



Prepared for Metropolitan Council

Innovating Cities: How Small Studies Shape Big Ideas

Small local studies play a crucial role in urban planning and infrastructure development, providing the detailed, context-specific insights necessary for addressing unique regional challenges. The Metropolitan Council, as the regional policy-making body for the seven-county Twin Cities metro area, leverages these studies to foster efficient and sustainable growth. By integrating community engagement and innovative solutions into their planning processes, the Met Council ensures that the region's development is aligned with the needs of its residents. From comprehensive plans like Thrive MSP 2040 to targeted infrastructure investments, these efforts are crucial in building a prosperous and resilient metropolitan area.

This white paper addresses the potential value of conducting small, targeted studies within the Metropolitan Council's transportation planning efforts. We emphasize that these small studies are not intended to divert funds from current projects but to serve as a precursor for future regional development. Furthermore, these small studies should avoid duplicative efforts by coordinating with other agencies conducting similar work, if at all possible. The recommendations outlined here are specifically directed at the transportation team within the Metropolitan Council, including the Transportation Advisory Board (TAB), to ensure that small studies can effectively support long-term infrastructure planning without disrupting established funding mechanisms. By integrating early-stage research in areas not covered by other efforts, the Council can foster innovation, mitigate risks, and align local projects with broader regional goals, such as those outlined in Thrive MSP 2040.

Small transportation studies enable increased community engagement in urban planning, benefiting residents and businesses thereby enhancing decision-making and project outcomes. These studies engage communities in developing more local insights about the public value the project may bring. In this white paper when we refer to studies, we refer to small transportation related studies.

Positive Impacts of Small Studies

1. **Enhanced Community Engagement:** Increased community involvement in urban planning can lead to better project outcomes. Businesses benefit from more informed decision-making processes

that reflect the needs of local populations, resulting in developments that support vibrant, engaged communities.

2. **Innovative Urban Solutions:** Small local studies often reveal innovative approaches that can improve infrastructure and urban development. Businesses can capitalize on these innovations by integrating new technologies and sustainable practices, leading to cost savings and improved project efficiencies.
3. **Improved Regional Competitiveness:** Strategic investments guided by local studies contribute to a region's economic vitality. Businesses operating in well-planned, efficiently connected regions benefit from better infrastructure, access to resources, and a more attractive environment for talent and investment.
4. **Risk Mitigation in Development:** Early studies help identify potential risks in infrastructure projects, such as environmental concerns or social impacts. This enables businesses to plan more effectively, avoiding costly delays and ensuring compliance with regulations, thereby reducing financial risks.
5. **Capacity Building and Knowledge Sharing:** Local studies contribute to the development of local expertise in urban planning. Businesses that engage with these studies can build relationships with local stakeholders, gaining insights and creating partnerships that enhance long-term growth and sustainability.

Public Value of Small Studies

The Metropolitan Council can emphasize the critical role of small, targeted studies in shaping effective regional planning and infrastructure development and allocate a modest amount of resources to well targeted efforts. These studies provide detailed, localized insights that guide decision-making and ensure that projects are tailored to the specific needs of communities. The Council can recommend prioritizing these studies to foster community engagement, support innovation, and align local initiatives with broader regional goals. By integrating the findings of small studies into existing strategic plans as real time insights, the Council can further fulfill its admirable goal of building a resilient, sustainable, and economically vibrant Twin Cities region.

A Practical Framework

1. **Localized Insight Generation:** Small studies will increasingly be used to gather in-depth, context-specific data critical for understanding unique regional challenges.
 - Focused research on neighborhood-level issues to inform broader policy decisions.
 - Tailored solutions developed from micro-level studies to address specific community needs.
2. **Community-Driven Planning Processes:** Small studies will play a pivotal role in ensuring that urban planning reflects the voices of local residents.
 - Increased community participation through localized surveys and focus groups.
 - Use of study findings to create more inclusive and participatory planning processes.
3. **Pilot Projects for Innovative Solutions:** Targeted studies will test and refine new urban planning concepts before broader implementation.
 - Development of pilot projects in small communities to experiment with new ideas.

- Application of successful pilot outcomes to larger regional projects.
- 4. **Environmental Impact Assessments:** Small studies will be essential for assessing the environmental impacts of specific local projects, contributing to sustainability efforts.
 - Detailed environmental assessments at the community level to guide sustainable practices.
 - Integration of local ecological data into regional environmental policies.
- 5. **Scalability of Local Successes:** Successful outcomes from small studies will inform scalable solutions that can be applied region-wide.
 - Identification of best practices from small-scale projects for broader application.
 - Development of frameworks to scale local innovations across the Twin Cities region.
- 6. **Enhanced Data-Driven Decision Making:** The insights from small studies will enhance the use of data in making informed planning decisions.
 - Collection of localized data to improve accuracy in regional forecasts and plans.
 - Use of study results to refine and adapt larger policy initiatives.
- 7. **Risk Mitigation Through Early Research:** Early small-scale studies will help identify and mitigate risks in larger infrastructure projects.
 - Identification of potential issues through targeted early studies.
 - Adjustment of project plans based on early findings to avoid costly mistakes.
- 8. **Capacity Building at the Local Level:** Small studies will support the development of local expertise, empowering communities to take a more active role in regional planning.
 - Training and knowledge-sharing initiatives driven by the findings of small studies.
 - Strengthening local planning capacities to enhance long-term regional development.
- 9. **Alignment with Regional Goals:** The outcomes of small studies will be crucial for aligning local projects with the overarching goals of regional plans like Thrive MSP 2040.
 - Ensuring that local planning efforts support regional sustainability and growth objectives.
 - Harmonization of small-scale initiatives with broader policy frameworks.
- 10. **Adaptive Policy Implementation:** Findings from small studies will support the dynamic adjustment of policies to better meet evolving regional needs.
 - Regular updates to regional policies based on new insights from targeted studies.
 - Flexible policy frameworks that incorporate localized findings for more responsive urban planning.

Recommendations for Metropolitan Council to Foster Small Studies

To maximize the effectiveness of regional planning and infrastructure development, we recommend the Metropolitan Council take under consideration fostering small, targeted transportation studies. These studies provide crucial, localized insights that can inform broader strategies, ensuring that regional initiatives are responsive to the specific needs and challenges of individual communities.

1. **Foster and Support Community-Led Studies:** The Metropolitan Council can play a pivotal role in fostering small-scale, community-led studies across the Twin Cities region. By empowering local governments, nonprofits, and community groups to undertake these studies, the Council can ensure that the voices of the community are at the heart of the planning process.
 - Consider establishing grant programs or funding initiatives that provide essential support for studies at the neighborhood or community level.
 - Offer technical assistance and resources to help local entities design and carry out meaningful studies that are aligned with the broader regional goals.

2. **Weave Community Insights into Regional Planning:** Integrating the valuable findings from small studies into the Council's regional planning efforts will ensure that broader strategies are informed by the unique needs and conditions of local communities.
 - Develop a framework that incorporates the outcomes of these studies into annual funding decisions, enriching larger regional plans such as Thrive MSP 2040.
 - Regularly review and update regional policies based on the fresh insights gained from these targeted studies, ensuring they remain responsive to evolving local realities.

3. **Encourage Collaborative Partnerships for Greater Impact:** The Metropolitan Council can encourage dynamic partnerships between public and private sectors to enhance the reach and effectiveness of small studies. These collaborations can unlock innovative solutions and lead to more sustainable infrastructure development.
 - Facilitate platforms where businesses, nonprofits, and government entities can come together to collaborate on studies and explore ways to implement their findings.
 - Welcome private sector involvement in addressing critical local challenges, ensuring that the benefits of these studies ripple through the entire region, fostering a more vibrant and resilient community.

Please see our suggested criteria for such studies in the appendix.

Respectfully submitted to Metropolitan Council on August 8, 2024.

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Appendix: Proposed Criteria for Assessing Small Studies

To assess small study submissions in alignment with the Metropolitan Council's strategic plans, criteria based on the guiding principles of the Transportation Policy Plans (TPP) and Thrive MSP 2040 can be formulated. These assessment criteria reflect regional objectives such as sustainability, equity, and resilience. Below are proposed criteria tailored to evaluate small studies, integrating strategic priorities from both the 2040 and draft 2050 plans:

1. Alignment with Regional Goals:

- **Relevance to Thrive MSP 2040 and Imagine 2050 Goals:** Small studies should demonstrate clear alignment with regional objectives, such as equity, sustainability, prosperity, livability, and stewardship.
 - **Sub-criteria:**
 - Does the study support the development of equitable infrastructure and transportation options?
 - Does the project contribute to environmental sustainability, such as reducing greenhouse gas emissions?
 - Does the study promote regional prosperity by enhancing economic competitiveness or supporting job access?

2. Community Engagement and Public Value:

- **Inclusion of Community-Led Input:** The proposal should illustrate how the study integrates community input, particularly from historically underrepresented groups.
 - **Sub-criteria:**
 - Has the study employed participatory approaches (e.g., focus groups, surveys, listening sessions) to gather local insights?
 - Does the study aim to enhance community well-being by addressing specific local needs, such as improved transportation options or better connectivity?
- **Engagement with Vulnerable Groups:** Special emphasis on how the study addresses challenges faced by low-income communities, people of color, or other marginalized populations.

3. Innovative and Scalable Solutions:

- **Capacity for Innovation:** Submissions should propose or test innovative urban planning or transportation strategies, potentially leading to pilot projects.
 - **Sub-criteria:**
 - Does the study introduce new technologies, sustainability practices, or data-driven approaches that could enhance project outcomes?
 - Can the findings be adapted and scaled to inform broader regional strategies?

- **Pilot Feasibility:** Preference for studies that offer actionable pilot project opportunities to test new ideas before broader implementation.

4. Environmental and Social Impact Assessments:

- **Sustainability and Climate Resilience:** The study should assess its potential environmental impact, contributing to regional sustainability goals, including greenhouse gas reduction, climate adaptation, and improved air quality.
 - **Sub-criteria:**
 - Does the study evaluate its environmental footprint, including effects on local ecosystems or contribution to climate change mitigation?
 - Are there clear benefits in terms of long-term environmental resilience?
- **Social Impact Mitigation:** The ability of the study to identify and mitigate risks, especially concerning equity, safety, or social disruption.

5. Data-Driven Decision Making:

- **Use of Localized Data:** Strong consideration for studies that generate localized, specific data that improves the accuracy of forecasts, project planning, and decision-making.
 - **Sub-criteria:**
 - Is there a clear methodology for data collection that reflects community-specific needs and issues?
 - Does the data generated enhance the ability to plan and adjust regional policies based on real-time insights?

6. Risk Mitigation and Feasibility:

- **Early Identification of Risks:** Studies should address potential risks related to infrastructure, environmental concerns, or community impacts.
 - **Sub-criteria:**
 - Has the study identified potential obstacles or risks early in the planning process?
 - Are there strategies proposed to address these risks, including cost management or regulatory compliance?

7. Capacity Building and Knowledge Sharing:

- **Local Expertise Development:** The submission should promote the development of local expertise in planning and transportation.
 - **Sub-criteria:**
 - Does the study create opportunities for local stakeholders to gain insights, skills, or form partnerships for future projects?
 - Is there a framework for disseminating knowledge and best practices from the study to the broader community?

8. Budget and Resource Allocation:

- **Cost-Effectiveness:** Studies should present a clear, realistic budget that reflects efficient use of resources while achieving impactful outcomes.
 - **Sub-criteria:**
 - Is the proposed study cost-effective and feasible within the outlined resources?
 - Are there opportunities for leveraging additional funding or partnerships to enhance outcomes?

These criteria ensure that small studies submitted to the Metropolitan Council are aligned with strategic regional goals, contribute to community engagement, and provide scalable, innovative, and sustainable solutions.