1 INTRODUCTION

The potential for new intercity and intercounty public transit service and other transportation programs exists in Central Minnesota. The purpose of this study was to determine what types of new services might be feasible and to provide alternatives and recommendations for implementing new services.

This study includes an analysis of the existing services and facilities in Central Minnesota, with an evaluation of the potential for new commuter transportation services. While this study process was underway, stakeholders representing an array of jurisdictions, employers, and transit providers offered input regarding what they envisioned as primary needs and opportunities to address them with new regional bus services, rideshare matching, and other programs.

This study considers a set of alternatives, some of which are prioritized based on current and anticipated mobility needs in Central Minnesota. Performance standards are proposed as a way of determining where new services should be considered, and also as a way of assessing demand and managing when new investment in transportation is appropriate. The study also addresses prospects for park-and-ride facility improvements and other capital investments. Elements of this study will considered in future regional planning efforts and highway planning programs in District 3.

The focus of this study is on 12 Central Minnesota counties:

- Benton
- Cass
- Crow Wing
- Isanti
- Kanabec
- Mille Lacs
- Morrison
- Sherburne
- Stearns
- Todd
- Wadena
- Wright

The study area, also known as Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) District 3, encompasses two state-designated Regional Development Commissions. These include most of the East Central Regional Development Commission (known as Region 7E) and all of the Region 5 Development Commission. Region 7W (Seven West) is a designated group of counties that are not served by a Regional Development Commission, but for which administrative and planning responsibilities are provided by MnDOT.

The St. Cloud metropolitan area is the largest urban center wholly within the study area and has its own Metropolitan Planning Organization, the St. Cloud Area Planning Organization (APO). The Brainerd-Baxter area represents the second largest urban population concentration within the study area. At the southern end of the study area are significant suburban populations on the outskirts of the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area. A number of smaller cities and townships are distributed throughout the study area.

Although vanpools, carpools, and intercity bus services operate through the study area, only one major regional commuter transit service exists today. Northstar is a regional commuter rail line operated by Metro Transit, providing service from the study area to Minneapolis. The largest existing transit operation in the study area is Metro Bus, operated by the St. Cloud Metropolitan Transit Commission, which provides fixed route and paratransit services in the St. Cloud area. Several other transit operators provide service in most of the cities and counties in Central Minnesota.

Many stakeholders described the possible benefits of regional commuter services service within the study area, including the economic development potential in attracting new jobs to the region; incorporation of isolated populations into the regional economy; connecting the residents of the cities and the non-transit communities to major job sites; and providing regional connections not only for employment and education purposes, but also for occasional shopping or medical trips.

This study not only considers strategies for regional transportation services and programs, it also considers obstacles. These include funding constraints and concerns about unsuccessful commuter transit services in the past. Concerns were also expressed about focusing transportation resources on commutes strictly within the study area given the large number of study area residents who commute to jobs in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area.

PROJECT ELEMENTS

The study was completed in three phases:

- **Phase I: Assessment of regional mobility needs.** The focus of the first phase was to review existing data and gather new data to understand and quantify the demand for commuter transportation in MnDOT District 3. Key elements of this phase included the following:
  - Review demographics, geography and existing transit services and transportation programs in Central Minnesota.
  - Identify temporal and spatial transit and park-and-ride service gaps.
  - Evaluate travel needs for potential commuter markets.
  - Evaluate commuter and non-commuter travel demand in Central Minnesota.
  - Understand public and stakeholder interest in new transit service or other transportation options.
- **Phase 2: Feasibility of developing new regional transit services, transportation facilities, and programs serving Central Minnesota residents and employees.** Key elements of this phase included the following:
  - Identify ridership markets that could be served by new regional commuter services.
  - Evaluate opportunities for new regional transit services connecting Central Minnesota cities, as well as services to jobs beyond the study area.
  - Assess costs and benefits of providing new programs and services.
  - Determine facility requirements.
  - Review the potential for local transit connections and parking facilities to feed regional transit services, as appropriate.

- **Phase 3. Refinement of alternatives, financial strategy, and implementation guidance to carry forward the elements of the study.** Primary tasks in this phase included the following:
  - Estimate operating and capital costs and funding potential, for new services and programs.
  - Define costs for new facilities and other capital investments.
  - Evaluate options to administer and oversee new services and programs.

ELEMENTS OF THIS REPORT

A significant amount of data was collected and analyzed in the development of this report. Information from relevant background studies and reports are integrated in the various chapters. The remainder of this report includes the following chapters:

- Demographic data, including population densities and employment concentrations are described in **Chapter 2.** This information provided a basis for identifying potential markets for commuter transportation.
- **Chapter 3** summarizes the findings from three major surveys in the study area. One was a telephone survey of more than 1,200 residents to examine current modes of transportation to school and/or work, awareness and use of public transportation services, and likelihood of using a new commuter mode. The second survey was conducted at park-and-ride locations to obtain information about lot users' commutes and travel choices. The chapter also includes the results of a survey of employers in the 12-county study area.
- The next two chapters look at existing services, infrastructure, and transportation investments in the study area. Transit services are described in **Chapter 4**, including Metro Bus service in St. Cloud, regional Northstar rail and feeder bus service, and the array of small local, regional and demand-response providers in District 3. **Chapter 5** looks at the road and rail network, and assesses existing commuter facilities (including park-and-ride lots). This information allows for an understanding of where services exist today and where modifications/enhancements would be required.
- **Chapter 6** provides a summary of regional commute patterns, based on the data collected for this study and the information available from the US Census and other data sources. This information provided a basis for understanding where new services would be most effective.
- **Chapter 7** establishes goals for commuter transportation in District 3. To achieve the goals, service measures and standards are defined in **Chapter 8**, along with a toolbox highlighting the services most appropriate to address regional commute needs.
- **Chapter 9** provides a summary of the corridors evaluated, based on projected ridership and identifies three specific bus corridors and one rail corridor for further consideration, based on ridership projections.
- Park-and-ride standards/prototypes for District 3 are described in **Chapter 10**, along with proposed improvements for specific park-and-ride facilities to bring them up to the proposed standards. The chapter also includes a brief discussion of how other states manage their park-and-ride programs.

- **Chapter 11** describes how almost all of the corridors could potentially accommodate new rideshare initiatives to encourage carpooling, telecommuting, and employer-based commute programs. A discussion about how these elements could be brought together is paired with some proposed standards.
- From all of the findings, **Chapter 12** summarizes the proposed services that are most appropriate for implementation in District 3. Based on a number of evaluation factors, vanpools and a few specific bus routes are seen as being the most effective alternatives in District 3.
- **Chapter 13** presents a financial strategy, identifying potential operating costs, capital costs and funding sources for new commuter services in District 3.
- Implementation considerations are presented in **Chapter 14**, with a discussion of appropriate administrative and operating structures for management of the commuter services.

Supportive information is included in a set of Appendices at the end of the report.