

Traffic Levels in the Albuquerque Metropolitan Planning Area Hold Steady

MRMPO tracks several key datasets and statistics through its **Traffic Monitoring Program** that relate to travel volumes and associated behavior. The new numbers are out for 2024, and they reveal some interesting patterns. First, work-at-home trends that had ramped up during COVID continue to have an impact on reducing regional travel. Data from the US Census Bureau show that four years following the pandemic, approximately 13.3 percent of workers continue to work from home on most days, compared with just five percent in 2019; this amounts to 52,000 workers off the roads on most workdays. Second, the vehicle miles tracked in the region have been essentially unchanged over the past three years and remains approximately eight percent lower than 2019. Taken together, these figures present a potential opportunity to reevaluate how we accommodate regional travel need today and into the future. However, there is a complexity to the issue that planners and engineers face when considering the region's mobility needs and travel options.

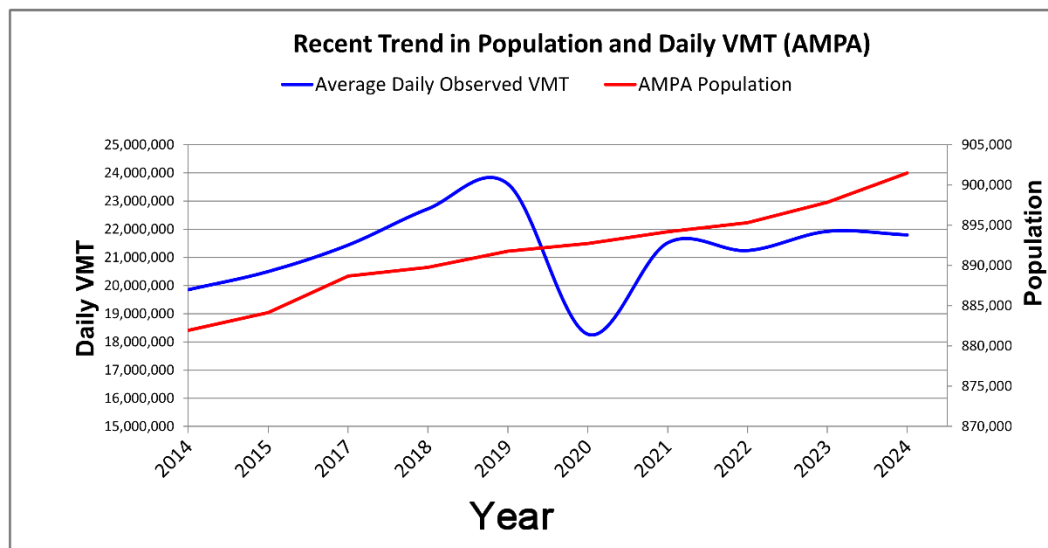


Chart 1: Trends in Regional Population and Daily Average VMT

More Workers are Working-at-Home and in Virtual Meetings

The COVID impacts of 2020 on vehicle travel were staggering as regional daily traffic volumes dropped precipitously. Although the pandemic resulted in shuttered businesses and a surge in online shopping, a moderating response was the emergence of a largely remote workforce in most industries comprised of work at home (WaH) and virtual meetings in-office. In the years following 2020 as we readjusted to life “post-pandemic,”

there is an interesting shift in the data. Prior to the pandemic, regional traffic volumes had grown essentially hand-in-hand with regional population, yet the past several years show a departure from that correlation; population continues to grow at a steady albeit slow pace, while regional traffic volumes have remained essentially flat, albeit with sub-area variations with some neighborhoods growing and others falling.

It is likely that this regional shift is at least partially due to the higher percentage of workers working from home. In the years prior to 2020, approximately 20,000 workers worked from home on most days; following COVID, WaH peaked in 2021 to reach 75,000 workers and now currently rests at about 52,000 workers. This statistic is impactful to traffic patterns because work commutes make up approximately 70 percent of all travel.

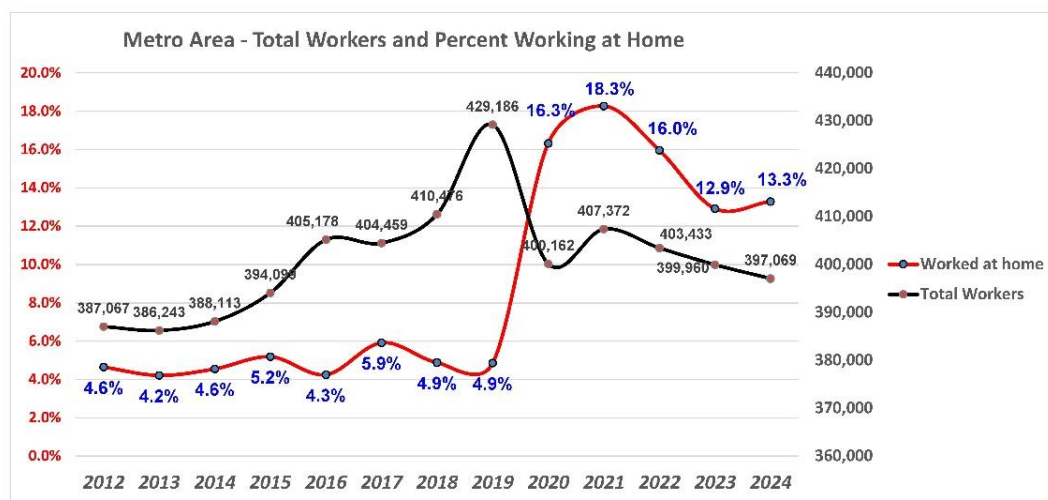


Chart 2: Total Workers and Percent Work from Home (*'22-24 WaH data for Bern Co and San Co only)

It is important to note that in addition to would-be commuters working from home, the reduction in miles traveled is further fueled by virtual meetings, classes, appointments and shopping, as the explosion of tools like Zoom have fundamentally changed the way we do business.

Travel Pattern Variations by Subarea

A close look at the data show variation in travel trends and work at home by job type, geographic area, socioeconomic status, land use, and internet access, among other factors. For example, areas that are heavily single family residential have bucked the regional trend by experiencing increased traffic volumes. This has led to river crossing volumes growing by four percent from 2019, with vehicle trips across the Rio Grande at an all-time high of 579,500 vehicles on an average annual weekday. Subarea variations are a

critical part of the picture when planning for transportation projects, however, they also offer insight into potential land use strategies for mitigating congestion. Increasing employment opportunities in primarily residential areas, and attracting housing to job centers, when appropriate, can be highly effective strategies for alleviating congestion, especially across the river.

Impact on Transportation Infrastructure

At the regional level the picture is clear: vehicle miles travelled overall is lower than the years leading up to 2020, and do not appear to be “bouncing back” but rather leveling off. This dynamic has the potential to shape future investments in transportation infrastructure, particularly given that roadways are generally designed for their highest volume peak hour of travel based on the daily average. If travel during peak commute times is happening on fewer days due to hybrid schedules (e.g., in office 2 to 3 days per week being most common with Mondays and Fridays WaH), fully remote work, or is spread out more evenly due to flexible work hours (e.g., 10-hour work days with Fridays off), additional roadway capacity might not be needed.

Planners must remain aware that the corridor-level highest peak hour of travel may still exist during mid-week (Tuesday-Thursday) when employees are in-office. The challenge agencies face is to provide a multi-modal transportation system that is resilient and built to accommodate all modes safely, for all times of day and days of week and with a level of reliable connectivity to suit the needs of all users. In the event there is excess capacity throughout the remainder of the day, a thorough engineering analysis is necessary before reducing capacity intended to handle peak hour demand.

Consequently, it is always possible that more employees will return to the office in the future. A recently released article (Forbes, March 2023) notes that exclusive “work from home” is not always best as it precludes the benefits of the in-person work environment such as heightened collaboration, spontaneous creativity, and mentorship, among others. Planners and engineers must remain nimble to fluctuations in work commutes, while remaining diligent about using limited public dollars wisely when making future transportation infrastructure decisions.

The data reinforce similar findings from the *2045 Metropolitan Transportation Plan* and prior MTPs that show that work-at-home and flexible work schedules can be a viable strategy for attaining reduced travel.

Traffic Monitoring Program

Data for this article is generated by MRMPO's Traffic Monitoring Program for the metropolitan area, which offers unique insights into travel demand and are critical for planning for safe and efficient multimodal transportation systems. The program generates key findings annually including maps, tables, and charts. Click here for the [2024 Traffic Flow Maps](#). The link will take you directly to the latest traffic information:

- Separate maps for the noted geographic areas of the region
- A series of traffic statistics including 2024 Albuquerque Metropolitan Planning Area (AMPA) roadway mileage, Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT), and Vehicle Hours Traveled (VHT)
- Top 25 Busiest Intersections with the past years (2019 thru 2024) for comparison
- Various graphics of historic traffic statistics and trends on Daily VMT and VMT per capita
- Volumes at select locations of interest such as the Rio Grande River Crossings and the Big I

Contact: Nathan P. Masek, MRCOG Senior Transportation Planner, (505) 724-3620, npmasek@mrcog-nm.gov