



**SRPEDD**  
Southeastern Regional Planning  
& Economic Development District



# Food Access and Security in Transportation (FAST)

## Plan

# 2025

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**For the SOUTHEASTERN MASSACHUSETTS**  
**METROPOLITAN PLANNING ORGANIZATION**

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The Southeastern Massachusetts Metropolitan Planning Organization certifies that its conduct of the metropolitan transportation planning process complies with all applicable requirements, which are listed below, and that this process includes activities to support the development and implementation of the Regional Long-Range Transportation Plan and Air Quality Conformity Determination, the Transportation Improvement Program and Air Quality Conformity Determination, and the Unified Planning Work Program.

1. 23 USC 134, 49 USC 5303, and this subpart.
2. Sections 174 and 176 (c) and (d) of the Clean Air Act, as amended (42 USC 7504, 7506 (c) and (d) and 40 CFR part 93 and for applicable State Implementation Plan projects.
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6. 23 CFR part 230, regarding implementation of an equal employment opportunity program on Federal and Federal-aid highway construction contracts.
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~~Monica Tibbits-Nutt, Secretary and Chief Executive Officer~~  
Massachusetts Department of Transportation  
Chair, SMMPO

May 21, 2024

# Transportation Planning Acronyms

ACS – American Community Survey (Census)  
ADA- American with Disabilities Act  
BIL – Bipartisan Infrastructure Law  
CFR - Code of Federal Regulations  
CIP – Capital Investment Plan  
CMAQ – Congestion Mitigation / Air Quality  
CMR - Code of Massachusetts Regulations  
DEP - Department of Environmental Protection  
EJ – Environmental Justice  
EPA- Environmental Protection Agency  
FAST Act - Fixing America’s Surface Transportation Act  
FAPRO - Federal Aid Programming and Reimbursement Office  
FFY - Federal Fiscal Year  
FHWA – Federal Highway Administration  
FTA – Federal Transit Administration  
GATRA – Greater Attleboro Taunton Regional (Transit) Authority  
GHG – Greenhouse Gas  
GIS- Geographic Information System  
JTPG - The Joint Transportation Planning Group  
LEP - Limited English Proficiency  
LOS – Level of Service  
MAP-21 - Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act  
MARPA - Massachusetts Association of Regional Planning Agencies  
MassDOT – The Massachusetts Department of Transportation  
MaPIT - MassDOT’s Project Intake Tool  
MEPA- Massachusetts Environmental Protection Act  
MOU - Memorandum of Understanding  
MPO - Metropolitan Planning Organization  
NHS - National Highway System  
NOFO - Notice of Funding Opportunity  
OTP - Office of Transportation Planning  
Pinfo – MassDOT’s Project Information Tracking System  
PPP – Public Participation Program  
PRC – Project Review Committee  
RSA – Road Safety Audit  
RTA – Regional Transit Authority  
RTP – Regional Transportation Plan  
SAFETEA-LU - Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users  
SGR – State of Good Repair  
SIP – State Implementation Plan  
SMMPO - The Southeastern Massachusetts Metropolitan Planning Organization  
SRPEDD – Southeastern Regional Planning and Economic Development District  
SRTA – Southeastern Regional Transit Authority  
STIP – State Transportation Improvement Program

## **Transportation Planning Acronyms Continued**

TAM Plan – Transit Asset Management Plan

Title VI – Federal law that mandates that any program, project or service be provided without regard to anyone’s race, color, or national origin, as well as age, gender or disability.

TIP – Transportation Improvement Program

TOD – Transit Oriented Development

ULB – Useful Life Benchmark

UPWP - Unified Planning Work Program

VMT - Vehicle Miles Traveled

VOC - Volatile Organic Compound

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Appendix A:

# Executive Summary

The Southeastern Regional Planning and Economic Development District (SRPEDD) seeks to better understand the current regional landscape regarding barriers, facilitators, and other factors influencing food access across the 27 municipalities. The Southeastern Massachusetts Metropolitan Planning Organization (SMMPO) is the agency responsible for conducting the federally required metropolitan transportation planning process for the 27 cities and towns that comprise the SRPEDD region. SRPEDD transportation staff also serve as the staff for the SMMPO. The creation of a plan centered on this food access information can help to provide a long-term source of funding and technical assistance towards advancing a transportation network that meaningfully advances healthy food access across the region.

Across the region, community members may use a combination of grocery stores, convenience stores, restaurants, fast food establishments, farmer's markets, food pantries, farm stands, food delivery services, schools, and government assistance programs to access a variety of food choices. Similarly, the SMMPO region is home to a wide variety of agriculture and food-based businesses and organizations that make up a diverse regional food system. Disparities in access and availability of healthy food options, however, leave significant portions of the region without easy access to food as well as the resources necessary to make healthy food choices.

Through strong public engagement efforts, core public health principles, examination of existing GIS data, and regional coalition involvement, the SMMPO Food Access and Security in Transportation (FAST) Plan provides a better understanding of the current circumstances and provides suggestions for bolstering regional food resilience and equitable healthy food access through integrated transportation investments and practices. Phase 1 of this Plan, concluding at the end of September and FFY2025, includes the following report and a public GIS mapping toolkit that both explore the current geographic landscape of food access within the SMMPO region. These materials seek to open dialogue on the improvement of the region's transportation network and infrastructure required to adequately support and sustain long-term improvements in the food access ecosystem.

# Overview

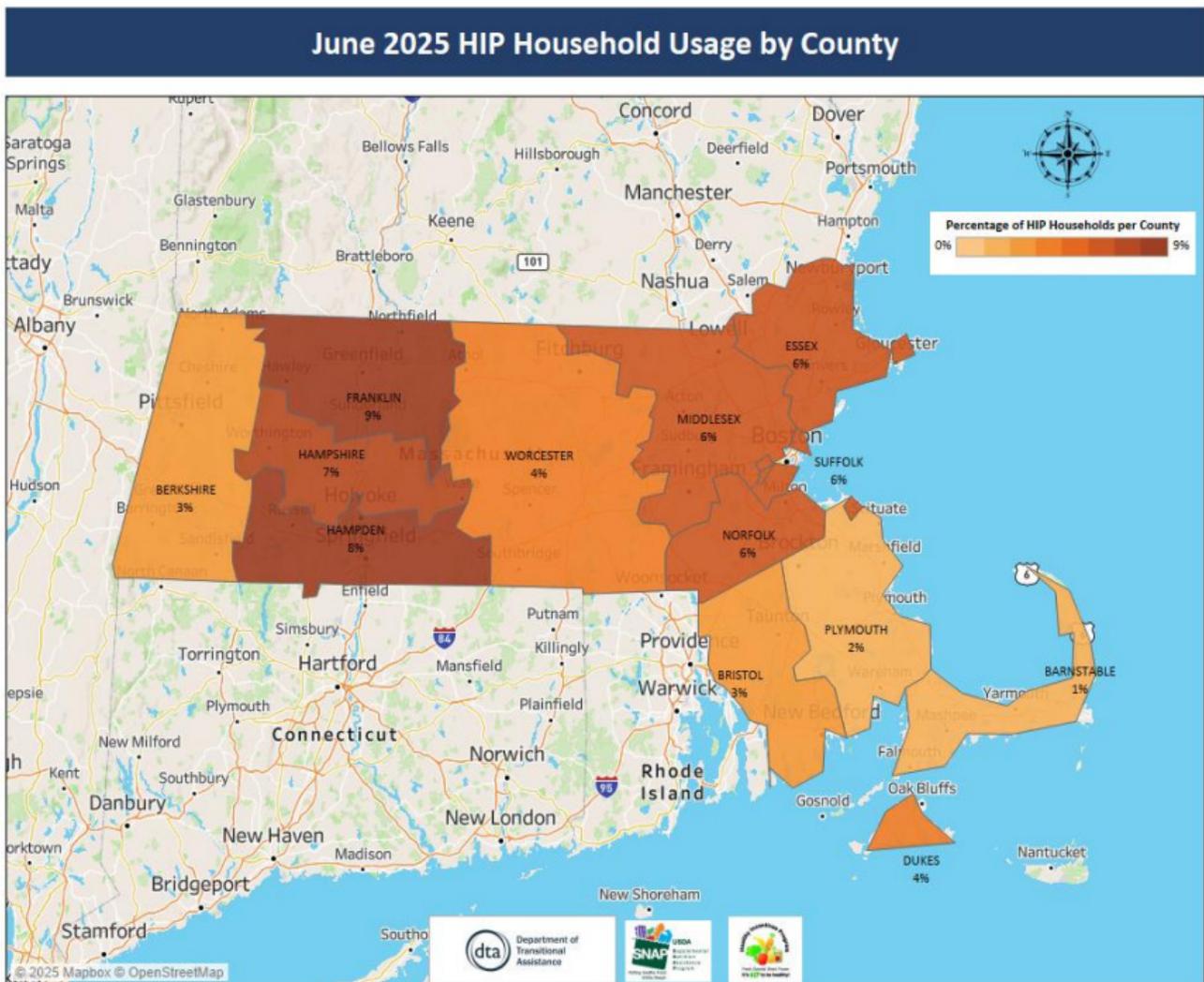
In 2024, more than 1 in 3 households (37%) in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts reported experiencing food insecurity within the last year (GBFB, 2025). This number reflects a continued upward trend, year over year, in the total number of individuals (roughly 2 million) who have shared concerns about where their next meal would be sourced from. Further, rates of food insecurity disproportionately impact certain demographics more significantly than others, with Hispanic, Black, Native American / Alaskan Native, and LGBTQ+ populations all reporting rates of food insecurity above 50% within the state last year. Older adults and college students also reported high levels of food insecurity across the state.

State and federal assistance programs often serve as primary resources to bridge affordability gaps in food access. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, more commonly referred to as SNAP, is the federal assistance program that provides financial assistance to low- or no-income individuals and households to afford healthy and nutritious food options at local grocery stores and other food retailers. Eligibility gaps remain prevalent in accessing SNAP benefits, with 44% (21 million) of food-insecure individuals across the US not qualifying for SNAP due to state-specific income thresholds, often between 130% and 200% of the federal poverty line (Feeding America, 2025). These eligibility gaps highlight an important and

critical misalignment between federal aid assistance and community-level need. As of February 2025, more than 1.1 million Massachusetts residents utilized SNAP benefits to help put food on the table (Food Research and Action Center, 2025). This number reflects only 79% of SNAP-eligible food-insecure households across the state (often referred to as the “SNAP Gap”), highlighting a coverage gap that must be addressed (GBFB, 2025). Although SNAP benefits serve as a resource for food-insecure households to begin to meet basic food needs, 75% of users across the state highlighted a need for greater support in fully realizing their food needs.

In Massachusetts, other federal and state financial assistance programs seek to increase access to healthy food options. The state’s Healthy Incentives Program (HIP), operated by the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA), provides enrolled SNAP users with a dollar-for-dollar reimbursement when users buy healthy, fresh, and local foods directly from farmers (HIP Fact Sheet, 2025). The HIP program has faced a variety of financial setbacks and limitations that have made long-term utilization less predictable. As of July 2025, the once-cut monthly benefits were fully restored to their original values, with assistance set to be provided at \$40/60/80 increments depending on household size (Healthy Incentives Program Coalition, 2025). Since the HIP program began in 2017, more than 206,000 households, or 309,000 individuals, have used HIP and purchased more than \$81 million in healthy, local food (HIP Fact Sheet, 2025). 63% of users included a senior, 18% included children, and 37%

included a person with a disability. For every dollar spent using HIP benefits, \$2 is generated in local economic impact through farmers using these funds to support local goods and services. HIP benefits have provided users with 1.23 daily servings of healthy fruits and vegetables, which can dramatically reduce the prevalence of chronic disease and its associated health care expenditures. With such evident and positive impacts, a key priority remains in advancing HIP utilization. The following map visualizes the total percentage of SNAP users that utilized their HIP dollars. These single-digit utilization rates reflect a need to better emphasize the ability for snap users to access healthy food options using the dollar-for-dollar benefits provided through HIP (DTA, 2025). In both Bristol and Plymouth County, HIP household usage was reported at only 2% of eligible households. Beyond SNAP and HIP, other programs such as Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and the free school lunch program provided at schools enrolled in the National School Lunch Program to all students at no cost serve as other methods to help reduce the level food insecurity experienced across the state.



Oftentimes, individuals must make difficult choices between accessing food and other necessities, such as the costs associated with housing, medical expenses, childcare, and transportation. Beyond the costs of food access, the financial strain associated with other incurred costs can deeply affect an individual's ability to have a reliable, affordable, and healthy food source. Across the state, 89% of the households that reported food insecurity also experienced struggles affording at least one other basic need – most often, these basic needs included heating and electricity, housing costs, and medical expenses. (GBFB, 2025). When individuals must forego one or several basic needs to maintain financial stability, both personal health and overall well-being can be significantly and negatively impacted by these decisions.

In terms of personal health and its relationship to healthy food access, chronic conditions such as asthma, diabetes, and mental health disorders have been linked to food insecurity. In Massachusetts, 67% of food-insecure adults and 51% of food-insecure children reported having at least one of the aforementioned chronic conditions (GBFB, 2025). 40% of these food-insecure adults also reported having skipped vital medical or dental care visits, with cost being highlighted as the top reason. Beyond the direct impact to individual health outcomes related to food-insecurity, the subsequent healthcare and operational costs attributable to food insecurity are estimated to be \$1.3 billion annually among Medicaid recipients (GBFB, 2025). These estimates come from the high costs of care for food insecurity-related hospitalizations and emergency room visits.



# Food Ecosystems and Agricultural Preservation

The Commonwealth has a deep and rich history in agriculture that heavily shapes the food access landscape. Across the state, the agriculture industry contributes more than \$10 billion to the economy annually (MA Farmland Action Plan, 2023). The industry creates almost 30,000 farm-working job opportunities and more than 45,000 secondary jobs within the food sector. There are, however, direct and immediate threats to farmlands across the state. The MA Farmland Action Plan (2023) reports that, by 2040, between 50-90,000 acres (nearly 15% of the total agricultural land area) of farmland are projected to be converted for other uses, making Massachusetts the third-most at-risk state in the country for land conversion risk. This loss equates to a loss of more than 1,200 local farms, \$91 million in revenue, and almost 5,000 sector-based jobs.

In 2022, Bristol County recorded 507 total farms, a number that reflects a 26% decrease from 2017 (Census of Agriculture, 2022). These farms spanned almost 28,000 acres of land and produced a total market value of \$46,163,000, averaging \$91,052 in product value sold per farm. 884 producers managed these farms, with a majority (525 / 59%) being male. In 2022, Plymouth County recorded 809 total farms, a number that reflects a 7% increase from 2017. These farms spanned over 54,000 acres of land and produced a total market value of \$90,237,000, averaging \$111,541 in product value sold per farm. 1,580 producers managed these farms, with a majority (979 / 62%) being male.

The Marion Institute's Food System Assessment (2021) highlights the significant pressures placed on the region's food system and identifies opportunities for continued resilience. Specifically, the region's farmland workforce continues to age, as the average age of producers stands at almost 60 years. Further, workers in the food and agriculture industries earn wages below their counterparts in other sectors. In moments of regional or industry disruption, as was seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, the food system may be severely strained in both physical and financial capacity. Workforce sustainability remains a focus area for bolstered resilience, as an aging workforce and limited participation among younger workers threatens the long-term prospects of local food production and farmland viability.

Resilient food systems must center localized agricultural development and a commitment to supporting regional farm systems that produce high quality, nutritious, and affordable healthy food options for communities. Further, the SMMPO region's transportation network must prioritize making healthy food access points accessible beyond a personal vehicle -- the region's bus, pedestrian, and bicycle networks can help strengthen this need for agricultural resilience.



# Public Engagement

The SMMPO region varies greatly by community – thus, the ways in which individuals access food options varies greatly, too. While many individuals rely on personal vehicles to get to and from food access locations, others rely on alternative forms of transportation, such as walking, bicycling, and taking the bus from one of the SMMPO region’s two transit authorities (the Greater Attleboro Taunton Regional Transit Authority, GATRA, or the Southeastern Regional Transit Authority, SRTA). This feedback, provided through strong public engagement efforts, provides invaluable insight into how the current regional transportation network either advances or deters individuals from accessing the greatest variety of healthy, affordable, and accessible food options throughout their communities.

For Phase 1 of this plan, SMMPO staff held multiple meetings with a variety of community-based organizations that provide food access-related services to subpopulations within the SMMPO region. These community partners represent a broad constituent base – from at-risk children and families to elderly populations, local farmers, and SNAP recipients, a wide range of priorities and concerns were discussed. Beyond conversation, promotional engagement material describing the purpose and goals of the FAST Plan were distributed amongst community partners to share with their constituents. The following list provides both the organization contacted and the date of communication:

- 1.2.25 - Southeastern Massachusetts Agricultural Partnership (SEMAP)
- 1.6.25 - United Neighbors of Fall River (UNFR)
- 1.8.25 - Coastal Foodshed
- 1.9.25 - Farm & Community Collaborative (FCC)
- 1.9.25 - Damien’s Place Food Pantry
- 2.3.25 - Coastline Elderly Services
- 2.27.25 - South East Regional Coordinating Council on Transportation (SERCCOT) February Meeting
- 3.5.25 - Greater Attleboro Self Sufficiency Coalition (GASSC) March Meeting
- 6.16.25 - Mass in Motion Fall River and Fall River Department of Public Health
- 7.29.25 - South East Regional Coordinating Council on Transportation (SERCCOT) July Meeting

During these meetings, community partners were asked to provide feedback and expertise regarding regional food access and transportation concerns and how their organization helped to support regional food access and resiliency efforts. Specific guiding questions during these meetings included:

- How does transportation access impact your work?
- What, if any, transportation concerns have been identified by the communities / individuals you interact with?
- Beyond transportation concerns, what other priorities should be addressed to improve healthy food access?

These questions sought to better understand the current barriers and facilitators that SMMPO community partners experienced when providing services to their constituents. Broadly, reliability and accessibility of public transportation services was noted as a barrier to providing the necessary frequency of service to and from food access locations. Several community partners noted that current transportation routes often require individuals to make multiple transfers and walk unjustifiably long distances. These logistics can be made more difficult with multiple bags of groceries, especially among children, the elderly (specifically homebound seniors), and parents with young children. Beyond transportation, the affordability of healthy foods was noted as another barrier to access. Specifically, limited SNAP and HIP benefits provide little flexibility of choice as food prices continue to rise. Further, several fresh food vendors noted that many farmer’s markets across the region are barely viable for farmers to profit from, thus creating very limited incentive to participate. These cost prohibitive decisions simultaneously limit the variety of healthy food choices available to individuals who attempt to spend their HIP budget via farmer’s markets. Finally, food pantries in the region noted that organizational capacities can negatively impact operational hours for community members to access food from these pantries. This constraint, combined with limited public transportation service to specific food pantry locations, can severely limit the level of access possible for individuals, especially those with the most urgent transportation barriers.



Phase 2 of the FAST Plan seeks to further public engagement efforts through greater participation of individuals experiencing food insecurity and transportation barriers within the SMMPO communities. Specifically, an online and physical survey will be conducted to garner both quantitative and qualitative information related to these focus areas. SMMPO staff will participate in public engagement opportunities to promote the survey and gather responses. The results of this survey will be used to better inform the necessary next steps in advancing a transportation system across the SMMPO region that advances greater accessibility to healthy and affordable food options.



## FOOD ACCESS AND SECURITY IN TRANSPORTATION (FAST) PLAN

SRPEDD seeks to better understand the current regional landscape regarding barriers, facilitators, and other factors influencing food access across the region's 27 municipalities.

### FAST FACTS

In 2024, 1 in 3 MA households reported experiencing food insecurity at some point in the last 12 months.

In the last year, 69% of food insecure people had to choose between paying for food and paying for transportation.

Food insecure people are more likely to experience chronic disease, poor mental health, and greater healthcare costs.

### HELP US UNDERSTAND

- What transportation mode(s) do you use to get to food access locations? What barriers make these places difficult to access?
- What barriers do you face in meeting your family's food needs?
- How has food insecurity impacted your health/wellbeing?

### PROVIDE FEEDBACK

Comments may be offered by a variety of methods, including:

- ✉ [nsoutier@srpedd.org](mailto:nsoutier@srpedd.org)
- 🌐 [www.srpedd.org/contact-us/](http://www.srpedd.org/contact-us/)
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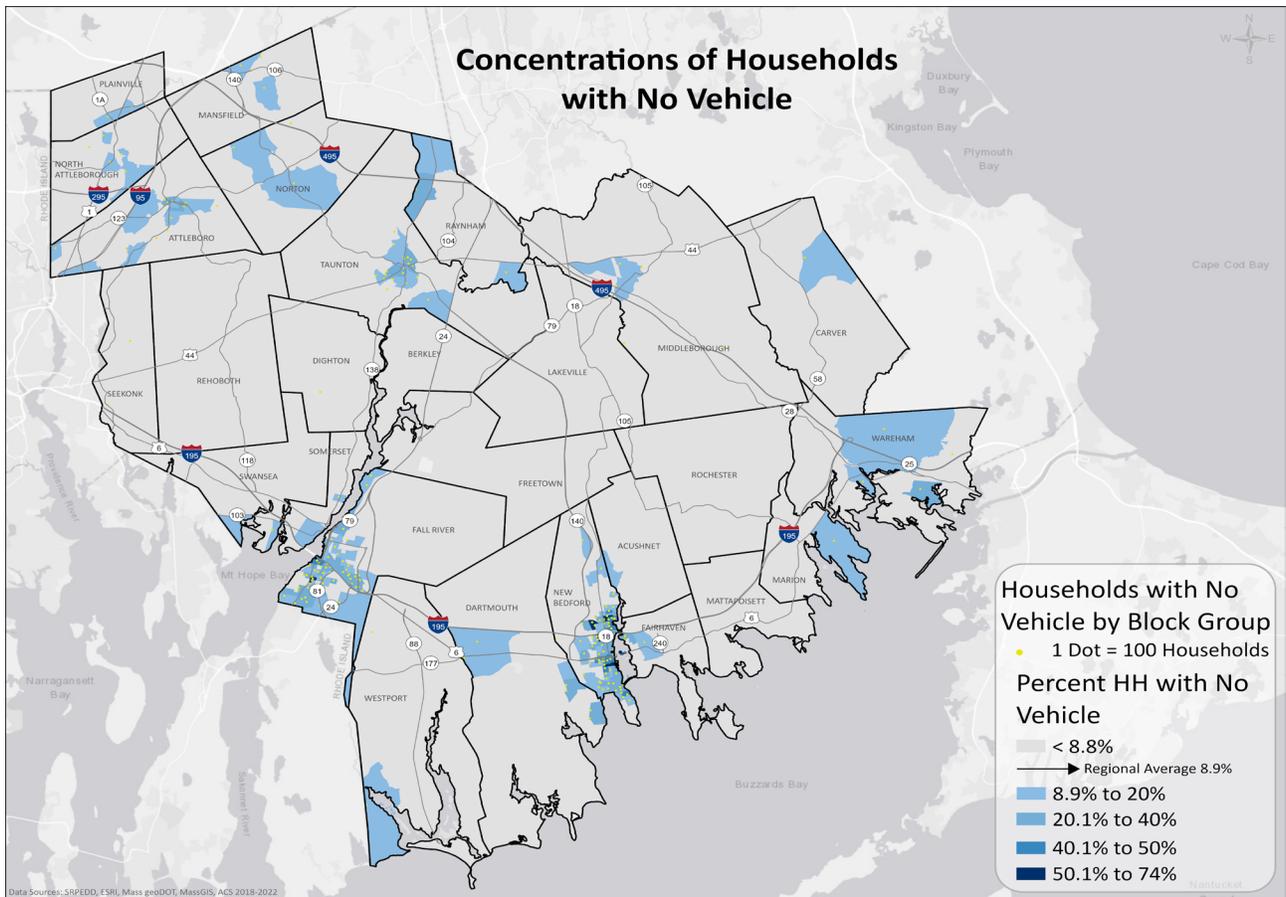
# Socioeconomic Experiences that Influence Food Access and Choices in Southeastern MA

The 2025 report, “The Cost of Hunger in Massachusetts” by the Greater Boston Food Bank found that Bristol County has one of the highest rates of food insecurity among all counties in the Commonwealth, with 46% of households reporting they are unable to afford enough food to eat or worrying about where their next meal will come from (Greater Boston Food Bank, 2025). Equally alarming, 30% of Plymouth County residents reported being food insecure. The Massachusetts Department of Transportation’s “Measuring Food Access to Improve Health” study conducted in 2024, which utilized a mixed method approach and machine learning model, revealed that population density and vehicle ownership are the most important determinates of food access in the Commonwealth (Massachusetts Department of Transportation, 2025). MassDOT’s study showed that residents living within nearly 2/3 of Massachusetts census tracts do not have access to food within a 10-minute walk, indicating highly uneven distribution of food access across non-driving transportation modes in the state (Massachusetts Department of Transportation, 2025). Race, ethnicity, income, car ownership, poverty level, and housing density were determined to be the factors that most influence access to quality food across the state. Residents in Massachusetts’ rural communities are highly dependent on personal vehicles to access food. Low-income households and those receiving assistance from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) have the lowest levels of food access in the state.

## *Vehicle Access*

Across demographic groups and types of communities, vehicle ownership is one of the key indicators of food access, as households that have access to a car generally have access to the largest number of grocery stores, frequent a larger variety of stores, and make more grocery trips each month (Massachusetts Department of Transportation, 2025). While food retailers are more limited in rural and some suburban parts of the state and SMMPO region, food accessibility is still relatively high due to high rates of vehicle ownership (Massachusetts Department of Transportation, 2025).

9% of households in the SMMPO region or roughly 58,478 people, however, do not have access to a vehicle (American Community Survey 2018-2022 5-Year Estimates). 18 SRPEDD communities have at least one neighborhood where 9-20% of households do not have a car. SMMPO communities where vehicle ownership is lowest or where 5% or more of the population does not have a vehicle include New Bedford, Fall River, Taunton, Attleboro, Fairhaven, Dartmouth, and Wareham, Middleborough, and Mansfield, with Fall River and New Bedford having above the region’s average number of households with no vehicle at 16% and 18% respectively.



Communities such as Berkley, Dighton, Mattapoisett, and Rochester have a lower number of food retailers but high vehicle access. Nearly 1 in 5, or 18 %, of the SMMPO’s region’s current population are older adults aged 65 and over. In Mattapoisett, Wareham, Marion, and Somerset, residents over age 65 make up 25% or greater of the municipality’s population (American Community Survey 2018-2022 5-Year Estimates). Furthermore, no age group in the region is projected to experience as much growth as older adults in the next three decades. In the coming decades many more rural towns in the region are set to experience increases in older adult populations by rate of change. From 2020 to 2050, Middleborough, Rochester, Berkley,

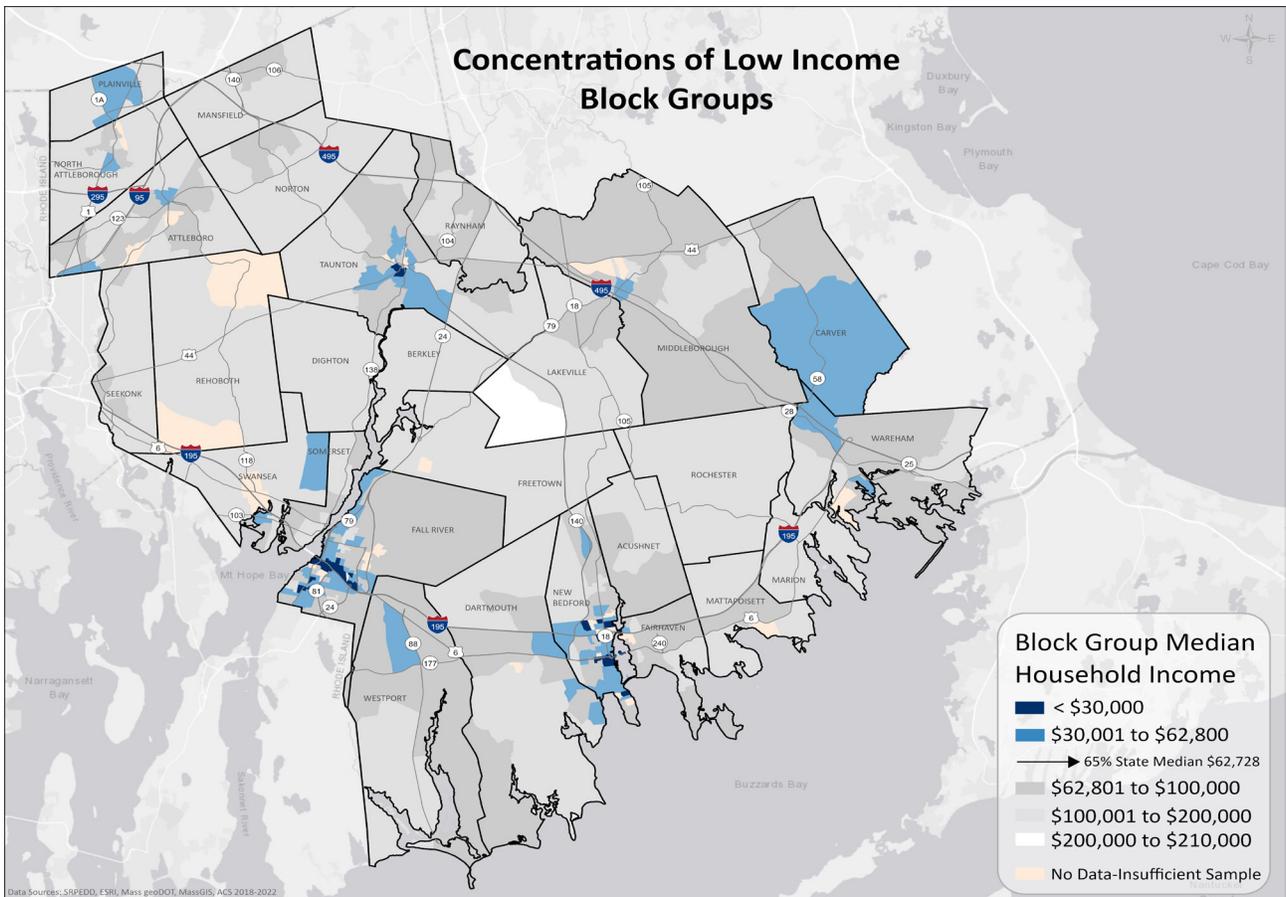
Mansfield, and Norton are projected to experience a 300%+ increase in the population of residents over 85, with Middleborough going from 529 85+ year olds in 2020 to 2,819 85+ year olds in 2050 and from 1,097 75–79-year-olds in 2020 to 2,371 75–79-year-olds in 2050. In SMMPO communities with very few food retailers, a growing older adult population of 75+ year olds, and limited transit networks, losing vehicle access presents a major barrier for accessing food. Although some of these towns have van transportation available for older adults, many of these towns do not have extensive transit services. This is not to imply that this entire age demographic is not able to drive, but as indicated in the collection of surveys for both

the SMMPO's 2023 Coordinated Human Services Transportation Plan and 2023 Regional Transportation Plan, losing the ability to drive inhibits travel for this demographic greatly and subsequently inhibits their access to food retailers and choices. While most households without a vehicle are in the region's more densely developed areas, it is important to provide safe connections in every community for those without access to a personal vehicle. SMMPO region cities like New Bedford and Fall River have more robust transit services available and have a denser development pattern that makes food access without a car more feasible. However, there are likely going to be service gaps that will need to be filled to successfully increase connectivity, access, and food choice for the region's older adults. None of this analysis is meant to assume that older adults would not benefit from the provision of other alternate transportation modes but that transit services have been highlighted as a priority by this age group in other SRPEDD studies.

### *Income*

While car dependence strongly impacts access to healthy food, other factors shape households' decisions about food choices. Poverty and household-income is a strong determinant of food insecurity, especially when considered alongside current rising grocery, housing, and healthcare costs. According to 2018-2022 ACS 5-Year Estimates, the SMMPO region has a median household income of \$84,085, which is 13% lower than the state average of \$96,505. 10% of households in the SMMPO region are considered to be experiencing poverty, that is, their median annual household income is 65 percent or less than the statewide median household income of \$62,728 (poverty measure defined by the Commonwealth's methodology). This is in comparison to 12 % in 2014, which shows a relatively stable poverty rate over the past 8 years.





The cities of Fall River, New Bedford, and Taunton have a total low-income/poverty population greater than the SMMPO’s regional average of 10% and are designated as “low-income municipalities.” Fall River, New Bedford, and Taunton have at least one block group of 1000+ people whose median household income is less than \$30,000; this equates to over 10, 900+ households or 21,590+ people at this income-range in the region. Attleboro, Carver, Dartmouth, Fairhaven, Fall River, Middleborough, New Bedford, North Attleborough, Plainville, Swansea, Taunton, Wareham, and Westport each have at least one block group of 300 to 1,000+ households whose median household income is between \$30,001 – \$62,800; this equates to over 55,130 + households or 125,260+ people at this income-range in the region. Overall, this

represents 66,030 poverty households (146,850 people) in the SMMPO region who have limited incomes.

Even for households who own cars, household income and access to funds impacts food choice in that car maintenance and repair can be a destabilizing household expense that constrains other daily living expenses, especially for the 16 communities listed above. The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates the cost of owning and operating a motor vehicle to be \$10,729 (per 15,000 miles driven) in 2022. This presents a large financial burden for people living in the SMMPO region should they need to own and operate a vehicle for everyday transportation, including to access food.

## Housing

In addition to vehicle access and income, another systemic factor that constrains food access in the region is relentlessly increasing housing costs, a trend not confined to the SMMPO region. Households experiencing financial hardship and housing cost burden often make difficult trade-offs between basic living necessities. Escalating housing costs in the region and state leave many low- and moderate-income households with limited budgets for food and other health necessities.

\_\_\_\_\_ % of SMMPO region households are housing cost-burdened, paying more than 30% of their income toward rent or housing expenses.

A 2024 report by the New Bedford Economic Development Council revealed that “86% of New Bedford households don’t make enough money to afford a mortgage for a typical home in the city” and “if forced to move, more than two-thirds of New Bedford renters would find the typical asking rent to be unaffordable” (New Bedford Economic Development Council, 2024). The report revealed a typical asking rent of \$1500 in New Bedford, \$1500 in Fall River, \$2,000 in Attleboro, and \$1900 in Taunton for 2023, with housing costs continuing to increase very disproportionately compared to wages. Fall River and New Bedford are today among the most affordable communities in the region and state, but escalating property values, untamable real estate speculation, growing gentrification, high housing demand fueled by displacement from other regions, low supply, and outdated zoning policies continue to drive up costs and constrain the budgets of a larger and larger portion of SMMPO region households. Similarly escalating costs of gas and electric utilities contribute to housing cost burden and further pressure on household budgets.

The Greater Boston Food Bank’s 2025 study found among survey respondents that “among households with food insecurity, 89 percent reported they had trouble paying for at least one other basic need (such as housing, heat and electricity, medical needs, transportation, child care, and/or debts or other bills), compared with only 26 percent of food-secure households” (Greater Boston Food Bank, 2018). It also found that over one-third of food insecure households reported struggling to afford transportation. Food-insecure respondents identified utilities, transportation, and mortgage or rent as the top three basic needs competing for their food dollars. They estimated needing an additional \$628 per month or \$7,500 per year to meet their basic food, housing, utilities, transportation, childcare, and healthcare needs (Greater Boston Food Bank, 2018).

Housing instability and increasingly out of reach basic living costs for low to moderate income households significantly limit households’ control over their food consumption and choices on food retailers they can access. These socioeconomic and demographic characteristics are correlated with notable disparities in levels of food access and health outcomes in the region.

Meetings with social services stakeholders across the region such as Damien’s Place Food Pantry and Coastline Elderly Services support that escalating costs of living necessities are a significant barrier to food access and choice, as older adults with a limited and fixed income have difficulty affording food, and the cost of food inflation outpacing the 2-3% increases in social security income or other food assistance benefits.

# Active Transportation

Access to healthy, affordable food is a foundational determinant of health. Walking, biking, and micromobility options offer essential non-driving transportation modes for many residents, especially for urban, low-income, or car-limited households. During Phase 1, initial discussions with food system organizations, including Coastal Foodshed, Southeastern Massachusetts Agricultural Partnership (SEMAP), Coastline Elderly Services, local food pantries, and other food system stakeholders revealed some common threads related to transportation, further detailed below.

An initial review of active transportation infrastructure (sidewalks, crosswalks, curb ramps, bike lanes, and paths) near food retail and distribution destinations such as supermarkets, corner stores, farmers markets, and food pantries confirmed a need for more focused analysis which will be completed in Phase 2. In addition to initial stakeholder interviews and infrastructure review, SMMPO staff have also reviewed a variety of local, regional, and statewide policies and plans related to the intersection of the transportation and food systems, including local Complete Streets Prioritization Plans, the Southeastern Massachusetts Food System Assessment, MassDOT's Healthy Transportation Policy Directive, the Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan, and the Healthy Community Design Toolkit's

Municipal Strategies to Increase Food Access. Many of the action strategies included in these policies and plans will serve as useful tools in the development of this plan's final recommendations in Phase 2.

## *Key Phase 1 Findings*

### 1. Infrastructure & Access Gaps

- **Sidewalk and Bike Network Discontinuity:** Many food retailers are located along high-speed arterial roads with insufficient or incomplete sidewalks and limited bike facilities.
- **First- and Last-Mile Barriers:** Micromobility infrastructure (e.g., secure bike parking, high-visibility crosswalks, and high-quality sidewalks) is often missing near food access points.
- **Limited Connectivity to Transit:** Where transit serves food destinations, pedestrian and bike connections to stops are often unsafe, indirect, or in many cases non-existent.

## 2. Land Use and Spatial Disparities

- Most communities in the region have complete streets prioritization plans, but it is unclear at this stage which of those prioritization plans directly link pedestrian and bike improvements to food access locations.
- In many communities, major grocery stores lie outside a safe 10–15-minute walk or bike ride, especially for those without cars.
- Low-income populations seem to be overrepresented in areas with poor active transportation infrastructure and limited healthy food options.

## 3. Ongoing Initiatives and Innovations

- The continued build out of regional high-comfort bicycle and pedestrian networks, such as the South Coast Bikeway or Taunton River Trail, could provide long-term connectivity to healthy fresh food for urban and rural communities alike

- Local food access organizations, such as Coastal Foodshed, are having success with innovative mobile farmer markets or delivery of fresh, locally grown produce directly to local institutions like Housing Authority properties, and serve as a model for expanding access to the State’s Healthy Incentives Program (HIP), in particular.
- The increased availability of e-bikes and e-scooters, and specifically e-cargo bikes, could increase the capacity of local organizations and businesses to more affordably distribute, and individuals to access, healthy food. These mobility devices are particularly useful in urban areas, or areas in close proximity to a high-comfort network that is connected to food retail and distribution locations.



## *Preliminary Recommendations*

1. **Integrate Food Access into Complete Streets and Active Transportation Network Planning:** Prioritize sidewalk, shared use path, and bike lane improvements that connect food retailers and pantries with high-need neighborhoods and housing developments.

2. **Create Safe Multimodal Corridors to Key Destinations:** Explore the potential for designation of “Healthy Transportation Corridors” that connect people to food, healthcare, schools, parks, and other essential public institutions, infrastructure, and services.

3. **Map and Prioritize Gaps:** In Phase 2, SMMPO staff will utilize our GIS mapping to overlay transit and active transportation networks, food retail destinations, food distribution hubs, as well as safety, demographic, and food assistance program data to pinpoint infrastructure gaps and investment opportunities.

4. **Support Local Micromobility Pilots:** Explore partnerships for bike/e-bike programs aimed at improving access to groceries and healthy food.

5. **Coordination with Food System Stakeholders:** In order to ensure SMMPO’s transportation planning process is responsive to the ever-evolving needs of the local food system, SMMPO staff have improved coordination with the South Coast Food Policy Council (SFPC), and now serves as a member of the SFPC’s Community Advisory Board, which is a regionally-based group of food system stakeholders from various industries working to improve state and local food system policy.

6. **SRPEDD Agency-wide Coordination:** With the creation of a new internal Agriculture and Food Systems Working Group in early 2025, SRPEDD staff have improved communication related to food system issues, projects, and opportunities across departments, and built a valuable tool for intra-agency collaboration on food system planning activities and work projects.

In Phase 2, SMMPO staff will gather direct input from residents, especially in high-need areas, about barriers they face in walking, biking, rolling, or taking transit to food sources in their community. Through direct technical assistance to municipalities, regional transit authorities, and coordination with state partners like MassDOT, the SMMPO can help to embed food access considerations into transportation planning decision making at the local, regional, and state level.

# Transit Considerations

There are two Regional Transit Authorities (RTAs) within the SRPEDD region. SRTA has fixed route and dial-a-ride bus services within 10 communities, most notably serving New Bedford and Fall River. Transit headways are between 20-60 minutes. In particular, Routes 9 (Intercity Route), 201 and 202 have 20-minute headways, while most other routes have half-hourly service. SRTA provides paratransit service for any location in all 10 communities. GATRA primarily has 60-minute headways and serves 33 communities primarily within the SRPEDD region. GATRA has fixed route, dial-a-ride, and on-demand transit. There are also community-based organizations like South Shore Community Action Council, who provide door-to-door transportation primarily for older adults, and people with disabilities to connect community members to critical programs and services. Councils on Aging also have some shuttles (some of which are operated by GATRA) to provide transportation to improve access to services.

In 2024, SRTA released a report that includes data for a widely distributed rider survey. 61% of people surveyed said their household has “zero motor vehicles” and 49% of respondents said they use the bus “every day.” People riding SRTA buses were also asked about why they were using the bus. 41% of respondents shared that they were using the bus for “shopping/errands,” which was also the most common response in the 2024 Rider Survey. Both RTAs are also currently conducting a rider survey for their Comprehensive Regional Transportation Plan.

There are obstacles to food access in the region. There are challenges pertaining to infrastructure, service hours, and transit headways. There are large food retailers that do not allow transit shelters or awnings for people waiting for the bus within the SRPEDD region. The 2023 Regional Coordinated Human Services Transportation Plan asked agencies about public transportation recommendations, which included an identified barrier to groceries: “No weekend transportation, no buses in evening, limited services even in city for grocery shopping especially” (CHST, 2023). There is also an identified barrier to food access in SRPEDD communities that don’t currently have fixed route service: “The closest bus stop is a mile away from Dighton Housing Authority who provides affordable housing for elderly/Disabled people. The closest grocery store is miles away from the Authority” (CHST, 2023). It is worth noting that parts of Dighton previously had fixed route service.

There are also opportunities to improve food security and access through public transit. Buses, mini-buses, vans, and shuttles can be equipped to securely hold people’s groceries while shopping to make a more comfortable and convenient experience. There can be transit shelters designed to accommodate people carrying groceries and protected from weather. In particular, Massachusetts has a single-use plastics ban, and there are people grocery shopping with paper bags. Having shelters would ensure people accessing food will have their bags secured without having their groceries potentially destroyed in the rain or snow. Having a minimal

walkshed between transit routes and food retailers/non-commercial food distributors is important for accessibility as well as ridership. In a 2025 peer-reviewed study on food access with public transit in Rhode Island, researchers utilized a 5-minute walkshed in each direction based on responses from community leaders (Bay, et al., 2025).

There are examples of mobile food pantries within the SRPEDD region. Bristol Community College has a mobile food pantry that is available monthly to people in Fall River and New Bedford. New Bedford Community Health also has a mobile food pantry in their parking lot for residents. There is also the possibility to have mobile food pantries using larger vehicles to go to areas with identified gaps to food access and transit. Several of the following recommendations can be championed by SMMPO staff but must be attained by others. The responsible entities have been noted for each of the following recommendations.



## Recommendations

### ● Short-Term (0–12 Months):

1. Map food pantries and other non-commercial food distributors (SMMPO)
2. Connect with community members who use transit for food access to identify obstacles and opportunities (SMMPO)
3. Integrate food pantries into transit route planning for RTAs (GATRA/SRTA)

### ● Medium-Term (1–3 Years):

1. Expand evening/weekend service on 3 high-demand routes (GATRA/SRTA)
2. Launch mobile food pantries in the SRPEDD region, prioritizing transit critical and food insecure community members access to groceries (RTAs / CBOs)

### ● Long-Term (3+ Years):

1. Reduce transit headways on fixed-route services (GATRA/SRTA)
2. Have an MOU that would require commercial food retailers on transit routes to have accessible transit shelters (RTA / Local Organizations)

# Mapping Toolkit

Alongside this Phase 1 report, SMMPO staff have worked to produce an online, publicly accessible food access GIS toolkit to be used as a resource among Transportation Department staff, local elected officials, community-based organizations, and community members to better understand the current landscape of food access and transportation within the SMMPO region. This GIS data intends to visually represent the geographic distribution of food access locations (such as grocery stores, food pantries, farmer's markets, local establishments, etc.) alongside transportation specific information, such as the existing service routes for SRTA and GATRA, the current bicycle and pedestrian networks across the region, and the High Injury Networks determined through the recent completion of the SMMPO region's Safe Streets and Roads for All 2025 Regional Safety Action Plan. Secondary information, such as the locations of local hospitals, housing authorities, and schools, have also been included to supplement the primary information, seeing as these institutions play a significant role in addressing food access and related issues. Phase 2 of the FAST Plan will continue to update this GIS data to ensure accuracy, perform further analyses, and combine this information with qualitative survey data to form region-specific recommendations to advance a more responsive food and transportation network.

GIS data was assembled for this project from a variety of sources to gain a comprehensive view of food systems in the SRPEDD region. Massachusetts food retailer information was derived from data provided by MAPC, restaurant and fast-food locations were derived from tax accessor data, and other layers were derived from existing MassGIS databases. In order to gain a better understanding of where there may be access gaps in the food system, a walkshed analysis was performed using transit routes throughout the SRPEDD region. In a recent study performed in Rhode Island, researchers found that the walk tolerance of people carrying groceries was about 5 minutes from a transit stop. Being so close to the SRPEDD region, similar walksheds were applied to the analysis in this report.