

Building Up Memphis: Equitable Growth through Transportation and Housing

POLICY ROADMAP

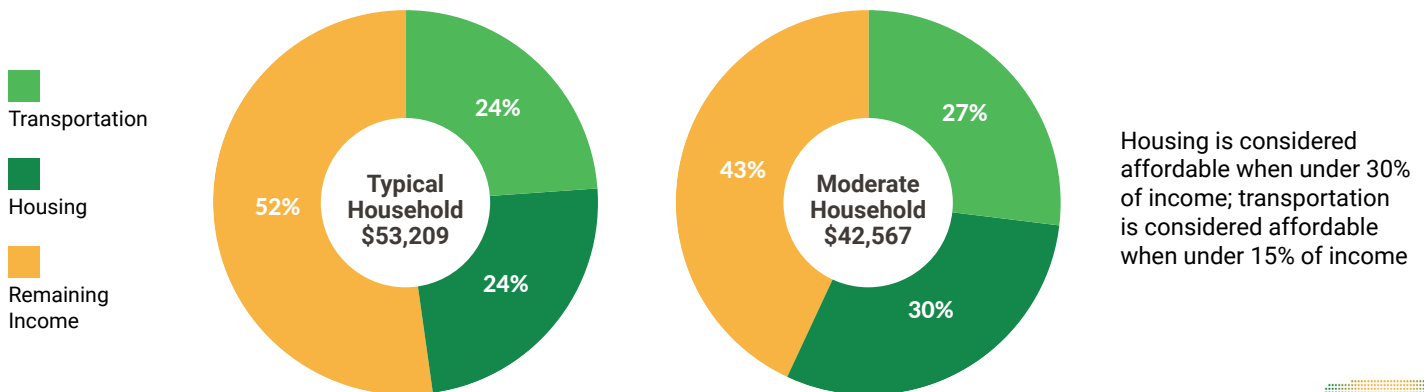
The election of Memphis' 65th mayor on October 5th presents an opportunity to leverage regional investments to create sustainable, equitable long-term growth. Smart investments and policies to create safe, walkable neighborhoods and vibrant, mixed-use corridors will connect Memphians to each other and to economic opportunity.

Memphis has undoubtedly seen its share of challenges in recent years. While population growth has declined approximately 4% since 2010, and [poverty](#) (24.2%) and [crime rates](#) (over 15,000 incidents reported annually) remain high, the region is poised for growth and investment.

- Memphis' [cultural and musical heritage](#) attracts more than 10 million tourists annually. It has one of the [busiest airports](#), the 3rd busiest trucking corridor, the 5th largest inland port, and connects to five Class 1 railroads. Hundreds of millions are being invested downtown, including the [Historic Snuff District](#) and [Tom Lee Park](#).
- The number of jobs in the region has grown to [662,900](#), a near record high, and is likely to further increase over the next ten years. In the last two years, the [Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development](#) has [announced](#) more than \$6.7 billion in investments with over 7,600 jobs coming to the region.

By focusing on housing and transportation, the next mayor can leverage this growth to reduce household costs and increase access to opportunity for all Memphians. While this policy brief does not directly address public safety (which will be an important priority for the next mayor), improving streets and corridors, prioritizing neighborhoods, and providing more transportation and housing options will help build a safer, stronger Memphis.

Memphis households spend 48% of their income on housing and transportation costs alone.



[Center for Neighborhood Technologies Housing and Transportation Index](#)

KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

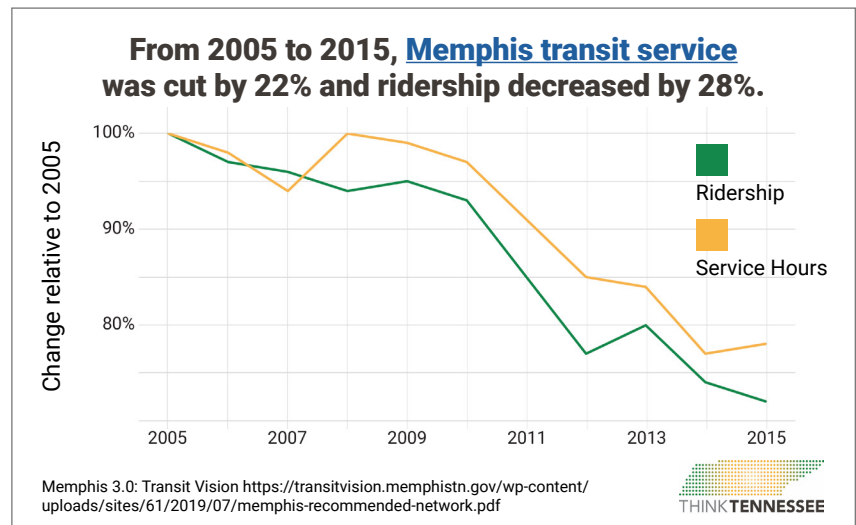
Focusing on accessible, high-quality transportation and affordable, resilient housing will ensure that all Memphis residents benefit from regional economic growth.

1. Create vibrant, walkable neighborhoods with a variety of housing types, safe streets, and more transportation options.
2. Reimagine corridors to connect people and neighborhoods, rather than separate them.
3. Review what is working well and what needs improvement across city departments.
4. Dedicate more funding for multimodal transportation and affordable housing.

Recommendation #1: Create vibrant, walkable neighborhoods with a variety of housing types, safe streets, and more transportation options.

Memphis' population and economic activity is dispersed throughout its nearly 300 square mile area. Only [1% of Memphis' neighborhoods are location efficient](#) (see box below on compact neighborhoods). This means that where you live determines if and how you can access the city and economic opportunities. Growing up, not out (as called for in [Memphis 3.0](#)) is critical for improving economic security and health for city residents.

- A lack of high-quality transit means that [78% of Memphis commuters drive alone](#), higher than peer cities (70%) and the state overall (76%).
- Memphis was recently listed at the top of the [Most Dangerous U.S. Cities for Pedestrians](#) due to the number of pedestrian deaths and lack of walkability.
- In Memphis, the [top-earning 1% of residents have 35% of the city's transit connectivity](#), while the lowest-earning 71% of residents have only 7% of the connectivity.
- A lack of transportation accessibility has been identified as a root cause of [lack of economic opportunity](#) and, in Memphis, [bankruptcy](#).



Compact, complete neighborhoods provide [significant benefits to residents, businesses and to the city](#):

- ✓ In compact, complete neighborhoods, infrastructure costs can be up to 50% lower than for low-density neighborhoods.
- ✓ Complete neighborhoods have diverse housing, with a range of affordability and types to meet the needs of different households.
- ✓ In complete neighborhoods, people are able to walk, bike, and take transit, which is [healthier and more affordable](#).
- ✓ These types of neighborhoods have denser housing and employment, increasing consumer activity in neighborhood businesses.



Continue to support “missing middle” housing development.

[Memphis has reformed its zoning code](#) to allow for more housing types, including two- to four-unit buildings in and around higher-density areas. This strategy can increase housing supply, lower housing costs, and create housing for families of different sizes, incomes, and needs. The city can encourage missing middle infill by updating fire codes and tax policies, educating stakeholders, providing permitting support through streamlined approval, and reducing parking requirements.



Accelerate the design, funding, and construction of Complete Streets.

The City of Memphis adopted a Complete Streets ordinance in 2013 and updated its [Complete Streets Plan](#) in 2020. Complete Streets balance the needs of all road users, especially pedestrians, cyclists, and transit riders, to ensure that streets are safe, efficient and accessible. They are a critical strategy in building stronger neighborhoods.



Expand options in all neighborhoods, especially within the urban core.

Neighborhoods need a variety of housing (rental and homeownership), transportation (transit, sidewalks, and bike lanes), and high-quality amenities (childcare, grocery stores, pharmacies, and retail options) to create [15-minute neighborhoods](#). Creating more vibrant neighborhoods promotes more thoughtful growth, while also prioritizing areas that may have been left behind.

Best-Practice Example

Implement Existing Plans

The City of Memphis' Comprehensive Plan, [Memphis 3.0](#), provides a strong guide for how to achieve a built environment that supports safe, affordable, and accessible neighborhoods. Implementing these strategies, in particular focusing on anchors and creating places for people, will result in stronger neighborhoods and more vibrant corridors.

Recommendation #2: Reimagine corridors to connect people and neighborhoods rather than separate them.

Most corridors in American cities have become wide, unsafe highways that divide communities. In Memphis, only [25% of jobs are in the central core](#), and corridors such as Lamar Avenue and Poplar Avenue provide not only vital access between neighborhoods, but can also be the location of a significant number of jobs and homes. To support more density, access to opportunity, more cohesive neighborhoods, and to connect Memphians to each other, corridors need to be reimaged to enhance their roles as both destinations and connectors.



Source: [Projects—City of Memphis Bikeway and Pedestrian Program \(wordpress.com\)](#)



Embrace greater mixed-use developments throughout the city. Mixed-use, higher-density developments, particularly along major corridors, allow for residential, commercial, office, and service uses, which are proven to improve [social connections and promote public transportation](#). In addition to these benefits, the additional activity levels increases “eyes on the street,” which has positive impacts on public safety.



Implement the frequent bus network. Building a high-quality transit system that is frequent, accessible, and reliable would reduce household transportation costs and improve access to opportunities for all Memphians. Memphis 3.0 identified a Short-Term Recommended Network, which includes four routes (20, 21, 7, and 5) that would have 15-minute frequency, at a total cost of \$38 million. The next mayor should move quickly to implement the recommended network, with a particular focus on a frequent bus network (service every 15 minutes, 20+ hours per day, 7 days per week). Bus system improvements should focus on increasing access to jobs within a certain time period (e.g. 30 minutes) and the route network should be reviewed every 5-7 years.



Retrofit Memphis’ corridors. The city should build on the success of the [Memphis Innovation Corridor](#) and expand to additional corridors, focusing on high-quality transit, transit-oriented development, and utilizing street design to improve health, safety and sense of place. Street design plays an important role in both [crime prevention](#) and [pedestrian safety](#). Ensuring corridors have adequate lighting, public green spaces, street trees, buried utilities, and tree-lined medians goes a long way in creating a sense of place.

Best-Practice Example

Public Private Partnerships

Cleveland, Ohio worked with numerous partners to revitalize the [Euclid Avenue corridor](#), which connects the city’s two largest commercial districts. Working with the transit authority, state and local government, and partners like the Cleveland Clinic, the city completed the HealthLine BRT in 2008. The new transit line is credited with generating \$6.3 billion in new development, 13,000 new jobs, and 4,000 new homes along the corridor.

Recommendation #3: Review what is working well and what needs improvement across city departments.

Memphis city government needs to work for Memphis residents. The next mayor should dedicate time and attention to reviewing what is working and what needs to be improved to ensure that the city's processes and structure are as efficient and effective as possible. The new mayoral administration should review zoning, land use, and existing plans, restructure city departments, and develop a housing and transit alliance to support organized reform.



Review, reform, and update zoning and land use.

Local jurisdictions are reviewing and [reforming existing zoning and land use policies](#) across the country to determine the best way to maximize housing options for their residents. Memphis is no exception. Responding to the needs of residents while improving the predictability of development approvals is a delicate balance, but can be done.



Restructure and consolidate the city departments associated with mobility and transportation.

The existing structure with Engineering, Public Works, and the Division of Planning and Development creates fragmentation and a lack of coordination across transportation projects. In the top 50 major regions in the country, Memphis is one of only four cities (along with Raleigh, Salt Lake City, and San Diego) with a shared engineering department. A new departmental structure with [one agency responsible for all transportation activities](#) would allow for better coordination across the planning, design, construction, and maintenance phases, allowing the city to quickly and effectively implement projects, strategies, and policies for multimodal transportation.

Best-Practice Example

Zoning for Housing Reform

In September 2023, Alexandria, VA, presented to its City Council a [Zoning for Housing/Housing for All](#) initiative with two objectives—zoning to expand housing production of both market-rate and affordable housing and zoning through an equity lens researching past discriminatory patterns, policies, and practices that have created these affordability challenges. Several zoning reform options were explored, including bonus height programming, historic overlays, transit-oriented development, and residential conversions.

Best-Practice Example

Housing and Transit Alliance

In Prince George's and Montgomery County, Maryland, housing and transportation community leaders connected with the local transit agency

and experts in housing finance and tax incentives to find ways to preserve and produce more affordable housing along its transit corridors. The county implemented a First Right of Refusal policy, allowing the county the right to refuse sales of multi-family housing for low and moderate-income families. The county can then transfer the right of purchase to a developer who will support greater affordability over a longer period of time.



Appoint a director of safe streets.

The new mayor should consider creating a new position in the mayor's office to focus on safe streets, the city's most valuable and extensive public space. The director of safe streets would have experience and best practices readily available to support reducing crime, improving neighborhood safety, and implementing innovative street design to reduce traffic fatalities. Since this position would work closely with multiple city departments, including the Memphis Police Department, Engineering, Public Works, and Planning & Development, being located within the mayor's office would maximize efficiency and coordination.



Create a city-county transportation and housing alliance. Memphis, along with other Tennessee cities, needs more transportation and housing champions. Transportation-housing alliances allow leaders to work together to develop holistic and sound practices. The next mayor needs to empower existing and additional leaders—both within city staff and out—to champion and prioritize policies, programming, and projects that emphasize greater mobility and affordability across the city.

Recommendation #4: Dedicate more funding for multimodal transportation and affordable housing.

Implementing the city’s vision for a safe, accessible multimodal transportation system and affordable, resilient housing will require increased investment. While municipal budgets are constrained everywhere, Memphis currently spends less than peer cities on its transit service, and an estimated [33% of its sidewalks](#) are considered in need of immediate repair. Memphis needs more general fund revenue for sidewalks, bike lanes, and vision zero projects, and to create a dedicated source of funding sufficient to improve transit. Similarly, dedicated funding for housing programs could accelerate preservation and production of affordable units, expand homeownership opportunities, and help keep low-income and elderly families in their communities.



Increase investment in the [Memphis Affordable Housing Trust Fund](#).

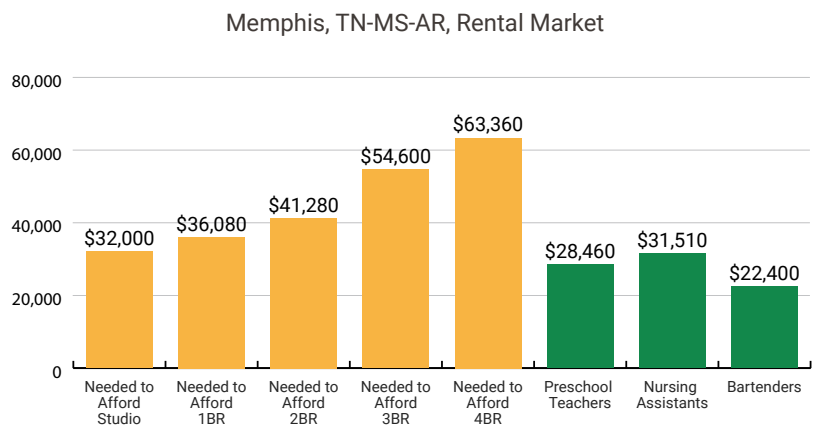
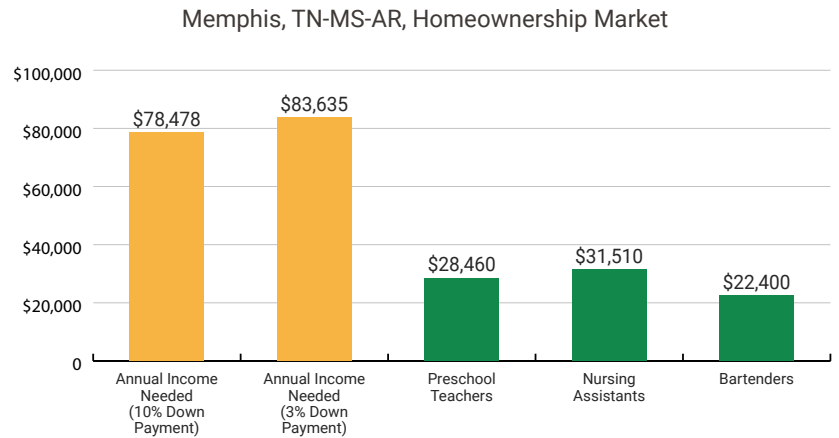
Created in 2019 to promote and protect housing affordability, the fund provided nearly \$1M in 2020 for single-family rehabilitation and aging in place efforts, however, there was no money allocated to the fund in 2021 due to limited federal grant funding. In 2024, the fund’s allocation increased to \$5M. To address the city’s shortage of over 30,000 affordable housing units in the city, it is critical that there is a dedicated and consistent stream of funding allocated to the fund each year. Potential revenue sources include PILOT funds, real-estate transfer taxes, document recording fees, property tax levy, hotel/motel taxes, general obligation bonds, and tax increment financing.



Increase funding for rehabilitation programs and intentional demolition.

Over 42% of Memphis’ housing stock was built prior to 1969, which signals a potential need for greater rehabilitation and demolition investment. Older homes are important parts of our history and communities, however older buildings can create health challenges, higher maintenance and utility costs, and, ultimately, blight that can contribute to public safety challenges. Creating new programs and funding for rehabilitation allows owners to maintain their homes, improve efficiency and resiliency, and sustain the many cultural and historically relevant communities in the city. While the city and county are working together on rehabilitation resources and efforts, additional staff capacity will be necessary to sustain the county’s housing repair needs.

Memphis housing is unaffordable for its most critical workers.



On average, nursing assistants and preschool teachers earn less than what is needed to rent a studio apartment and earn half of what is needed to purchase a home in Memphis.

[National Housing Conference, Paycheck to Paycheck](#)

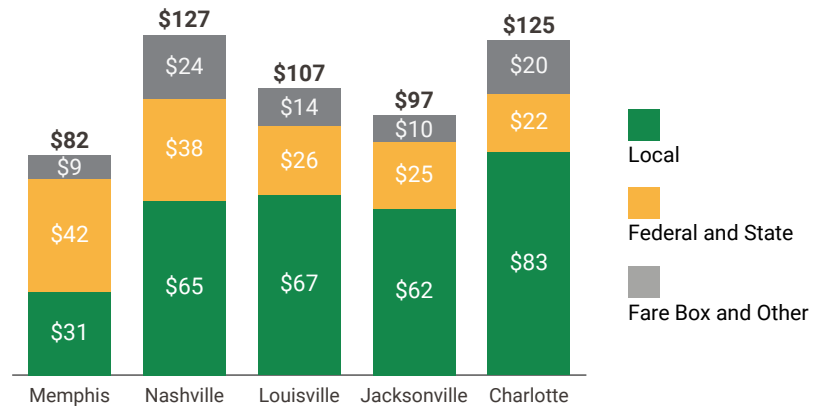




Memphis needs sufficient dedicated funding for transit.

Local dedicated funding provides reliable revenues that support quality transit and matching dollars that increase the likelihood of winning state and federal grants. Nationwide, 46 of the 50 largest metro areas have dedicated funding for their transit agencies. Orlando, Nashville, Memphis, and Hartford are the only four cities without dedicated funding.* The majority of cities, 39, utilize some form of sales tax, generating an average of almost \$394 million in annual revenue. Potential funding sources to consider include, [IMPROVE Act](#) local option taxes (sales tax, business tax, hotel/motel tax, and rental car tax) via referendum (available to both Shelby County and Memphis), parking revenues, and vehicle registration fees.

Memphis spends less per capita than peer cities on transit.



2017-2022 average operational spending per service area population by source Transit Agencies Profiles, National Transit Database



Best-Practice Example

Indy Connect

After a period of significant transit cuts, in 2010 leaders in Indianapolis formed Indy Connect, an initiative to improve transit and foster economic development in the region. Initially led by the Indianapolis Metropolitan Planning Organization, IndyGo, and Central Indiana Regional Transportation Authority, the initiative expanded to a coordinated regional effort involving six counties. In 2014, after

three years of lobbying, the state legislature authorized the six counties to hold county-wide voter referendums to increase local income tax rates up to .25%. Marion County voters approved the tax in 2016, and the tax generated \$56 million of funding for IndyGo in 2019.

*In 2022, Memphis redirected property tax revenues from expired PILOT programs to a special revenue fund for transit and mobility. While these revenues are crucial to MATA's ability to maintain current service and maintenance costs, the slow, long-term revenue growth will likely be unable to realize the vision and public demand for better transit in Memphis. A meaningful dedicated funding source, similar in scale to the revenue generated by the 2019 public safety referendum, is needed for MATA's ability to meet residents' expectations for high-quality transit.

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