

**WEBINAR**

FROM COMPLEXITY  
TO CLARITY:  
**ENGAGE AND  
INFORM USING THE  
PLAIN LANGUAGE  
ADVANTAGE**



PublicInput

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# HOUSEKEEPING

## BEFORE WE GET STARTED

- Take advantage of the Zoom Q&A feature as we go.
- This session's recording will be delivered within the next 24 hours via email.

... and thank you for joining us today!

## ABOUT PUBLICINPUT

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The mission of PublicInput is to create a more collaborative democracy through technology.

What this means for you: We enable agencies to deliver equitable investments in their mobility initiatives by providing solutions to consolidate public engagement and deliver insights that prioritize ‘who’ you’re reaching and ‘what’ these communities have to say.



**PublicInput**

## TODAY'S AGENDA

- Plain Language for Public Agencies (the “why”)
- Practitioner Panel (the real life “how”)
- Q&A

## WHY PLAIN LANGUAGE?



54%

of adults in the U.S.  
**read and write below  
a 6th grade level**



20%

of adults in the US  
**struggle to read and  
write basic sentences**

34

of adults who struggle with reading  
and writing were born outside the  
US.

43

of adults with lowest literacy levels  
live in poverty, compared to only  
4% at highest levels

%

ACCESSIBLE  
INFORMATION

Empowers people to find, read and  
understand information quickly  
with less confusion.

EASY TO  
UNDERSTAND  
BY EVERYONE

Easier for people to  
participate meaningfully

## OUR PANEL OF PRACTITIONERS



**Cynthia Baur, Ph.D.**

Director, Horowitz Center  
for Health Literacy



**Monica Haines Benkhedda, MSW**

Public Involvement Coordinator  
Baltimore Metropolitan Council



**Brenda Thomas**

Administrative Services Manager,  
Aviation, Public Information and  
Ridesharing  
Fresno Council of Governments

## **PLAIN LANGUAGE**

The Intersection of  
Literacy, Communication  
and Public Policy.



## LIMITED LITERACY IS WIDESPREAD

- **19%** of US English-speaking adults lowest levels of literacy
- **29%** lowest level of numeracy
- **24%** lowest level of digital problem-solving skills

*Source: U.S. Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies*



## PLAIN LANGUAGE IS FOR EVERYONE

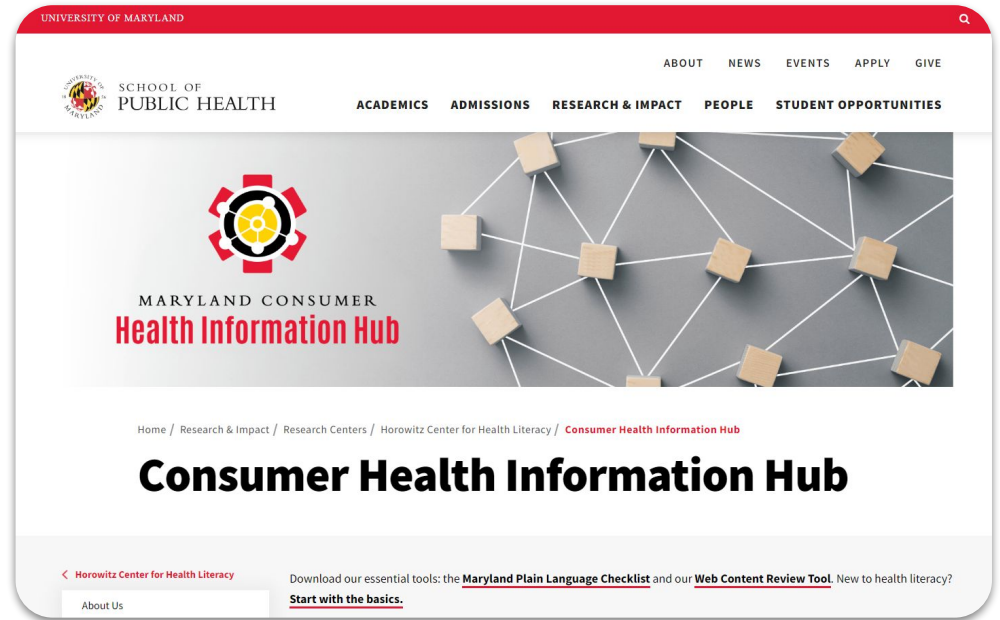
- **PLAIN LANGUAGE STANDARD:** Communication so clear people understand the first time
- Plain language opens up communication possibilities for **all** residents

## PLAIN LANGUAGE IS A POLICY ISSUE

- Plain language **laws put responsibility on organizations** to communicate clearly with the public
- Plain language implementation **requires strong leadership**
- Program leaders and subject matter experts need to **understand plain language**

# MARYLAND EXAMPLE: CONSUMER HEALTH INFORMATION HUB

- Law on plain language, language access, and info access for state and local agencies
- Plain language implementation requires strong leadership and someone to drive implementation
- Program leaders, subject matter experts need to understand plain language



<https://sph.umd.edu/research-impact/research-centers/horowitz-center-health-literacy/consumer-health-information-hub>

## Cynthia Baur, Ph.D.

Director, Horowitz Center for Health Literacy

E-Mail: [cbaur@umd.edu](mailto:cbaur@umd.edu)



# Plain Language and Community Engagement

Overview of efforts and successes



# A renewed focus on Plain Language

Developing Policy and Practice



# Increasing Focus on Equity

**2021** Executive Order: Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities

**2022** U.S. Department of Transportation Equity Action Plan

**2023** BMC Equity Scan Project

- Nearly 20 recommendations to implement in the next 1-5 years
- Based on the 4 key transportation plans:
  - Transportation Planning Budget
  - Long Range Transportation Plan
  - Short Range Transportation Improvement Program
  - Public Participation Plan

# Adopting Plain Language Practices

## Equity Recommendations

2023 Equity Report for our agency suggested we:

- Make information available in plain language
- Improve clarity about the planning process and how the community can be involved

## Staff Training

Equity Working Group identified training and management supported

- [The Essentials of Plain Language](#) (nine part, 45 minute training)
- [Plain Language Writing for Web](#)

## Implementation

Staff began implementation in January 2024

Maryland Plain Language Initiative passed in July 2024

Staff continue professional development



# Creating and Measuring Plain Language

Tools and Tips



# Writing for Your Reader, Not Yourself

## Shift to Everyday Language

- Avoid industry jargon
- Use clear, simple language that everyone can understand.

## Consider Translation and Accessibility

- Ensure terms are easily translatable and accessible to people with diverse linguistic backgrounds and disabilities.

## Invest Time and Effort

- Writing in plain language requires dedication and training.
- Involve staff skilled in public engagement and communication, as well as stakeholders, in your review. They can offer for valuable insights to make your message resonate with the broader community.
- Keep learning through resources like TED talks and webinars to enhance your skills.

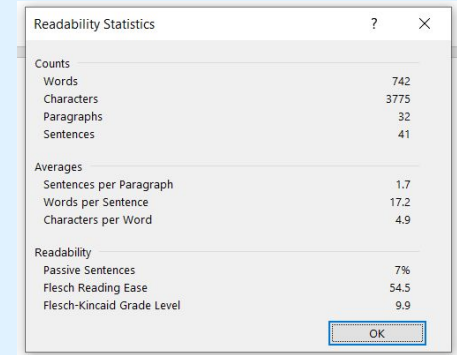
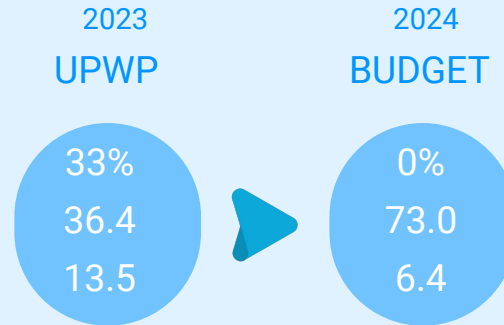


# Checking Readability of Outreach Materials

Run draft text through Microsoft Word to get readability stats

**GOAL:** 8th grade level

Passive Sentences  
Flesh Reading Ease  
Flesh-Kincaid Grade Level



Readability Statistics	
<b>Counts</b>	
Words	742
Characters	3775
Paragraphs	32
Sentences	41
<b>Averages</b>	
Sentences per Paragraph	1.7
Words per Sentence	17.2
Characters per Word	4.9
<b>Readability</b>	
Passive Sentences	7%
Flesh Reading Ease	54.5
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	9.9

Rewrite to reduce passive sentences and increase reading ease and plain language

# Using AI to Improve Plain Language

## PROCESS

Run text through AI tools such as ChatGPT or Coral AI (pdfs)

Review suggested language

Keep the best and leave the rest

Update and re-check readability  
Rewrite and re-check until get to goal

- Help me improve readability
- Make this more friendly
- Write this in plain language
- Explain this in plain language

Or, Ask a Question

# Examples

Qualitative Results and Insights



# Transportation Planning Budget

[publicinput.com/brtbudget](https://publicinput.com/brtbudget)



**Transportation  
Planning Budget** FY25

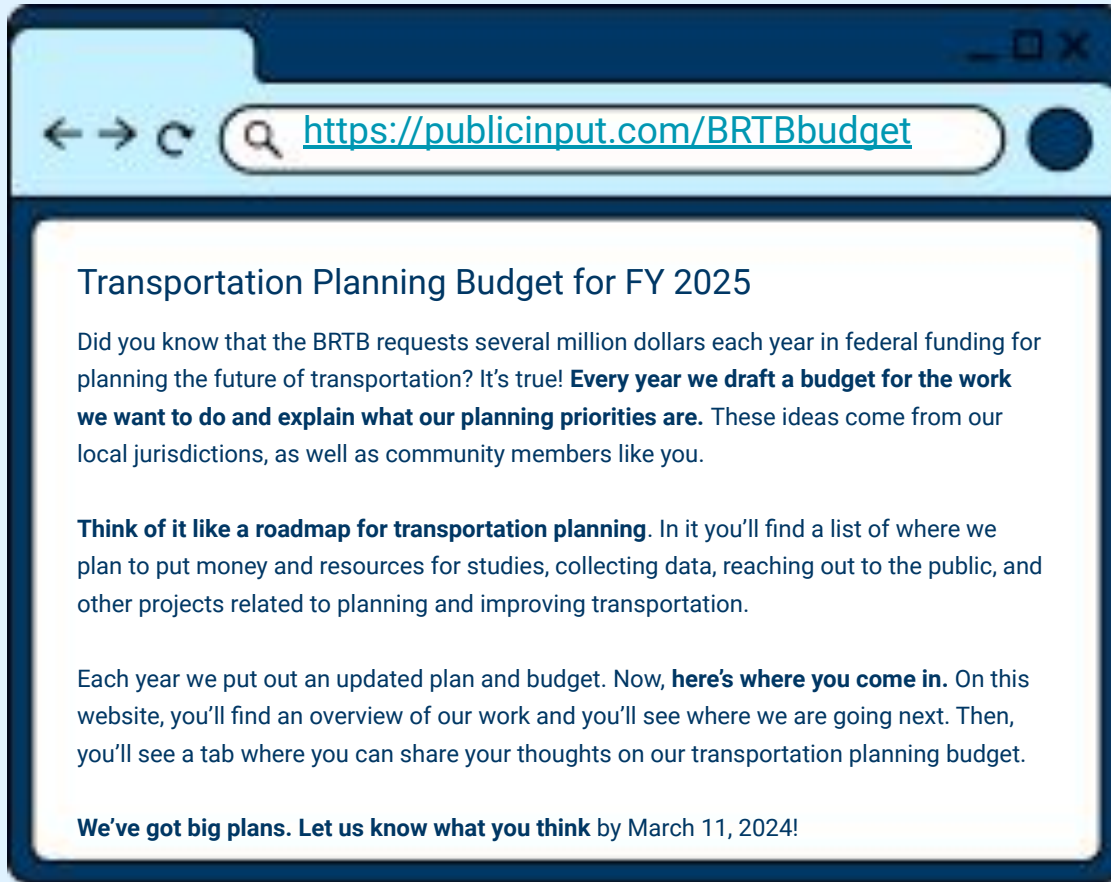
**UPWP**  
UNIFIED PLANNING WORK PROGRAM  
Baltimore

*Did you know you can weigh in on our annual budget? We want to hear from you!*



**BRTB**  
Baltimore Regional Transportation Board

Learn more and weigh in by March 11 at  
[publicinput.com/BRTBbudget](https://publicinput.com/BRTBbudget)



Rebranding to move away from formal name Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP)

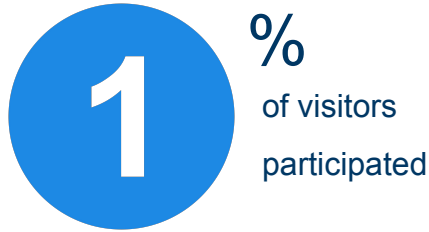
Friendly and encouraging tone

Everyday language like budget, priorities, roadmap and plan.

Clear direction on what we're doing and how to take action

# Increased Engagement

2023



2024



- Large increase in participation over past years
- Challenging to write all content on page at a middle school level - ranges from 6 (intro and share thoughts) to 11 (details about the budget and plan)

Overview **Share Your Thoughts** FAQ Notice

### We want to hear from you!

We are continually planning for the future and a key part of that is finding out what the public thinks. Currently, we are looking ahead to Fiscal Year 2025, which starts in July 2024, and we want to get your feedback on what we're going to be working on!

Here's how you can share your feedback on this year's budget:

- Survey - Please fill out our survey at [publicinput.com/BRTBbudget](https://publicinput.com/BRTBbudget)
- Email: [FY25BRTBbudget@publicinput.com](mailto:FY25BRTBbudget@publicinput.com)
- Text: send keyword 'FY25BRTBbudget' to 73224
- Voicemail: Leave us a voice message at 855-925-2801 x 6880
- Social Media: Find us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [X](#), and [LinkedIn](#).

Comments are welcome from **February 7 through March 11, 2024**.

### What will you do with my feedback?

The comments you provide through any of the ways listed above will be shared with the project team. This team includes BMC staff and BRTB committee members. Your feedback will be used to update our transportation planning budget for the coming years. We also report to local jurisdictions, helping them respond to the needs of their communities.

Need more information or help with something? Email us at [FY25BRTBbudget@publicinput.com](mailto:FY25BRTBbudget@publicinput.com) or call 855-925-2801 x 6880 and leave us a message in any language. We'll get back to you!



# Federal Certification

[publicinput.com/BRTBcertification](https://publicinput.com/BRTBcertification)

**»BRTB BALTIMORE REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION BOARD  
CERTIFICATION REVIEW**

## *Are we connecting?*

Every four years, we work with our federal partners to get **certified**. Through this process, we ask folks in our region for feedback.

- Have you heard from us about our planning projects?
- Were the details clear and easy to understand?
- Have you noticed changes in our outreach?
- What can we continue to improve on?

Let us know online, or join us in person.

 Complete our survey by May 7 at [publicinput.com/BRTBcertification](https://publicinput.com/BRTBcertification)

 Join a meeting on May 1 at 6:30 p.m. virtually or in person at our McHenry Row office

## *We want to hear from you!*

 FEDERAL HIGHWAY ADMINISTRATION & FEDERAL TRANSIT ADMINISTRATION

# Increased Engagement



**45,500+**  
Emails and Social  
Media Impressions



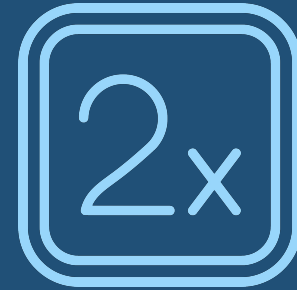
**730+** visitors



**41** participants



**6%**  
of visitors  
participated



as many  
participants  
over 2020  
Certification

# Your Voice. Your Region.

## Rewriting Our Guide to Transportation Planning



### GUIDE TO TRANSPORTATION PLANNING

*Your Voice. Your Region. Your guide for getting involved in transportation planning in the Baltimore Region*



#### **From Concept to Concrete: Understanding the Journey of Transportation Project Planning in the Baltimore region**

Ever wonder how decisions are made on where to build roads, bridges and transit lines that affect your daily life? How do officials choose these projects, and why do projects sometimes turn out differently than expected?

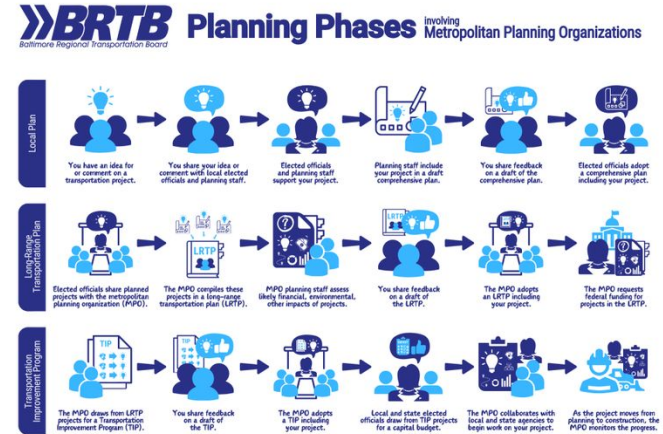
This guide is here to help you understand the process of planning transportation projects in the Baltimore region. Learn when, where and how you can have a say in the decisions made by planners, engineers and elected officials.

# Revising Educational Materials

Overhaul Guide to Planning to improve plain language and readability.

Incorporate infographics to visually explain the process.

Work with Transportation CORE to review and provide feedback.



# Thank you very much!

Monica Haines Benkhedda | Public Involvement Coordinator

410-732-0500 x1047 | [mhainesbenkhedda@baltometro.org](mailto:mhainesbenkhedda@baltometro.org)

[baltometro.org](https://baltometro.org) | [publicinput.com/hub/1231](https://publicinput.com/hub/1231)





# Do's and Don't Plain Language Formatting

You have text, now what?



# Plain language layout and formatting - Do's

1. **Keep written material as simple and short as possible**
2. **Do keep an eye on how much type you include on one page, slide or space**
3. **Break up type with whitespace**
4. **Limit yourself to no more than two different fonts on one project (shouldn't be similar)**

# Plain language layout and formatting - Do's

5. Chose graphics & photos representative of your audience
6. Provide visuals to explain your content
7. Select a color theme (contrast colors) and use it throughout





## Fresno COG *NEEDS YOUR FEEDBACK!*

Fresno COG is seeking your feedback to develop our 2026 Regional Transportation Plan and Sustainable Communities Strategy (RTP/SCS)!

Starting this September, we will be asking for your input on your greatest transportation needs in Fresno County, from bike lanes to bus stops and everything in between.

### Share Your Feedback Now

Submit questions or comments regarding the RTP in one of the following ways:


Email: [2026rtp@publicinput.com](mailto:2026rtp@publicinput.com)

Voicecall: **855-925-2801**, enter code **10291** when prompted, then leave your comments.

For more information about the RTP update visit [www.planfresno.com](http://www.planfresno.com)



Fresno COG > Plan Fresno: 2026 Regional Transportation Plan Update Brenda Thomas ▾




 **Plan Fresno**  

# Your Voice Matters!

## Regional Transportation Plan Update




Translate

About the RTP
Get Engaged
Timeline
Survey
Meetings
Stay Updated
Resources
Contact Us



## Plan Fresno: 2026 Regional Transportation Plan Update

Our plan looks more than 20 years into the future, pointing out present and future transportation needs and problems. Then, it looks for potential solutions to those problems while estimating available funding to pay for future transportation projects and programs. For more information about the RTP update visit [www.planfresno.com](http://www.planfresno.com).

Fresno COG's Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) looks 25 years into the future at our region's transportation system. It sets regional transportation goals, identifies present and future needs, deficiencies and constraints, analyzes potential solutions, estimates available funding, and proposes investments. For more information about the RTP update visit [www.planfresno.com](http://www.planfresno.com).

For complete details regarding Fresno COG's 2026 RTP Update go to [www.planfresno.com](http://www.planfresno.com)

Submit questions or comments regarding the RTP in one of the following ways:

Email: [2026rtp@publicinput.com](mailto:2026rtp@publicinput.com)

Voicecall: 855-925-2801, enter code 10291 when prompted, then leave your comments.

You may also submit comments directly from this site under the Get Engaged tab.



# *Your Voice Matters!*

Regional Transportation  
Plan Update



 Translate

## 2024 Transportation Needs Survey

### Welcome!

Have a say in how money for future transportation projects is spent in Fresno County. The Fresno Council of Governments is looking for transportation project suggestions that could become part of its 20-year Regional Transportation Plan.

The Regional Transportation Plan is updated every four years. The last one included over 2,000 projects from areas all around the county.

**Introduction**

Your Suggestions

Questions

About You

Stay in Touch

Thank you!

# Plain language layout and formatting - Don'ts

1. **Don't ask questions unless they inform your process**
2. **Don't provide too many multiple choice options**
3. **Don't prioritize branding over content - logos, keywords**
4. **Don't try to include everything you want people to know**
5. **Don't try to over-inform or educate on the spot**

## Survey Question Provided By Consultant

Introduction

Your Suggestions

Questions

About You

Stay in Touch

When you think about where you live and your daily travel habits, what mobility challenges have the biggest impact on your day-to-day life? Please select three.

No access to a reliable vehicle

Lack of useful public transit options

Inadequate bike lanes

Inadequate sidewalks

High cost of transportation

Other (Please specify below)

Select a response

# Consultant's Survey Question Run Through Word's Readability Tool:



When you think about where you live and your daily travel habits, what mobility challenges have the biggest impact on your day-to-day life?

No access to a reliable vehicle

Lack of useful public transit options

Inadequate bike lanes

Inadequate sidewalks

High cost of transportation

The screenshot shows a dialog box titled "Readability Statistics" with a question mark icon and a close button (X). The dialog box contains the following data:

Counts	
Words	44
Characters	237
Paragraphs	6
Sentences	1

Averages	
Sentences per Paragraph	1.0
Words per Sentence	23.0
Characters per Word	5.0

Readability	
Flesch Reading Ease	51.0
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	11.8
Passive Sentences	0.0%

Readability statistics are based on your text selection.

OK

## Revised Survey Question with Word's Readability Analysis:

What problems keep you from getting to work, school, appointments, or shopping?

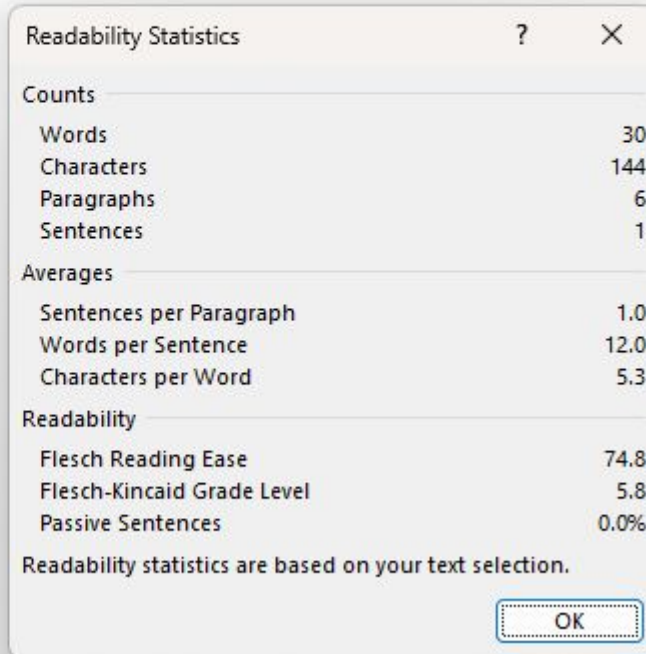
No car

Bus route locations or schedule

No safe bike lanes

No safe sidewalks

It costs too much

A screenshot of a "Readability Statistics" dialog box from Microsoft Word. The dialog box has a title bar with a question mark and a close button. It is divided into four sections: "Counts", "Averages", "Readability", and a footer note. The "Counts" section lists 30 words, 144 characters, 6 paragraphs, and 1 sentence. The "Averages" section shows 1.0 sentences per paragraph, 12.0 words per sentence, and 5.3 characters per word. The "Readability" section shows a Flesch Reading Ease score of 74.8, a Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level of 5.8, and 0.0% passive sentences. An "OK" button is located at the bottom right.

Readability Statistics	
<b>Counts</b>	
Words	30
Characters	144
Paragraphs	6
Sentences	1
<b>Averages</b>	
Sentences per Paragraph	1.0
Words per Sentence	12.0
Characters per Word	5.3
<b>Readability</b>	
Flesch Reading Ease	74.8
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	5.8
Passive Sentences	0.0%

Readability statistics are based on your text selection.

OK

# Don't try to include everything you want people to know



## Fresno COG *NEEDS YOUR FEEDBACK!*

Fresno COG is seeking your feedback to develop our 2026 Regional Transportation Plan and Sustainable Communities Strategy (RTP/SCS)!

Starting this September, we will be asking for your input on your greatest transportation needs in Fresno County, from bike lanes to bus stops and everything in between.

### Share Your Feedback Now

Submit questions or comments regarding the RTP in one of the following ways:

Email: [2026rtp@publicinput.com](mailto:2026rtp@publicinput.com)

Voicecall: **855-925-2801**, enter code **10291** when prompted, then leave your comments.

For more information about the RTP update visit [www.planfresno.com](http://www.planfresno.com)



### Have a say in how future transportation dollars are spent.

The Fresno Council of Governments (Fresno COG) is looking for transportation project suggestions that could become part of its 20-year Regional Transportation Plan or RTP. The RTP is a long-term plan for the Fresno County region's transportation system that is updated every four years. Our last RTP included over 3,100 projects from around the region and we are in the process of updating that plan now.

- Do you have suggestions for roadway, transit, bikeway, trail, or other types of improvements?
- Do the streets near you need repair?
- Are the roads you travel unsafe or congested?
- Would you benefit from a change to current bus stops or schedules?
- Does a new bikeway, trail, or sidewalk need to be added in your community?

**We want to know!** Please tell us by participating in a very brief, easy survey by October 15th. Submit as many project suggestions as you would like. Your project suggestions will be forwarded to the appropriate agency for review, consideration and possible inclusion into the updated RTP or local plans.

**Take The Survey** by opening the stock Camera app on your cell phone and point it steadily for 2-3 seconds towards the QR Code you want to scan. Whenever scanning is enabled, a notification will appear. Touch the notification to open the survey. If nothing happens, you may have to go to your Settings app and enable QR Code scanning.

#### English Survey



#### Spanish Survey



#### Punjabi Survey



Or log on to [www.planfresno.com](http://www.planfresno.com) and click on RTP Survey.

If you are unable to complete an online survey visit the PlanFresno website and submit your project suggestion via email. You may also call our office to share your project suggestions at (559) 233-4148.

*The Fresno Council of Governments (Fresno COG) is a consensus builder, developing acceptable programs and solutions to issues that do not respect political boundaries. Fresno COG undertakes comprehensive regional transportation planning, provides citizens an opportunity to be involved in the planning process, and supplies technical services to its member agencies--the 15 incorporated cities within Fresno County and the County of Fresno.*



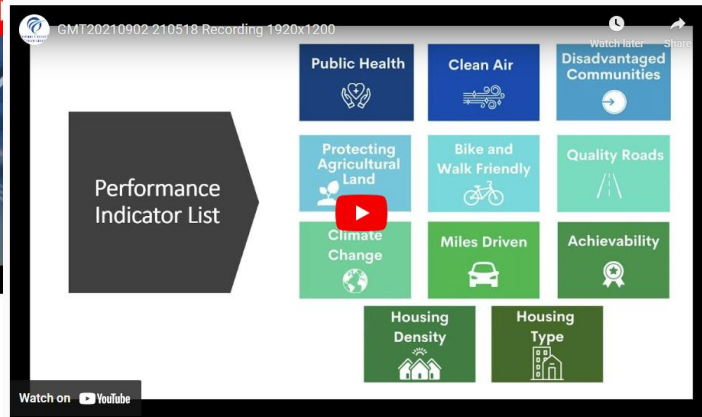
Follow us on Social Media!

[@FresnoCouncilofGovernments](https://www.facebook.com/FresnoCouncilofGovernments) [@FresnoCOG](https://www.twitter.com/FresnoCOG) [@fresno-council-of-governments](https://www.instagram.com/fresno-council-of-governments)

## Welcome!

This site will show you three regional, draft plans for the Fresno County region's future growth called "Sustainable Communities Strategies". Then it will quickly ask for your opinion of each one through a short series of questions.

If you are short on time (or patience) skip to the Scenarios tab to begin. Your input will be shared with three committees and Fresno Council of Governments' Policy Board who are tasked with selecting one final Preferred Scenario vision for our community from one of the three. Each of the following tabs contains a short video explanation. You are encouraged to watch each brief video before answering the questions under the Reporting Tab.



### Transportation Strategies

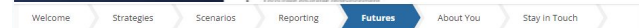
- Maintain existing streets and roads
- Improve bus transportation and ridesharing options
- Enhance operational efficiency and transportation demand management strategies
- Improve bikeways, trails, walking paths and sidewalks
- Provide an efficient, reliable, and safe roadway system for transporting goods
- Modernize transportation options and infrastructure
- Improve traffic safety
- Improve access and connection between cities/towns
- Improve transportation equity
- Decrease congestion

### Land Use Strategies

- Support efficient land uses and livable communities
- Provide a variety of housing options for all income levels
- Conserve agricultural land
- Encourage equitable redevelopment
- Limit growth "footprint"

### Other Beneficial Strategies

- Encourage shifts away from the single occupant vehicle
- Increase climate resiliency
- Improve air quality
- Support work from home





# Questions & **Answers**





PublicInput



# LET'S CHAT.

Scan the QR Code above or visit [publicinput.com/demo](https://publicinput.com/demo) to connect with a PublicInput expert.