



OPINION
RESEARCH
& STRATEGY

TO Fresno Council of Governments

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RE: Fresno County Transportation Focus Groups Key Takeaways

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INTRODUCTION

Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates (FM3) recently conducted a series of seven focus group sessions with Fresno County residents to inform the development of the next long-range transportation plan. The groups were designed to provide context on the opinions of residents in the County who do not frequently participate in public engagement processes, give residents a longer session for discussion about some issues related to transportation planning in the County than they might have even in a community meeting, and inform a follow-up survey which will provide statistical reinforcement of the discussion in the focus groups. To help understand the differences in resident opinions across the County and among people in different demographic groups, FM3 conducted four sessions with participants divided by geography, one among seniors who may face different transportation challenges than people in other age groups, and two among Latino residents in Spanish – one largely with residents of rural areas, and one with participants from more urban areas (**see Figure 1**). Sessions were held April 22-24, 2025 at a dedicated focus group facility in the City of Fresno and included 65 participants across the seven sessions.

Figure 1: Focus Group Dates and Compositions

Date	Group Composition
April 22, 2025	Coalinga, Firebaugh, Huron, Kerman, Mendota, San Joaquin, and nearby unincorporated areas
April 22, 2025	Clovis and the City of Fresno north of Shaw Avenue
April 23, 2025	Seniors
April 23, 2025	Spanish-speaking Latinos in Rural Areas
April 23, 2025	Spanish-speaking Latinos in Non-Rural Areas
April 24, 2025	City of Fresno south of Shaw Avenue
April 24, 2025	Fowler, Kingsburg, Orange Cove, Parlier, Reedley, Sanger, Selma and nearby unincorporated areas

CAUTIONS ABOUT FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

Residents were recruited from different backgrounds and with demographics that broadly represent their communities. However, the results of these and any focus groups should be considered suggestive of the broad attitudes and perceptions present within the sub-groups of residents from which participants were recruited, but not to represent these views with statistical precision. Nor can the participants' responses necessarily be extrapolated to other sub-groups of residents in Fresno County. The ability to generalize to larger groups of interest is best left to the proposed future statistically-valid surveys. Another important reminder is that the focus groups intentionally excluded residents who frequently participate in public dialogues and processes. Therefore, the participants may have had lower awareness of some elements of County policy and governance, and the discussions may have highlighted some different issues than would have been raised if more of the participants were more engaged in local political and government activities in their respective communities.

GENERAL VIEWS ON TRANSPORTATION AND TRAFFIC

- Traffic, poor road conditions and potholes, unsafe driving and pedestrian safety are top-of-mind concerns for some residents and were mentioned in every focus group session among the most serious overall problems in Fresno County.
- Participants repeatedly expressed very significant concerns with road conditions throughout the county. This was more pronounced in rural areas and the central area of the City of Fresno but was persistent in every group.
- Issues related to safety for drivers, pedestrians and others were raised very frequently in the focus groups. This issue was not as much of a focal point in past Fresno County transportation research and should be explored further in survey research to confirm the findings from these qualitative sessions.
 - Many participants brought up stories of recent accidents or near-accidents caused by reckless driving and participants in all groups mentioned their perception of increases in speeding, running red lights, driving while using cell phones, or other dangers. Some referred to feeling unsafe on the roads because of these drivers.
 - Some drivers also feel unsafe when merging onto freeways given the number of cargo trucks on the road, which is seen as an increasing issue.
 - Another safety concern raised frequently is the lack of lighting on rural roads, and particularly on stop signs on those roads. Many people had experienced driving down a dark road and not seeing a stop sign until the last minute. To this point, there was a lot of interest in illuminating stop signs with solar-powered lights to better alert drivers.
- Due to changing travel patterns during and after the COVID pandemic, there is a shift in perceptions about when traffic is at its worse (e.g., “rush hour”)
 - Many think it starts in the morning around 7am, lasts for several hours and then returns in the late afternoon/evening.

- Most people equated the term “the transportation system” with public transportation only. It is important to explain that transportation system includes streets, roads, highways, non-vehicular transportation, etc. so they do not focus exclusively on public transportation.
- With the term explained, the “transportation system” in Fresno County received mediocre rankings with few rating it “excellent” or “poor” and almost no one thinking the system has gotten better in recent years.
 - The biggest concerns are potholes, traffic and the lack of quality/efficient public transportation.
 - For many, their rating is based on a comparative to somewhere they have lived previously.
 - Several participants mentioned that they think the system is not operating well in part because of major roads that go from four lanes in some places down to two or three causing a bottleneck of traffic before it opens back up to four lanes for reasons they do not understand.
- Some people see road construction, but they generally think it’s not done well, not completed quickly enough, and they are not sure why some projects that seem to them to be low priorities are done ahead of projects that seem more urgent.
 - It could be helpful to do more to communicate the reasoning and timeframe for some transportation construction projects.
- Most think their city or Caltrans is in charge of transportation in their area, with just a few who either mentioned or had heard of the Fresno Council of Governments or Fresno County Transportation Authority. There was more identification of Fresno Area Express (FAX) among public transportation options.
- There was also low awareness of some of the transportation options available to residents. While most participants in the seniors group had heard of Handy Ride, few knew about the senior scrip program.

OPINIONS ON PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

- On public transportation, many participants want systems that could take them from their homes in rural areas of the county into the City of Fresno. But most also recognized that it is somewhat unrealistic given the large distances from place to place.
- Several who had used public transportation in Fresno County were disappointed that it takes so long to get from their house to where they want to go. Several expressed that it would take a long time to get to the bus stop without driving, bus routes are infrequent, and that it can take a long time to get to their final destination from the bus stop.
- Several also mentioned being uncomfortable getting dropped off at the bus station in Downtown Fresno where they do not feel safe. Further, many people expressed concerns about safety on buses and at bus stops, including “undesirable people.” This view was often offered reluctantly, so it may have been even more widespread than what was discussed in the groups.
- Since relatively few participants had recent first-hand knowledge of the City bus system, many judged the public transportation options in comparison to international cities (Paris, London, etc.) which operate in very different landscapes.
- Some people have issues figuring out how the system operates and were dissuaded from taking buses because of their lack of knowledge.

- As in many other communities, taking public transportation is seen as a “last resort” only done when a car isn’t available for you. It’s fine for kids or for people who don’t have a car.
- Several indicated an appetite to use public transportation more if it were more available to get where they need to go, if it picked them up close to home, and if it were safe.

AWARENESS OF PAST AND CURRENT PROJECTS

- There is little recognition that anything meaningful has happened to reduce traffic.
- Improving Highway 180 was among the few recent transportation improvements that was viewed positively by nearly all participants who were aware of it.
- The California High Speed Rail (HSR) project is one of the few projects that was identified in every group as a recent or current transportation project because participants can see some construction happening. But they are not sure what is being done, when it will be complete or importantly, who is funding and managing it.
 - The groups indicate that it is imperative to clarify for participants that HSR is not a County project and is not funded with local Measure C dollars, which many did not realize. Generally, participants felt the process of building HSR has been poorly managed and is their reference point for public works projects going over budget and facing extensive delays – even for participants who want the HSR to be implemented.
- Participants from the north side of the County largely recalled that Herndon Avenue was supposed to be a highway that would have improved east/west traffic, but was changed to be a regular surface street. This led many of them to doubt that the County can plan for transportation effectively or make good choices.

LONG-RANGE TRANSPORTATION PLANNING

- Participants assumed there is a long-range transportation plan but they are unaware of it in any specific terms or what is in the current plan.
- Several goals were mentioned for what should be included in the Transportation Plan, leading with repairing potholes which was cited very frequently. Participants also mentioned ideas such as expanding light rail, creating more truck lanes on freeways, creating more lanes on freeways generally, and improving bicycle and pedestrian safety.
- There was a clear sense that transportation needs are different in the county’s rural and urban areas. Local rural roads were seen as needing major repairs, needing widening, and lacking in lighting, making them dangerous. Public transportation would be appreciated in rural areas, but several recognized that it would be hard to accomplish a system that is convenient for people in such disparate areas. Respondents in rural areas also more frequently mentioned wanting to add sidewalks and other pedestrian safety measures.
 - It is important to remember that most participants from rural areas travel to and through urban areas of the County, so they care about the improvements in and around the urban areas also.
- A lot of people think different areas get more or less resources for transportation, with the wealthier areas benefitting more from existing funding.

- Participants clearly identified construction of new homes and population growth in Fresno County since the start of the COVID pandemic in 2020 as a major change which has impacted traffic and road conditions and will continue to do so. There was a strong belief that the necessary planning for freeways and local roads was not done to accommodate this growth.
 - Some participants wanted to respond to this growth by expanding freeways to allow more cars to pass, while others felt that widening freeways would not help reduce traffic in the long run because more cars would just fill that space. However, almost none said that making freeways wider or improving them would cause more people to move into the area – rather, they assumed more growth is inevitable.

ISSUES RELATED TO TRANSPORTATION FUNDING

- Most think that transportation projects and services are paid for by “taxes” (without any specifics on which kind of taxes), car registration fees, and traffic tickets. Only one participant named FCOG or FCTA as the administrator of those tax dollars.
- There was a broad belief in the need to continue existing funding for transportation, even if the participants did not know what the existing tax is or how it is being used.
- Improvements to freeways, highways and local streets and roads were higher priorities than other categories in a transportation priority planning exercise in which participants allocated a hypothetical \$100 to five different transportation priorities (
- **Freeway** and highway improvements were seen as higher priorities because they would reduce traffic and because they affect residents on a daily basis. Additionally, fixing potholes and synchronizing signals on local streets and roads are needs that participants brought up on their own earlier in the discussions and are considered very basic upgrades that would significantly improve participants’ quality of life.
 - The County transportation expenditure plan differentiates between local return dollars used to improve local roads and funding for freeways maintained by the County. But to the participants, a lot of the same issues (potholes, safety, need for widening) appear on both and they did not distinguish between who is in charge of each - for many, they may not care – they just want local road improvements to take place.

There were varying definitions of “technology” in the case of this exercise, with some thinking exclusively of traffic cameras and others signal synchronization. For many, it is about somehow improving the flow of traffic or road safety, but they could not articulate what the specific upgrades/steps would be.

As mentioned earlier, participants were interested in public transportation and improving pedestrian safety (especially in rural areas without sidewalks/crosswalks), but they were simply lower priorities than improving freeways and fixing potholes.

- Figure 2 on the following page). While there was some variation in the exact dollars allocated to the priorities in each group, the broad strokes were consistent with those two (freeways/highways and local roads)

receiving around half of the funding and the other three options each receiving about \$15-20. This is very similar to the findings in quantitative surveys conducted in 2021, 2022 and 2023.

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Figure 2: Weighted Average of Funding Allocations to Transportation Priorities

Priorities	Weighted Average of Allocations
Freeways/Highways including: Upgrading current freeways, highways, on- and off-ramps; interchanges and bridges; adding lanes on freeways and highways; improving safety; constructing new freeways; highways and dedicated truck lanes.	\$28
Local Streets/Roads including: Maintaining and upgrading streets/roads/bridges; repairing potholes; synchronizing signals; adding left turn lanes; reducing flooding of streets; separating streets from railroad tracks.	\$25
Technology/Efficiency including: Using technology to simultaneously manage the flow of automobiles, public transportation, train and truck traffic on freeways, interchanges, on- and off-ramps and city streets to be more efficient and safe.	\$17
Public Transportation including: Maintaining and improving local bus service; replacing current buses and commuter rail with zero-emissions vehicles; keeping bus fares low for students, seniors, veterans and individuals with disabilities; maintaining and improving Dial-a-Ride and Paratransit services for seniors and the disabled.	\$15

Non-vehicular Modes of Transportation including: Upgrading pedestrian and bike safety; repairing/constructing sidewalks; adding crosswalks; improving safe routes to school; upgrading and maintaining hiking, biking and walking trails; and protecting open-space from development.

\$15

- Further, nearly all participants prioritized freeway and road improvements over investments in public transportation, bike lanes and efforts to reduce air pollution, when faced with a forced choice between the two (

- **Figure 3** on the following page). Since the participants rarely use public transportation or bicycles, they explained that while it would be nice to invest in those things, the focus should be on the transportation modes they use every day. Several also mentioned mixed feelings about bike lanes which can take away lanes from cars and still not provide a safe experience for bicycle riders if they do not include a physical barrier.

Figure 3: Priority for Transportation Funding Investment

	Increase investments in public transit, bike lanes, etc. to reduce air pollution and promote a healthier lifestyle	Maintain and improve freeways, highways and local roads to reduce congestion, preserve the quality of life and support the local economy
Coalinga, Firebaugh, Huron, Kerman, Mendota, San Joaquin, and nearby unincorporated areas	0	9
Clovis and the City of Fresno north of Shaw Avenue	3	5
City of Fresno south of Shaw Avenue	1	8
Fowler, Kingsburg, Orange Cove, Parlier, Reedley, Sanger, Selma and nearby unincorporated areas	1	9
Seniors	0	10
Rural Latinos (Spanish)	0	9
Not Rural Latinos (Spanish)	1	9
Total	6	59

AWARENESS AND OPINIONS OF MEASURE C

- Few participants were specifically aware of the 2006 Measure C that provides funding for Fresno County's transportation system. FM3 often finds that voters do not recall measures that were on the ballot even within a few months of the election, let alone 20 years later, and the participants were recruited to exclude people who frequently participate in public issue dialogues, so in some ways it is not surprising that there was low recall of Measure C. Further, there have been several state transportation ballot measures and other local measures labeled Measure C since 2006 which makes the landscape more confusing.
 - Recognition of Measure C was largely limited to seeing "Your tax dollars at work" signs with the Measure C logo on them. While these signs created some awareness of the measure, it is not clear they are helpful at demonstrating that funding is used well or needs to continue.
 - No more than a couple of respondents mentioned the iteration of Measure C on the ballot in 2022, and some people thought they had voted on Measure C but were confusing it with other transportation-related measures that had been on the ballot at various times.
 - Therefore, it is worth remembering that awareness of the 2022 Measure C is likely not widespread, and for those who recall Measure C, they may not know if it passed or failed. For example, even in

FM3's post-election research in 2023, 15% of voters thought the measure had passed and 55% reported that they did not know.

- Despite not knowing much about the measure previously, nearly all participants said it was a good thing that the measure was approved (**Figure 4**). There was broad agreement that all of the upgrades and bullets listed in the language of Measure C (referenced in

- Figure 5 at the end of the memo) were important to address and nearly all continue to be issues.

Figure 4: Opinions on the Passage of Measure C

	Very good thing	Somewhat of a Good Thing	Somewhat of a Bad Thing	Very Bad Thing
Coalinga, Firebaugh, Huron, Kerman, Mendota, San Joaquin, and nearby unincorporated areas	5	4	0	0
Clovis and the City of Fresno north of Shaw Avenue	2	6	0	0
City of Fresno south of Shaw Avenue	7	2	0	0
Fowler, Kingsburg, Orange Cove, Parlier, Reedley, Sanger, Selma and nearby unincorporated areas	7	3	0	0
Seniors	7	3	0	0
Rural Latinos (Spanish)	2	6	1	0
Not Rural Latinos (Spanish)	5	5	0	0
Total	35	29	1	0

However, this did provoke questions about what had been accomplished with the funding from Measure C since 2006. Few felt that goals such as “Reduce congestion” or “Improve highways 99, 41, 168, 180” had been met. This is largely why many rated the passage of Measure C as “Somewhat of a good thing” – they like the ideas in the measure, but do not think much has been done to accomplish them.

- Showing participants the information on what their community had received from Measure C on the measure website helped many see that local investments had been made and their area had benefited, but not all were convinced by this information and some felt their area had been short-changed relative to others or that not enough had been done.
- Many participants worried that current transportation funding could expire, which would lead to a decrease in the quality of the local transportation system. Importantly, they do not specifically worry about “Measure C” ending – just that existing funding could go away.

Figure 5: Language of Measure C Referenced in Focus Groups

<p>MEASURE C (2006)</p> <p>FRESNO COUNTY TRANSPORTATION, SAFETY, ROAD REPAIR MEASURE</p>
<p><i>To:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •<i>Repair potholes, improve/construct local streets/highways</i> •<i>Reduce air pollution through new clean fuel school buses, including child safety seat belts</i> •<i>Support regional economy</i> •<i>Reduce emergency response times</i> •<i>Improve highways 99, 41, 168, 180</i> •<i>Reduce congestion</i> •<i>Improve public safety</i> •<i>Improve transit, senior/disabled services, transportation choices</i> •<i>Match state/federal funds</i> •<i>Provide citizen oversight/annual audits</i> <p><i>Shall Fresno County Transportation Authority continue, but not increase, existing half-cent sales tax for 20 years, per locally adopted Expenditure Plan?</i></p>