation improvement options using data-driven planning methods to generate and evaluate alternatives. Planning studies and evaluations are included in the Unified Planning Work Program or UPWP.
- Prepare and maintain a Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP), or Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) that establishes a long-range transportation plan for the metropolitan area covering a planning horizon of at least twenty years that fosters (1) mobility and access for people and goods, (2) efficient system performance and preservation, and (3) good quality of life. In Midland County this is the ***Towards 2045*** LRTP for the Midland Area. This plan must be consistent with the [State of Michigan's Long Range Transportation Plan \(LRSTP\)](#) and be updated every five years.
- Develop a Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) that defines a short-range (four-year) program of transportation improvements based on the long-range transportation plan; the TIP should be designed to achieve the area's goals, using spending, regulating, operating, management, and financial tools. **All projects requiring federal funding must be in the TIP.** The TIP is how the region allocates its limited transportation resources addressing the various capital and operation needs of the area.
- **Involve the general public and other affected constituencies in the four essential functions listed above.**

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MATS membership includes:

- Homer Township
- Non-motorized advocate
- MBS Airport
- Ingersoll Township
- Mount Haley Township
- MDOT Mt. Pleasant TSC
- Jerome Township
- Saginaw County Road Commission
- Midland County
- Larkin Charter Township
- Tittabawassee Township (Saginaw County)
- Saginaw Area Transportation Agency
- Edenville Township
- Midland Dial-A-Ride
- Jack Barstow Airport
- Bay County Road Commission
- Lincoln Township
- Village of Sanford
- Bay Metro Transit Authority
- MDOT Bay Region
- Williams Charter Township (Bay County)
- City of Auburn
- MDOT Statewide Planning
- Bay City Area Transportation Study
- City of Midland
- Midland Charter Township
- Eastern Michigan Council of Governments (EMCOG)
- County Connection of Midland
- Midland County Road Commission
- FHWA

Most MPOs will not take the lead in implementing transportation projects but will provide an overall coordination role in planning and programming funds for projects and operations. The MPO must involve local transportation providers in the planning process by including transit agencies, state and local highway departments, airport authorities, maritime operators, rail-freight operators, Amtrak, port operators, private providers of public transportation, and others within the MPO region.

For a transportation project to become reality, it is required to be programmed in the Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP) and the Transportation Improvement Plan/Program (TIP) to be eligible for federal funding.

- **Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP) or Long-Range Transportation Plan (LRTP)** is the way the region the plans to invest in the transportation system. Per federal regulations, the plan includes both long-range and short-term strategies that lead to the development of an integrated intermodal transportation system that facilitates the efficient movement of people and goods throughout the region. In Midland County this is the ***Towards 2045*** LRTP for the Midland Area. This plan includes:
 - Policies, strategies, and projects for the future.
 - A systems level approach considering roadways, transit, non-motorized, and intermodal connections.
 - Projected demand over 20 years
 - Regional land use, development, housing, and employment goals and plans
 - Cost estimates and reasonably available financial sources for operation, maintenance, and capital investment

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- Ways to preserve existing roads and facilities and make efficient use of the existing transportation system.

MATS specific goals and objectives identified in the Towards 2045 LRTP include:

- Preserving the existing infrastructure
- Developing a multi-modal transportation network
- Enhancing accessibility, efficiency, and mobility
- Promoting connectivity/integration between varying modes
- Improving overall safety and security of the system
- Mitigating environmental impacts
- Supporting economic vitality

Furthermore, MATS determined that its overall vision was to strive for a safe and efficient transportation system which promotes the region's attractiveness to live, work, and visit. Additional detail regarding [MATS Towards 2045 Goals and Objectives are found in the full Towards 2045 document on Page 9.](#)

- **Transportation Improvement Plan/Program (TIP):** In the TIP, the MPO identifies the projects and strategies it plans to undertake in the next four years. **All projects requiring federal funding must be in the TIP.** The TIP is how the region allocates its limited transportation resources addressing the various capital and operation needs of the area. The current **MATS TIP** covers the 2023-2026 time period. Under federal law, the TIP:
 - Covers a minimum of four years of investment.
 - Is updated at least every four years.
 - Is **realistic** in terms of available funding and **not a wish-list of projects.**
 - Is approved by the MPO and the governor.
 - Incorporated directly, without change, into the **Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP).**

The TIP must be consistent with the LRTP. The TIP also needs to be in accordance with the MATS Public Participation Plan. The determination of projects to be included in the TIP is the responsibility of the MATS Technical Committee and MATS staff. It begins with local road and transit agencies, and MDOT, recommending projects that best meet each agency's needs. Projects are reviewed by a selection committee, evaluating each potential project based on local needs, priorities, and importance area wide as well as current federal transportation legislation. The entire TIP project list is then released as the preliminary list for public comment. Following a defined comment period, the MATS Policy Committee then approves the final project list.

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- **Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP):** Annually, the MPO produces a document called the Unified Planning Work Program. The current MATS 2024 UPWP is [here](#). The contains information about the MPO’s work in the region, including a description of the planning work and its results, who will perform the work, time frames for completing the work, the cost of the work, and the sources of funding. This helps ensure transparency and accountability.

These documents influence the region’s growth patterns by planning for multi-modal transportation. This helps improve the transportation system and safety for all and ensures the existing and future transportation system is adequately maintained.

	Who Develops?	Who Approves?	Time Horizon	Content	Update Requirements
UPWP	MPO	MPO	1 or 2 Years	Planning Studies and Tasks	Annually
MTP	MPO	MPO	20 Years	Future Goals, Strategies, and Projects	Every 5 Years 4 years for nonattainment and maintenance areas
TIP	MPO	MPO/ Governor	4 Years	Transportation Investments	Every 4 Years
LRSTP	State DOT	State DOT	20 Years	Future Goals, Strategies, and Projects	Not Specified
STIP	State DOT	US DOT	4 Years	Transportation Investments	Every 4 Years

Figure 2: Key Planning Documents (FHWA)

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How does the Letts Road Corridor Study fit into this?

As part of the MATS Towards 2045 LRTP, regional travel demand modeling was completed, the Great Lakes Bay Region (GLBR) Model. This included Midland, Saginaw, and Bay Counties, and required coordination between MATS and its peer organizations in Saginaw and Bay Counties, the Saginaw Area Transportation Agency (SATA) and Bay City Area Transportation Study (BCATS). Due to how the Bay City, Saginaw, and Midland areas are interrelated, travel patterns are more accurately modeled on a regional level.

Travel demand models are a key piece in the development of long-range transportation plans. They:

- Calculate the number of trips.
- Connect origins and destinations.
- Forecast travel mode.
- Identify the routes most likely to be used to complete a trip.
- Determine where future transportation problems are likely to occur and forecast congestion and other issues.
- Test the ability of transportation system improvements to address forecast issues.

This travel demand model works best at the **regional** level. It does contain specific volumes for individual segments, but **only serves as a starting point for additional analysis of a specific project**. Even in areas such as the MATS region which is undergoing limited growth the travel demand model is still important to model connectivity, identify capacity expansion projects, and identify the effects of those projects. Similarly, it can also see the effects of not constructing projects, whether positive or negative. Further information on the GLBR model can be found in the Towards 2045 LRTP.

Traffic operations throughout the region are acceptable, with only one segment above 75% capacity. Areas such as those around the Midland Mall, Eastman Avenue, and Jefferson Avenue operate between 50% and 75% capacity. The no-build 2045 scenario identified three segments forecasted to operate at over 75% capacity, when accounting for anticipated traffic growth. A build 2045 scenario was also modeled with **potential** network enhancements, which **include a potential Letts Road extension**.

These potential network enhancements were developed through extensive dialogue with local agencies within the MATS area. It included projects that were sought after and feasible. It was determined that a Letts Road extension would provide improved connectivity north of the Eastman Avenue commercial area, allowing residents to travel east of Jefferson, and west of Eastman if not traveling to the mall area. **It is important to note that the model included both the extension of Letts Road from one mile east of Jefferson Road to Waldo Road and the extension of Commerce Drive from Eastman Avenue to Sturgeon Road.** Modeling of these improvements showed reduced capacity utilization on Monroe Road and some reduction on Eastman Avenue and Jefferson Road. This modeling included the implementation of all improvements, **but Letts Road from one mile east of Jefferson Road to Waldo Road has not been analyzed as a standalone project to date.**

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Identified projects in the LRTP, include:

- Letts Road from one mile east of Jefferson Road to Waldo Road (2035)
- Commerce Drive from Eastman Avenue to Sturgeon Road (2045)
- Mier Road from M-30 to Dublin Road (2035)
- Jefferson Avenue at Joe Mann Boulevard left turn lane addition (2035)
- US-10 at Waldo Road full interchange (2035)

As part of the Towards 2045 LRTP, a list of prioritized projects was developed accounting for expected revenues and funding. This list was approved by the MATS Policy Committee to fulfill the objectives of the LRTP. This included the Letts Road Extension:

By 2035	Midland County	New Roads	Letts Road	Waldo Rd. to 1 mi E. of Jefferson	County New Road Construction	CON	\$3,500,000	STUL/Local
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Figure 3: Prioritized 2022-2045 Projects Excerpt (Towards 2045 LRTP)

During the development of the 2045 LRTP, MATS solicited public comment as part of the previously noted proactive public involvement process to represent the concerns of stakeholders and the general public. **During this time, a large number of comments were received regarding Letts Road, including several in opposition.**

In 2023, the Midland County Road Commission sought to evaluate the potential extension of Letts Road further, including isolating the project as a standalone one, since all previous modeling had included multiple projects being completed over the long-range analysis period. This important step is necessary, for not only Letts Road, but any other project identified to obtain more focused public input, and a subsequent more accurate determination of the project's individual impacts and cost estimates. By completing these, the ultimate feasibility of the project can be determined. It should be emphasized that the Letts Road Extension project has been identified by previous long range transportation planning efforts, including those conducted by MATS, the Midland County Road Commission, and City of Midland. This study does not mean the project is going to be a reality, it only provides an additional tool to be utilized as the local agencies develop their short-term and long-term transportation plans in the future and continue their ongoing transportation planning efforts.