

5.0 Needs Analysis

In Section 1, OMEGA established four goals for the development and implementation of the Regional Development Plan. The goals are:

1. Preserve Regional Assets to Support Local Economies
2. Increase the Safety of Regional Infrastructure
3. Facilitate Economic and Community Development
4. Develop and Maintain Regional Resiliency

These four goals, and their related objectives provide the overall guidance to assess the transportation and other needs of the region. These goals, together with the analysis of the Existing and Future Conditions of the transportation system of the region and the input provided by the members of OMEGA's Executive Board, Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC), and other stakeholders provide the framework for the Needs Analysis. Regional needs associated with these four goals will be covered within this section. Fiscal constraint will be addressed in Section 7 – Recommendations.

5.1 Preserve Regional Assets to Support Local Economies

The preservation of regional assets is vital to the long-term viability of the region. With a resurgent, restructuring, and expanding economy in the region, these assets will play an ever-increasingly important role in facilitating the movement of goods, people, services, and resources safely and efficiently. This section will summarize the needs to maintain for transportation and non-transportation infrastructure, such as water distribution and wastewater systems.

Roads

As indicated in Section 3.1, the OMEGA RTPO has 10,520 center line miles of roadway. Of this total, 71% are under local jurisdiction, and therefore may not be eligible for federal funding. In 2019, the state of Ohio raised the motor vehicle user fee by 10 cents/gallon to 38.5 cents/gallon total. This increase was distributed both to the Ohio Department of Transportation and to the local maintenance authorities (municipalities, counties, and townships). Keeping roads in a state of good repair, even with this modest increase, is a challenge for local maintenance authorities, especially in areas with high volumes of heavy truck traffic and areas where the population or jobs are decreasing (reducing local revenues). Compounding this issue is the fact that some locations are facing increasing traffic congestion as new development/reinvestment occurs, and as cities throughout the region begin adding population again, after years of decline.

OMEGA may need to assist local maintenance authorities with pursuing additional federal and state funding sources to complete necessary preservation and rehabilitation projects. OMEGA will also need to work collaboratively with ODOT and neighboring MPOs to ensure creative funding solutions are developed for complex projects in areas without adequate resources. This will support OMEGA's objective of increasing the number of lane miles in "Acceptable" pavement conditions on the Federal Aid system.

Bridges

As indicated in Section 3.1, the OMEGA RTPPO has 3,423 bridges. Of these, 183 are considered at risk, as their General Appraisal Rating is less than or equal to four. Bridges are critical links in the transportation system. The loss of a bridge through deterioration or closure could force residents and business inbound and outbound deliveries to detour several miles. Currently there are 12 closed bridges in the RTPPO and another 766 that are considered functionally obsolete.

Furthermore, 658 bridges are over 70 years of age. In the short term, many of these bridges will require more robust maintenance to keep them functioning as intended. Another 469 bridges (for a total of 1,127) will be 70 years or older by 2045, putting them near their end of their useful life. By 2045, nearly one third of all OMEGA RTPPO bridges will be 70 years or older. The level of investment needed to repair and/or replace these bridges will continue to climb as the infrastructure ages.

OMEGA will need to assist local maintenance authorities pursue additional federal and state funding sources to complete necessary preservation and rehabilitation projects. This supports OMEGA's objective of reducing the number of bridges on the local system with a General Appraisal Rating of four or less.

Active Transportation

The RTPPO currently has over 700 miles of existing bicycle facilities which includes designated national and state bike routes throughout each of the eight counties. Moving forward with the development and implementation of tri-county and eventual regional active transportation planning, OMEGA will work to preserve and maintain these existing facilities along with other existing infrastructure including sidewalks, trails, and buggy lanes. This work will include partnering with local communities to identify and assist with relevant funding applications.

Aviation

Each of the eight counties in the RTPPO is served by at least one public, general aviation airport. There has not been a new statewide study conducted since the 2015 Regional Transportation Plan. In that plan, the estimated cost to maintain system compliance for the current classification for each airport totaled \$33 million. Approximately \$31 million (94%) of that funding was for the maintenance of the primary runway and other pavements. A new study is scheduled in 2020 or 2021, and these totals will be revised upon the findings of that study.

Rail

Railroads in the OMEGA RTPPO are largely privately owned and maintenance of the railroad and its related structures falls to the owner or operator of those rail lines. OMEGA will provide a clearinghouse of current grant opportunities to local owners or operators that subscribe to the OMEGA mailing list to ensure the timely dissemination of information.

Maritime

Keeping maritime facilities in a state of good repair is imperative to the movement of waterborne goods along the Ohio River. Wellsville, Ohio (Columbiana County) is home to the only public intermodal port along the Ohio River that is located within the OMEGA RTPO. The Wellsville port is owned by the Columbiana County Port Authority. This port is crucial to development in Eastern Ohio, as barge traffic allows oversized loads to be transported close to the final assembly/installation site, reducing the amount of wear to the road and rail systems. This form of transportation is also largely cheaper than others, especially in bulk shipments. Maintenance of this port is vital to the continued economic growth of the region.

South of the Wellsville, along the Ohio River, are two lock and dam systems that could greatly impact the movement of maritime freight into and out of the RTPO. The first one downstream is the New Cumberland Lock and Dam located near Stratton, Ohio in Jefferson County, south of the OMEGA RTPO. These locks were opened in November 1959. The Pike Island Locks and Dams were opened in November 1963. This facility is in southern Jefferson County, near the Villages of Yorkville and Tiltonville. Both facilities are critical to waterborne access to the OMEGA RTPO and further into the Port of Pittsburgh, where the first ethane cracker in Monaca, Pennsylvania is located. Continued industrial development in the future along the Ohio River corridor is dependent on the safe operation of these locks and dams. By 2045, both facilities will be over eighty years old.

OMEGA will work collaboratively with the Columbiana County Port Authority to pursue federal, state, and other funding opportunities to keep the Wellsville Intermodal Facility in operational condition. OMEGA will also work with the Brooke-Hancock-Jefferson Metropolitan Planning Commission and Belomar Regional Council to advocate for increased spending on the maintenance of the locks and dams along the Ohio River to ensure the movement maritime freight is not delayed or impeded due to facility failures.

Other Infrastructure

It is essential for OMEGA to work to support the preservation of the high public investment into the region's infrastructure so far. The maintenance of existing infrastructure to include water and wastewater systems is a key component for community and economic development. Many of the existing water and wastewater systems in our region are nearing the end of their useful life and need to be replaced. Implementation of asset management programs will provide the framework for maintaining these systems and developing a financially sound strategic plan for replacement and rehabilitation.

While the need for new infrastructure exists, maintenance of existing assets will support new investments, paving the way for future investment and builds that can be built off well-maintained existing infrastructure.

5.2 Increase the Safety of Regional Infrastructure

Safety is an integral part of all networks that serve the OMEGA region. Transportation safety endeavors will be aligned with ODOT's new and existing efforts to make the regional network safer for all users. OMEGA will also work with communities to enhance or replace deficient water and wastewater systems to ensure that a safe reliable supply of drinking water is available, and that wastewater collection and treatment systems are protective of human health and the environment. Further assistance will be given to communities to provide safe public spaces and procure additional resources for public safety departments, such as police and fire.

Roads, Bridges, and Active Transportation

Roadway safety is an integral part of transportation planning. Safety is not limited to motorists, but also includes pedestrians, bicyclists, horse and buggy operators, and agricultural vehicle operators. Between January 1, 2016 and December 31, 2018, there were 29,991 reported crashes, just shy of 10,000 crashes per year on OMEGA RTPO roadways. The leading type of crash was Fixed Object (28%). This type of crash also includes roadway departures, where the vehicle strikes another vehicle, a mailbox, utility pole, tree, or ditch. This type of crash is common in rural areas, due to the higher speeds and narrower lane widths found on many county and township roads.

In December 2017, the OMEGA Executive Board adopted a resolution calling for a one percent reduction in the number and rate of fatal crashes, the number and rate of serious injury crashes, and the number of non-motorized crashes (bicycle, pedestrian, and buggy). This resolution supported a larger statewide initiative to add performance measures to the transportation planning process. In 2019, a new gubernatorial administration increased their focus on roadway safety for all users. Ohio's highway safety program, already one of the largest in the nation, was expanded and directed to improve dangerous intersections throughout the state.

OMEGA will work with a consultant to develop a systemwide screening tool to provide annual regional updates on dangerous intersections and road segments. This tool will be developed in FY 2021, and regional updates will be completed annually. OMEGA will also continue to work with the ODOT Local Safety Assistance program (or its equivalent) to study selected high-risk locations and provide consultant-led safety studies and/or safety funding applications.

These efforts will support OMEGA's objectives of reducing the number and frequency rate of fatal and serious injury crashes and reducing the number of fatal or serious injury non-motorized crashes.

Rail

In the OMEGA RTPO, grade crossing incidents are not common (4 incidents in 3 years). When they do occur, however, they are generally severe or fatal. Unfortunately, there were two incidents in Salem and Columbiana, that returned this type of crash to the safety spotlight. This type of crash is largely preventable. OMEGA will work with local officials, PUCO, ODOT, and the Ohio Rail Development Commission to study any grade crossing crashes and assist in funding applications for appropriate countermeasures, if needed. OMEGA will also work with Operation Lifesaver, a national non-profit, to incorporate educational materials for communities within the RTPO. This effort will support OMEGA's objective to reduce at-grade railroad crossing crashes to zero.

5.3 Facilitate Economic & Community Development

Facilitating economic and community development is the bedrock of OMEGA's existence as an LDD and EDD. With the addition of the RTPO, these efforts will utilize additional tools in creating opportunities for new businesses to move into the region or to allow existing businesses to expand. Historically, the Appalachian region has lagged the rest of the nation in many indicators of economic success. With an assortment of instruments spanning several distinct programs, OMEGA is uniquely positioned to assist communities in broadening and growing their economies for the advancement of the region.

Road

Access to employment and educational opportunities are critical for the success of the region. OMEGA will work with regional partners to determine the need for road or bridge improvements necessary to facilitate future economic or community development projects. OMEGA will assist in data collection and pursuing funding opportunities for projects as they are developed by local partners. OMEGA will also identify corridors that promote economic development and connectivity. OMEGA will advocate for the development of economic development corridors, such as the US 30 and Columbus to Pittsburgh Corridors. These efforts will support OMEGA's objective to increase the average number of jobs accessible within 30 minutes of driving and increase employment by attracting new businesses to the region or facilitating the expansion of existing businesses.

Transit

Investments in public transit and human services transportation will be essential for mobility throughout the region. As the population continues to age, the number of residents needing assistance to access non-emergency medical and other services will likely increase. A robust transit/human services transportation system will allow senior citizens, and persons with disabilities to age in place and remain in their houses independently for longer periods of time. Continuing work with regional transportation service providers to enhance collaboration and connectivity will support OMEGA's objectives to:

- ✓ Increase the number of commuters using transit
- ✓ Reduce denials
- ✓ Reduce cancellations and no-shows
- ✓ Track call volume to Transportation Service Providers (TSPs) and regional call center

Below is the list of current unmet needs, as outlined in the Regional Coordinated Human Services Transportation Plan:

Current Unmet Needs:

- More weekend services
- More travel service and payment options
- More efficient employment transportation
- Expand other types of transportation service
- Improve/increase bus service
- Expand non-Medicaid service hours
- Offer transfers and improve city connections
- Increase medical transportation outside county and state
- Easy fare/rate for low income individuals for regional mobility
- Simplify public information
- Local area hospitals closing, causing longer trips for providers and patients
- More frequent trips
- Evening transportation service
- Transportation to/from Akron-Canton airport
- Bus stop shelters
- Day and seasonal passes

Active Transportation

Active transportation infrastructure including sidewalks, bicycle lanes, trails, and buggy lanes are essential to enabling community and economic development throughout the region. Active transportation networks provide multi-use accessibility to local businesses, attractions, and recreation opportunities. These unique networks also allow tourists a variety of enjoyable ways to travel outdoors throughout the region's beautiful and vibrant communities. The Tri-County Active Transportation Plan and other regional active transportation planning activities support OMEGA's objectives to increase the number of commuters walking and biking and to increase the number of miles of trails or designated bike facilities throughout the region.

Rail

Rail can play a major role in the economic development of the region. Large quantities of freight can be removed from the road and safely delivered to businesses along the rail line. Freight can also be shipped to intermodal facilities, such as Wellsville, and reduce the number of miles needed for over the road trucking. In the OMEGA RTPO, most railroads are Class 2 or Class 3 regional and short line operators. Revenues generated by these railroads are lower than the Class 1 railroads (CSX and Norfolk Southern) and often maintenance activities are limited. To increase the efficiency of rail throughout the region, OMEGA will monitor funding opportunities to assist railroads, communities, and ODOT to replace substandard assets (such as bridges with insufficient vertical or horizontal clearances), rehabilitate abandoned lines for economic development, or develop new rail spurs needed for continued economic expansion.

Abandoned Mine Lands

Abandoned mine land in the OMEGA region poses as a threat to both economic development and the safety of the region. Sites located on this land require extremely expensive remediation before infrastructure can be built on the surface above old underground mines. Remediation of abandoned mine lands is also needed to transform vacant, unusable land into productive use leading to business development and job creation. OMEGA will assist communities with procuring funding assistance for the remediation so that site development costs are competitive with other regions. Dangerous highwalls and slips pose as unsafe to children and families exploring the rural countryside that makes the OMEGA region so beautiful and unique. OMEGA will continue to work and advocate for abandoned mine land remediation across the region.

Brownfield Remediation

During much of the 19th and 20th centuries, the regional economy was driven by coal mining, oil drilling, glass manufacturing, and steel mills. The abundance of red clay throughout the region also supported a thriving pottery industry. The subsequent rise of industrialization in the United States during the late 19th century created scores of industries that required the abundant resources of Appalachia to fuel growing factories and mills. The rich ore deposits in the area were shipped across the country to fuel the industry that would build a nation, but eventually leave Appalachia depleted and distressed. The lack of developable land throughout the region adds to the urgency of assessing and cleaning up brownfield properties. In the 2017 OMEGA Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS), a lack of shovel-ready sites was highlighted as a significant barrier to economic growth. There is new momentum building on the back of the thriving energy industry throughout the region. OMEGA will continue to assist communities in pursuing brownfield remediation funding to rehabilitate and revitalize potential brownfield site and prepare them for redevelopment.

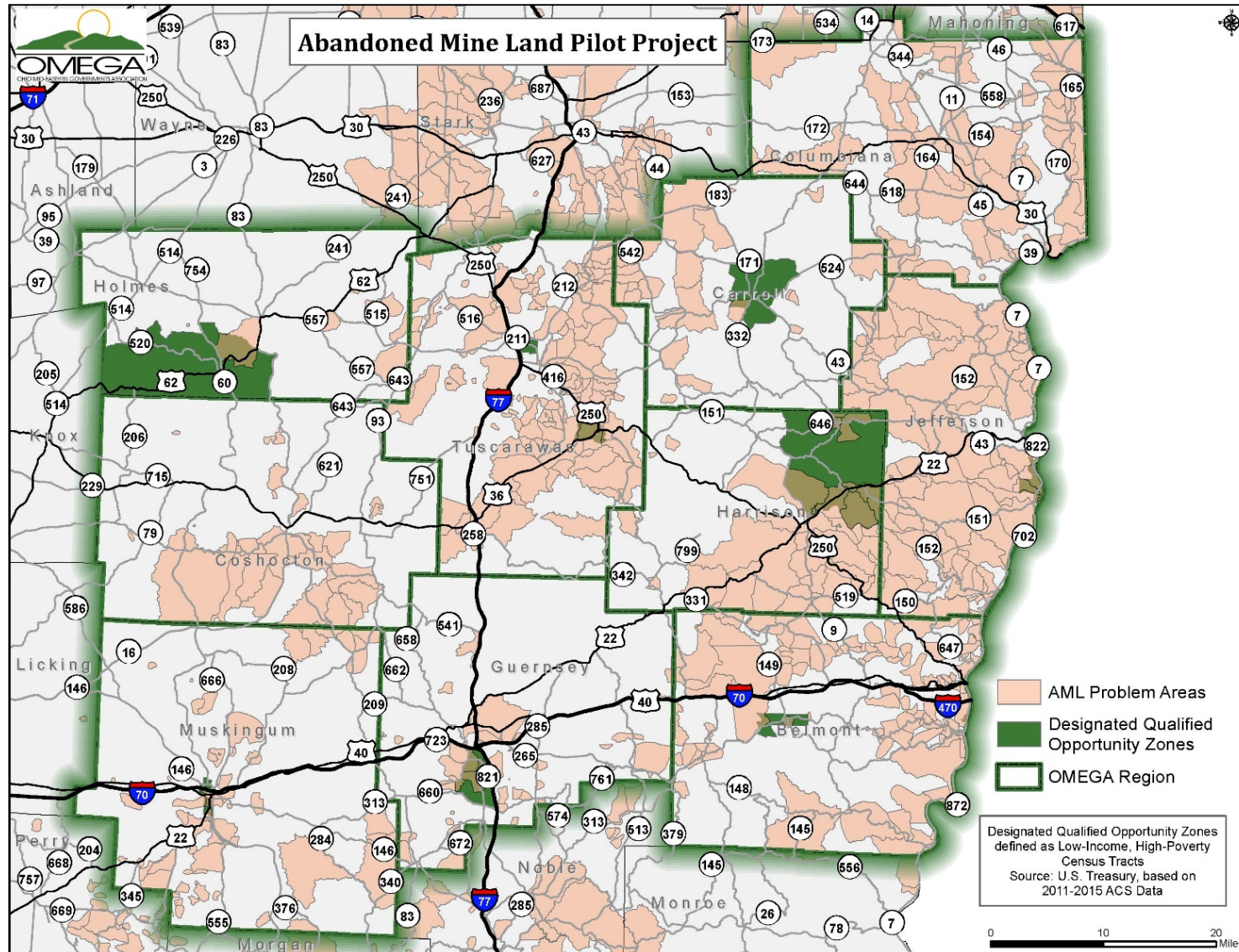


Figure 5-1: Abandoned Mine Land Problem Areas

Other Public Infrastructure

Access to safe drinking water, public wastewater systems, and reliable high-speed affordable broadband are needed to promote business development and expansion. Without these basic utilities, businesses are more likely to search elsewhere for developable sites, where these basic utilities are in place. As the rest of the country continues to develop broadband and public water access, the OMEGA region lags, putting our youth's education, health, and future in jeopardy of being behind. During times such as the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, when schools were shut down and students were required to do work from home, many students in the region lacked access to reliable broadband directly impacting their ability to receive a quality education. Lack of access to reliable broadband also prevents many small businesses from competing in today's global economy and during the pandemic of 2020, prevented many workers from working from home.

OMEGA will continue to assist local communities in finding funding for public infrastructure projects in order to reach economic parity with the rest of the state and the nation. This supports OMEGA's objectives of increasing the number of people and businesses in census blocks served by broadband and the number of households and businesses improved with access to safe drinking water or public wastewater systems.

Business Assistance

OMEGA will continue to host the Revolving Loan Fund (RLF) to support private, for-profit small businesses throughout the region. Through the **OMEGA Revolving Loan Fund (RLF)** program, businesses may be eligible for a fixed rate, low-interest loan to assist in the startup, purchase, or expansion of a business. Some eligibility requirements are as follows:

- The RLF can finance up to \$300,000, if all criteria is met and funds are available
- The business must be private-for-profit
- The business must create and/or retain full-time equivalent (FTE) job opportunities
- Owners must contribute no less than 10% cash equity towards the total project cost
- Maximum bank participation of no less than 50% of the total project cost is required
- Applicant/Borrower must occupy 51% or more of the commercial facility
- Loan proceeds can be used for acquisition and/or improvement of business assets including land, building, machinery, equipment; and limited term working capital
- Construction projects must comply with the Davis-Bacon Act more commonly known as prevailing wage - (www.dol.gov/whd/govcontracts/dbra.htm)
- Projects must comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (www.ada.gov/business.htm)
- The business must be located within the ten-county region served by OMEGA which includes Belmont, Carroll, Columbiana, Coshocton, Guernsey, Harrison, Holmes, Jefferson, Muskingum and Tuscarawas counties

OMEGA also administers the **State of Ohio Regional 166 loan** program which finances fixed assets only for businesses in the commercial, industrial, or distribution sectors. The Regional 166 loan program offers an attractive interest rate fixed at or below the current market rate and has many of the same requirements previously listed for the RLF program. The interest rate is determined upon approval of the OMEGA Loan Committee and is then recommended to the State Controlling Board for their approval. However, the State may change or adjust the rate as they deem necessary.

Please note the OMEGA loan programs operate on a first-come, first-serve basis. Unfortunately, resources are limited; therefore, OMEGA may not be able to assist with all loan requests due to lack of funds.

OMEGA will also support workforce enhancement projects to train prospective employees and to upskill existing employees with the needed skills of businesses within the region. The RLF, Regional 166, and workforce development programs support the OMEGA objectives to increase the number of businesses improved and the number of employees in manufacturing and other professions.

Community Development

OMEGA will continue to assist local communities with funding for their public infrastructure needs, including water, wastewater, broadband, stormwater and drainage, downtown and neighborhood revitalization, access roads, and economic development, including workforce development, facilitation of entrepreneurship and other activities leading to job retention and creation. These community and economic development activities will provide the framework necessary to facilitate higher Median Household Incomes especially in comparison to state and national incomes, lower poverty rates higher educational attainment levels, and lower transfer payments in the region.

5.4 Develop & Maintain Regional Resiliency

Resiliency is fundamental for the continued growth and success of the OMEGA region. OMEGA will work with communities to incorporate resiliency in economic, community, and transportation planning projects. To mitigate adverse impacts, OMEGA will help communities plan for and/or mitigate economic downturns, extreme weather events, and other external factors that may impact the region. This goal, and its associated objectives will be outlined in Section 6 – Resiliency.