

6-2019

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Recommended Citation

Rumore, Danya, Philip Stoker, Zacharia Levine, and Lindsey Romaniello. Small Towns with Big City Problems: Mobility Challenges and Solutions in Our Natural Areas. Project Brief NITC-RR-1118. Portland, OR: Transportation Research and Education Center (TREC), 2019.

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Small Towns with Big City Problems: Mobility Challenges and Solutions in Our Natural Areas

Danya Rumore, Ph.D., Philip Stoker, Ph.D.

Western North America boasts an abundance of scenic mountains, ski areas, stunning desert landscapes and national parks. Living near these natural amenities are small communities, many of which are becoming increasingly popular places to live and visit. The influx of visitors creates unique transportation and mobility challenges for these small towns and cities, such as seasonal spikes in severe roadway congestion and a desire for e-bike share programs in communities of less than 1,000 people. These challenges often in turn affect community character and wellbeing.

Given their proximity to these impacted communities, NITC researchers Danya Rumore of the University of Utah and Philip Stoker of the University of Arizona were inspired to study and address the mobility and planning challenges in western GNAR (Gateway and Natural Amenity Region) communities. In addition to their newly published study, the research team has also created a new GNAR Community Online Toolkit for the planners working in these small rural towns and cities. Having developed a database of western GNAR communities, they interviewed and surveyed the planners and public officials and identified challenges, solutions, and strategies.

SMALL TOWNS, BIG CITY PROBLEMS AND INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

Regardless of the population size, geographic location, dominant political affiliation, or economic prosperity of the community they represented, every single interviewee emphasized the importance of community character and sense of place. They commonly spoke about the importance of a “small- town feel.” They also highlighted access to natural spaces and outdoor recreation opportunities and general livability and quality of visitor experience as being valuable to their community members.

In contrast to the importance of this small-town feel, the study confirmed that many western GNAR communities are growing, sometimes rapidly, and often experiencing dramatic increases in visitation. As a result, small GNAR communities throughout the west are experiencing a wide range of “big-city problems” including:

- Housing Affordability
- Income Disparity
- Severe Traffic Congestion
- Parking Challenges

Despite often having few, if any, professional planners or other paid public officials, these small communities are trying an array of innovative solutions including developing community land trusts for housing and pop-up intersection treatments to deal with congestion and traffic flow. GNAR communities could prove to be a valuable setting for studying novel transportation and planning approaches.

IMPORTANCE OF REGIONAL COLLABORATION

In spite of their rural locations and geographic isolation, GNAR communities within the same region have many connections. It’s common for amenities like national parks or heritage sites to border multiple jurisdictions. Entities within a rural region are likely to depend on the same water source, confront the same natural hazards, or share an arterial road or highway.

The actions of one community or organization are likely to impact the others around it. Moreover, neighboring entities might be working on resolving the same issues and duplicating efforts. In other situations, agencies might be unintentionally working toward contrary aims simply because they are not communicating. Inviting more people to the problem-solving table will:

- Diversify the voices,
- more accurately identify the causes of the problem,
- increase available resources,
- increase coordination, and
- ultimately create solutions that are more comprehensive and sustainable.

Through collaboration and information sharing, the research team seeks to educate a transportation workforce that supports the creation of infrastructure to ensure mobility and accessibility, and stimulate economic growth, in these unique natural areas. To this end, Dr. Rumore has been facilitating two regional collaborative planning efforts in western GNARs—the Zion Regional Collaborative in southern Utah and the Bonner Regional Team in northern Idaho. Though these ongoing efforts, the research team hopes to develop a model approach that can be used in other GNARs throughout the west.

NEW GNAR COMMUNITY ONLINE TOOLKIT

The research team worked with University of Utah students to create a GNAR Community Online Toolkit. A resource for planners, public officials, community members, consultants, and others working in GNAR communities—it provides case studies, model ordinances, and other tools to help GNAR community members plan for and respond to the unique planning, transportation, economic, community development, and sustainability challenges and opportunities they face.

In the toolkit you can find insights on:

- Community design and placemaking,
- economic development and tourism management,
- housing and lodging,
- natural hazards, and
- human-powered transportation on accessible, recreational trails.

The toolkit emphasizes the role of the planner, and provides guidance in technical skills like scenario planning. Still in development, the toolkit is a living resource for researchers and partners to share the most useful information possible. The research team welcomes partners to help build and develop the website, as well as contribute resources and lessons learned from GNAR communities. If you are interested in partnering on or sharing resources, please contact the team at gnar@utah.edu.

This research was funded by the National Institute for Transportation and Communities, with additional support from Washington County, Project 7B, the Town of Springdale, Utah's Office of Tourism and the University of Utah.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The research team consisted of Danya Rumore, University of Utah; Philip Stoker, University of Arizona; Zacharia Levine, University of Utah; and Lindsey Romaniello, University of Arizona.

THE FULL REPORT and ONLINE RESOURCES

For more details about the study, download the full report **Planning in Gateway and Amenity Communities: Understanding Unique Challenges Associated with Transportation, Mobility, and Access to Opportunity** at <https://nitc.trec.pdx.edu/research/project/1118>

Explore the GNAR Community Online Toolkit: <https://gnar.utah.edu/>

Watch an April 26, 2018 webinar: <https://nitc.trec.pdx.edu/events/professional-development/webinar-april-2018>

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The National Institute for Transportation and Communities (NITC) is one of seven U.S. Department of Transportation national university transportation centers. NITC is a program of the Transportation Research and Education Center (TREC) at Portland State University. This PSU-led research partnership also includes the University of Oregon, Oregon Institute of Technology, University of Utah and new partners University of Arizona and University of Texas at Arlington.

