



# Residents' Opinions of Public Transportation in Three Counties: A Focus Group Study

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# Residents' Opinions of Public Transportation in Three Counties: A Focus Group Study

## INTRODUCTION

In 2013, the University of Central Florida's Institute for Social and Behavioral Sciences (ISBS) conducted a public opinion telephone survey of residents in Central Florida to help MetroPlan Orlando measure transportation issues of importance to the region. The survey was commissioned as part of MetroPlan Orlando's public involvement program and obtained input on future funding options and identified educational deficiencies.

Several findings from the survey prompted the need for further exploration. Focus groups were identified as a way to dig deeper and obtain qualitative data from residents. Specifically, four findings from the telephone survey were determined to be important areas of exploration in focus groups with area residents. First, contrary to expectation, senior citizens were found to be the least likely age group to say they would use the bus system or to support transit options more generally. Second, small differences between counties were identified in relation to which transportation funding options were most attractive. Third, people who reported the lowest levels of trust in the government were found to be the least approving of all funding options. Fourth, county variations were seen in support of transit as a means to address congestion.

To begin to provide answers to these and related questions, the ISBS convened 12 focus groups on behalf of MetroPlan Orlando, focusing on two general transportation related topics: (1) the use and perceptions of public transit and (2) opinions on public funding options for transportation initiatives. These topics would be covered by conducting three focus groups with each of these categories of participants: 1) Senior citizens (aged 65 and older), 2) Orange County residents, 3) Osceola County residents and 4) Seminole County residents.

## THE FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups were held from October 22, 2013 to December 14, 2013. In all, 82 Central Florida residents participated in these 12 sessions. Participants represented a diverse spectrum of age, ethnicity, income level and commute preference.

Three of the groups were held with residents 65 and older. One group was held with seniors who are frequent LYNX riders. This session was held at a meeting room in LYNX Central Station. Another session was held with a mixed group of riders and non-riders, and this session was held at the Beardall Senior Center in Orlando. Staff from the Beardall Senior Center and the L. Claudia Allen Senior Center assisted in recruiting participants for these sessions. The third session with seniors consisted of participants who rarely or never ride LYNX. This session was held at Baptist Terrace, a senior living facility in downtown Orlando. Participants in this session were recruited by the facility social worker.

Three focus groups were convened in each of three Central Florida counties, Orange, Osceola and Seminole, resulting in a total of nine "general residents" groups. In Orange County, the focus groups were held in a conference room at the MetroPlan Orlando office. In Seminole County, the groups were held at the UCF Partnership Building at Seminole State College. In Osceola County, the groups were held at the UCF/Valencia Osceola Campus in Kissimmee.

Participants for all of these sessions were recruited through various means. Focus group recruiters from ISBS visited locations in the respective counties to pass out fliers advertising the groups. Fliers were also sent via email to business contacts in each county.

All aspects of the study protocol, including recruitment methods and guiding questions for the groups themselves, were reviewed and approved by the UCF Institutional Review Board in accordance with UCF and federal regulations governing research on human subjects. Participants in the elderly sessions were paid \$20. Participants in the general sessions were paid \$50. Seniors were paid less because their sessions were held at locations convenient to them, resulting in fewer commuting costs that needed to be compensated. Notes were taken at every session to aid in data analysis. All of the focus groups lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours. Each group had a general area of focus, however, the topics often overlapped.

For the “general residents” groups, two of the sessions in each county focused on perceptions of public transportation, while the third focused on transportation funding options. Since LYNX is the only public transportation system currently operating in Central Florida, much of the discussion focused on the bus system. Participants were also asked about SunRail, but could not offer much in the form of opinions since the system is not yet operating. Many of the findings from the public transportation discussions can be generalized to other forms of transit, including rail. When time allowed, participants in sessions focused on general transit were asked about funding options as well. Prior to discussing funding options, a short PowerPoint presentation covering how transportation projects are currently funded was given by a MetroPlan Orlando staff member.

For the three senior groups, the focus was on public transportation. Senior participants who ride LYNX regularly were asked about their experiences with the system, assessment of ways to improve and their knowledge of and willingness to ride SunRail. Seniors who did not ride LYNX or who rode rarely were asked about any experiences they had riding the bus system, ways to increase ridership among people in their demographic group and their knowledge and willingness to ride SunRail. (See Appendix A for focus group guiding questions.)

The focus group data have been analyzed and a discussion of recurrent themes is presented herein. Observations from MetroPlan Orlando staff on how the region might address key findings are also included. See Appendix B for detailed focus group session summaries.

## RESIDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE CURRENT TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM

In the six focus groups with “general residents” that focused on transit, we began by asking about overall perceptions of the transportation system in the Central Florida region and specifically in their respective counties. Participants were asked about different modes of public transportation, including LYNX, SunRail and other forms of transit such as express buses and bus rapid transit.

The following themes emerged from discussions of the overall transportation system:

**→ Residents cite congestion as a problem throughout the region. This is consistent with results from previous research.**

Participants considered traffic congestion to be a problem in Central Florida. This is not surprising, considering the same sentiments have been echoed in the past several

iterations of MetroPlan Orlando's public opinion telephone surveys. Congestion was particularly expressed as an issue in Osceola County, where participants cited acute congestion in Poinciana and on US 192 and Orange Blossom Trail. This is to be expected, considering Osceola County is currently the fastest growing county in Central Florida. Population projections show this trend will continue in coming years.

**→ Residents realize widening roads is not a long-term solution to congestion.**

Many participants believed major roads in the region such as I-4 would need to be widened to deal with congestion, though many conceded this would achieve limited results and can only be done on some major roads. One participant noted that, "once you've hit the max amount of room, then you can't do anything about it." Some participants viewed "stacking" as a viable alternative for some roads, though building any type of raised road facility is extremely cost prohibitive from a transportation planning perspective. Focus groups in Orange County discussed using toll roads because they were a less congested option, though drivers thought the tolls were expensive.

In addition, participants across the groups discussed the problems that road widenings cause, including traffic delays during construction and the length of time needed for completion of widenings. One group in Osceola County did not think that widening roads in their county would help the traffic situation overall, citing recently widened roads in their area that were already congested again. As one participant said, "I think it is a good idea [to widen some roads], but it is not a long-term solution."

**→ Residents in all three counties desire more transportation options, including an improved and expanded public transportation system.**

In addition to road widening, many thought that other transportation options such as bus and rail needed to be expanded to provide viable and convenient travel options for residents. This too is consistent with phone survey results, with 88 percent in the 2013 survey saying they wanted more transportation choices. Across the six groups, transit was considered to be a very important issue in the region. To explore this issue further, participants were asked about the current public transportation system, their experiences with transit and their opinions on ways that the system could be expanded or improved.

## **RESIDENT PERCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION IN CENTRAL FLORIDA**

As mentioned earlier in this report, much of the discussion focused on LYNX, since the bus system is the only public transportation currently operating in Central Florida. The findings below can also be generalized to future forms of transit in the region, including SunRail. While most focus group participants used their own cars to get around, many had limited experience with LYNX and a few were regular riders.

The following themes emerged from discussions of public transportation:

**→ Regardless of whether they used public transportation, participants agreed that having a good system is a must for the region. Connectivity between transit modes is seen as vital to the system's success.**

Most participants viewed public transportation as a service they might need on occasion, and they wanted it to be available. Many mentioned its importance to the region for employment and tourism, as well as a way to decrease congestion and protect the environment. In several groups, there were participants who had lived in other communities with more robust transit systems, and they were eager to see Central Florida's transit grow. In addition, several participants pointed to the inclination of young adults to use public transportation instead of driving. "They see car ownership as trouble," said one group member. Some Seminole County residents said their area needed to be more bike-friendly (perhaps with bike lanes protected by barriers) and pedestrian-friendly. They felt these sorts of improvements would also encourage people to use public transit. Participants in all the counties were enthusiastic about an increased rail presence in the region. Many were concerned, however, that without stronger bus, bike and pedestrian systems for connections, the rail component might not work well. Across the groups, people said LYNX and SunRail should be transportation priorities.

**→ Residents overwhelmingly want a transit system with more frequent service, more reliable service, expanded routes and longer operating hours.**

Participants generally see room for improvement in the current transit system and said they would be much more likely to use public transportation if it met their needs better. The issues cited most often were convenience and consistency. Many of the participants told stories of trying to use the system but being unable to navigate it successfully or being frustrated by late buses or unpredictable schedule or route changes. Some said they had long walks to and from the bus stops to reach their destinations and urged bus routes closer to neighborhoods. Others said the places they needed to catch the bus were uncomfortable or unsafe. Many participants wanted better bus service in the evenings, since they said it is easy to get stranded at night when the buses are few and far between. Some participants in Osceola County were concerned about riding with small children or using strollers or wheelchairs. These situations can cause difficulty in boarding the bus and present some dangers, including small children at bus stops close to busy highways. While group members generally embraced the idea of SunRail, many said the schedule would not allow them to use it often. They were disappointed to learn that night and weekend trains would not be available when the commuter rail service opens.

**→ Resident suggestions for making public transportation more attractive focused on making route and schedule information readily available and providing amenities such as more expansive shelters, cell phone charging stations and park and ride lots.**

Most participants pointed to current bus stops as barriers to ridership. While some stops provide shelters with shaded seats, many don't. Residents said they were put off by the idea of standing at an uncovered signpost to wait for a bus. Participants said they would like to see shelters with maps and schedule information, so potential riders

can figure out where they are going more easily. The lack of accurate bus schedule information was a big concern for those who had used the system and was often cited by non-riders as something that kept them from riding. Participants saw the value of using transit for long commutes, but they were concerned about leaving their cars behind. Seminole residents in particular said they would want safe park and ride lots available before they would regularly commute by bus or train to another part of the region. While residents were interested in the possibility of using SunRail for commuting, they were very focused on the parking situation as well as other amenities on the trains and at the platforms. Most were pleasantly surprised to hear about the free Wi-fi and electrical outlets available on the trains.

**→ Residents like the idea of using technology to enhance the public transportation experience, such as cashless ticketing systems and mobile applications that provide real-time bus locations and arrival information.**

In discussions about ways to enhance transit service, many participants mentioned they would like to see technology used to improve the rider experience. One Orange County resident said that “paying with cash on the bus slows things down” and suggested implementing a cashless system to expedite boarding. There was discussion in almost all groups about the possibility of using a mobile application to track buses in real time. This concept was highly supported, with one participant exclaiming, “This is the future!” Another suggested being able to sign up for text alerts if a bus is running late on a certain route. Participants were generally more accepting of bus service that occasionally runs late if they could reliably track the buses through a mobile application and time their trips accordingly. One of the common barriers voiced to taking public transportation was the amount of time needed to make a trip that would be shorter by car. Using technology to allow riders to maximize their most valuable asset - their time - would relieve stress and increase customer satisfaction.

**→ LYNX riders seemed to experience difficulties with the current transfer policy.**

Bus transfers are free and valid for 90 minutes to allow riders to reach their destinations via multiple routes. Riders seemed to understand and accept that buses sometimes run late because they get stuck in the same traffic congestion as cars. However, several riders voiced complaints about experiences where their transfers had expired because of late buses and were unusable through no fault of their own.

**→ Residents feel it is important to provide transit service to help residents who do not own cars to get to work reliably.**

The cost of bus passes was mentioned several times in the Orange and Osceola focus groups. Some suggested the price was too high for those with lower wage jobs, particularly in the hospitality industry. One participant who works for the United Way's 211 service (a free, 24-hour information and referral helpline) said she frequently receives calls for assistance to obtain bus passes and gas cards. Another participant suggested this area of need might be met by encouraging more corporate social responsibility programs that focus on transportation.

→ Residents welcome SunRail as an additional travel option and would like to see it expanded. The number one requested destination for a future phase was Orlando International Airport.

While many participants in the focus groups did not see SunRail as a viable commute option for themselves, they believe in the importance of a commuter rail system as part of a well-developed transit system. The majority of participants in groups across the counties viewed it as the best option in terms of developing transit and easing congestion on roads. However, not all participants were convinced the system would work. One person expressed that a culture shift will have to take place and that “people need to see it and understand it.” Participants again emphasized the importance of connectivity with LYNX to make the entire public transportation system seamless and convenient.

If SunRail were to expand in the future, most participants stated that the airport is the most important destination. Other locations that were mentioned included Disney, UCF, State Road 50 and the Lake Nona area. Participants across the groups mentioned the desire to have a statewide rail system connecting Florida’s major cities.

#### OPINIONS ON PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION AMONG SENIORS AGED 65+

The 2013 telephone survey found that citizens 65 and older were least receptive to the statements: *“I would be more likely to use the bus system if the service went more places”* and *“I would be more likely to use the bus system if wait times were decreased.”* This was a puzzling result in view of what we know about changing demographics and travel patterns. According to an analysis of the National Household Travel Survey by the AARP Public Policy Institute, transit use by people 65 and older increased by 40 percent between 2001 and 2009, marking a new trend among this age group. Since baby boomers are starting to reach retirement age, the older segment of the American population is on track to grow at a rapid pace in the next few years. This will have major impacts on the transportation system and on future transportation planning efforts.

The guiding questions for the senior citizen focus groups explored the participants’ experiences with public transportation and also explored what they thought could be done to increase ridership among their peers. As mentioned above, the three focus groups with residents 65 and older included regular bus riders, occasional riders and those who had never ridden. The following themes emerged from the sessions:

→ Several of the seniors’ negative experiences and perceptions of the bus system were caused by discourteous behavior from fellow riders.

This included riders causing delays because they did not have the correct fare ready prior to boarding and riders crowding the entrance, making boarding difficult. One group that was mentioned several times was teenaged riders. Examples of problem behaviors included not vacating seats reserved for elderly passengers, putting shoes up on seats making them dirty, and being “rowdy, noisy, and [using] profanity.” There was an expressed opinion that drivers often do not try to curb such behavior out of fear for their own safety. This was often cited as a problem when a large number of high school students ride to and from school. Several participants expressed a desire for bus drivers to be more proactive in asking riders to free up seats for seniors,



especially when the bus is full. Seniors would also like to see drivers ask boisterous passengers not to disturb others. Several participants acknowledged that while they would like to see drivers address discourteous behavior, ultimately riders bear personal responsibility in this area.

→ Seniors with little transit experience would be more willing to ride public transportation if they were trained on how to use the system.

Many who have never used the bus do not ride because they are afraid they will get lost or disoriented when navigating the system and not be able to return home. This is especially the case on routes that require riders to transfer from bus to bus. One participant said she had bought a bus pass last year, but never used it because she was unsure of where she was going. Many seniors indicated they would feel more comfortable riding if they received some type of orientation or training. There were some seniors who expressed concerns about safety, and these were in the minority. The participants who had safety concerns said they did not feel confident riding because they did not want to appear vulnerable. Here, too, the concern seemed to spring mainly from a lack of knowledge about navigating the bus system.

→ Seniors, like residents in other age groups, want to see improvements like more frequent bus service, more shelters and more reliable, on-time service.

Many seniors who were regular riders said they were thankful for the LYNX bus system because it allowed them to maintain independence. Participants expressed a desire for longer operating hours, shorter wait times between buses, and higher service levels on the weekends. One related concern was that during very busy times, some buses are completely full and unable to accommodate new riders who have been waiting at a bus stop for a long time. Convenience was a major factor in willingness to try public transportation, as is the case with other age groups.

→ Seniors experienced some difficulties keeping up with changing bus schedules when planning their trips. They often turn to bus drivers as a source of route information.

The participants who ride regularly were generally complimentary of the assistance they receive with trip planning when contacting LYNX customer service. The seniors found the print-outs from customer service representatives on what routes to take especially helpful, and many said they also often use the printed schedules to determine which routes to take. One participant stated that she liked that she can "take them [customer service] an address and they give me a printout of directions." Though some senior participants were technology savvy and used the LYNX website to map their trips, keeping up with schedules was a challenge for those who were not comfortable with technology. Some participants also said they would like bus drivers to be more knowledgeable about how routes across the system connect. While drivers readily gave information about their own routes, they often could not help passengers with questions about how to connect to other routes.

→ Driver attitudes appear to have more of an effect on the senior residents' experiences with transit versus other age groups.

When asked about general experiences with the bus system, one participant said that rider experiences are largely determined by drivers' attitudes. Helpful drivers resulted in good experiences. Another person noted that in one instance, she appreciated that the driver was very helpful in reminding her to get off at her stop. In other cases, drivers with apathetic attitudes created a poor experience for the senior riders. It seemed that with this age group in particular, a caring driver had a greater positive impact than with other age groups.

**→ Seniors felt LYNX accommodated mobility issues well and were complimentary of drivers' respectful behavior toward riders using wheelchairs, walkers and canes.**

One of the groups said that LYNX has "come a long way" with assisting the elderly. When riders were asked if they have a difficult time boarding and disembarking, very few expressed difficulties in this area. One woman stated that she had fallen once because she could not get past people to take a seat before the bus began moving. Some of the participants thought that accommodation of mobility issues were an inconvenience for other riders. Specifically, they thought that people in wheelchairs or with walkers caused delays for the buses.

**→ When asked whether they planned on using SunRail, seniors said they are willing to try it out.**

Most participants in these groups said they do not plan to ride SunRail regularly because they don't have to commute to work, but many were excited that it was coming to the region and expressed that they wanted to ride it at least for "fun." Some participants said they hoped they could take it for certain outings like visiting family members in neighboring counties.

## **OPINIONS ON TRANSPORTATION FUNDING OPTIONS**

One group in each of the three counties focused specifically on transportation funding options. Participants in these groups were asked how transportation improvements should be funded and what would need to be in place for citizens to support different funding options. Groups also discussed how trust in government can be increased.

The following themes emerged from this series of focus groups:

**→ Residents do not know how transportation is funded and could not offer viable funding solutions without prompting. Education in this area is essential, especially before being presented with decisions on any funding sources for transportation.**

The discussion on funding mechanisms opened with a question on how residents would like to pay for the transportation changes they proposed. The only potentially viable option that was presented in any group was to use funds generated by the lottery. To have the groups think about realistic funding options, at this point in the sessions, MetroPlan staff gave a brief presentation explaining how transportation initiatives are currently funded in Florida. They also answered any questions group participants had

about funding. After the presentation, we presented the groups with funding options and the participants were able to offer opinions.

→ **Local governments must put funding yields and transportation costs in perspective for residents.**

A potential barrier to imposing funding sources that require voter referendums is that residents generally don't understand how much transportation projects cost. Focus group feedback revealed a need for more education on why transportation projects often carry a high price tag. One participant noted that when she first attended city council meetings, she was shocked by the city budget. The sticker shock some experience after first learning of project costs could cause negative reactions, such as assuming money is being wasted. Those with the lowest levels of trust in government are most likely to opine that transportation can't be funded because of perceived government waste.

→ **Opinions on using sales tax to fund transportation were given a cautious nod across all county groups, though participants were adamant that they would need to see proof that sales tax proceeds were dedicated to transportation.**

The Seminole County group was slightly more amenable to a sales tax increase because of past transportation sales tax initiatives in the county. While one participant in Orange County thought that an increase in the sales tax was a "necessary evil," others thought that sales tax would punish those who are economically disadvantaged and that the money generated would not be used for what it was allocated to be used for. Similar sentiments regarding trust were expressed in Osceola County and, again, the concern that the money would be used for other purposes was mentioned. Still, when we went around the table and asked by a show of hands how many would support a sales tax increase, the majority of participants said they would. "I wouldn't have a problem with it [an increase in the sales tax] if it was actually dedicated to it [transportation initiatives] and not used for anything else."

→ **Gas tax increases received mixed support.**

When asked about a potential increase in the gas tax, the same participants from Osceola County who were amenable to the increase in the sales tax were also accepting of this option. Gas tax received a lukewarm response in Orange and Seminole Counties, though participants admitted that people would not notice an increase because of frequent fluctuations in the price of gas. The presentation from MetroPlan staff showed gas tax does not generate a lot in comparison to sales tax, so the fact that it was not widely supported is not surprising.

→ **Residents rejected the idea of tax trade-offs (i.e. offering a decrease in property tax in exchange for an increase in sales tax).**

The option to trade one tax for another was not popular in any county. The concept seemed overly complicated and caused confusion. Participants said they did not understand why local government would want to offer such an option.

→ To be publicly accepted, any funding mechanism for transportation must come with maximum transparency, a clear outline of results, citizen participation in project choices and citizen oversight.

Regardless of the funding type, participants were asked what would need to be in place for them to support any measure. Again, the importance of accountability and transparency was raised in all counties. In Osceola County, it was important that people be able to see “what we’re investing in.” Similarly in Seminole County, participants wanted to be provided with a lot of easy-to-access information, including how decisions are made, how projects are prioritized and a detailed financial breakdown of a project. They suggested a comprehensive website would be a good option for disseminating the information. One participant thought explaining the positive impact a project could have would be beneficial to garner support. “Show that a similar project had a good effect... show that it will be successful here too.” In Orange County, the group also expressed support for outreach to the community “to see what they have to say.” Some Seminole County participants expressed it would be beneficial for citizens to know that visitors to the region were contributing to the transportation system as well.

→ Participants offered various suggestions on how residents with low levels of trust in government might be persuaded to support new funding for transportation.

Focus group participants were asked about trust in government and what, if anything, could be done to persuade citizens with low levels of trust to support new funding methods for transportation. In Osceola County, the group was rather cynical and distrustful of government, saying “most people don’t really vote anymore.” The only ways they thought these sentiments could be overcome is by providing proof that what is proposed in transportation will happen. One person stated that SunRail is an example of a project that has garnered a lot of media attention and that others can see coming to fruition. People in Orange County expressed some of the same discontentment with elected officials, but also thought that citizens are not doing their part to educate themselves and be involved. Orange County participants also thought that public education on potential transportation projects was important. They mentioned ways to communicate to residents, including ads on the radio and social media. In Seminole County, the participants varied widely in their trust levels of government officials. One person said he would give politicians a 1 out of 10 as they “are run by special interest groups,” and overall the rating was a 5-7. Consistent with the 2013 telephone survey, most focus group participants were more inclined to trust local elected officials than those on a federal level. To persuade citizens to support funding initiatives, groups were adamant that they must be shown where the money is going. They also thought it was important to show how efficiency was a priority.

## ADDRESSING KEY FINDINGS

Citizen participation is an important piece of the transportation planning process. As was mentioned at the outset, measuring public opinion through market research, including surveys and focus groups, allows the MetroPlan Orlando Board to create transportation policy that is responsive to residents’ needs.

MetroPlan Orlando will use the qualitative data in this report to enhance the regional discussion with partners on the importance of investing in transportation, with an emphasis on transit. The observations outlined below are only a start to the conversation on formulating solutions to strengthen Central Florida's travel options.

**By far, the most important step the region can take to improve public transportation is to institute a dedicated funding source.** A substantial amount of funding is needed to deliver the type of convenient transit system residents want. Frequent service, shorter headways, technology and increased amenities all require funding; and the region must be willing to step up and pay for improvements if the level of service is to improve. Addressing this issue becomes increasingly important as we consider the needs of a rapidly aging population that will soon experience mobility issues that require multimodal solutions.

At the metropolitan planning level, we should continue to evaluate policies that govern the mode split for our federal funding. We should also work toward a prioritization process that places high emphasis on multimodal planning and projects.

The MetroPlan Orlando Board has had several discussions on the need for education of the public when it comes to transportation funding. Our survey and focus group research shows this is a daunting challenge that no one organization can address on its own. We must pool our regional planning, financial and community outreach resources to make progress in this area. MetroPlan Orlando communication staff will be focusing on providing partners with outreach resources to help tell the transportation funding story.

As our partners at LYNX and SunRail work to provide a seamless public transportation system for Central Florida residents, feedback from the focus groups pointed to some specific areas in operations and outreach that could go a long way toward elevating public perceptions of transit. Some potential actions could include:

- Reviewing the transfer policy
- Providing intensive driver training. LYNX is already making strides in this area.
- Focus groups indicated there is great potential to expand travel training programs, especially targeting seniors. Several participants said they would feel more comfortable riding with companions, so providing training in group sessions might allow seniors to learn with friends. Another participant suggested that it would be helpful to have transit staff issue official senior pass IDs on-site at the senior centers along with training.
- Central Floridians are not generally experienced transit users and may need assistance learning acceptable riding behavior. To that end, several transit agencies around the world have helped their riders respect others by conducting public transportation etiquette campaigns. This might be worth considering here.
- Another possible target audience for an outreach campaign would be student riders. Perhaps some type of incentive program for student training or a program rewarding students for good behavior could help alleviate some of the issues seniors mentioned in our focus groups.

By working together with our partners and the public, we can achieve a regional transportation system that offers a variety of travel choices and supports the region's vitality.

## Appendix A: Guiding Questions Used for Focus Groups

### Senior Citizen Frequent Riders Guiding Questions

1. How often do you use the LYNX bus system?
2. What kind of places do you use the LYNX bus to get to?
3. Do you have a car and if not, how do you usually get from place to place?
4. Tell me about your experience using LYNX buses. Do you usually have a satisfactory experience? Why or why not?
5. How easy is it to get on and off? Do you have a mobility issue, such as wheelchair or cane use? What could help?
6. Do you have problems getting to and from the bus stop?
7. Do you typically ride by yourself, or do you ride with a friend?
8. How do you feel about the bus schedule? Is it easy to understand? Is there enough information available, and is the information easy to find?
9. Do you ever use the LYNX website to figure out your route?
10. What do you think about the overall quality of the LYNX bus system?
11. In what ways do you think the bus system can be improved?
12. What would it take to get more of your friends to ride LYNX?
13. Have you heard of SunRail? What do you think about this new system? Do you plan to try it out when it begins operating next year? Why or why not?

### Senior Citizen Rare-to-Never Riders Guiding Questions

1. What is your primary method of getting around? (personal car, bus, bike, walk, etc.)
2. What do you typically do when that method is unavailable?
3. Tell me about the last time you traveled with LYNX. How was your experience?
4. If you have not ever ridden LYNX, why not?
5. What do you think can be done to improve the quality of the LYNX bus system?
6. Do you think the bus would be hard to get on and off of because of any mobility limitations?
7. How would you go about increasing ridership in your demographic group?
8. Is there anything that could be done to make you want to use LYNX buses over other transportation methods?
9. Have you heard of SunRail? What do you think about this new system? Do you plan to try it out when it begins operating next year? Why or why not?
10. (*sometimes added*) If there comes a point when you can't drive - or don't want to - how will you get around?
11. (*sometimes added*) If technology were available to see where buses are (cellphone app) would you use it?

## General Public Transit Guiding Questions

1. What is your overall perception of the quality of the transportation system in \_\_\_\_\_ County, including your feeling about congestion on the roads?
2. What is your primary method of commuting? (personal car, bus, bike, walk, etc.) What do you typically do when that method is unavailable?
3. There are a lot of things we can do to address congestion. I'm going to ask your opinions on several options that we have. First up are roads. Do you think we should continue to widen roads? At what point should we consider other options?
4. Public transportation is another option to relieve congestion. Let's start with the bus system. Have you ever ridden LYNX? Tell me about your experience using LYNX buses. How do you feel the bus system can be improved? Is there anything that would motivate you to use public transit instead of other forms of transportation?
5. How do you feel about Bus Rapid Transit (BRT)? This operates slightly differently than regular routes. Sometimes there is a dedicated lane for the bus, like the LYMMO system in downtown Orlando. Is this something you would be interested in using? Do you think it's something that should be expanded in Central Florida?
6. Rail is another method we can use to relieve congestion. Now that SunRail is becoming a reality, do you think we should expand it? If so, where do you think it should go next? Airport? SR 50? Lake County? US 192? Lake Nona/Medical City?
7. How important is it for your county to have a well-developed public transportation system? (Even if you do not use public transit).
8. Of the public transportation options that we've talked about - bus, BRT and rail - what type is most appealing to you? Why?
9. We have discussed many forms of transportation and options to address congestion. If you could set the priorities for your county, what would be your top ways to alleviate congestion? What should be the priority?
10. Think again about your county's transportation system. Are there any options or features you'd like to see that are not currently available?

## General Public Funding Guiding Questions

*(Included brief discussion of funding methods and a short PowerPoint from MetroPlan Orlando staff)*

1. What do you all think is the best way to address congestion in Central Florida? How can we best improve Central Florida's transportation system?
2. Think about your county's transportation system. Are there any options or features you'd like to see that are not currently available?
3. Thinking about these priorities you have discussed, what do you think are the best ways to fund these?
4. With the current funding structure in mind, what do you think about increasing the sales tax to fund transportation?
5. What do you think about increasing the gas tax?
6. Would you support a tax trade off? For example, instituting a sales tax in exchange for a decrease in gas tax or property tax? What kinds of trade-offs would you like to see?
7. What would need to be in place for you to support an additional funding source for transportation? A specific project list? A citizen oversight board?
8. *(sometimes used)* In a recent survey, we found that trust in elected officials at all levels of government (federal, state and local) is low and that this inhibits support for all funding changes. How do you see yourself with respect to trust in government? What do you think could be done to persuade residents with low trust levels to support new funding methods for transportation?

## Appendix B: Summary of Focus Group Responses

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### Senior Focus Groups: #1, #2 and #9

Oct. 22, 2013 -LYNX Central Station

Nov. 7, 2013 - Beardall Senior Center

Dec. 5, 2013 - Baptist Terrace

#### Use of the LYNX bus system:

The groups included regular LYNX riders - those using the system more than five times a week; occasional riders; and those who have never ridden a LYNX bus. The destinations mentioned most frequently by the regular riders were doctors' offices and stores. Most of the non-riders owned cars, although several of them said they would rely on the bus if and when their car was not available.

#### Overall experiences with the LYNX system:

Non-riders and occasional riders tended to be apprehensive about the bus, often citing concerns about the amount of time it took to get places and concerns about their ability to navigate the system. The regular riders reported some bad experiences in those areas, but they also pointed to many positive experiences. Since they are familiar with the system, they offered several ideas for improving service - including better shelters, requiring passengers to take responsibility for their behavior and more accommodating schedules - issues brought up in several other focus group sessions. They also mentioned issues pertaining directly to senior citizens. Some of the specifics:

- Several riders pointed to fare collection as a problem, saying other riders along the route didn't have fares ready and the bus was delayed while they located the money. (One participant suggested signage urging folks to be ready with the fare when the bus pulled up.)
- Most participants reported being on a bus where other riders' behavior was inappropriate - rudeness, intoxication, loudness and profanity -- and said that drivers seldom got involved. The seniors seemed to feel particularly intimidated by teen passengers, feeling that they tended to "take over" the bus and were disrespectful to the older riders.
- The participants had several observations about the bus schedules, ranging from hours of service to buses that were not on time or failed to stop. They reported having a difficult time getting accurate schedule information and said some drivers were not helpful.
- Riders also reported issues with transfer passes expiring, sometimes because a connecting bus was late. They said drivers generally refused to honor them and this made it difficult to use the bus for longer trips. They suggested a revamped policy on transfers that helped people - particularly those who move a bit slower - to be able to use the transfers.



- In general, this group related that there was not a culture of courtesy for seniors on LYNX buses. They felt that they were often at a disadvantage when riding a crowded bus and that drivers were unlikely to intervene on their behalf with other passengers who were rude or broke the rules. They complimented some individual LYNX staffers who were friendly and helpful to them. Others said they had observed drivers giving extra effort to help disabled passengers.

### **Safety and Mobility:**

The senior riders said they sometimes feel rushed getting on and that younger riders are discourteous - often taking seats that are supposed to be available for seniors or others who need easy access. The non-riders said they were concerned about appearing vulnerable - especially if they were unsure of how to use the system or didn't know their way around the bus stop area.

Participants said they were usually able to get to and from bus stops easily, although they were concerned that many of the stops didn't have shelters or even seats to help them out during their waits.

### **Schedules and Information:**

These riders echoed a common theme of focus group participants about confusing or inaccurate schedule information. Most said they had learned to navigate the system by trial and error. Only a few of the riders had used the LYNX website. Non-riders singled out education about the system as the number one need for getting more seniors to ride the bus.

Riders and non-riders were concerned about spotty service in the evening hours, which was not only inconvenient but also made them feel vulnerable if they were waiting for a bus after 8 p.m. One rider commented: "If you're a person who depends solely on public transportation, you get stuck somewhere, you don't have cab fare, you don't know anybody, that's a bad situation."

### **General Perceptions of LYNX:**

The group consensus was that on a scale of 10, LYNX scored about a 5. While they appreciated that the system allowed them to maintain their independence without driving, they were concerned about the service level. Some of the riders had experience with transit in other cities and said that LYNX didn't measure up to their expectations. They said it would not fully meet their needs until some of the scheduling problems were solved, and that they longed for more reliable mass transit.

### **Perceptions of SunRail:**

The participants did not know a lot about SunRail, and none of them thought they would use it regularly, although they might use it sometimes. Others said it seemed like a good idea "for working people." These participants - while unhappy with many aspects of the bus system - were less enthusiastic than most of the groups about using the new commuter rail service.

## Orange County Focus Groups #3, #4 and #5

Nov. 9, 2013 - MetroPlan Orlando offices

### Transportation System: Status & Improvements

Participants in these groups used both cars and the LYNX bus system as primary means of transportation. The group members generally wanted a more “seamless” public transportation system so that Orlando would not have to be a “driving city,” and they suggested that young people are less interested in car ownership than their parents.

Participants said the area is very congested and that widening roads might help relieve it, as would improving public transportation. Several of the focus groups considered whether widening roads would be beneficial in the long-term. Others urged changes in construction with “stacked” highways to reduce sprawl, bigger breakdown lanes and bike lanes for safety, and dedicated lanes for public transit.

### Public Transportation in General

Regardless of whether they used public transportation, participants agreed that having a good system is vital to the region. It was characterized as more environmentally friendly and safer than driving.

The overall impression in the groups was that the public transportation system is troublesome, particularly for seniors and the disabled. Participants saw advantages to both rail and bus in the transit system. SunRail was seen as potentially more reliable and more environmentally friendly than LYNX - especially if it could be expanded. But they acknowledged that buses could offer better access throughout the region.

The groups also explored alternatives that commuters could use, such as carpooling and vanpooling and rentals like bike shares and moped rentals.

### Bus & Rail Specifics

Participants in all the groups supported increased frequency and service hours for buses and rail, saying public transit should be more widely available in the evening and on weekends. This was a common sentiment throughout the focus groups.

Another common suggestion was for more reliable service with shorter wait times between buses and better information on existing bus routes and schedules. Orange County participants agreed with those in other groups that better scheduling and easier access to information would encourage non-riders to give public transit a try. Riders favored having information available via a smart phone app. They also suggested more bike racks on buses and more park and ride areas.

There was concern about bus stops that lack protection from the weather or benches. Participants suggested that there be some way to access schedule information at each bus stop. Again, this echoed ideas expressed in almost all the groups.

The Downtown Orlando LYMMO service was popular, and participants were eager to see it expanded, especially to heavily traveled areas such as College Park and Thornton Park.

Participants were excited about SunRail and planned to ride “at least for the experience.” Suggestions for future expansion in Orange County included Colonial Drive, Orange Blossom Trail, S.R. 436, and the Orlando International Airport. Some participants also wanted to see rail service to the attractions.

### **Transportation Funding**

The most popular methods of increasing transportation funding among the Orange County participants was through a sales tax and increasing the gas tax. Participants disagreed about the amount of sales tax they would support, but most said a half of a percent might be acceptable. Increasing the gas tax might also discourage driving, which participants saw as a potential plus.

### **Confidence & Trust**

Participants were vocal about wanting assurances that money designated for transportation would be used for that purpose. Transparency and participation from the public, including a citizen transportation board, were ideas for making that palatable to voters.

Some participants said they would support tax increases only if there was a specific result or project attached. The groups thought it would be important to educate the public on funding and demand accountability from elected officials. “People deserve to know specifically what their money is going toward,” said one group member.

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## **Seminole County Focus Groups #6, #7 and #8**

Nov. 12, 2013 - Seminole State College

Nov. 13, 2013 - Seminole State College

### **Transportation System: Status & Improvements**

The Seminole groups included mostly automobile drivers, although a few participants said LYNX buses were their main way to get from place to place. The overall perception of the quality of the transportation system in Seminole County is that it needs improvement for both drivers and transit riders, because there is a great deal of congestion on the road and the buses are often late and/or full.

Reducing congestion on I-4 was seen as a priority, including the clearing of accidents to keep traffic flowing. One participant said that if there is room to widen roads, then they should be widened, but that will not necessarily solve the congestion problem for the long term.

Among the things participants mentioned was better management of traffic lights. One resident said: “They’re not managed by sensor, they are on timers. Some are too long, some are too short. Some get backed up on side streets.” Residents also were interested in getting better taxi service in the county.

## **Public Transportation in General**

All of the participants felt that it is very important for their county to have a well-developed mass transportation system. Several participants stated the bus is the most appealing choice for increasing mass transit ridership. A few thought SunRail (in conjunction with other forms) was most appealing.

Other participants felt that if the county was more pedestrian and bike-friendly that it would encourage people to use alternative forms of transportation. They said biking seems dangerous on many roadways and would be easier if there were barriers between bike lanes and automobile lanes.

Participants felt that LYNX needs to market and sell bus passes more widely to attract more riders. They also felt there should be more information about schedules and targeted outreach to younger people who can't or don't drive. One member commented: "Seminole County is not the best place to live without a car."

## **Bus & Rail Specifics**

Participants expressed the same ideas as other focus groups about inconsistent LYNX bus service and uncomfortable or potentially dangerous bus stops. Participants suggested additional lighting, pay phones and emergency posts might make riders feel more secure at the stops. In addition, Seminole residents said there was a need for better transit connections to Orlando-Sanford Airport.

Residents thought there was an opportunity to attract bus riders in Seminole by emphasizing savings in transit commuting and providing park and rides, so it would be easy to leave cars parked safely and catch a bus for downtown Orlando. Another participant said direct lines or express routes to the attractions would help as well.

The participants generally agreed that SunRail could benefit the area and said they would be interested in using it and parking their cars at the Seminole stations. They agreed that good connectivity with other modes was key to SunRail's success.

A few participants thought the SunRail system was "a waste of money." They complained the train stations were not accessible and that the trains would not run at night or on weekends when a lot of folks in Seminole would want to use them.

There was support for more Bus Rapid Transit, especially in the downtown areas. Some participants suggested restricting small LYMMO-style buses to inner city areas and having riders switch to a different bus for outlying areas.

## **Transportation Funding**

Group members supported a small increase in the sales tax to fund transportation, but members felt the county sales tax should not go above 7 percent overall. Another option they favored was increasing the gas tax, since they thought it would not be overly burdensome - or even very noticeable with the fluctuating gas prices.

Several participants thought it would be appropriate to use taxes from tourism to improve transportation, pointing out that visitors use the transportation system right along with residents.

### **Confidence & Trust**

To persuade residents to support increased transportation funding, the participants felt there needed to be transparency and demonstrated efficiency. Participants believe there is wasteful spending in government, with little or no penalty.

Participants said that to support any tax increase for transportation, they would need a detailed financial breakdown of the projects that the money would fund. They also suggested that there be education to the public on how similar projects had been successful. They agreed that public information should come through multiple outlets, so that all demographics would have access to it.

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## **Osceola County Focus Groups #10, #11 and #12**

Dec. 14, 2013 - Valencia College - Osceola Campus

### **Transportation System: Status & Improvements**

Overall, the group members felt the quality of transportation in Osceola needs improvement. Traffic congestion was cited as a huge problem in the county, more so with increasing population. *"Traffic is getting worse ... When I first moved to Kissimmee [about a decade ago] it wasn't that bad,"* said one participant.

Many participants pointed to the Poinciana area as being exceptionally congested, because there is limited access. Heavy traffic there can leave people waiting for half an hour, primarily around rush hour, they said.

Participants were split on road widening, saying that it was likely to be only a short-term solution.

Most participants said cars are their primary form of transportation, but some said they occasionally need to use the bus and would use it more frequently if the system were more reliable. (Two group members attempted to take the bus to the focus group meeting, as an experiment, and wound up being 20 minutes late.)

### **Public Transportation in General**

It was very important to the participants to have a well-developed public transportation system in Osceola County, even if they do not use it. They felt it was important to the large number of working people in the county who use the bus.

Participants felt that a combination of SunRail and LYNX buses would be the most appealing public transportation option in the future. They agreed the timing of buses would need to be improved to serve the people riding SunRail, especially if they needed to travel out of the county.

The participants also were interested in bringing some new forms of transportation to the county, such as a monorail, trolley or other type of shuttle service for getting around to popular sites.

### **Bus & Rail Specifics**

Osceola participants expressed many of the ideas for improving the LYNX system that were mentioned in other groups: frequency and reliability of service and better access to scheduling information at bus stops and through a mobile app.

These participants also raised the issue of cost repeatedly, which had not been a prominent issue in other groups. Several group members suggested more aggressive discounting for regular riders, seniors and students and even “hardship passes” for folks who just can’t afford to buy a ticket. Participants were then surprised to find out that only a very small part of the LYNX budget is covered by fare box collections and that passes would be much more expensive if it were the main source of funding.

Those who had ridden on LYNX said stops were often very spread out and required long walks to reach their final destination. Participants also were concerned about riding with small children or using strollers or wheelchairs. These situations can cause riders difficulties boarding the bus and can present some dangers, including small children having to wait at bus stops close to busy highways.

The groups liked the idea of Bus Rapid Transit and said it should be expanded, especially along US 192.

Overall, the Osceola participants were excited about the arrival of SunRail in their area, although most were not aware that their portion was in the second phase of construction. They hoped the commuter line could be expanded to the attractions, OIA, area hospitals and eventually to St. Cloud.

### **Transportation Funding**

Most participants seemed to think that a sales tax was the best option to raise money for transportation, with some saying they would be willing to accept up to a 1% increase. After the funding presentation, some group members also said it seemed reasonable to increase the gas tax, since it has not been increased in 20 years.

Participants put forth some other ideas for raising money, including a tax on new cars or on car dealerships, taxes applied to the fossil fuels industry and tourist taxes.

### **Confidence & Trust**

Participants repeatedly said that in order to support an additional funding source for transportation, they would need assurances - and proof - that the money was being used for transportation and not being diverted to other uses.

Many of them also said that public discussions and a citizens’ oversight board were needed. Several participants said they would favor a dedicated source of funding for the buses if they could be sure it was used for that purpose.