



WILMINGTON URBAN AREA
METROPOLITAN PLANNING ORGANIZATION

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STRATEGIC PLAN 2026-2031



Prepared by: **wsp**



WILMINGTON URBAN AREA METROPOLITAN PLANNING ORGANIZATION

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The Wilmington Urban Area Metropolitan Planning Organization (WMPO) planning area includes the following jurisdictions: City of Wilmington, New Hanover County, Pender County, Town of Leland, Brunswick County, Town of Carolina Beach, Town of Wrightsville Beach, Town of Kure Beach, Town of Belville, and Town of Navassa. The WMPO Board is composed of officials from each of these Wilmington urban area counties and municipalities, as well as the Cape Fear Public Transportation Authority (WAVE Transit) and the North Carolina Board of Transportation.

WMPO BOARD MEMBERS

Town of Carolina Beach

Mayor Lynn Barbee — *Chair*

NC Board of Transportation

Landon Zimmer

Town of Kure Beach

Mayor Allen Oliver

Brunswick County

Hon. Frank Williams — *Vice Chair*

New Hanover County

Hon. Bill Rivenbark

Town of Leland

Mayor Brenda Bozeman

Cape Fear Public Transportation Authority

Hon. Stephanie Walker

Pender County

Hon. Brad George

Town of Wrightsville Beach

Mayor Ken Dull

City of Wilmington

Mayor Pro Tem Kevin Spears

Hon. Cassidy Santaguida

Town of Belville

Mayor Charles Bost

Town of Navassa

Mayor Rose Terry

ALTERNATE BOARD MEMBERS

Brunswick County

Hon. Mike Forte

Town of Carolina Beach

Mayor Pro Tem Deb Leconte

Town of Navassa

Hon. Latonya Lowe

City of Wilmington

Hon. JC Lyle

Town of Kure Beach

Hon. Mark Dirks

Town of Wrightsville Beach

Hon. Zeke Partin

Town of Belville

Hon. Hunter Smith

Town of Leland

Hon. Veronica Carter



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Wilmington Urban Area Metropolitan Planning Organization (WMPO) is the federally designated regional transportation planning agency for the Wilmington Urban Area in the lower Cape Fear region of southeastern North Carolina. They are responsible for coordinating regional transportation planning and ensuring that funds are spent through a cooperative, comprehensive, and continuing planning process. The WMPO Board is the decision-making body responsible for guiding transportation policy and funding priorities. This 13-member Board is made up of representatives from all the member jurisdictions within the WMPO, as well as the Cape Fear Public Transportation Authority and the North Carolina Board of Transportation. One of the key roles of the Board is the development of a strategic plan that guides short-term decision making through the lens of an overarching mission statement, a vision for the future, and key focus areas with associated strategies. To ensure that the mission, vision, and focus areas for the WMPO remain responsive to community needs, shifting priorities, and emerging issues, the Board updates the strategic plan on a regular basis.

The Board put forward an updated mission statement for the WMPO to proactively lead transportation planning and decisions in the lower Cape Fear region by fostering collaboration and strategic actions that deliver safer, more connected communities, economic opportunity, and an elevated quality of life.

The Board's updated vision for the organization is to deliver safe, reliable, and seamless multimodal solutions that meet the evolving needs of everyone in our dynamic and growing region as a collaborative leader, partnering with member jurisdictions, residents, businesses, the legislature, stakeholders, and visitors to proactively shape the future of transportation in the region.

To accomplish this mission and realize the vision, the WMPO will target eight focus areas:



Regional Collaboration and Partnerships



Engagement and Education



Infrastructure and Safety



Organizational Excellence



Promotion of Alternative Transportation and Connectivity



Planning for Growth and Development



Adaptive Resilience



Funding

The implementation of the plan will depend heavily on the WMPO staff and development of an implementation plan with key performance indicators.

REGIONAL CONTEXT AND WMPO ROLE

The Wilmington Urban Area Metropolitan Planning Organization (WMPO) covers approximately 494 square miles and includes 10 jurisdictions made up of three counties, seven municipalities, and two partner organizations including the Cape Fear Public Transportation Authority and the North Carolina Board of Transportation. The WMPO is federally required to conduct transportation planning in the WMPO region through a continuing, cooperative, and comprehensive process. This includes coordinating the activities of a Technical Coordinating Committee, the WMPO Board, and developing and adopting a Metropolitan Transportation Plan and Comprehensive Transportation Plan. Other activities include reviewing and approving the State and Metropolitan Transportation Improvement Programs, completing a Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP), approving changes to the Federal-Aid Functional Classification System, and establishing goals and objectives for the transportation planning process.

WMPO's newly adopted Metropolitan Transportation Plan, *Cape Fear Navigating Change 2050*, is aptly named for a region experiencing significant growth and transformation. Record tourism spending is strengthening the regional economy while increasing transportation demand and the need for multimodal solutions. Expanded capacity at the Port of Wilmington is further fueling economic activity and underscoring the importance of thoughtful planning to accommodate continued growth. The Fort Fisher-Southport ferry remains vital to regional mobility and quality of life, though aging vessels and limited capacity may challenge its ability to meet future demand. Wilmington International Airport continues to serve as a major economic asset and is experiencing record growth. Intercity rail is also under consideration and would provide an important multimodal connection across the state and beyond. At the same time, WMPO faces increasing risks from natural disasters and system disruptions, making resilience planning ever more critical.

Against this backdrop, the WMPO continues to expand its role and deliver strong projects across planning, mobility, and data-driven services. These efforts include the “Be a Looker” safety campaign, personalized alternative commuter plans, numerous bicycle/pedestrian plans, and a focus on trails, data collection, and development reviews.

The region's continued development, combined with the WMPO's evolving role, makes this a timely moment to update the WMPO Strategic Plan.



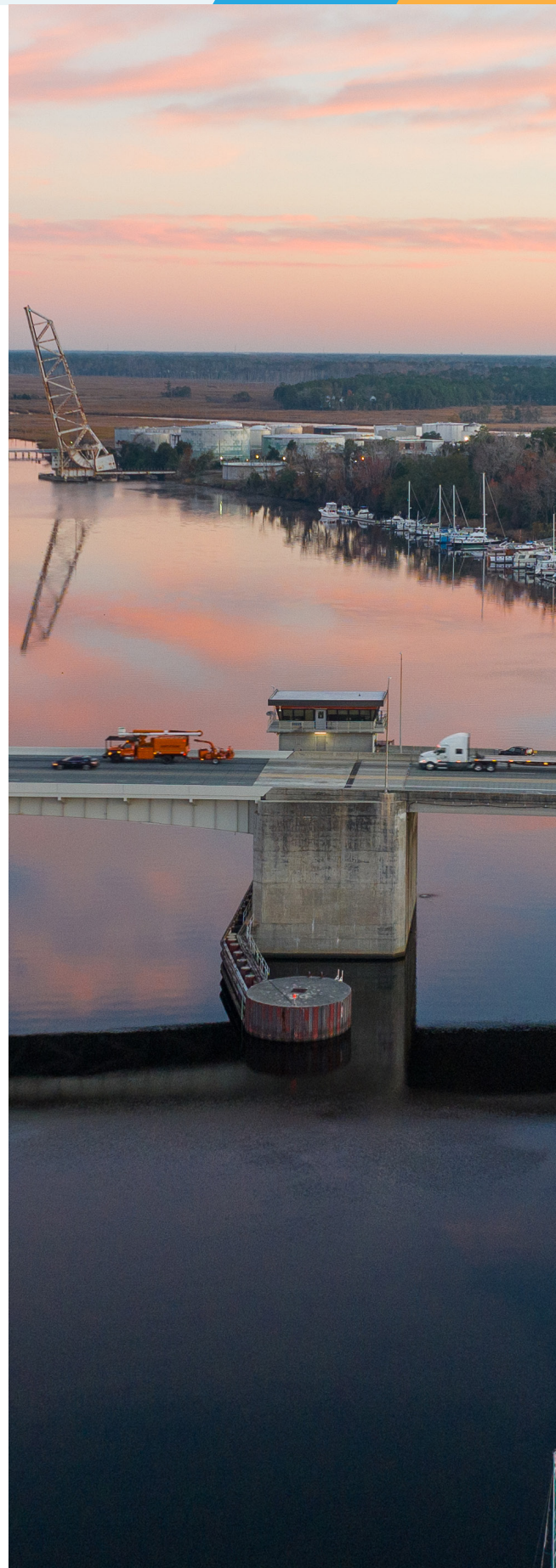
BOARD ENGAGEMENT AND PLAN DEVELOPMENT

The WMPO Board was engaged in the development of the strategic plan through the administration of two online surveys and two facilitated conversations over the span of five months. The first survey was administered in advance of the first facilitated conversation held during a special Board meeting on March 25, 2026. The purpose of the survey was to serve as a refresher of the current strategic plan's focus areas, and to provide insight into the Board's current thinking on those focus areas and associated strategies. Additional insight was captured to identify potential new focus areas and strategies that could inform the new strategic plan.

During the March 25th meeting, the Board engaged in a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis to assess the WMPO's internal conditions and external factors. Following the SWOT analysis, several activities were conducted to update the organization's mission and vision, evaluate existing focus areas, identify emerging focus areas, and generate policy direction for the new strategic plan. The Board collaboratively generated a list of transportation projects, both funded and unfunded, deemed impactful and important to the region.

Following the March 25th meeting, the Board completed a second survey to prioritize the transportation projects identified during the session.

The second special Board meeting on May 27, 2026 provided an opportunity to receive the Board's feedback on the draft mission, vision, focus areas, strategies and prioritized projects crafted from the two surveys, SWOT analysis, and March 25th Board discussion. Feedback received during this special meeting provided clear directions on the 2026-2031 Strategic Plan.





MISSION AND VISION

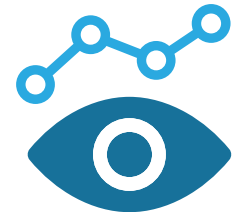


Mission

To proactively lead transportation planning and decisions in the lower Cape Fear region by fostering collaboration and strategic actions that deliver safer, more connected communities, economic opportunity, and an elevated quality of life.

Vision

Our vision is to deliver safe, reliable, and seamless multimodal solutions that meet the evolving needs of everyone in our dynamic and growing region as a collaborative leader, partnering with member jurisdictions, residents, businesses, the legislature, stakeholders, and visitors to proactively shape the future of transportation in our region.



STRATEGIC FOCUS AREAS AND STRATEGIES

The strategic focus areas and associated strategies are the backbone of the strategic plan; they represent how the WMPO will translate the broad vision into priorities and action.



Regional Collaboration and Partnerships

Promote collaboration and strong partnerships among residents, Board members, NCDOT, local governments, and key stakeholders.

- Facilitate and encourage collaboration between local member jurisdictions.
- Develop joint initiatives or task forces with NCDOT and other partners to streamline project planning and project delivery.
- Facilitate regular collaboration and knowledge-sharing sessions among Board members.
- Support member jurisdictions in efforts to coordinate and share transportation initiatives.



Infrastructure and Safety

Improve infrastructure to enhance safety.

- Ensure that legislative action to classify and allow local regulation of e-bikes considers safety concerns.
- Focus on expanding transportation to and from the Port of Wilmington.
- Invest in infrastructure projects that enhance safety for all modes of transportation.
- Advocate for improved safety measures in the prioritization process.



Promotion of Alternative Transportation and Connectivity

Promote and expand alternative and active transportation modes, such as biking, walking, and public transit, with a focus on multimodal connectivity.

- Expand and improve public transit options through targeted service enhancements guided by comprehensive needs assessments and benchmarking studies in partnership with the Cape Fear Public Transportation Authority.
- Actively nurture partnerships to encourage biking and

walking through targeted outreach and education.

- Encourage investment in active transportation infrastructure to close existing gaps and expand the system to meet growing demand for biking, walking and other active modes of transportation.
- Advocate for and support intercity rail.



Adaptive Resiliency

Promote adaptive resiliency to prepare for technological advances, disaster preparedness, and mitigation strategies.

- Encourage investment in infrastructure improvements and disaster-resilient designs to reduce vulnerability to severe weather events.
- Develop and implement a Resiliency Improvement Plan (RIP)
- Better position the region for a future with Connected and Automated Vehicles and the emergence of AI, including the development of an AI policy.
- Coordinate with NCDOT Aviation Division to discuss planning strategies to support advanced air mobility.



Engagement and Education

Enhance communication and engagement, improve Board member and public understanding of the transportation planning process, and foster broader community support through engagement and education.

- Coordinate a peer exchange to facilitate direct learning and sharing of ideas.
- Provide guest speakers at Board meetings from industry, academia, or partner agencies to highlight innovative practices, updates from members, and emerging topics of interest to the WMPO Board.
- Organize targeted Board training sessions that cover traffic impact analysis; the NCDOT project prioritization process; the NCDOT project delivery and implementation process including topics related to project lifecycle, funding, and risk management; and other trainings as desired by the Board.
- Continue WMPO communications to make technical material more accessible and relevant for constituents.
- Expand WMPO public outreach efforts to educate residents and local elected officials about transportation options and benefits and the role of the WMPO.
- Design and deliver training with the intention of connecting old knowledge to new knowledge to enhance the learning and retention process.



Organizational Excellence

Meet complex transportation challenges by fostering skilled staff, stable leadership, clear project management, and adaptability to Board changes for continuity and effective leadership.

- Develop strategies to reduce loss of institutional knowledge stemming from Board turnover or changes in leadership.
- Adopt knowledge management practices to retain and share organizational expertise in the event of Board member or staff turnover.
- Encourage ongoing professional development for staff to further enhance technical competence and leadership development.
- Implement leadership succession planning and mentorship programs to sustain staff leadership stability.
- Prepare staff for AI and other emerging technologies through training and continuous learning.



Planning for Growth and Development

Implement planning strategies that are responsive to the challenges and opportunities related to growth and development and the changing demographics and travel patterns associated with this growth.

- Adopt adaptive planning processes that account for rapid growth and changing priorities due to changing travel patterns and other uncertainties related to rapid growth.
- Initiate conversations with neighboring communities in preparation for a WMPO boundary expansion following the 2030 Census.
- Continue active participation in the Transportation Review Committee (TRC) process to facilitate collaboration between transportation planners and land use planners to ensure that new developments are aligned with regional mobility goals, minimize congestion, and support multimodal options.
- Explore the use of alternative metrics in Traffic Impact Analyses (TIA) for major developments in urban areas or infill development.
- Use demographic and travel trend data to guide future land use and transportation investments to encourage strategies that address growth, shift travel demand, and support mixed use development.



Funding

Respond to ongoing challenges of insufficient resources, constraints on the ability to generate additional revenue, and funding levels that fail to match regional growth.

- Proactively engage with NCDOT to communicate the need for funding that matches regional growth and inflation. This includes providing data-driven evidence of unmet

needs and the impact of delayed projects.

- Explore grants, Public-Private Partnerships (P3s), and innovative financing mechanisms to supplement traditional funding streams.
- Develop a regional voice to lobby state legislature and congress to increase influence and access to funding, and the state legislature for any needed changes to the prioritization formula.
- Foster regional collaboration to minimize competition and maximize collective funding opportunities.
- Actively pursue alternative funding sources and increase advocacy for federal and state support.



PRIORITY PROJECTS

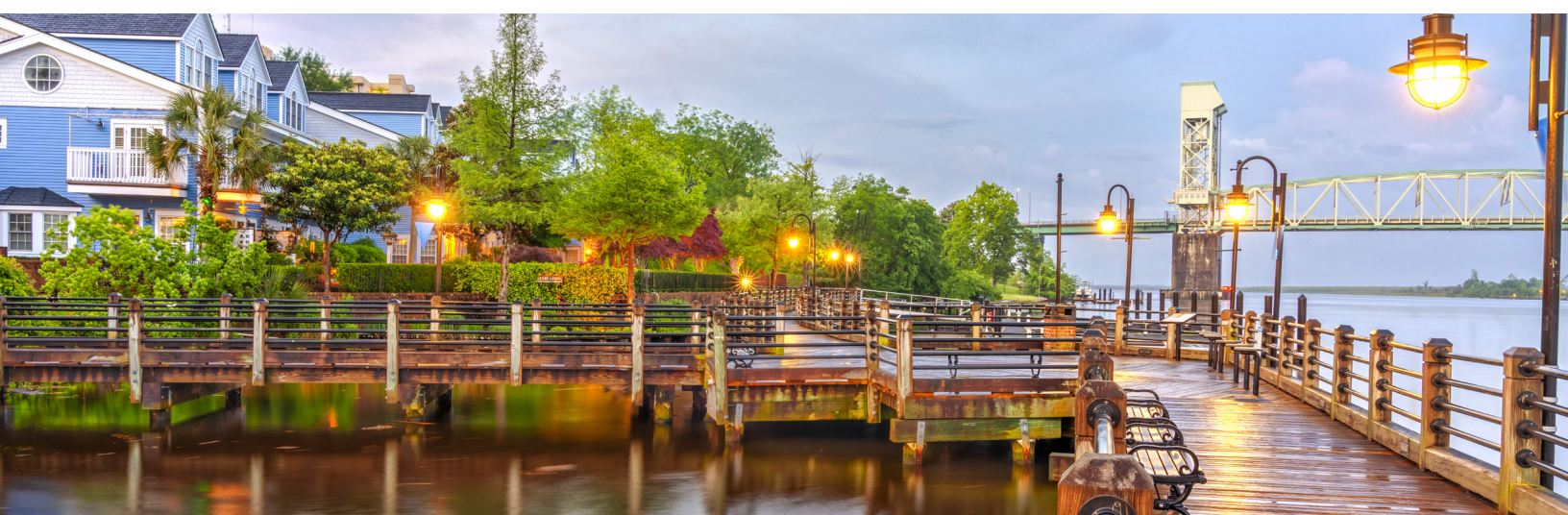
Priority projects reflect the list of projects that the WMPO Board believes will deliver the greatest benefit while balancing short-term needs with long-term impact.

Funded Transportation Projects

1. **US 74 / Martin Luther King Jr Parkway & US 117 / NC 132 / College Road Interchange from SR 2048 (Gordon Road) to US 17 BUS (Market Street):** Upgrade roadway and upgrade intersections to grade separated interchanges.
2. **Wilmington Citywide Signal System:** Upgrade to a new signal system.
3. **US 74 / NC 133 / Isabel Holmes Bridge Interchange:** US 17 / US 421 in Wilmington. Construct a flyover and free flow ramp at the interchange.
4. **Kerr Avenue and Martin Luther King Jr Parkway Interchange:** Upgrade existing intersection to an interchange.
5. **US 421 / Carolina Beach Road Widening & Intersection Improvements from NC 132 (South College Road) to SW 1187 (Sanders Road) in Wilmington:** Widen the existing roadway and construct a continuous flow interchange at US 421 and NC 132.

Non-Funded Transportation Projects

1. **Cape Fear Memorial Bridge Replacement from US 421 to 3rd Street:** Bridge replacement and road widening to six travel lanes and multiuse path.
2. **US 117 / NC 132 (College Road) at US 76 (Oleander Drive) Intersection Improvements (at grade alternative):** At-grade quadrant intersection improvement.
3. **US 17 Upgrades in Leland from SR 1732 (Carol Lynn Drive NE) to SR 1702 (Zion Church Road NE):** Access management improvements.
4. **US 17 / 76 / Oleander Drive Access Management from Independence Boulevard to Greenville Loop Road:** Access management improvements.
5. **Cape Fear Crossing from I-140 to US 421 (Carolina Beach Road):** New route on new/partial new location including new high rise bridge crossing over the Cape Fear River.



IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

Implementation of this strategic plan will require the WMPO to align its annual work program, budget, committee activities, and staff responsibilities with the plan's strategic focus areas and strategies. Each strategy should be supported by clear implementation steps, identified lead staff or partners, realistic time frames, and measurable indicators to track progress. The WMPO should also establish a regular process for monitoring implementation, reporting progress to the Board and stakeholders, and updating priorities as conditions, funding, and organizational needs evolve.