

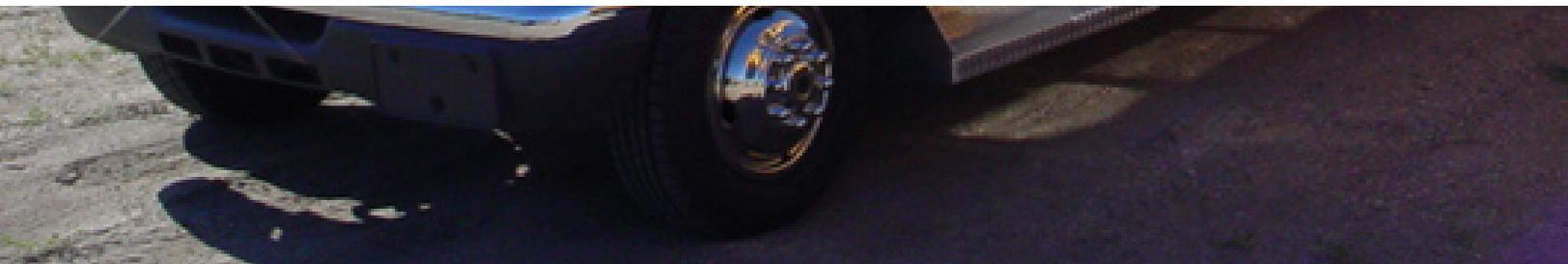


Minnesota  
A Collaborative Vision  
for Transportation

# Greater Minnesota Transit Investment Plan



TM#9 – Stakeholder Interviews  
October 2015







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# OVERVIEW

Transit serves the community, therefore robust outreach to those who provide transportation or whose customers need transportation must inform the Greater Minnesota Transit Investment Plan. Stakeholder interviews were conducted in all seven districts to understand transit needs, opportunities, and challenges, as summarized in this document. The full interview guide can be found in Appendix A. More than 180 people were invited to participate in these interviews. These challenges identified during these interview

## FINDINGS

Full interview notes can be found on the following pages. A summary of overall themes has been provided below.

### Transit Services

- Trip lengths in rural areas are very long, which is a challenges for providing transit. It is common for people to travel 30-40 miles to the doctor.
- Commuters travel long distances to work – often 20-30 miles – meaning getting home to pick up children from school is not feasible. Parents must rely on transit to get children from school to after-school programs.
- Need for trip chaining – a person does not just travel from work to home. The trip includes day care, grocery store, then home. Serving these trips with demand response or low frequency service is not feasible.
- More informal park and ride is needed.
- Long trips endemic to rural areas would be much better served using vans, which have lower operational costs. MnDOT requires all vehicles to be accessible, meaning all agencies must procure cutaways. The capital cost of an accessible van is the same as a cutaway. Vans are not available through MnDOT procurement.
- The decline of STS providers hurts transit agencies. STS businesses are going bankrupt. Fragile clients with high needs are then put on public transit.
- Increasing need for door through door transportation, but agreement that public transit is not the right service for such needs.
- Extreme appreciation for existing rural providers; there is just not enough service.
- Recognition that MnDOT overall is very supportive financially and a good agency to work with; however, in very rural areas people feel MnDOT is out of touch with needs and does not understand challenges for transit operators.
- Extremely difficult to find bus drivers due to increased regulations. E.g. sleep apnea test for people with neck sizes above a certain circumference. Very hard to get a CDL. This issue plagues yellow bus as well.
- In answering the question of should transit agencies focus more resources on those without any transportation options or branch out to serve commuters, schools, etc. – stakeholder said agencies need to do both.
- No matter how long a trip or remote a person is, stakeholders are very passionate about the need to serve that trip, and that the state should support providing such a trip.

- Volunteers need access to lift-equipped vehicles.
- Need for flexibility in rural areas – e.g. can driver take vehicle home to reduce deadhead?
- Need MnDOT to define “access.” Agencies struggle to provide access while also meeting performance standards.
- General feeling that consolidation that has happened thus far is positive thing.

## Time of Operation

- Lack of coverage in evenings after 5 pm
- Lack of Saturday service, even in places like Rochester
- Zero Sunday service
- High demand during peak times (7-9 am; 2:30-5 pm) when people are traveling to and from school, social services, DAC employment sites, and after school programs; excess capacity at other times
- In manufacturing districts (6 and 7 primarily) a need to cover first, second, and third shifts

## Marketing and Education

- The “transit dependent” populations **are** the general public; the message needs to change around this issue.
- The public does not understand what public transportation is.
- We need to make the bus hip; make it cool.
- Needs to be a life cycle of education and awareness about the bus, starting with school kids.
- Parents are often the biggest obstacle to kids riding the bus – the parents need to ride with children.
- High levels of interest in travel training.
- Harness technology to make transit work in rural areas; e.g. the same technology for Uber can be used to get people to work on a bus.
- Given constrained budgets, marketing is the first thing that agencies cut.
- Volunteers are crucial to transit but most volunteers are also older adults – in five years that group may be gone. How to encourage a new generation of volunteers?
- Need for transit ambassadors or marketing that showcases all the positive stories of transit. People hear about the bad experiences, but those are few – most people have great experience on transit.
- Insurance and liability is a confusing topic to many and would appreciate MnDOT providing clarifying information about topics such as how to handle volunteer liability.
- Need for training of operators and dispatchers in Somali, Spanish, Hmong, etc.

## Potential Markets

- Especially in District 6, 7, and 8, there are more jobs than people. Need to work with employers and show them the value of transit for employment transportation – more

- reliable workforce, local workers, etc. Informal vanpools and bussing is already happening.
- School transportation is a huge market in many districts. In some districts schools support (in policy) transit for students who do not qualify for yellow bus but some do not.
  - Pre-schoolers do not qualify for any yellow bus service. Many providers (e.g. in District 8 and 4) transport unaccompanied pre-school children.
  - Interest in using school bus vehicles during down time.
  - Interest in vanpools for employee transportation.

## Funding

- Volunteer drivers are crucial, but cannot be reimbursed for unloaded miles. On a 30-mile one-way trip, this makes the trip much less attractive.
- Transit agencies by default administer volunteer programs, but do not get reimbursement for administrative time.
- Each District ATP has its own unique process for allocating STIP money – this is challenging since some districts are more transparent about process and evaluation criteria than others.
- Need for multimodal coordination of funding – rather than capital expansion for roads, the state needs to fund bicycling and walking infrastructure that would also assist in access to transit.
- Need to pay drivers better. The job is not easy, and pay is low (usually \$13-\$14 per hour).
- In many districts cities may fund transit but counties do not. Counties typically support transit in name, but have not been approached for funding (yet).
- In-kind used as match is rare in Minnesota.

## Partnerships

- DAC clients make up a large percent of transit agency ridership and revenue. Tension between combining DAC clients and general public – some DAC clients are dangerous.
- Regional Coordinating Councils are new organizations being formed by MnDOT who are meant to handle mobility management. In some areas, people welcome this role, but in other areas people are worried that it will become another layer of bureaucracy.
- Medical trips are a major (and very important) trip purpose. The medical community has not been good partners with transit.
- In some regions, community organizations and employers have willingly changed start times to accommodate transit; in other areas, employers expect transit to change to meet their needs. More employers need to be at the table.
- Veterans program has recently funded vehicles in every county (Ridelink).

## ADDITIONAL STAKEHOLDERS

The following were identified as potential additional agencies or organizations to explore:

- Joe Jacobson, Rochester City Lines



- Greater Mankato Growth
- Regional Development Commissions
- Regional Coordinating Councils (Effort led by Sue Siemers of MnDOT)
- Major employers in District 7 – JBS, Bedford Industries, Hedgestock

## **FOLLOW-UP ITEMS**

- Several stakeholders requested the transit services maps (district-level and statewide).

# DISTRICT 1

## PARTICIPANTS

- Dennis Jensen – Duluth Transit Authority
- Stephen Hallan – Pine County
- Kristi Kane – Itasca County
- Myrna Peterson – Itasca County
- Robin Harkonen – East Range DAC
- Maryann Perk – AccessNorth
- Amy Skluzacek – UDAC Inc.

## TRANSIT SERVICES

### Existing

- Arrowhead Transit – Serves multiple counties but the level of service depends on the contributions in the area
  - Drivers are extremely friendly and helpful to its users
- Duluth Transit – City of Duluth and Superior, WI – funded by a property tax levied in the City of Duluth
  - Proctor and Hermantown receive service but do not contribute funding
  - Operates ADA Paratransit known as STRIDE
- UDAC has five vehicles
- 90% of East Range DAC clients arrive via public transportation

### Challenges

- Arrowhead’s service area is extremely large (larger than Rhode Island) and sparsely populated – it is very difficult to support DAR trips in rural areas outside of population centers
- Rapidly aging population compared to other parts of the state – generating greater demand for accessible medical trips
- There are no accessible taxi services – most services use pre-owned vehicles which are not required to be accessible
- Insurance liabilities and difficulty finding qualified drivers prohibit social organizations from fully utilizing 5310 vehicles
- Contracting human service organizations have special seating needs to protect their users and other rides. DACs want clients to have their own bus but MnDOT wants vehicles to be open to the public.
- County line service area boundaries prohibit important trips such as job access

“We have to start thinking ‘these people’ ARE the general public..”

- Medical providers are not interested in coordinating transportation for patients
- Volunteer drivers are primarily elderly – There is a great need to get younger generations involved
- **Hiring drivers is a major issue** – There is a limited applicant pool of drivers reduced by insurance regulations, restrictions (DWI/drug testing), requirements (CDL), split shifts, and unattractive wages

## TRANSIT NEEDS

### Service

- There are significant service gaps in Arrowhead’s service area
- Significant last-mile gaps in getting people to services such as veteran’s vans
- How can we get people at the federal level to understand how policies like CDL requirements hurt rural areas?
- Can school buses be used for public transportation? School buses drive down every street, cost a lot of money, and sit idle much of the time.

### Time of Operation

- Limited service hours limit commuter trips –especially for those working manufacturing shifts
- Very limited weekend service

### Marketing and Education

- The perception of Arrowhead Transit is not of public transit for everyone but a service exclusively for the elderly, disabled, and low-income
- Marketing is extremely limited from transit operators because it is the last priority for funding – They rely on human service organizations like UDAC
- DTA does not advertise STRIDE because there is no capacity. ADA trip costs \$24.

“Over the long run it’s cheaper to provide public transportation than put someone in an assisted living facility.”

### Potential Markets

- Duluth Transit has the potential to become a regional transit authority if it can leverage funding from other communities
- The key concern is for serving transit dependent markets and vulnerable populations vs. trying to perpetuate a cultural shift to capture choice riders

## FUNDING

- State procurement policies limit the vehicle types that agencies can receive matching funding for (prioritizing large buses vs. vans)

- Transit agencies are competing for vehicle procurement funding from the same pots of money as high level infrastructure projects like bridge and road replacement
- There has not been funding for expanded services in the area
- 86% of Duluth Transit’s budget goes to wages

## PARTNERSHIPS

- Arrowhead has been a very good collaborative partner with human service organizations in the area
- Faith based organizations have been strong partners
- DTA and Arrowhead have established an MOU; discussing new transit center downtown.

“Politicians say can’t people just move downtown? But there is no housing. All you can afford is a trailer with no heat 20 miles out.”

## OPPORTUNITIES

- Confirm that Arrowhead is permitted to make trips beyond service area into Chisago and Isanti Counties – There is the perception that this is prohibited by MnDOT
- Allow smaller operators to use MnDOT facilities to store and fuel vehicles
- Smaller, smarter, and more efficient vehicles like Sprinter vans
- Technologies to better coordinate vehicles and drivers across the region
- Establish a core of statewide volunteer drivers
- Insurance breaks for young volunteer drivers (ages 18 to 24)
- Veterans program has funded a van in every county called Ridelink
- Allow drivers to take vehicles home; use technology to handle regulatory issues. For example, can use breathalyzer app to check that they are not intoxicated at shift start. This decreases deadhead.

# DISTRICT 2

September 24, 2015 – Bemidji

## PARTICIPANTS

- Jan Heuer – Bemidji State University
- Michelle Frenzel – Bemidji State University
- Jason Carlson – Tri-Valley Opportunity Council
- Marcia Haglund - Tri-Valley Opportunity Council
- Sandy Kegler – Crookston Chamber & Visitor Bureau
- Kurt Wayne – Headwaters Regional Development Commission
- Darla Waldner – Northwest Regional Development Commission, Area Agency on Aging
- Holly Lenex – East Polk County DAC
- April Collman – Adult Day Services Bemidji
- Linda Bair – Hubbard County Heartland Express
- Lezlie Grubich – Paul Bunyan Transit
- Helen Pieper – Kanabec County Timber Trails
- Kent Johnson – Polk County Social Services
- Ken Yutzenka – Pennington County Social Services

## TRANSIT SERVICES

### Existing

- Tri-Valley – 7 counties with buses and 8 counties with volunteer drivers
- Tri-Valley – uses travel trainers
- Paul Bunyan Transit had a contract with Bemidji State University which has since expired
- Fargo and Grand Forks, ND are the major metropolitan destinations for travel (medical appointments etc.)
- Operations are primarily curb-to-curb
- Primary users are those without vehicles

“The MnDOT DPMs are good but their voices get lost [in Twin Cities].”

### Challenges

- Providing greater access negatively effects performance
- Rural users are very uneasy with transfers which hinders the market for county to county service and cooperation between operators
- Mobility devices and motorized wheelchairs reduce capacity and are difficult to secure
- Bemidji State students underutilized transit when it was offered to them – potentially due to lack of marketing or service spans that did not meet student travel patterns

- Marketing is the first item that gets cut from budgets and limits penetration into new markets
- No volunteer driver reimbursement for unloaded miles
- Hiring drivers due to physicals, drug and alcohol testing, CDL licenses, and inability to offer competitive wages – This problem is particularly acute for human service organizations with programs beyond transportation that require funding and administration
- Volunteer drivers are primarily elderly – there is a strong concern that programs will not be able to attract new drivers in the coming years
- The cost of serving rural needs are exorbitant
- A stigma exists that transit is only for the elderly, disabled, or poor
- Medical providers are not interested in coordinating transportation for patients
- Would new mobility management (Regional Coordinating Councils) just be another layer of bureaucracy?

## TRANSIT NEEDS

### Service

- Very rural areas that are difficult to serve because they negatively affect performance
- Need to get to Fargo
- Providers prefer clients to travel with an aid; otherwise burden may fall on bus driver
- Put vans on state procurement list
- Burdensome regulations; e.g. having to have a compliance manager. It takes as much administrative time to run six buses as 26 buses.

### Time of Operation

- Work trips after 5pm/6pm
- Night trips (that would result in low performance and high operating costs)

### Marketing and Education

- Travel trainers
- Mobility managers shared between multiple agencies
- “Need to make riding the bus cool” – the perception is that transit is for seniors only
- Reaching out to youth
- The biggest challenge is fear
- Bring the bus downtown to events and have kids ride the lift – make it fun

“MnDOT says it funds 85%, but really it’s 65% because you never get all you ask for. The first item that gets cut is marketing.”

## Potential Markets

- Head start programs and pre-schools have great potential but those services have vehicle restrictions and demand occurs at peak times
- Park-and-ride for institutions like Bemidji State University

## FUNDING

- Short trips with high demand can help subsidize long, low productivity access trips
- Contracts are 50% of the ridership and significant portion of funding; contract rate does not include capital replacement. Concern about how rates are raised.
- Volunteers not reimbursed for unloaded miles.
- More Medicaid trips could help; Timber Trails gets \$3.75 per regular trip and \$5 for Medicaid

## PARTNERSHIPS

- Churches and Veterans Affairs
- DigiKey Electronics, a major employer in Thief River Falls, and Tri-Valley have a successful ongoing partnership providing employees with reliable transport to and from work

## OPPORTUNITIES

- Work with pre-schools to adjust pick-up and drop-off times to fit into periods when there is excess transit capacity
- Adjust performance standards to allow occasional lifeline routes to provide critical access to very rural areas
- Produce a baseline definition of critical access
- Separate performance metrics between rural operators and urban metro operators
- Work with Bemidji State University dorm leaders to help students sign up for Paul Bunyan transit rides for shopping trips
- Share travel trainers between operators

# DISTRICT 3

*September 25, 2015 – St. Cloud*

## PARTICIPANTS

- Matt Carlson – Options Inc.
- Berta Hartig – St. Cloud Metro Bus
- Dean Loidolt – Central Minnesota Council on Aging
- DeWayne Mareck – Stearns County Commissioner
- Rita Waxon – Guardian Angels
- Wendy Thompson – Kanabec County Health and Human Services
- Sue Siemers – MnDOT Office of Transit
- Steve Voss – MnDOT District 3
- Jon Mason – MnDOT District 3

## TRANSIT SERVICES

### Existing

- St. Cloud Metro bus – operates in St. Cloud, Sauk Rapids, and Waite Park with fixed-route buses and DAR
  - Long-range plan update is in development
  - DAR is ADA paratransit that provides door-to-door service
  - Travel trainers work with elderly and recent immigrant populations to make them more comfortable with using fixed-route transit
  - Has a U-Pass program with local colleges
- Tri-Cap serves the rural counties around St. Cloud bringing people into the trade center
- Day Training and Habilitation programs like Options Inc. run a large number of vehicles and routes to job sites
- Northstar commuter rail operates from Big Lake to downtown Minneapolis along the Highway 10 Corridor – Expansion to St. Cloud is proposed
- Brainerd & Crow Wing Public Transit operates some trips for private schools

### Challenges

- No volunteer driver reimbursement for unloaded miles
- Volunteer driver recruitment
- Performance standards do not take into account the myriad benefits that public transit offers to dependent populations (value to users vs. performance)
- Meeting performance standards is difficult in rural areas during off-peak hours
- Low fuel prices dissuade choice riders
- Northstar rail scheduling is affected by BNSF ownership of the right-of-way

## TRANSIT NEEDS

### Service

- Rural access both in the urban fringes of counties like Sherburne and remote counties like Cass
- Seamless transportation that provides trips across county lines

### Time of Operation

- Rural areas have no service after 4pm-6pm and on weekends
- Users of St. Cloud Metro Bus would like to see weekday service until midnight and weekend service until 9pm
- Night service gaps are a major issue for job access – users may be able to get to a job but not able to get home after work
- Accommodating the lengthy and uncertain nature of medical appointments

### Marketing and Education

- There is a low general awareness that there are people with transit needs and providers out there working to meet those needs
- Stigma attached to transit limits choice ridership

### Potential Markets

- Fringe areas of the St. Cloud Metro Area where new development is occurring
- College students
- Commuter trips – such as those corridors identified in the Central Minnesota Commuter Study
- Lots of employers are desperate to find employees – But potential workers may lack reliable access to those jobs

## FUNDING

- There are four regions within the District that determine the distribution of funding which localizes decision making
- Many providers would prefer vans but MnDOT procurement policies prohibit that

## PARTNERSHIPS

- There could be better coordination between different transit operators
- Stearns County Commissioner has been a good champion of transit and working to meet needs such as addressing the deficit in volunteer drivers



## OPPORTUNITIES

- Temporary free pass program to potential users – Recent hires and immigrant communities
- Conference with employers to gauge their needs for transit to provide transit access and potential partnership that could arise
- Stretching the service area of Brainerd & Crow Wing Public Transit into Cass County
- Fare payment through EBT cards
- Driverless cars to meet the need for volunteer driver programs that cannot find drivers

# DISTRICT 4

September 24, 2015 – Detroit Lakes

## PARTICIPANTS

- Kevin Anderson – Rainbow Rider
- Paul Gerde – Pope County
- Steve – Transit Alternatives

## TRANSIT SERVICES

### Existing

- Rainbow Rider- 6 counties across 2 Districts (Grant, Douglas, Traverse, Stevens, Pope, and Todd). Owns 30 plus vehicles and 54 employees
  - All DAR except for one deviated route in the City of Alexandria
  - Joint powers board with 2 commissioners from each of the 6 counties
  - Joint powers allows for more nimbleness than CAP agencies as there are less organizational constraints
- Transit Alternatives – Primarily DAR, some fixed-route, and volunteer drive program. Has 80 vehicles including some vans as holdovers.
- Transit is concentrated in the largest communities
- CAPs are in some ways better able to meet needs than transit agencies. CAPs get multiple grants and have staff to oversee them; they get their own funding such as Title IIIB; and they also are already engaged with transit-dependent populations.
- Daily commuter route exists from Detroit Lakes to Fargo-Moorhead
- Senior service and human service coordinators are used to help recruit volunteer drivers
- Basic marketing such as radio, billboards, outreach, rider's guide, and youth travel training
- Potential merger between Becker and Wadena

### Challenges

- Local politics prevents consolidation, partnerships, and economies of scale
- The western corridor of Minnesota is extremely rural and faces challenges that other areas do not – depopulation and increasing isolation in many communities
- More riders that require mobility devices = increased load times
- Job commuting distances are long (20-50 miles each way)
- Efforts for commuter routes have largely been unsuccessful due to long distances and preference to drive
- Convenience and independence of driving limits people's desire to take transit to work
- Access to jobs (manufacturing shifts) is not widely viewed as the purpose of public transit in Greater Minnesota by MnDOT

- Volunteer driver vehicles are not accessible
- There is very limited support from the state for volunteer driver programs
- Access vs. performance (serving the most communities vs. serving the most riders)
- Agencies cannot meet performance standards by meeting all of the demand from more rural areas – Often the operators have the capacity and ability to perform these trips but they would be too detrimental to performance
- Hiring drivers and employees in general is a major issue – Both as a general labor shortage and limited applicant pool of drivers reduced by insurance regulations, restrictions (DWI/drug testing), requirements (CDL), and unattractive wages
- STS providers are going away; also cannot find drivers. Not interested in becoming an STS provider – administration is a nightmare.

“Either lower regulations so people can be drivers or lower expectations of service.”

## TRANSIT NEEDS

### Service

- Serving populations furthest out (which hinders performance do to long distances and time involved)

### Time of Operation

- Weekend service is non-existent
- Hours of operation are largely based around when human services are in operation (8am-4:30pm)
- Earlier start times could meet commuter demand for first manufacturing shifts but there are not the resources to meet the later shifts
- Demand for Saturday service

“I would rather work with MnDOT than any other state agency.”

### Marketing and Education

- Language skills for dispatch, marketing, and drivers - Growing Hispanic and Somali populations
- Communication for drivers to handle youth riders and school trips

### Potential Markets

- Younger generations – Many youth believe that only the elderly or disabled are eligible to ride public transit
- School trips for children who do not meet the school bus shed requirements

- Unmet demand in most rural areas that aren't fully served due to pressure to meet performance standards

## FUNDING

- State procurement policies limit the vehicle types that agencies can receive matching funding for
- Agencies that operate in multiple MnDOT Districts have to work with multiple vehicle procurement plans and schedules
- Fleets are operated far beyond FTA standards due to limited resources
- Transit agencies are competing for vehicle procurement funding from the same pots of money as high level infrastructure projects like bridge and road replacement
- The process of procuring funding for facilities is so arduous that it is not worth trying for transit operators. Challenge that 5309 funding no longer available.

## PARTNERSHIPS

- City run systems are generally not interested in partnerships or integration with county/multi-county systems
- City run systems are often unionized and are not interested in expanded or partner service as they are already meeting the needs of their jurisdiction
- Daycare centers, pre-schools, clinics, and VA Hospitals are largely open to partnerships in the District

## OPPORTUNITIES

- Provide a baseline definition of access and performance for the state
- County may match funds if performance standards were loosened or redefined that would make it feasible to serve most rural areas
- Changing public transit and looking at it as a business instead of a social service - Wages need to be at a level that makes bus driving a legitimate career

# DISTRICT 6

September 22, 2015 – Rochester

## PARTICIPANTS

- Amy Repinski – Three Rivers CAP/Hiawathaland Transit
- Erlene Welshons – Semcac/Rolling Hills Transit
- Robert Weigel – SEMCIL
- Cheryl Key – Wabasha County
- Natalie Siderius – Winona County

## TRANSIT SERVICES

### Existing

- Semcac/Rolling Hills – Operates demand-responsive curb-to-curb service on weekdays from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. in Dodge, Fillmore, Houston, Olmsted, and Winona counties
- Three Rivers/Hiawathaland – Operates DAR from 7:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. on weekdays in Goodhue, Rice, and Wabasha Counties in addition to a handful of deviated routes
- Three Rivers CAP- Administers Winona Transit, a fixed-route system in the City of Winona
  - Transit providers administer volunteer driver programs. Average trip length is 30 miles.
- Amy and Erlene’s organizations are both Community Action Partnerships (CAP) meaning they also administer Head Start, Meals on Wheels, and other community programs used by transit-dependent populations
- DAR is very well used in Lake City
- Many school students outside of school bus sheds ride DAR in the District
- Manufacturers are using Rochester City Lines to shuttle workers to rural jobsites
- Most communities lack taxi service

### Challenges

- The cost of service provision in rural areas is far greater than potential ridership
- No volunteer driver reimbursement for unloaded miles. Volunteers fill a key need in the transit network – they carry long-distance trips that are not cost-efficient to provide on a bus.
- No reimbursement for administration of volunteer driver program.
- Transportation issues are compounded by poor land use planning – e.g. Habitat for Humanity recently built a bunch of new housing where there is no transit
- Providing increased access is detrimental to meeting performance standards
- Bike/pedestrian connections to transit are lacking in most communities
- Limited applicant pool to hire certified bus drivers

## TRANSIT NEEDS

### Service

- Service gaps exist in further out rural areas; however, serving these communities would make it difficult to maintain current levels of service for existing riders
- Accessible and affordable transport to MSP Airport
- Increasing need for door-through-door service that is not possible for public transit to provide
- Service is not convenient for someone making multiple trips – e.g. traveling from work to day care to the grocery store to home

### Time of Operation

- Very limited Saturday service and non-existent Sunday service
- Evening weekday services are need until 11pm-midnight – Primarily to serve manufacturing trips for second or third shifts. Often work shifts run from 3-11 p.m.
- People are homebound after 5 pm

### Marketing and Education

- Education initiative in schools to teach the mindset of using transit – should be a statewide campaign in public schools akin to health class
- Child/parent on-board transit travel training
- Travel trainers for elderly and new immigrant populations to ease fears of riding fixed-route buses
- People don't understand what public transportation is
- This is where providers would put more resources if they had it

### Potential Markets

- Bi-directional commuting to Rochester, La Crosse, and the Twin Cities for those not wanting to drive to or park at work
- Aging population will exacerbate existing medical transport needs
- The job market is booming and employees are keen to transport workforce to employment – some communities, such as Lake City, have more jobs than residents
- Summer tourism market in Lake City
- Expanding school transportation – the school district projects a \$750,000 increase in cost to run yellow bus
- Pre-school students are not provided with yellow bus. After pre-school ends at 11 a.m., they need transportation to Head Start and other after-school programs. Many put kids on the bus. A parent cannot leave work to pick up their kids (plus people generally commute long distances) thus they would rather pay \$3.75 per day to put the kid on the bus.

## FUNDING

- Three Rivers receives 20% match on vehicles from cities that it serves
- Counties are supportive of existing operators but they do not provide funding
- Cities provide 20% match for vehicles
- Funding prioritization exacerbates land use-transportation disconnect.
- Desire for state aid to include perks for other modes.

“MnDOT gives us money to build roads that we won’t be able to maintain in 10 years; instead we need more bike/ped infrastructure and more transit.”

## PARTNERSHIPS

- Existing operators share ideas but there is little overlap in service areas and it is difficult to share facilities
- Medical providers and hospitals are often not interested in cooperation – The Mayo Clinic is a very insular operation
- Dialysis clinics sometimes partner

## OPPORTUNITIES

- Design countywide DAR services to feed commuter bus routes
- Foster trips from Rochester into suburban areas where employment is growing – not everyone is heading into Rochester
- MnDOT sponsor a public education campaign about what is public transportation
- Provide park and ride at Rochester city limits to feed commuter lines
- Need publicly owned, informal park and ride

# DISTRICT 7

September 23, 2015 –Mankato

## PARTICIPANTS

- Linda Alvarez – MSU Mankato
- Elise Morrison – SMILES
- Bob Apitz – Brown County Family Services / Heartland Express
- Jay Parker – Taylor Corporation
- Abraham Algadi – Worthington Regional Development

## TRANSIT SERVICES

### Existing

- Brown County Heartland Express – Runs with five vehicles housed within the County’s Family Services. Provides approximately 60,000 rides per year between outlying areas and the regional trade center of New Ulm.
- Brown County Heartland Express – 93% of clients are transit dependent
- Existing services like Heartland Express and VINE Faith in Action (volunteer driver program) are doing a good job at meeting the stated goals of their organizations.
- Informal employer vanpools are already happening

“Counties by nature are social service agencies. Therefore they are only looking to serve the transit dependent.”

### Challenges

- Older populations who become transit dependent are not comfortable or don’t know how to seek help for transit
- Political establishment says they are not hearing about transportation needs – therefore it must not be a problem
- Last-mile issues are acute (e.g. difficult to get to work, day care, grocery store, and home using demand-response services)
- 
- Lack of buy-in from counties around Mnkato
- Bike/pedestrian infrastructure is largely recreational
- Rural communities lack access to shopping and medical facilities beyond volunteer driver programs
- Strict performance standards limit the levels of access that operators can offer

- Minnesota transit services are rooted in county programs or Community Action Partnerships, which by nature are social service organizations – therefore transit has the reputation for being a social service.

## TRANSIT NEEDS

### Service

- Lack of commuter, express bus, park-and-ride, vanpool options for workers coming into Greater Mankato
- Nicollet and Blue Earth Counties are underserved outside of the Greater Mankato Area
- Limited services crossing county lines from Nicollet to Mankato
- Reliable and affordable access to job sites
- VINE is fantastic but does not have accessible vehicles
- Transit circulator in downtown Mankato; maybe bike share
- Vehicles need hooks for grocery bags

“In the past people got a vehicle and you see a van built in 1994 that has 12,000 miles on it. What is the cost of running a bus versus the [opportunity cost] of it sitting?”

### Time of Operation

- Accommodate manufacturing shifts – including third shift

### Marketing and Education

- Many employers are unaware of available transit services
- There is a stigma attached to transit – An effort needs to be made to make it more hip, tech savvy, and approachable
- The existing Mankato Transit map is difficult to use

### Potential Markets

- Manufacturing is booming in the area – Employers are desperate to bring workers into the area with reliable transport.
- Jay Parker employs 3,500 people in the state, of which 200 work in Mankato – potential partner

## FUNDING

- Politicians are unwilling to support transit without constituents highlighting that it is a priority

## PARTNERSHIPS

- Many major employers would be amenable to partnerships, communication, and voucher programs if transit services can ensure reliable access for an increased workforce

- There is the view that many of the consolidations of transit operators in the state have been successful and that it will be an ongoing trend.
- Transit and traffic engineers need to work together at the beginning of street design
- University charges \$300 per year for employee parking – employees would be open to transit to avoid paying for parking

## OPPORTUNITIES

- Guaranteed ride home program to provide a safety net for workers to rely on transit for job access and overcome fear of uncertainty
- Park-and-ride lots to serve major employment sites around Greater Mankato
- Improvements to the Highway 14 corridor opens the opportunity for increased regional connections
- Work with groups like Greater Mankato Growth to form partnerships between transit operators and major employers
- Obtain accessible vehicle(s) for VINE (this was a recommendation in Blue Earth study)
- Explore circulators in major employment areas or vanpools. Harness technology – e.g. on-demand smart phone apps – to get people on transit. Reach out to major employers such as JBS, Hedgestock, and Bedford Industries in Nobles / Worthington.

“The technology is there to make fixed route work even in rural areas.”

# DISTRICT 8

September 23, 2015 - Willmar

## PARTICIPANTS

- Ted Nelson – Prairie Five Rides
- Chad Christianson – Council-Elk / Central Community Transit
- Tiffany Collins – Central Community Transit
- Cathleen Amick – Western Community Action
- Heidi Olson – Ridgewater College
- Annette Fielder – Southwest Regional Development Commission

## TRANSIT SERVICES

### Existing

- Prairie Five Rides – provides curb-to-curb service
- Central Community Transit – provides door-to-door service and volunteer drivers
- Western Community Action– transit service, flex-routes, volunteer driver service (approx. 150,000 rides per year)
- Western Community Action - Pipestone and Rock are not part of their service area yet
- Western Community Action - Offers Head Start program and they coordinate schedules with their transportation arm
- Volunteer drivers are reimbursed by IRS mileage rate. Insurance is carried by the volunteer.
- Operators contract with human services and managed care which comprises a large share of rides

“Everyone says, ‘We’re not ready for you yet – but we’re glad you’re here.’ ”

### Challenges

- Having enough resources to meet needs of rural areas, because resource allocation is tied to performance standards (vehicles and funding)
- Providing accessible service especially in rural areas requires more time, reducing passengers per hour performance
- Origins and destinations are so widely dispersed in rural areas which add considerable time and distance – making it difficult to meet performance standards
- Reliance on volunteer drivers in outlying areas
- 
- Finding drivers is extremely challenging Following. Federal Motor Carrier regulation and obtaining a CDL for drivers is a difficult and costly process that deters a lot of people from applying to become drivers. Driver wage is low – CCT pays \$13.86 per hour.

- A lack of economies of scale due to dispersed low density populations result in low levels of frequency that dissuade choice riders
- A stigma exists that transit is for the elderly or disabled, especially in very rural areas

## TRANSIT NEEDS

### Service

- There is limited regulatory flexibility to start new routes or provide seasonal service to meet temporary demand (demand is much higher in the winter months). Currently that is considered as an expansion project as it constitutes an increase in hours
- Struggling to meet the need for medical trips and commuter trips outside service hours
- Multiple scheduling software programs are used (Routematch, Trips Park)
- Yellow bus operators serve students who live more than 2 miles from school; they would love to serve more students but districts will not pay for anything within the 2-mile boundary.
- People don't just need to get from home to work. They need to get from work to day care to the grocery store to home.
- STS providers are going out of business, forcing trips onto public transit. STS will deny riders based on size. Overtime, for example, CCT has to now buy vehicles with 1000 lb lifts. Public providers can also be STS providers but there is no reward; just more paperwork.

“Let’s do a good job for those who need it first.”

### Time of Operation

- Commuter peak hours and after school period are covered well but capacity is very strained during those hours (7:00am -9:00am and 2:30-4:00pm is peak demand)
- Numerous services such as adult day care, school, etc. are done at 2:30 pm resulting in not enough buses to serve peak demand. Western Community Action, as a CAP, also runs Head Start and has been able to shift program start time slightly to level out peak.
- The Jennie-O plant changed its first shift time from 5 am to 6 am to better align with bus schedules
- Most areas are not covered after 5pm/6 pm
- Sunday service is non-existent
- Demand is much higher in the winter months
- For employees whose shifts end at 1 am, tried putting them on private providers but stopped because of liability concerns

### Marketing and Education

- Update materials indicating liabilities for volunteer drivers and their rights with insurance, the current one is out of date
- There needs to be more education on what the definitive requirements are for driver certification – what is required versus recommended

- More up to date, tech savvy outreach is needed to promote to student markets
- Standard branding and marketing from MnDOT that can easily be adapted to specific operators
- Karan language for on-board surveys
- Interest in travel training
- Need a one-call center

## Potential Markets

- Demand for service to Head Start programs but no resources to add the capacity, especially during those hours of peak demand
- Medical community is well served but commuter and student markets could be better served
- Operators are most concerned with providing service for those who most need it before tapping into new markets
- Contracting with school bus operators to meet after school activity demand
- Employers expect transit operators to meet shift times vs. the employers operating to service spans
- CAP organizations typically conduct surveys that may provide more insights into needs and markets.
- Return to Community program for veterans has provided vans to all veterans agencies throughout the state

## FUNDING

- More demand exists for volunteer drivers than there is funding to subsidize them
- Additional resources would best be used to meet peak demand and provide weekend service for errand trips that workers cannot make during the week when service does not operate in the evenings
- There is no incentive to be efficient and save because if you do not use funding you will not receive the same levels of funding the next year. An operator might have lower costs one year (e.g. fuel) but next year may need th (i.e. low cost of fuel this year and many agencies over budgeted those costs based on published fuel rate)

“There is no incentive to be more efficient. You spend the money or you lose it.”

## PARTNERSHIPS

- Multiple fare structures is an obstacle to collaboration and partnerships between operators (a single farecard would be a solution)
- Ride counting (i.e. who gets credited for the ride) dissuades cooperation as it affects performance standards
- Different systems have different registration standards for volunteer drivers, e.g. some allow drivers up to age 70 and some to age 76.

- Medical community is unaware of the services available
- School transportation is a major market opportunity, but currently school districts will not formally partner. Parents must be the ones to call for rides.
- The Regional Development Commissions should be reached out to.

## OPPORTUNITIES

- Internal MnDOT “craigslist” for operators to source materials and equipment
- Produce an up to date statewide brochure indicating liabilities and rights of volunteer drivers to give to insurance companies
- Provide more flexibility to meet sudden demand and allow provision of seasonal or temporary routes
- Establish level of service standards. Given long trips, agencies are starting to think through how to get more people on each vehicle but also provide good service. One metric is the four-hour threshold – a person shouldn’t be on the bus more than four hours from origin to destination.
- Need vans for regional trips to reduce cost

# APPENDIX A – INTERVIEW GUIDE

## 2015 Greater Minnesota Transit Investment Plan

### Stakeholder Interview Outline

#### **Introduction**

#### A. Plan Overview:

The 2015 Plan will guide MnDOT's future strategy for preserving and improving transit service across Greater Minnesota. The major goals of the 2015 Plan are:

- Update the 20-year strategic plan with emphasis on improving mobility for the general public and seniors, low income individuals, people with disabilities, and commuters;
- Update investment priorities; and
- Lay out strategies for the state and transit providers to achieve a 21<sup>st</sup> Century transit system.

Development of the Plan includes several key tasks, including the following:

- Assessment of the existing transit systems
- Nationwide analysis of peer systems/best practices
- Assessment of transit needs including demographic trends
- Identification of investment needs, priorities and strategies
- Public and stakeholder input process
- Development of strategic direction

B. Purpose of stakeholder interviews/meetings: to discuss current perceptions of transit services in your community, transit opportunities, short and longer-term needs, trends and challenges. Your input will help us understand the types and levels of public transportation services that will best meet the needs of the state's residents.

C. Individuals may speak to us in confidence. Any quoting of outcomes will be done anonymously. Our main purpose is to allow stakeholders to speak freely about their concerns.

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#### **Questions/Topics** *(Note: not all topics or questions will be relevant for all stakeholders)*

Stakeholder Name:

Organization/Role:

Contact Information:

#### **Transit Services**

1. What are the major challenges your community/organization is facing with regard to public transit?

2. What is your opinion of transit service in your area? What are the strengths and weaknesses of existing service (s)? What is/should be the role of public transit?
  - Specifically, comment on service availability, quality, consumer familiarity with service, ease of use for local residents and connectivity to major destinations/activity centers
3. Are there any potential transit markets (groups of people, types of people, people in certain areas) that you think could be better served? Do you have specific suggestions for serving them? Are there any populations that are over-served?
4. What comments do you have regarding access to the transit network? What opportunities do you see for improving accessibility and connectivity? Are there suggestions you have for enhancing amenities/facilities and/or infrastructure improvements?
5. Do you see a need to expand transit service beyond what exists today? To which cities or communities? To other neighboring counties?

### **Transit Needs**

6. What do you think are the primary gaps in service? Do you have tools to assess gaps, service duplication, or underused assets?
7. What do you see as the top three transit needs in your county? For your city/organization? What are the primary transit-related concerns that you have /hear from your constituents/clients/consumers?
8. Do you and your partners provide travel training / information / customer education? How is it distributed and made available? How prevalent is awareness of transit service?
9. What are the top 3 - 5 priorities for transit within the short-term? What are the top 3 - 5 priorities in the long-term?

### **Transportation Funding and Partnerships**

10. Does your agency fund transportation services? If yes, how much and to whom is the funding provided?
11. If there were more funds for transit, how should these funds be used? (For example, provide later evening service, weekend service, connections to neighboring counties, etc.)
12. Does your agency/organization have any current partnerships with public transportation providers? What do the partnerships look like? Are they formal or informal?
13. Do you have ideas about additional partnership opportunities between your organization and the public transportation providers?



**Other**

- 14. Do you have any advice for involving the public in this planning process? Are there any specific stakeholders or groups you think we should talk with?
- 15. What haven't we covered that's important to you?
- 16. Do you have any other comments, questions or concerns?