



Dedicated to a Strong Greater Minnesota

June 18, 2020

Chair Hornstein and Members of the House Transportation Committee:

On behalf of the more than 100 member cities of the Coalition of Greater Minnesota Cities, I write to urge Driver and Vehicle Services (DVS) and this Committee to consider modifications to the current driver testing backlog plan to better serve all areas of the state. At the request of our member cities, the CGMC has reached out directly to DVS about this issue prior to this hearing, and we thank DVS Director Emma Corrie for welcoming rural perspectives and input. We hope that the Committee's discussion can lead to increased collaboration between rural stakeholders, DVS, and the legislature on this issue going forward.

Even before the emergence of COVID-19, the significant backlog in driver tests facing the state was emerging as significant quality of life issue in Greater Minnesota. Limited service and high demand at many of DVS's 93 testing locations around the state was causing significant delays and inconvenience to test-takers. The problem with behind-the-wheel road testing was particularly acute, with some residents forced to travel long distances from their homes, bypassing many closer testing locations just to find one with availability to offer a test.

Now, shutdowns related to COVID-19 have significantly worsened the backlog issue. But as DVS has begun to implement its current plan to address that backlog, significant geographic equity concerns have emerged. When DVS began to gradually re-open testing centers in May, it only opened 14 of its 93 locations. Unfortunately, just ten of those testing sites are located outside of the seven-county metro area, and some areas of the state are particularly poorly served.

For example, communities in Northern Minnesota are particularly burdened under the DVS plan. There are currently no testing sites open north of US Highway 2, meaning the residents of cities like Roseau, Warroad, or Ely must drive significant distances and commit considerable time and resources to obtain a test. In fact, the Bemidji location is currently the only testing center serving the Northwest corner of the state, with other sub-regional testing centers shutdown. But to put it in perspective, a resident of Roseau being forced to take a round trip of more than four hours and 260 miles to reach the testing center in Bemidji is the equivalent of a resident of Minneapolis or St. Paul having to travel to Mason City, Iowa.

Moreover, while behind-the-wheel tests are provided on an appointment basis, knowledge testing is done on a first-come, first-served basis. This process means that individuals embarking on that trip are not even guaranteed they will be able to take the test they are seeking when they get there. Consolidation has also not improved the customer experience in the operating locations. Recent firsthand reports from the Greater Minnesota DVS testing centers describe them as "chaotic" and running behind schedule.

We ask that DVS and this Committee begin to take steps to address these issues and improve service to Greater Minnesota as soon as possible. First, we urge DVS to evaluate the geographic distribution of the testing centers that are currently open around the state and work toward safely opening additional locations.

Second, DVS has indicated to the CGMC prior to this hearing that they are open to expanding their online platforms to allow enhanced online access for individuals in Greater Minnesota who are seeking knowledge tests, possibly including online reservations for these services. We urge DVS to take these steps as soon as practicable and ask the legislature to provide DVS with the ability to further expand its online services.

Third, we ask DVS to articulate clear and transparent criteria that will guide its decision-making on whether re-open additional testing facilities. We hope that these criteria include, at a minimum: (1) a clear set of metrics DVS will consider when determining which of its testing centers will re-open next; (2) a regional analysis of the current plan's progress in overcoming testing backlogs in different areas of the state; and (3) metrics designed to balance testing efficiency with geographic equity concerns by establishing goals concerning maximum travel times and wait times customers can be expected to experience in seeking a test.

Finally, we urge DVS to engage in efforts to better communicate with local partners and the public. Several CGMC member cities are home to DVS testing centers that are currently shut down, but many of those cities have indicated that they have received little communication or clarity around whether their testing center will be reopening. In fact, this limited communication includes more than one instance in which the local DVS testing center is located in a city-owned facility, but where even those cities have received little clarity about what to expect.

Again, we appreciate the Committee's attention to this issue and Director Corrie's openness to receiving feedback from communities in the state who don't feel represented by the current plan. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bradley Peterson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Bradley Peterson
Executive Director
Coalition of Greater Minnesota Cities