

14 IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

INTRODUCTION

For regional commuter transportation services, a number of options exist to manage and administer a program (or more than one program) in Central Minnesota.

This study serves as a roadmap for future transportation investments, providing a menu of options for services that could be implemented. Carrying forward any of the preferred service alternatives requires a wide range of activities. It will be critical to identify which organizations and entities would be responsible for implementing new commuter bus routes, and what responsibilities they would have with regard to policy oversight and day-to-day management/operations. This chapter discusses the steps that might be taken to carry forward the various elements of this study. It also presents some considerations for enhancing the effectiveness of commuter services and provides some guidance for regional land use policies to encourage more effective commuter transportation services in District 3. Figure 14-1 illustrates some of the basic implementation steps suggested to advance the findings of this District 3 Commuter Study.

Figure 14-1 Basic Implementation Steps



ESTABLISHING A TRANSIT COORDINATING COUNCIL

Strategy for Bringing Key Stakeholders Together

To help define organizational decisions regarding who might lead the efforts to implement a regional commuter transit service or a new District 3 vanpool program, several steps should be undertaken to improve existing regional transit coordination and to start to build a foundation for future commuter transit services. As part of this effort, a primary consideration for District 3 is to initiate a transit coordinating council at the district level or within each region.

Although many of District 3's longer distance commuter transit needs are limited, significant numbers of local, county, or multi-county transit providers operate throughout the district, and are in many cases supplemented by human service transportation providers. In very few instances do these existing services work together as a coordinated transportation network or system, and there is no established mechanism through which existing operators can work together to address transit issues, develop regional services or address new needs.

An important first step toward regionalizing transit service — not necessarily for commuter purposes alone, but commuter transportation would play a role in any coordination effort — would be to establish a transit coordinating council or coordinating councils. Presumably, one could be established in each region, but the coordinating councils of all three regions could work together and meet as a group on a regular basis.

According to the Minnesota Statewide Transportation Policy Plan: 2009-2028, specific direction is provided for MPOs, transit agencies, and human service agencies to "work together to evaluate transit needs and develop strategies to increase transit service and options." The Plan notes "there is a growing role for transit in addressing the needs of commuters through support for rideshare programs, establishing new services, and providing for park-and-pool and/or park-and-ride lots," but also calls for "expanded carpool and vanpool assistance." The plan affirms that "RDCs and planning commissions, tribal governments, rural transit providers, human service agencies, and local jurisdictions should continue to work toward strengthening and expanding core transit services."

The purpose of a transit coordinating council would be to formalize an approach for existing and potential transit providers to address common and interparty issues through a more regional perspective. Participation in the transit coordinating council could be voluntary, and the council would serve to promote and facilitate cooperation and coordination, and provide a forum through which participants could address regional issues and share expertise. Working through the coordinating council(s) could afford the implementation of commuter strategies identified in this study, with the coordinating council taking a lead role in improving coordination, sharing expertise, developing common marketing tools, and exploring funding opportunities. A coordinating council could also play an important role in the development of a governing and administrative structure for a regional transit service operation. The RDCs may be the most logical parties to lead development of the coordinating councils.

What would be the Most Appropriate Responsibilities for Coordinating Councils in District 3?

Key responsibilities of coordinating councils in District 3 would likely be the following:

- **Improve coordination among District 3's existing services.** As noted in this report, a number of transit services exist within District 3, but few of them work together as part of a system and there are only modest coordinated efforts within the district and with operators in adjacent districts. Once formed, a major focus of the coordinating council would be to facilitate improved service coordination in District 3.
- **Improve sharing of expertise.** There are currently a number of similar programs with different operating parameters, like volunteer driver programs, different fare programs, service hours and days, etc. Another important focus area of a coordinating council should be to compare individual practices to determine which work best and then work with individual providers to extend those practices to other services.
- **Better publicize and market existing services.** Existing services are not well publicized or marketed (at the beginning of this study, it was often difficult to obtain detailed information about the services). Another major focus area of a transit coordinating council could be to improve information on existing services. The coordinating council could establish a clearinghouse that provides information about the availability of existing services via the Internet, phone, print media, and other methods.
- **Explore funding opportunities.** One of the major challenges in the development of commuter transit services will be how to fund them. The coordinating council could work with its individual constituencies to determine how existing revenues should be used, and whether there could be support for a sales tax or excise tax to support investment in capital improvements to support commuter transportation.
- **Establish the framework to implement new regional commuter transportation services.** The next section describes the potential roles and responsibilities for organizations and agencies that may participate in the development of regional transportation programs and services.

ASSESSING AND DEFINING ROLES FOR VARIOUS STAKEHOLDER AGENCIES IN DISTRICT 3

Responsibilities for Planning and Implementing Regional Commuter Services

Several key responsibilities exist for developing and administering commuter services in District 3. Presumably, there would be one administrative or lead agency, either for the entire district or for each region, that would assume all administrative functions such as routine tasks in overseeing a vanpool program or transit service's daily operation, as well as the planning, financing and overall performance monitoring of a system. The major responsibilities of this entity, referred to as the "lead agency" are as follows:

- Purchasing and contract oversight (depending on how service is implemented)
- Short and long-term planning and scheduling
- Analysis of commuter transportation service performance
- Fare policy, including structure and pass arrangements
- Capital improvement programming and grant applications
- Federal and state reporting requirements

- Monitoring federal and state legislation
- Marketing and advertising the commuter transportation services

Characteristics of a Lead Agency

A number of different possible lead agencies are considered for oversight of commuter transit services and vanpool services in District 3. To refine the list of potential administrators, three important areas are discussed regarding which roles might be assigned to which organizations or agencies in District 3. These include (1) administration, (2) accountability, and (3) ease of implementation.

Administration

An appropriate lead agency will be able to assume administrative responsibility for a regional commuter service and reduce duplication of current administrative functions. Many organizations and entities have an administrative structure that would be capable of absorbing a regional commuter transit routes or a vanpool program. There are several transit providers in District 3, and some of them such as St. Cloud Metro Bus and Tri-CAP, which already operate service, would have the experience and capabilities to add administration of regional commuter services to their list of responsibilities (although additional staffing may be required). The objective in selecting a lead agency with administrative experience is that administration of commuter transit service — and possibly vanpools and rideshare program management too — can become one of many responsibilities related to the current activities of the organization.

The other key component of finding a suitable lead agency for administration of new commuter services is the *potential* for keeping costs lower, based on current administrative responsibilities. At this time, however, there are no reasonable economies of scale that can be easily identified for any single organization in District 3 related to the startup of new commuter bus routes or vanpool oversight.

Accountability

District 3's political environment makes accountability an essential element in the identification of a suitable lead agency. The lead agency must appropriately represent the interests of all parties involved in the new commuter services. For example, stakeholders in St. Cloud may be interested in seeing more regional services travel to St. Cloud from outlying communities, or bring people to town not only for work or school, but also for medical, retail and social reasons. Wright County stakeholders recognize the need for commuter services to the Twin Cities, but the lead agency would have to be accountable to elected officials who may be concerned about operating service that takes people outside of the county. Having a single entity tasked with commuter transit and ridesharing in District 3 may not be appropriate given the size of the district: few Wadena or Cass County residents would see much value in supporting a district-wide administrator if all of the funding and programming is going to programs in Region 7W. Thus, balancing local and regional interests will be important in defining an appropriate lead agency or agencies.

Nevertheless, any regional commuter transportation service will be a cooperative effort involving multiple jurisdictions and interests. It will be important for all participants and funders to feel that the lead agency represents their interests.

Implementation

The degree of difficulty for an agency to assume oversight responsibility to operate regional commuter transit services service must also be addressed. Although appropriate political and administrative structures may already be in place at some organizations, transitioning them to fully assuming the administrative responsibilities for a regional commuter bus service, for example, may be a challenge. It is assumed that new transit services might be operated by an existing provider with their own vehicles, or by a private contractor who could also provide the vehicles, but new vehicles could also be purchased. Likewise, a vans could be purchased for a vanpool program or provided through a vanpool leasing provider such as VPSI or Enterprise.

If contracting is necessary, any of the counties, transit operators, or MnDOT have a structure in place for administering contracts. Nevertheless, as this study was prepared, no single entity expressed significant interest in undertaking a role in administering, managing or operating regional transit services, which suggests that ease of implementation may be more challenging in District 3 than either the administrative responsibility considerations or the accountability considerations discussed above.

POTENTIAL ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

A few specific organizations were considered for their potential role as a lead agency or as a partner with specific advisory, grant writing, or administrative functions. These were identified based on where the proposed services might be implemented. Brief discussions follow for oversight by a specific county, a nonprofit agency or local organization, an existing transit agency, the St. Cloud APO, MnDOT, or a new agency or administrative structure.

Wright County and/or Stearns County

Although neither has experience operating transportation services directly, either Wright County or Stearns County could be interested in overseeing new regional commuter transit service. These counties are identified because the preferred regional bus services are the Cold Spring-St. Joseph-St. Cloud route serving Stearns County, and the services from St. Michael or Buffalo, both in Wright County. Wright County's role might be managed through the Wright County Coordinator, or potentially any of the following departments: Highway, Human Services (which oversees the senior transportation program), Park, or Planning and Zoning. In Stearns County, the program could be managed by the County Administrator, or a specific department such as Public Works, Environmental Services, or Human Services. Since almost any of these departments operates with a lean staff, additional funding may be required to support a part-time employee to oversee transit operations.

There are many advantages for either of the counties to assume the management oversight function. First, many of the potential sources to fund the service require that a public agency apply for and receive funds, an area in which both counties have experience. Both Wright and Stearns Counties' funding stability and prior experience managing various contracts are other major advantages for a county to assume this management role. Possible disadvantages of having one of the counties serve as a lead agency include the fact that regional transit services are not currently overseen by either county, and that most local transit services are provided by local or regional nonprofits.

A Nonprofit Agency, Local Organization or Rural Transit Provider

There are a limited number of nonprofit agencies, including some transit operators, in District 3 that may be interested in and qualified to serve as the lead agency for regional commuter services. Two likely ones include Tri-CAP, which provides an array of services, including transportation, in Stearns County, and Rider River, the transportation provider that serves selected Wright County communities. The familiarity of both of these agencies with transit operations and transit funding suggests they may be appropriate lead agencies. There are certainly some advantages to Tri-CAP, which operates the Transportation Resource Center and focuses primarily on providing transportation assistance and services in Region 7W, but which also provides mobility management services for all of District 3 under a two-year grant from MnDOT.

Tri-CAP currently offers basic transportation services that potentially could be expanded with additional resources (Tri-CAP's Mobility Management program currently has one full-time staff person.) Tri-CAP's Mobility Manager has conducted extensive outreach in the region to chambers of commerce, individual employers, governmental agencies, and a number of other organizations. Tri-CAP also has been working to build partnerships with regional agencies such as the Metropolitan Council, but does not yet offer enough services to be able to develop a full collaborative relationship. Additionally, the TRC has purchased rideshare matching software that has the capability of registering hundreds of thousands of individuals and can be expanded to include specialized vanpool and GRH modules. To date, between 100 and 200 Central Minnesota residents are registered in the rideshare database with TRC. Tri-CAP's current program could be expanded into a full-fledged regional commuter transportation program, however doing so would require additional staff and program resources.

No other nonprofit-operated transit services exist in Stearns or Wright Counties, but some organizations, such as the Chamber of Commerce or Community Action Agency, could be potentially appropriate lead agencies. Given the myriad roles and responsibilities of a lead agency, it may be difficult to identify an organization that has both experience and interest in managing regional commuter options.

The major advantage of a nonprofit organization serving as the lead agency is the potential to secure labor at below-market rates, as well as by employing volunteers. Another advantage is that a local nonprofit agency would intimately understand the particular needs of certain transit market segments and would be perceived as focusing on local needs.

A major disadvantage is that a private organization will not be eligible to apply for some public funds, and no local organizations have direct experience in full-scale regional commuter bus operations. Few local organizations have a mandate that goes beyond serving a very specific population segment. Any human services-focused nonprofit might inevitably find the administration of a commuter service that is not limited to specific populations to fall outside of its organizational mission.

St. Cloud Metro Bus

St. Cloud Metro Bus may be an appropriate agency. The organization operates transit services throughout St. Cloud and beyond, to Sartell, Sauk Rapids and Waite Park. Metro Bus also provides Link service for Northstar, providing the connection between St. Cloud and the end of the rail line in Big Lake.

Although the agency has limited funding, which has impacted local services, it still may be appropriate, based on their existing fleet, to operate services in the Cold Spring-St. Joseph corridor. Metro bus also has the capability of contracting to provide services, write grant applications for new vehicles, and manage a vehicle fleet, so the agency could also have a role in overseeing a vanpool program based in St. Cloud.

A disadvantage for Metro Bus is the perception that the service is a local service, and the agency would have a difficult time justifying administration of any services in the northern or eastern parts of District 3. Without appropriate levels of funding to expand its scope of services — assuming new commuter bus routes and a vanpool program — Metro Bus may be seen as overreaching beyond its mission.

St. Cloud APO

Taking a holistic approach to community transportation issues is part of the mandate of regional agencies and organizations. Because the proposed regional commuter services may serve several counties and address the needs of people traveling in and around the St. Cloud area, the St. Cloud APO may be an appropriate entity to administer a commuter transportation program.

The APO is involved in regional transit planning efforts and has the staff to coordinate and review transit funding applications. The APO is responsible for coordinating local transportation funds and ensuring that transit planning efforts are consistent with the Regional Transportation Plan.

APOs and councils of government administer transit systems in communities throughout the United States, particularly in areas where regional services are operated.

The advantage with the St. Cloud APO as the lead agency is a regional commuter service would benefit from the regional focus of the organization, allowing it to coordinate services currently provided within individual jurisdictions.

Disadvantages are that the APO has a very lean staff, and has no direct experience administering a transit operation, nor has it expressed any interest in doing so. The APO does not have a significant stake in regional commuter transportation services, and much of the APO's work focuses on the St. Cloud urbanized area, while regional services would operate through a larger area.

The APO could be an appropriate lead agency if there becomes greater interest in consolidating transit services in St. Cloud and the surrounding area.

Minnesota Department of Transportation

MnDOT is identified as a potential lead agency, but oversight of regional commuter services and their operation is seen as an unlikely role for this State of Minnesota department. MnDOT's more likely role is in the development and adoption of regional commuter bus and rail service standards, standards for park-and-ride lots, and potentially the administration of a vanpool program. Region 7W may be an appropriate lead agency based on its mission, geography and its location as the portion of District 3 where most of the preferred new commuter services might be implemented. Staffing is provided by MnDOT, but Region 7W has its own Transportation Policy Board and Transportation Advisory Council.

MnDOT works to promote ridesharing with an array of local transit partners, TMAs and the Metropolitan Council. MnDOT does not manage a vanpool program directly, but it could, as

other states have done. There may be a more robust role MnDOT could take in facilitating vanpooling in Minnesota, particularly outside of smaller cities and in rural areas. Vanpools with destinations in the Twin Cities are already administered under Met Council's Van-GO! Commuter Vanpool Program, but costs are higher for individuals who live outside Anoka, Ramsey, Washington, Scott, Carver, Hennepin, or Dakota Counties. MnDOT's primary role for a vanpool program in District 3 may be to help develop a strategy to subsidize vanpools, help a local lead agency contract with a vanpool leasing company, and provide technical and marketing support to encourage vanpooling to regional jobsites.

MnDOT could have a more central role in the marketing and promotion of park-and-ride facilities in District 3 (and possibly, throughout the state). Very limited information is available to the public about existing park-and-ride lots, their precise locations, amenities and available transit services and rideshare options from the lots. Even if MnDOT is a not a lead agency for the development and implementation of commuter transit services, it would be appropriate for the department to develop a

SHOULD MNDOT CONSIDER MANAGING VANPOOLING STATEWIDE?

MnDOT works to promote ridesharing with an array of local transit partners, TMAs and the Metropolitan Council. MnDOT does not manage a vanpool program directly, but it could, as other states have done. Some states have small-scale vanpool programs run by the state. For example, the Wisconsin State Vanpool program provides vanpools to Madison, serving public employees, but also private sector employees. Vans are owned by the State of Wisconsin, which manages the program and works to recruit and train vanpool drivers and participants.

A number of states manage statewide vanpool programs, but contract with private vanpool managers to secure vehicles and process monthly fees. Michigan's MichiVan program is sponsored by the Michigan Department of Transportation, but operated by VPSI Inc., one of the largest vanpool program vehicle providers. The state manages local rideshare offices in all urbanized areas, which also administer, at the local level, the State's guaranteed ride home programs.

Vermont's program, also administered by VPSI, provides a \$500 monthly subsidy to each vanpool to offset the costs of leasing and operating a vanpool. Vermont also has a program known as the Interest-Free Vanpool Loan Program, which allows employers to purchase vanpools for their employees, interest-free. Employers — or the group managing the individual vanpool — make a downpayment and then monthly payments through the state program.

The reason many states opt to administer their vanpool program via a vanpool leasing agent like VPSI is that owning a fleet of vanpools can be costly. The Maine Department of Transportation's GO MAINE vanpool program was recently eliminated and replaced with VPSI services. The state owned 27 passenger vans for commutes throughout Maine, and was responsible for maintenance and operations costs. Due to increasing costs and the need to replace many of the State's van fleet, the State opted to discontinue the program and is transitioning, in summer 2012, to a private contractor. Some expect commute costs for vanpool participants to go up as they will need to pay the leasing cost for the van as part of their monthly fees.

Some states, that do not manage statewide vanpool programs, such as Oregon, Virginia and Washington, manage subsidy programs to help new vanpools get started, and will cover the costs of a vacant vanpool seat for a short period of time, reducing the overall commute costs for participating riders/drivers.

MnDOT does not administer any large-scale programs directly for consumers and managing vanpools at the state level would be a new responsibility, which may be difficult to implement given current financial constraints. For the benefit of District 3 in the short term, vanpools administered by a local lead agency will likely be easier to implement and may be more cost effective than a statewide vanpool program, given the trend in other states to contract their programs or shift them to local level.

more robust website about park-and-ride lots in District 3, which would include maps and images, and might eliminate the distinctions of official and unofficial which are confusing to the general public.

New Agency or Organization

A new regional commuter transportation entity or agency could be developed in District 3 or in a portion thereof. A regional transportation agency could be established as an authority, including a potential joint powers authority (see next section). Likewise, a Transportation Management Association (TMA) could be developed to directly administer commuter transportation programs in a specific geographic area within District 3. TMAs typically focus on the commuter transportation needs impacting employers. They function as public-private partnerships, allowing for regional implementation of programs that make it easier for employees to get to jobs, making it easier to employers to attract employees and to focus on transportation infrastructure projects that support a community's economic development goals. As a result, TMAs tend to be located in areas where there are concentrations of employers, including downtown areas and suburban job centers, but some TMAs have been developed in larger regions, rural areas, and along specific highway corridors. In some cases, TMAs have provided services beyond what have typically been the focus of these organizations, with some regional organizations looking at coordination of human service transportation in addition to employer transportation programs. Development of a TMA would require a feasibility analysis to see whether or not a TMA could be successful in District 3 (or a portion thereof), and an assessment would need to be made about how a TMA might be developed and managed. All TMAs are nonprofit business associations, either 501-(c) (6) or 501-(c) (4).¹ Many TMAs are completely free-standing organizations, while a number of them are part of other nonprofit business associations.

A regional TMA would ideally be funded in large part by employers in the region and would therefore be accountable to those employers. The Tri-CAP mobility manager has contacted employers to gauge their interest in forming a TMA, and generally has found that employers are uninterested due to the current economic climate.

Which Approach may be Most Appropriate for District 3?

Each of the potential lead agencies has some merit in terms of administering regional commuter services in District 3, as shown in Figure 14-2. Determination of an appropriate approach might best be made by the transit coordinating council, working through the various issues that arise in District 3. While a new agency with a regional perspective may be most appropriate in the long term to administer regional transit services, in the short-term, implementation of new services would have fewer barriers under an existing agency with direct experience operating or contracting for transit services. An organization such as Tri-CAP or St. Cloud Metro Bus may serve District 3 commutes well, while Wright County, for example, may be an appropriate lead agency for commuter services to the Twin Cities.

Exploring a TMA in District 3, particularly in St. Cloud or within Region 7W, has merit, but employer interest in commuter solutions was found to be relatively limited. To carry forward a

¹ Various political education organizations fall under the 501-(c) (4) association, whereas 501-(c) (6) associations are business league and chamber of commerce organizations.

TMA will require a few major employers or developers to act as champions, and a feasibility analysis would be recommended.

The right lead agency may be, in part, determined based on the appropriate organizational model for policy oversight, management, and funding of regional commuter services (see the next section). Any of these lead agencies could act on its own, manage contracts/agreements with other agencies or organizations, or could take the lead as a joint powers authority.

Regardless of which alternative is ultimately pursued, coordination with the Metropolitan Council and Metro Transit is critical and has the potential to effectively leverage the resources of both regions through cross promotion and coordination of services and programs.

Figure 14-2 Summary of Potential Lead Agencies for Central Minnesota Regional Commuter Services

Potential Agency	Advantages	Disadvantages	Evaluation Factors and Comments		
			Administration	Accountability	Implementation
Wright County and/or Stearns County	Have direct stake in service. Experience applying for and receiving funds, managing contracts.	Neither county oversees transportation services; may limit service oversight to a small geographic area within District 3.	▲ Has day-to-day administrative experience	▲ Good for services in Wright or Stearns Counties	▲ Could assume responsibilities
A Nonprofit Agency, Local Organization or Rural Transit Provider	May manage transit operations. Can secure labor at lower rates, including volunteers. Understand the particular needs of certain transit market segments.	A private organization may not be eligible to apply for some public funds. No local organizations have direct experience in full-scale regional commuter bus operations. Commuter service may be outside organizational mission.	▲ Has day-to-day administrative experience	◀▶ Depends on mission, experience, and geographic reach	▲ Could assume responsibilities
St. Cloud Metro Bus	Has direct experience. Has vehicle fleet, can procure vehicles, can contract for services.	Perceived as a local service. May be outside of mission. Would need to significantly expand service area.	▲ Has day-to-day administrative experience	◀▶ Moderate due to service area	▲ Could assume responsibilities
St. Cloud APO	Regional focus of the organization. Experience planning and coordinating among multiple jurisdictions. Knowledge of and experience with funding.	Limited staffing. May be outside of mission. No direct experience administering a transit operation or managing vanpools.	◀▶ Limited program admin. experience	▲ Good for services to St. Cloud region	▲ Could assume responsibilities
Minnesota Department of Transportation	Regional focus of the department. Experience planning and coordinating among multiple jurisdictions. Knowledge of and experience with funding.	May be outside of mission. No direct experience administering a transit operation or managing vanpools.	◀▶ Limited program admin. experience	▲ High regional accountability	▲ Could assume responsibilities
New Agency or Organization	Could be established to specifically meet the need of commuters and employers in District 3.	Would require start-up and new ongoing funding, organizational development. May be duplicative of other organizations.	▲ Would be designed for this specific purpose	▲ High regional accountability	▼ Most challenging to establish

Legend: ▲ Most relevant experience, regional scale, easiest ◀▶ Moderately relevant experience or geographic scale ▼ Most challenging

DEFINING AN APPROPRIATE STRUCTURE FOR IMPLEMENTATION OF COMMUTER TRANSPORTATION SERVICES IN DISTRICT 3

Organizational Models

One of the challenges for implementing regional commuter transit services is the development of an effective institutional structure under which new services can be provided. Throughout Minnesota and across the US, transit service and vanpool operations are provided by many different types of organizations that use a wide variety of governance structures. Any of the proposed lead agencies could manage regional commuter transportation services under any number of different organizational models.

Among the various structures that may be most appropriate in Central Minnesota are four different organizational arrangements: multiple operator agreements, consortiums, joint powers agencies or authorities, or a single consolidated oversight entity (a nonprofit agency, county, or other jurisdiction). Each of these is described below.

Multiple Operator Agreements

One of the reasons for developing multiple operator agreements is to allow for policies to be established that allow agencies to share the funding and/or provision of transportation services. In many places, multiple operator agreements address cost-sharing arrangements. The agreements spell out the formula for determining how much a jurisdiction contributes to the net operating cost of a cooperatively funded transit route (or system). It is possible, and advisable, to have a coordinating council or advisory group provide policy direction for the services operated under multiple operator agreements, but not required.

The primary advantage of this type of agreement is that it maintains strong operator autonomy and limits staff resources dedicated to coordination activities and meetings. Transit providers essentially operate independently, but may receive funding and informal or formal policy direction. The primary disadvantage is that this model results in each operator functioning as a separate agency, somewhat limiting the potential to fully identify areas where more fully coordinated services could be effective.

Consortiums

A consortium brings together any number of transit agencies into an organized group to cooperatively work toward transit service development, operations and coordination. The consortium is brought together under a common agreement, which generally outlines how the consortium will function and what its purpose will be. All actions of the consortium must be agreed to unanimously. In addition, the policy board that manages each individual operator must agree to the activities of the consortium.

Consortiums have been created to address specific transit service routes that benefit multiple jurisdictions or to address a specific service type that benefits multiple operators.

Consortiums generally do not have a formal staff. The participating agencies share responsibilities for the various tasks, often rotating them from time to time. Typically, consultants or contract staff are hired to complete special studies or tasks.

The primary advantage of a consortium is that it formalizes agreements among transit agencies relative to a particular service or type of service. The agreements, commonly referred to as Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs), include goals and objectives for services, descriptions of transit operator roles and responsibilities, funding formulas, service standards, and triggers for service expansion or corrective action for under-performing services. The primary disadvantage of a consortium is that it has no formal jurisdiction. All agreements must be unanimous and require sign-off by each participating agency's policy board, which can be a time-consuming endeavor. One strategy to allow for the various policy boards to work together is to develop an advisory committee made up of representatives from each of the participating transit agencies.

JPAs

According to Minnesota Statute 471.59, governmental units may enter into a Joint Powers Agreement (JPA). Although a number of JPAs have been established in Minnesota for an array of purposes — community development, human services collaboration, public safety, streets and roads — only a few examples are identified for policy direction and administration of transit services or transportation programs.

JPAs are formal decision-making bodies created to provide a specific service (i.e., water service, waste management, fire suppression, regional transit services, etc.). JPAs have been exercised to allow for transportation planning, such as a JPA in Stearns County for the St. Cloud APO; to design new transit lines, such as the Northstar Rail Development Commission; or to allow for local transportation services to operate beyond a single jurisdiction's boundaries, such as a JPA between the Metropolitan Council and the State of Minnesota to allow Transit Link Dial-a-Ride service beyond the Metropolitan area. In District 3, an opportunity exists for a JPA to provide policy oversight and manage day-to-day operations of regional transit services.

JPAs are generally formal organizations with a voting board, ruled by majority rather than consensus voting. JPAs generally have an assigned staff and an annual operating budget funded by the participating agencies. In many states, regional transit districts, which are organized to address services in a large area beyond the jurisdictional boundaries of a single provider, are generally organized as JPAs. In Minnesota, JPAs can be structured in one of three ways: a consolidated service, a service contract, or a mutual aid JPA. For most regional transit service operations, either a consolidated service approach, where participating jurisdictions share the operation of service, or a service contract approach, where one jurisdiction manages operations and the others purchase services, is likely to be appropriate.

The primary advantage of a JPA is that it possesses decision-making authority of its own. The other two arrangements (consortiums and multiple-operating agreements) are largely recommending bodies. JPAs are best suited to situations where very clear service provision and financial advantages can be identified and where those advantages are accrued to all of the participating agencies. The primary disadvantage is that JPAs can limit the autonomy of the individual agencies or jurisdictions.

Regional or Sub-Regional Agency Consolidation

While the strategies described above may be appropriate for transit agencies and local jurisdictions to maintain their autonomy while working together to provide specific service(s) in a region or corridor, the consolidation of transit operations in Central Minnesota would afford the highest levels of coordination for the provision of regional commuter service. Under consolidation, existing transit agencies merge their operations to form a single entity. This can be

done under a JPA (see above) or a new consolidated transit agency, authority, or district. The advantage of a consolidated agency is that a single entity can have cross-jurisdictional authority to provide transit/transportation service, which would work well to serve some of District 3's commuter needs, allowing a single agency to provide the transit operations in a full corridor, and to provide feeder and distributor services on both ends. In the short-term, this may be most advantageous in District 3 not for commuter services alone, but for all types of transit services, just as the multi-county operations (Tri-CAP and Chisago-Isanti Heartland Express, as examples) serve larger areas and provide cross jurisdictional travel. Some disadvantages of a multi-county consolidated transit agency are that local entities may give up some control of service design and operations, as well as policy oversight, turning them over to a larger district or joint powers body; and that a larger agency in District 3 would have to use some of its funding to provide regional trips rather than focus on local service operations, which could impact the quality or level of service at local transit operations.

Which Model may be Most Appropriate for District 3?

Considering the advantages and disadvantages of the potential organizational models, the JPA model may be most appropriate for regional commuter transit service and vanpool operations within District 3, and would not necessitate consolidation, but would facilitate more robust operations than multiple operator agreements or consortia. The following section provides a closer look at the advantages and disadvantages associated with the formation of a JPA (or multiple JPAs) in District 3.

Advantages:

- **Ease of formation.** A joint powers agreement can be drafted by any mutually agreed upon agent, or a committee of the various agencies involved. Unlike special districts, a JPA does not require special legislation. The paperwork required is the filing of a statement with the Minnesota Secretary of State's office, and routine audits of the new entity.
- **Flexibility.** JPAs can include and exclude any powers that are common to the participating parties. They can be short-term, with discreet functions, or continued indefinitely. JPA governing voting rights can be determined by formula - for example, votes could be "weighted" by population, or by the amount of funding contributed, or could be simply "one member one vote."
- **Reduced risk of liability.** JPAs protect the participating parties from potential lawsuits. By creating a separate entity, the participating parties are no longer liable for actions made exclusively by the joint powers authority. However, protection from legal action does not apply if the joint powers agreement only commits the parties to working together and not to the creation of a distinct body. Additionally, the parties continue to be responsible for the debts, liabilities and obligations of the JPA unless the agreement specifies otherwise.
- **Leads to "higher level of commitment."** While in force, joint powers agreements define the level and scope of contribution made by each participating party. Signatories are obliged to adhere to commitments to the extent provided for in the signed agreement.

Disadvantages:

- **No authority to raise their own tax revenue.** JPAs are dependent on the agreements reached with participating parties combined with fares or other user fees associated with JPA activities. While a Central Minnesota JPA can apply for and administer grants and can receive tax revenues or other funding from participating jurisdictions, it cannot introduce tax measures for financing its work. This constraint can be viewed as an advantage, as there may be reluctance to enter into an agency that has the power to initiate tax measures, even if there is no immediate intention to do so.
- **Cannot pass ordinances.** A JPA has no power to pass ordinances in cities or counties for the accomplishment of its tasks. It is, therefore, less powerful than a special district. Again, this may be seen as an advantage as well as a constraint, since there is no threat that the JPA will overstep its intended authority.
- **Less public accountability.** Public officials are not required by law to sit on a JPA's governing board. Without elected official participation, a JPA board is not directly accountable to its constituents. This disadvantage can be addressed by requiring in the agreement that the JPAs governing board members be public officials or their alternates.

Figure 14-3 Potential Organizational Models for Central Minnesota Regional Commuter Services

Organization Type	Description	Key Features/Characteristics	Applicability in Central Minnesota	Advantages	Disadvantages
Multiple Operator Agreement	Two or more transit agencies enter into agreements for special purposes.	Agencies remain separate with specific responsibilities and/processes for carrying out agreements.	Jurisdictions work together to form agreements for cost-sharing.	Maintains autonomy and limits staff resources to specific function(s).	Each city/agency remains autonomous limiting opportunities for higher levels of cooperation and coordination.
Consortium	Several transit agencies cooperatively work together to improve coordination or move toward consolidation. Typically form to address special projects.	No formal staff, Agencies share tasks, and All actions must be agreed to unanimously.	Relevant for transit services to cooperatively participate in special projects or new regional commuter services.	Transit agencies/cites continue to function independently.	No formal jurisdiction, Agreement must be unanimous requiring sign-off by each participating Council or Board.
Joint Powers Authority (JPA)	Selected local and regional jurisdictions (and transit providers) formalize an arrangement for working together to provide services.	Regional services are overseen by a regional entity with direct responsibility for managing and setting policy for those services.	An existing transit provider could serve as the lead agency or the JPA could develop a new structure for the regional service.	A JPA has decision-making authority and does not require special legislation. JPAs can be established relatively easily.	JPAs limit autonomy of individual agencies and/or jurisdictions.
Regional or Sub-Regional Agency Consolidation	One agency assumes responsibility for day-to-day administration of two or more agencies. Local and regional transit services consolidate under one single entity.	Individual services/systems would operate as one system – one set of routes, one fare structure, etc.	May be relevant for one or more of the smaller providers to consolidate operations.	Easier to plan for intercity/inter-jurisdictional services and routes. Beneficial for non-commuter bus services as well as commuter services.	Each transit operator/jurisdiction has unique processes and procedures.

ADMINISTRATIVE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE INTRODUCTION OF NEW COMMUTER SERVICES IN DISTRICT 3

Part of defining structures and appropriate agencies will include determining specific organizational responsibilities, staffing requirements, whether functions are contracted or carried out in-house, etc. Because there is no determination yet of the scope of services that might be implemented, this study does not identify specific requirements to introduce the preferred services.

IMPLEMENTATION OF NEW SERVICE

A critical part of implementation focuses on operational issues, described in further detail in this section. It is assumed that the lead agency or contractors would take the primary responsibility in the various implementation steps.

Final Running Times for Recommended Service Implementation

Commuter bus and rail running times were initially developed for each route to identify vehicle requirements for operating at modeled headways and to calculate annual service hours. Detailed route planning and route testing would be required to:

- Finalize running times for the development of accurate route schedules.
- Establish outbound and inbound deadhead times.
- Set time point references.
- Test the feasibility of turns, planned bus stop/park-and-ride locations, transit center circulation, and operations along each of the commuter corridors.

Start of New Commuter Bus Service

The following are the key planning and operations steps that must be completed before any of the preferred services are carried out. This assumes the establishment of a transit coordinating council and the administrative structures necessary to implement service. It also assumes that a process is defined for how service would be operated. If vehicle procurement is required, it assumes that vehicles are procured. If the service is contracted to a provider that supplies the vehicles, then it assumes the contract is in place. These steps are as follows:

- Establishment of detailed, workable implementation plan and schedule.
- Establishment of marketing, outreach and staff orientation plans.
- Finalization of service goals, objectives, policies, performance standards and design criteria.
- Finalization of park-and-rides and other bus stop locations.
- Finalization of transfer points as well as connections to St. Cloud Metro Bus, Metro Transit, Northstar Link and/or commuter rail, and rural transit operations.
- Route testing and finalization.
- Bus stop sign installation and curb painting.

- Destination sign design and installation.
- Scheduling and shift design.
- Operator driving instructions.
- Information brochure and website.
- Implementation of marketing and outreach (public meetings, press releases, public notices/revised service maps in newspapers and outreach at major transit facilities).

Consideration of Rural/Feeder Bus Modifications

No specific recommendations for local feeder/shuttle routes are provided based on the ridership projections and assumptions that the majority of regional transit users would drive or be dropped off at a park-and-ride facility. Rural transit providers can be considered for potential feeder services to regional commuter bus or rail services, but operate limited service schedules, and often operate during limited service hours. If existing rural services are to be considered as local feeders, many of them will need to expand their service hours (which can be costly and may attract limited ridership). The lead agency would be encouraged to work with potential feeder operations to see if any of these services might be expanded to address commuter needs. Considerations include the following:

- Existing service frequencies/schedule times may need to be adjusted to maximize connectivity between regional commuter services and local bus services.
- Coordinated fares may be appropriate to facilitate transfers between rural and commuter bus services.
- Dispatch coordination will be essential in order to ensure that passenger transfers are seamless.
- Safe, convenient waiting areas for local/feeder transit services may need to be developed in some areas where they do not currently exist.
- It may be necessary to revise/eliminate any local policies/limitations on operating transit services over county lines/to certain locations.
- Public information enhancements and coordinated information about regional commuter services will be useful.
- Saturday service and new Sunday service, where it is not currently provided, may be appropriate for local operators, if regional buses provide service for recreational markets.
- Transit amenities (benches, shelters, etc.) and infrastructure that makes it possible to access transit (sidewalks, bike lanes, etc.) is an often overlooked aspect of providing local and feeder transit service. While these amenities exist to some degree, some of District 3's providers have very few amenities, and access to many stops is difficult, especially in the winter when snow plowing may make it difficult to enter the street from the sidewalk or curb.

Start of New Vanpool Service within District 3

Key implementation steps for the establishment of a vanpool program in District 3, assuming that vans are not purchased but that a program is developed with a vanpool leasing agent, are as follows. These assume that an agency is taking the lead in developing a program specifically for District 3. Some work should be done to coordinate with the Metropolitan Council Van-GO!

program to ensure that service to the Twin Cities is fully accessible to employees who reside in District 3.

- Determination of available local or state funding for incentives and defining incentives for vanpoolers (fuel cards, subsidies, etc.).
- Determination of employer responsibilities (if any) for incentivizing vanpools.
- Procedure for registration, and management of the District 3 vanpool program.
- Mechanism for employers to sign up their employees and for employees to express interest in a vanpool.
- Information brochure and website.
- Meetings with employees to review vanpooling costs, procedures, and requirements.
- Contract monitoring with vanpool leasing company and administrator.

Marketing/Public Information

Some of the existing transit providers in District 3 have very good public information tools. Metro Bus, for example, has a comprehensive website, individual service brochures, and a useful system map. Some of the rural providers also have good public information, with websites that include service schedules and maps, but many of them have information that is difficult to understand or information is not readily available. Implementation of any new commuter transportation services provides an opportunity for transit providers in District 3 to coordinate to develop marketing strategies and actions that improve the visibility and showcase the benefits of transit services available throughout the district, while emphasizing the benefits and availability of commuter transportation services. Four key elements that should be considered as part of the implementation of the preferred commuter bus services include the following:

- System identity
- Signage
- Information resources
- Advertising

System Identity

To promote ridership and the coherence of any commuter transit effort, visual identity is important. When people can easily identify the buses, they are reminded that transit might be available to take them to their destination and they may seek information about how to use it.

Signage

It is important to maximize the casual marketing value of information services such as signage. Information sources should always present the necessary information as clearly and concisely as possible. Ultimately, clear information is the best marketing.

- **Signs on the buses.** Signs on vehicles are especially important because they allow the service to advertise itself.
- **Signs and amenities at the key bus stops and park-and-ride lots.** Informative bus stops provide an invaluable ongoing marketing function. Comprehensive bus stop

signs show people who are not familiar with the available services that they exist and might be useful to them. They also reassure riders that they are at the correct location. Because proposed commuter transit services would likely be relatively infrequent based on the demand, bus stop signs should be clear, and should include the service name and a logo, as well as route and schedule information.

Information Resources

Printed and Telephone Information

Providing information to better serve the customer is one of the key tenets of transit marketing. In addition to a brochure, quality telephone information is necessary to inform customers about available services and answer questions for regular customers. Telephone service also allows for troubleshooting when necessary. In addition, the telephone number should be posted on buses, signs, in the brochure, in any print advertisements and on bus/rail passes/tickets. This ensures that individuals with questions about a specific route — or commuter transportation in general — always have access to a number to call.

Internet

There is no regional website about commuter transportation options. Ideally, the lead agency would prepare a website that includes maps, service information, service changes and special events information not only for the commuter bus (and rail) services, vanpooling and ridesharing, but also for the existing transit services that operate in District 3. A single source of regional transit information would ideally be maintained regularly and information should be updated as new services are implemented. The site address should be listed and advertised on all regional transit information materials, in news releases, and on buses throughout the district.

Advertising

A comprehensive information and advertising campaign is ideal in advance of introducing any new commuter transportation services. The lead agency's goal in advance of introducing the new service should be to blanket the community with information about the new services.

SUPPORTING COMMUTER TRANSPORTATION AT A REGIONAL LEVEL

Finally, goals and objectives in this study address opportunities for regional commuter services, but as stated earlier in this report, commuter services in District 3 can be made more effective by advocating for transit-supportive land uses

While neither MnDOT nor most of the existing urban and rural transit operators can directly influence development patterns in Central Minnesota, implementation of commuter services suggests that an array of organizations and elected officials that have been stakeholders in this study can advocate for and advise jurisdictions on policies to allow commuter services to better meet demands. They can also provide for an environment that supports ongoing investment in an effective — and more efficient — commuter transportation system, relying less on people driving alone and parking at their destination.

This study considers the importance of land use, circulation and urban design. The coordination of these three aspects of form and function are essential in order to decrease use of single-

occupant vehicles in District 3 and improve the quality of life for people who seek to change their commutes.

Land Use

Land use policies in Central Minnesota should support the goals of this study. If stakeholders want to see more effective transit and commuter transportation alternatives, land uses will play an important role in increasing their feasibility in the future.

- **Land uses should be mixed.** In urban centers, vertical mixed use, with ground floor retail in developed areas and activity centers as identified through land use plans, can increase the vitality of the street and provide people with the choice of walking to desired services. Development near Northstar (and future rail lines) should emphasize vertical mixed uses. For most of District 3, mixing uses horizontally can prevent desolate, single-use areas, and encourages increased pedestrian activity. Scale of use and distance between uses are important to successful horizontal mixed-use development.
- **Support and enhance major activity centers.** Activity centers have a strong impact on commuter transportation patterns as the major destinations in the city. They are generally characterized by their regionally important commercial, employment, and service uses. To make these places more transit-supportive they can be enhanced by land use decisions that locate new housing and complementary neighborhood-scale retail and employment uses to diversify the mix, creating an environment that maximizes transportation choice. Much of the current employment development in District 3 is isolated, which reduces the effectiveness of a commuter transportation network.
- **Land use intensities should be at levels that will encourage use of transit and support pedestrian and bicycle activity.** Commercial and employment/education uses with high employment densities (e.g., SCSU) support more transit use than do those with lower employment densities (e.g., industrial or warehousing). Extensive areas of retail tend to be auto-dominated if not scaled appropriately and mixed with other uses. Non-residential uses with a Floor Area Ratio (FAR) of 0.5 provide a baseline that can support transit ridership. The general rule of thumb is to maximize the intensity of development given market conditions and to make certain that the transit network provides high-quality service to areas with concentrations of employment uses and retail services.
- **Parking requirements (and parking provision) should be compatible with compact, pedestrian and transit-supportive design and development.** Requirements should account for mixed uses, transit access, and the linking of trips that reduce reliance on automobiles and total parking demand.

Circulation and Connectivity

Transit and transportation systems need to provide a balance of hierarchy and integration between and among modes. The circulation system facilitates access and safety for all travel modes, with particular attention to pedestrian and bicycle access, as these modes support transit ridership, and especially commuter transit use.

- **The transportation and circulation framework should define compact districts and corridors** that are characterized by high connectivity of streets to not overly concentrate traffic on major streets and to provide more direct routes for pedestrians, good access to transit, and streets that are designed for pedestrians and

bicycles, as well as vehicles. Of the various cities in the county, the street networks in St. Cloud and Brainerd are the best for transit operations because of the better connectivity of arterials.

- **New residential developments** should include streets that provide connectivity. Cul de sacs and walls around communities, which have been the norm in newer developing communities in the southern part of District 3 are especially challenging for providing effective local circulation and access to commuter services.
- **Transit improvement projects should be targeted at areas with transit-supportive land uses** (existing and planned), in and around key destinations and projects that can increase pedestrian activity. New Northstar rail facilities will maximize the propensity for ridership if they have multiple access points and mixed uses.

Urban Design

High quality urban design, including street and building design, can support increased use of commuter transit services and encourage pedestrian and bicycle activity.

- **Streets should be designed to support use by multiple modes**, including transit, bicycles, and pedestrians, through proper scaling and provision of lighting, landscaping, and amenities. Amenities must be designed to provide comfortable walking environments.
- **Buildings should be human scaled**, with a positive relationship to the street (including entries and windows facing onto public streets, and appropriate articulation, signage, etc.).
- **The impact of parking on the public realm should be minimized** by siting parking lots behind buildings or screening elements (walls or landscaping). Buildings should be close to the road so parking can be located on the side or in the rear.

These are only basic guidelines that can help Central Minnesota communities address the public's concerns about congestion and ineffective transit services. Land use decisions are integral to improving commutes in District 3. Smarter growth (with future jobs, educational facilities and human services centralized near transit facilities), mixed land uses, and ways to make it easier for pedestrians to access transit will provide some of the supportive mechanisms needed to achieve District 3's commute transportation goals.

CONCLUSION

Implementing new commuter transportation services in District 3 will require a wide range of activities, most of which will be led by staff of the selected lead agency or a contractor working on behalf of that agency. Successful implementation, however, will require the cooperation and coordination of many different stakeholders, including MnDOT, local transit providers, the St. Cloud APO, jurisdictions that are served by commuter transportation, major employers, human service agencies, and the Metropolitan Council. Ongoing public involvement and feedback will also be a critical component of moving forward with implementation.

The major task involved in advancing commuter transportation in Central Minnesota includes developing the right organizational structure. A number of different alternatives are discussed in this chapter, but the most appropriate one will garner support from an array of stakeholders as well as major employers.

This study can be used as a roadmap to develop more detailed strategies for implementing specific services within District 3 and from communities in the district to the Twin Cities. Development of specific plans will be necessary to make the strategies discussed in this report actionable.