“Of the many strategies to reduce car trips, encouraging multimodal integration is a promising direction, as a single transportation mode is unlikely to fulfill the mobility needs of various commuters. Our goal was to develop and implement a flexible commute program that incentivizes commuters for driving less—an answer to the ubiquitous monthly parking contract model that provides little incentive for commuters to avoid driving from one day to the next.”

— Yingling Fan, Professor, Humphrey School of Public Affairs

Why was the study needed?
Transportation is the largest source of greenhouse gas emissions in both the US and the Twin Cities, and commuting trips are a major contributor to transportation emissions. To meet its emission-reduction mandates, Minnesota needs strategies to reduce car trips—especially single-occupancy vehicle travel. This CTS project aimed to leverage existing transportation infrastructure and systems to provide more flexible, multimodal transportation options for parking contract holders at Minneapolis’ ABC Ramps, who tend to be single-occupancy vehicle drivers.

About ABC Ramps
- **ABC Ramps** was built on top of the I-394 and I-94 access points on the west side of downtown Minneapolis in 1992. The ramps have more than 6,000 stalls.
- The Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) owns the ramps and is required to invest in congestion-reduction strategies for downtown Minneapolis.
- Carpooling strategies have not gained traction, so MnDOT is investigating additional strategies for reducing single-occupancy vehicle trips and daily parking demand.

FlexPass: A hybrid parking–transit product
The research team collaborated with the study’s advisory group to design and implement the FlexPass program, which offered unlimited transit use along with in-and-out privileges at the ramps for 10 or 14 days per month (depending on the chosen contract). The cost of a FlexPass contract was calculated to offer a discount over simply combining existing transit and parking products, thereby rewarding commuters for embracing limitations and mode flexibility.

Key takeaways
- **FlexPass shows promise**: Phase One study efforts indicate that FlexPass is a viable product that could be attractive to downtown commuters. The actual number of interested commuters and what impacts FlexPass would have for congestion mitigation, however, are uncertain.
- **Parking reigns supreme**: Phase Two of the study was conducted post-COVID, and overall enrollment was much greater than in the first phase. FlexPass participants parked more frequently, but interest in the program and transit use were less than expected.
• **Integrate parking with transit:** This study confirmed that one card can be used for both ABC Ramps and Metro Transit. In the future, ABC Ramps customers could be given a combined parking and transit card rather than only a parking card, as a reminder to consider public transit each time they park.

• **Institutionalize the FlexPass program:** Benefit providers such as human resource departments and transportation management organizations could promote FlexPass, offer more flexibility to commuters, and reduce the complexity of accessing multimodal travel.

• **Simplify commuter tax benefits:** Today, the commuter tax benefit offers a $280/month reimbursement for qualified parking or high-occupancy transit to the employee and the employer. However, transit and parking expenses must be tracked separately, creating an unnecessary hurdle to providing flexible commute benefits.

**How was the study conducted?**

The study team conducted multiple data collection efforts to assess the viability of this alternative parking contract design. These included online interest surveys, online evaluation surveys, and travel behavior data collection using Daynamica, a digital day reconstruction app. The research was conducted in two phases, beginning in February 2020 and ending in August 2022. During the project’s second phase (beginning in October 2021), the FlexPass offering was adjusted in response to a survey of interested FlexPass users collected during summer 2021. The new approach included a parking-only 14-day flexible pass and a parking-plus-unlimited-transit access pass.

The implementation of the FlexPass program was severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which drastically altered commute patterns in Minneapolis. For example, in Fall 2021, ABC Ramps were filled to only 20 to 30 percent of their daily capacity, and in December 2021, ridership on Metro Transit was at 50 percent of pre-pandemic levels. As a result of these impacts, data collection efforts did not yield sufficient data to generate conclusive findings. The data did, however, provide rich insights into the viability of alternative parking contracts designed to limit the amount of driving.

**Conclusion**

Despite COVID impacts, researchers found that integrated parking and transit passes designed to limit the amount of single-occupancy vehicle driving trips are a potentially viable option that could offer downtown commuters flexibility and incentivize them to telecommute or take transit to work more often—promoting more sustainable mobility. Future opportunities for advancing this project include better integrating parking with transit, offering FlexPass in more of downtown Minneapolis, and simplifying commuter tax benefits.

“We set out to investigate the ability of commuter programs to shape commuting behavior and test the viability of a combined parking and transit program. Little did we know the study would be conducted during COVID, causing a large shift in metro-wide commuting habits. While we were unable to develop definitive findings due to these disruptions, as commuters and employers look for more post-COVID commute flexibility, FlexPass could help them establish this pattern for the long term.”

—Yingling Fan, Professor, U of M Humphrey School of Public Affairs