



Minnesota
A Collaborative Vision
for Transportation



Greater Minnesota Transit Investment Plan



How-To Guide for 3Cs

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THE 3C STRATEGY HOW-TO GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

This document serves as a guide to the 3C strategies, providing information from MnDOT's August 2013 report titled *Guidance for Coordination, Cooperation and Consolidation*, as well as information from three recently completed transit restructuring projects.

The document contains the following:

- A summary of coordination, cooperation, and consolidation strategies and the benefits they can offer to local stakeholders
- A guide through the action steps of a 3C study
- A review of lessons learned from three recent Transit Restructuring Studies

BACKGROUND

In 2011 the MnDOT Office of Transit launched the Transit for Our Future initiative as an effort to refine MnDOT's process for evaluating applications for public transit funding under preservation or contraction scenarios, as state forecasts predicted the availability of substantially lower funding levels. The goal of the Transit for Our Future initiative is to improve customer access and service by establishing consistent State program policies that balance accessibility (i.e. broad availability to all users regardless of ability, income, etc.) with efficiency in providing public transit service in Greater Minnesota. Transit systems may choose one or more strategies intended to enhance the organizational working relationships among Greater Minnesota public transit systems resulting in expanded service access, more efficient management, and/or a higher level of compliance with existing and future federal regulations.

As part of this initiative, the MnDOT Office of Transit is leading a statewide effort to encourage coordination, cooperation, and consolidation (the "3C" strategies) among Greater Minnesota's transit providers. The "3C" strategies are:

- **Coordination:** Two or more agencies work together in some formal relationship, perhaps focusing primarily on information sharing. All agencies retain their separate identities and authorities, including control over the vehicles they own and their employees.
- **Cooperation:** Two or more agencies use joint decision making power to establish formal arrangements (interagency agreements) to provide for the management of the resources of a distinct system. Agencies retain their separate identities and authorities, including control over the vehicles they own and their employees.
- **Consolidation:** Two or more agencies vest all operational authority in one agency that then provides services according to purchase of service agreements or other contractual relationships. The vehicles are owned by the consolidated system and employees may be employed by the consolidated system.



BENEFITS OF THE 3C STRATEGIES

Benefits of coordination and cooperation of transit services include:

- Eliminates duplicate services allowing providers to pool resources and passengers/riders
- Better balance between efficiency as measured by operating cost per revenue hour and effectiveness as measured by passengers per revenue hour
- More flexibility in vehicle management
- More attentiveness to all aspects of federal requirements
- Potential for increased mobility for better access across jurisdictions.
- Removal of disconnect between rural networks and employment, educational, and social destinations

Benefits of consolidating transit service include:

The above benefits for coordination and collaboration can also be achieved with consolidation. Additional benefits of consolidation include:

- Generating savings to meet current and future needs
- Improving fleet maintenance to save money and improve service quality
- Offering an opportunity to implement integrated, updated systems and technology
- Streamlining demand-response operations
- Adjusting the service levels to demand on an ongoing basis
- Public information that is understandable to riders and conducive to more effective public information efforts
- Saving money primarily by reducing administrative and management costs through the elimination of duplicative functions
- Reducing overall operating cost

SPECIFIC 3C STRATEGIES

As mentioned above, the 3C strategies cover ways to achieve coordination, cooperation, or consolidation among public transit systems. Each category includes a range of options. This “continuum” ranges from information sharing to the consolidation of services under a single provider as described above.

- Coordination— involves low-level linkages, informal agreements, and some possible resource sharing and also more intense linkages that include resource sharing to pursue common goals
- Cooperation—formal linkages among partners and complex goals implemented over longer periods of time
- Consolidation—one organization assumes responsibility for service delivery on behalf of other agencies

Figure 1 depicts several strategies that have been recommended or implemented locally. Each of the following specific 3C strategies is intended to provide an overview of how transit systems can work together:

- Mobility Manager/Coordinator



- Coordinated Funding and Grant Writing
- Coordinated Flexible Voucher Programs
- Joint Purchasing
- Shared Resources
- Transportation Management Coordination Center
- Consolidated Service Operations



Coordination, Cooperation, and Consolidation (3C) Strategies

Figure 1 3C Strategies

Coordination Strategies			
Strategy	Description	Benefits	Current Application in Minnesota
Mobility Manager/Coordinator	Mobility managers/coordinators are staff dedicated to promoting and improving mobility of residents and/or agency clientele. The Mobility Manager/Coordinator is responsible for coordinating transportation resources and providing public education regarding existing transportation resources. Mobility Coordinators also work to build awareness among decision makers, service providers, and riders on key issues related to the coordination of transportation and human services.	<p>Mobility Coordinators typically:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Serve as advocates for addressing the critical needs in transportation services to the general public and individuals with special needs Train agencies and individuals on local transportation options Develop and oversee outreach and education efforts on transportation resources 	Currently four mobility management programs are funded with federal grant resources. The four mobility programs are: Rural Rides/Arrowhead Transit, VINE Interfaith, TriCap Transit Connection, and Western Community Action. These programs are primarily involved with helping individuals connect with available transportation resources on a multi-county basis. Mobility management positions that focus on individual information and referral are also referred to as “transportation solutions coordinators”. Information, Assistance and Referral is a service that helps individuals, families and communities identify, understand and effectively use the programs that comprise the human service delivery system.
Coordinated Funding and Grant Writing	A single agency prepares and manages grants for several agencies. The lead agency develops co-sponsored grant applications and fosters multiple-agency grants, which creates opportunities for leveraging existing funds to meet grant matching requirements.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides wider access to range of funding programs Reduces regional costs for pursuing grants Provides access to more specialized grant writing staff Facilitates more centralized planning and management of resources 	<p>Technology Consortium - Ecumen (Meeker County Transit) was the lead agency with Pipestone, Martin and Brown counties for applying for a State Grant and the procurement of advanced technologies.</p> <p>Western Community Action is the grant contractor for Pipestone. Pipestone retained the staff and vehicles and the county pays salaries, but Western is the contract holder and is responsible for all other regulations and expenses of the system.</p>



Coordination Strategies			
Strategy	Description	Benefits	Current Application in Minnesota
Coordinated Flexible Voucher Programs	<p>Travel vouchers are vouchers that are provided by a sponsoring organization to an eligible individual (eligibility determined by the sponsoring organization) for travel using a variety of transportation resources that are willing to participate in the program.</p> <p>Transportation operators might include public transit or paratransit, taxis or private for-hire service providers; volunteer drivers, or a friend or family member. The concept is to make existing services more affordable for the individual. Examples of a sponsoring organization include a county, a municipality, or a human service agency.</p>	<p>Maximizes use of existing transportation services.</p> <p>Allow volunteers and/or family members to be reimbursed to expand transportation options..</p> <p>Provides an affordable option for long-distance trips.</p> <p>Allows users have their choice of transportation provider.</p> <p>Coordinating and/or centralizing flexible voucher programs allows organizations to share information, software, staff time, and other resources</p>	<p>There are no systems that currently use flexible vouchers in Minnesota.</p> <p>In the past, vouchers were used by Western Community Action with DHS grant funding to provide a reduced rate for seniors; however, the program ended when grant funding ran out.</p> <p>Flexible vouchers may potentially be utilized in Blue Earth, Le Sueur and Nicollet Counties to offer a way to expand volunteer driver programs that struggle with recruiting a sufficient number of drivers.</p> <p>The process of creating Regional Transportation Coordination Councils (RTCCs) across Minnesota, which is currently underway under the leadership of MnDOT and the Minnesota Department of Human Services, represents another opportunity for improving mobility for many of the target population groups in the three counties, particularly those who may need services that are more specialized than public transit. An RTCC serving the area would offer infrastructure, financial support, and technical assistance that human service agencies and transportation providers could use to create or expand services—such as voucher programs, and others—to fill service gaps.</p>



Coordination Strategies			
Strategy	Description	Benefits	Current Application in Minnesota
Joint Purchasing	Joint purchasing focuses on coordinating administrative and fiscal functions commonly undertaken by multiple organizations as a way to achieve greater cost efficiency and eliminate redundant activities.	Type of Joint Purchasing: Combined vehicle maintenance contracts Joint insurance contracts Multi-agency driver training Multi-agency substance abuse testing.	Timber Trails (Kanabec and Mille Lacs Counties) and Chisago-Isanti Heartland Express have successfully implemented a joint maintenance program. Timber Trails buses are maintained by the Chisago-Isanti Heartland Express Maintenance Facility in Cambridge, which has proven to be beneficial to both systems. When RouteMatch software was first used in rural Minnesota, Ecumen was the contract holder and transit systems (Pipestone, Brown, Prairie Five, and the former River Rider) purchased their software through Ecumen.
Shared Resources	This strategy involves the shared purchase and/or use of resources. Sharing resources may include capital resources such as vehicles and facilities and/or operating and support services.	Examples of sharing operating and support services include: Sharing vehicles Sharing software Offering joint driver training Offering joint drug testing programs Sharing (or developing joint) policies, procedures, and implementation plans	



Coordination Strategies			
Strategy	Description	Benefits	Current Application in Minnesota
Transportation Management Coordination Center or “One-call/One-Click Center”	Coordinating dispatch and/or call centers involves creating a one-stop call-in number and using a single dispatching center to schedule requested rides among the available providers, vehicles or services. Providing consumers with one call-in number greatly increases customer convenience. To improve convenience may directly or indirectly include centralized information and referral. Jointly scheduling trips also helps to organize trips efficiently and maximizes ride-sharing. Reducing individual trip costs means the ability to provide more rides to more people for the same amount of resources.	<p>Enables passengers to make one call and access services provided by several providers</p> <p>Improves productivity and efficiency with higher volumes and co-mingling of trips</p> <p>Enables providers to schedule vehicles to fill service gaps.</p>	Hubbard County contracts with Paul Bunyan Transit, located in neighboring Beltrami County, to provide dispatch services for its city buses. Paul Bunyan Transit uses dispatch software, automatic vehicle locators (AVLs), and mobile data terminals to make a direct connection with the Hubbard County vehicles. Residents of Park Rapids call the same phone number for service, but calls are transferred to Paul Bunyan Transit for dispatching. In 2015 Paul Bunyan merged with FAR North and dispatches Roseau County and Lake of the Woods County out of their office in Beltrami County. The prior experience with Hubbard made the transition to additional call taking relatively seamless.



Coordination Strategies			
Strategy	Description	Benefits	Current Application in Minnesota
Consolidated Service Operations	The consolidation or merger of some or all functions of service operations (hiring, training and deploying drivers and maintaining vehicles) under a single operating entity.	<p>Creates cost-efficiencies by consolidating trip reservations and scheduling staff</p> <p>Maximizes opportunities for ride sharing</p> <p>Improves service delivery and customer satisfaction</p> <p>Provides leverage/local match dollars to secure additional federal funding</p> <p>Potentially increases service due to cost savings</p>	<p>In 2014, Faribault and Martin Counties consolidated transit service into one agency through a Joint Powers Board that includes representatives from both counties (more details on pg. 13).</p> <p>In 2015, Kandiyohi and Renville Counties consolidated transit service into a new system called Central Community Transit. Later that same year, the Joint Powers Board agreed to consolidate service with Meeker County to create a three-county system (more details on pg. 13).</p> <p>The focus of this guide expands beyond rural transit programs to small city/suburban programs; thus, an applicable example of consolidated service operations is Smart Link in Scott/Carver Counties. Smartlink Transit is the Dial-A-Ride, ADA and Medical Assistance service provider for both Scott and Carver counties. One dispatch center coordinates all ride requests, as well as the regional connections to surrounding communities. Smartlink was created through the merger of Scott and Carver County transit systems.</p> <p>Additional examples of recent consolidations include Lincoln County and Pipestone County transferring operational responsibility to Western, FAR North transferring operational responsibility to Paul Bunyan Transit, and Waseca County joining the multi-county SMART system in Southern Minnesota.</p>

ACTION STEPS

This section is intended to guide local transit systems through the action steps at the three different phases of the Transit for Our Future effort.

Getting Started

Figure 2 shows a multi-step process that outlines the steps involved for a system initiating Transit for Our Future discussions, which could potentially lead to receiving funding assistance through the Office of Transit.

Figure 2 Getting Started Action Steps

Step	Action Step	Entities Involved
1	Two or more Small Urban and/or Rural Public Transit Systems mutually agree to initiate discussions regarding the coordination, cooperation and/or the consolidation of one or more services provided by a lead transit agency and/or the transit system consolidation of administration and operating services.	Transit system representatives
2	Meet with public transit system governing bodies to proceed with discussions and planning	Transit system representatives District TPM
3	Public Transit Systems should contact their Transit Project Manager for technical support and guidance. Lead System Managers must work closely with Project Manager throughout entire process.	Transit system representatives District TPM
4	Develop one-page document that describes objectives of the project and outlines potential benefits. Present the project to MnDOT Office of Transit	Transit system reps District TPM MnDOT OT staff
5	Determine if the project involves any of the following components: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Organizational restructuring ▪ Route redesign that includes increasing service hours If so, it is highly recommended that the system undertake a Transit Restructuring Planning Study.	Transit system reps District TPM MnDOT OT staff
6	If not undertaking a Transit Restructuring Study, transit system representatives can go forward with developing a Transit for Our Future project, working alongside MnDOT Office of Transit staff. Submit projects for funding consideration. Submit a proposed management plan which includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Objectives of the project ▪ Expected benefits ▪ Preliminary budget ▪ Partner relationships ▪ Timeline for planning, public outreach, implementation, evaluation, and sustainability 	Transit system reps MnDOT OT staff

Step	Action Step	Entities Involved
7	Grant contract award and execution	MnDOT OT staff
8	Ongoing project management team meetings for life of project	All entities

Restructuring Plan

MnDOT Office of Transit provides funding to engage a consultant to conduct restructuring studies to support interested transit systems in understanding what needs to happen to work together. Figure 3 details the steps to undertake this effort (continuing from **Step 5** in Figure 2).

Figure 3 Restructuring Plan Action Steps

Step	Action Step	Entities Involved
1	If undertaking a Transit Restructuring Study, work with Office of Transit planning staff to finalize a scope of work for the study.	Transit system reps MnDOT OT staff
2	Release RFP with the scope of work for the study, vet applicants, and choose a consultant to complete the study.	Transit system reps MnDOT OT staff Consultants
3	Provide oversight and guidance for the Transit Restructuring Study that will include the following elements: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Existing conditions report-perceived problems/barriers/whatever ▪ Service design alternatives ▪ Organizational and administrative alternatives ▪ Funding implications ▪ Implementation Plan 	Transit system reps MnDOT OT staff Consultants
4	Conclude Transit Restructuring Study and move forward with approved implementation plan and next steps.	Transit system reps

Implementation of 3C Strategies

It important to note that local regions will have different outcomes, recommendations, and implementation goals. Figure 4 provides an example of the implementation action steps recommended to the Project Advisory Committee in the Faribault/Martin project. These action steps intended to implement full consolidation of the two transit agencies into one single transit agency.

Figure 4 Implementation Action Steps for Consolidation in Faribault and Martin Counties

Action Step	Entities Involved
Administration / Staffing	
Convene meetings of commissioners from both counties to determine Joint Powers Board (JPB) composition	Staff from both counties; county commissions
Draft Joint Powers Authority (JPA) agreement to establish guidelines for a consolidated transit service	Staff from both counties and/or consultant



Action Step	Entities Involved
Determine staffing plan and plan for contracted services	Staff from both counties and/or consultant
Develop staff transition plan (or staff contracting plan)	Staff from both counties and/or consultant
Take JPA agreement to both commissions for formal action	Staff from both counties; county commissions
Hire staff/facilitate move of staff to new roles or contract for administrative staff	Staff from both counties initially and JPB
Ongoing meetings with JPB	Staff from both counties initially, then JPA staff; JPB
If applicable, prepare RFP(s) for contracted maintenance, scheduling/dispatch, or operations	JPA staff
If applicable, negotiate seniority, bid selection with staff representative or union	JPA staff; JPB
Plan for transition of assets to JPA	JPA staff; MnDOT staff
Develop budget	JPA staff
Implement Community Advisory Committee	JPA staff; JPB
If applicable, select contractors for maintenance, scheduling/dispatch, operations	JPB; support from JPA staff
Develop set of administrative procedures	JPA or contracted staff, as appropriate
Capital and Financial Planning	
Gain consensus and buy-in from MnDOT and counties to plan for smooth funding transition from local counties to JPA	Staff from both counties and MnDOT staff
Finalize cost sharing strategy	Staff from both counties and/or consultant
Negotiate with both counties on transfers of existing fleets to JPA based on vehicle age, condition, mileage and suitability for the service area	Staff from both counties and/or consultant; MnDOT staff
Finalize set of consolidation transition-related costs for MnDOT for transition funding	Staff from both counties initially, then JPA staff; MnDOT staff
Develop unified capital replacement plan	JPA staff; MnDOT staff
Explore local revenue enhancement opportunities/partnerships to support local share of transit funding	JPA staff
Develop long-term financial plan	JPA staff
Marketing / Public Information	
Create public information about the planning process and planned outcomes of the consolidated planning effort	Staff from both counties and/or consultant
Develop new brand identity for the two-county consolidated system	Staff from both counties initially, then JPA staff (and/or consultant)
Determine how to delineate different services: dial-a-ride, deviated route, commuter services and scheduled group trips	JPA staff and/or consultant

Action Step	Entities Involved
Secure URL for new consolidated system website	JPA staff
Conduct public meetings about planned changes to transit	JPA staff
Develop consolidated transit brochure/service area map; print and distribute	JPA staff and/or consultant
Develop website for consolidated system	JPA staff and/or consultant
Develop and implement consolidated public information/outreach campaign	JPA staff and/or consultant
Conduct kick-off event to launch consolidated transit service	JPA staff
Service/Operations	
Begin discussions with drivers about proposed plan for transition	Staff from both counties initially, then JPA staff
Refine the service plan	JPA staff and/or consultant
Adopt performance measures and standards	JPB
Develop an operating plan to support the service plan	JPA Staff; MnDOT staff
Test deviated and commuter routes for operability, make adjustments as needed	JPA staff
Coordinate with adjacent transit agencies for potential transfers/service alignments	JPA staff
Determine fare structure; consider price changes/zone fares and passes	JPA staff
Conduct public hearings and adopt service and fare plan	JPA staff
Make final revisions to services before implementation	JPA staff and/or contract operator
Establish local bus stop maintenance and amenities plan	JPA staff; City of Fairmont staff
Prepare training plan for drivers	JPA staff and/or contract operator
Finalize schedules	JPA staff and/or contract operator
Train drivers and administrative staff about new services and procedures	JPA staff and/or contract operator
Install new bus stop signs in Fairmont and at commuter bus stop locations	JPA staff or City of Fairmont staff
Implement consolidated service plan	JPA staff and contract operator(s), scheduler(s), and maintenance provider(s); JPB
Refine service schedules as needed	JPA staff and/or contract operator
Develop plans for refinement and future expansion of service	JPA staff
Facilities, Equipment and Maintenance	
Confirm storage locations for vehicles	JPA staff and staff from both counties
Inform MnDOT of vehicle transfers & change of licensing/permitting	JPA staff; MnDOT staff
Upgrade facility or facilities for consolidation	JPA staff and/or contract operator
Confirm provider(s) for vehicle maintenance (if not part of contracted services)	JPA staff

Action Step	Entities Involved
If applicable, transfer spare parts for vehicles	JPA staff and/or contract operator
Develop appropriate parts inventory levels	JPA staff and/or contract operator
Replace decals on vehicles with unified system brand; repaint vehicles as needed	JPA staff and/or contract operator
Information Technology and Systems Admin	
Secure telephone number for two-county consolidated system	JPA staff
Transfer licenses for RouteMatch and tablets to JPA; purchase additional tablets/software licenses	Martin County staff and JPA staff
Develop consolidated telephone and computer center for scheduling and dispatch	JPA staff and/or contract operator
Develop vehicle communications plan between dispatch and operators	JPA staff and/or contract operator
Install communications equipment on vehicles from Faribault County	JPA staff and/or contract operator
Install uniform fareboxes	JPA staff and/or contract operator
Initiate centralized scheduling and dispatch center for consolidated system	JPA staff and/or contract operator
Monitoring (After Implementation of Consolidated Service)	
Determine if consolidated services are meeting performance standards	JPA staff
Monitor service on monthly basis and report to Community Advisory Committee and JPB	JPA staff
Adjust service and make other revisions as necessary	JPA staff and/or contract operator
Solicit rider feedback via surveys	JPA staff

LESSONS LEARNED FROM RECENT TRANSIT RESTRUCTURING PROJECTS

Recent Transit Restructuring Projects

In the last three years, MnDOT funded three restructuring studies to support interested transit systems in understanding how they can work together to implement the 3C strategies in their regions. The interest in cooperation and coordination among transit providers, especially small operators, reflects a variety of objectives, including a desire to accommodate riders' needs to travel regionally as well as to increase service efficiency and effectiveness.

MnDOT set five primary goals for these efforts:

- Improve customer service and seamlessness in terms of fares, service coverage and informational tools;
- Increase the availability of transit services, with potential new destinations and expanded service hours that come from eliminating any duplicative services;
- Improve cost effectiveness for the agencies operating services through cost savings, shared expenses, more flexible use of available resources and equipment, economies of scale and freeing up resources;



- Economic development opportunities due to improved buying power and the potential for larger scale developments, and
- Improved relationships between organizations by way of shared governance and multijurisdictional political support.

Below is a summary of each of the three recent transit restructuring studies:

Faribault and Martin Counties

Timeframe: 2013-2014

This study recommended the consolidation of transit operations for Faribault and Martin counties. After reviewing existing services and service characteristics, assessing regionalization opportunities, evaluating potential cost structures for a consolidated transit operation, and proposing alternatives for staffing, the Project Advisory Committee agreed to move forward with consolidation to form a single two-county transit agency under a Joint Powers Agreement (JPA), which includes representatives from both counties. An implementation blueprint was prepared to assist the JPA in carrying out the array of tasks required to begin consolidated operations.

Kandiyohi, Renville, and Meeker Counties

Timeframe: 2015

On January 1, 2015, Kandiyohi Area Transit (KAT) and Renville County Heartland Express consolidated services and formed a new transit provider for both counties, called Central Community Transit (CCT). The goal of the Transit Restructuring study was to analyze the feasibility of merging Meeker County Public Transit (MPT) into the CCT system and developing a region-wide network of inter-county transportation services. A major portion of the project was spent developing organizational and governance structure options for merging MPT into CCT and crafting a consolidated service improvement plan for providing consistent, inter-county service. The service plan recommended increased deviated fixed route service both between and within the major urban area and structured dial-a-ride services to the smaller communities on specific days of the week with recommended routes, pricing, and scheduling. After reviewing the service plan and organizational alternatives, the Project Advisory Committee agreed to move forward with consolidation of Meeker Transit into CCT through a Joint Powers Agreement (JPA). In the final step, an implementation plan was developed to provide actionable steps to creating a consolidated regional system.

Blue Earth, Nicollet, and Le Sueur Counties

Timeframe: 2015

A transit restructuring study was conducted in the three-county region that includes Blue Earth, Nicollet, and Le Sueur Counties, specifically focusing on three transit providers: Saint Peter Transit (City of Saint Peter), Le Sueur Transit (City of Le Sueur), and the nonprofit VINE Faith in Action. Working with regional stakeholders and leaders at each of the transit agencies, the project team developed an overview of existing transit services, operations, and governance and conducted a thorough outreach effort to obtain input about unmet transportation needs from regional stakeholders, riders, and human service organizations. Findings from these efforts highlighted the need for inter-county connections between the major urban areas and new demand-response services in communities across the region. The final step of the project developed a service plan for new regional service and identified organizational examples for



management and operation of a regional network. During this process, Saint Peter Transit was identified as the lead agency to act as a champion to work with local stakeholders to move acceptance of the service plan forward in the region.

Unsuccessful 3Cs Projects

Timber Trails (Kanabec and Mille Lacs Counties) and Chisago-Isanti Heartland Express received a TFF grant in 2014 for a shared position of Compliance Coordinator. Despite good intentions and a sincere effort to coordinate, working across two multi-county systems did not work as planned. There was too much to do with just one system that left little time for the other.

However, the same two transit systems have been successful in another collaborative effort. Timber Trails buses are maintained by the Chisago-Isanti Heartland Express Maintenance Facility in Cambridge, which has proven to be beneficial to both systems.

One of the first proposed Transit for Our Future projects was known as Buffalo Ridge. The goal was a route that travelled through four counties (Pipestone, Rock, Nobles and Murray) in Southwest Minnesota. Despite sincere effort of all the participant transit systems, the route was not particularly successful and no longer operates. One of the barriers to success was the extremely sparsely populated area where efficient scheduling could not be realized. Faulty assumptions about the true need that could be met by public transit underlay the initial planning. However, it did show that the four Buffalo Ridge partners were enthusiastic about actually working together to solve a regional problem.

Overarching Lessons

Agree on Common Goals

Identifying common consolidation goals to improve service and increase ridership is an important first step. Participants can develop an understanding that by consolidating services, the potential exists to do more than either county (agency) can do on its own. In the case of the Faribault/Martin study, both counties wanted to enhance service and provide greater mobility for their residents without having to invest more funds in transit. The counties agreed that combining resources and expanding the service area will provide more mobility options for residents.

Identify a Local Champion

In the Blue Earth, Nicollet, Le Sueur County study, the willingness of the City of Saint Peter and Saint Peter Transit to consider consolidation/coordination and meet with local stakeholders to discuss the value of improving and expanding transit services was an important factor in the traction that the idea has gained. In the Kandiyohi, Renville, Meeker County study, Kandiyohi County (as Central Community Transit) stepped forward as the champion.

Embrace Support from MnDOT Office of Transit

Support from MnDOT's Office of Transit is also important. In addition to funding the 3C studies and providing ongoing encouragement and assistance with coordination and consolidation, MnDOT staff met with local stakeholders after the development of the recommended service plan for the Blue Earth area to explain the plan, answer questions, and show its support. The availability of funding through MnDOT for new and expanded services may have been the single most significant factor in the service plan's movement forward.



Moreover, MnDOT staff is very knowledgeable about different organizational models and best practices throughout the state, and shared relevant case studies and examples. By providing examples of systems that had successfully consolidated elsewhere in Greater Minnesota, the Project Advisory Committee's comfort level increased and trusted that regional consolidation could be achieved in Blue Earth, Le Sueur, and Nicollet counties.

Identify the Region's Existing Services, Gaps, and Needs

The Blue Earth/Le Sueur/Nicollet County project began as a transit restructuring study, but evolved into more of a transit new starts study to reflect local conditions (limited or no service throughout much of the three-county region became a more pressing issue than restructuring existing municipal/non-profit services). It can be helpful to get a sense of a region's existing transportation services and needs or gaps before undertaking a formal coordination study so that the scope of the study can be tailored to the local environment.

Lessons on Stakeholders and Partners

Engage Stakeholders Early and Often

Participation from technical staff and policy board members throughout the process can help bring together people with different perspectives on transit, different approaches to management, and different levels of involvement in the day-to-day management of transit. It may be beneficial to conduct one-on-one or small group interviews early in the study to allow individuals to speak candidly about their concerns, preferences, and priorities for consolidating transit services. Ongoing participation beyond the study will be critical for stakeholders to cultivate trust and respect each other's strengths and weaknesses.

Keep the Momentum Going by Including Elected Officials

Once the previous studies were underway, moving forward in a timely fashion proved to be beneficial. As preliminary decisions were reached, such as the desired service design and agreement to consolidate services, it was valuable keep to an agreed upon schedule and keep the momentum going to support interest and enthusiasm for moving ahead and taking the next steps toward consolidation.

In each of the three studies, once elected officials became interested in what expanded transit service might look like in the study areas, momentum picked up substantially.

Overcome Concerns about Local Control

Fear of losing control of the service may be a critical concern for both technical staff and county commissioners. Loss of control relates to service design, pricing, marketing and service quality. In the case of the Faribault/Martin study, to move the process forward, representatives from both counties indicated a strong willingness to develop something new — to take a different approach from what has historically been done in their respective counties.

Partner with Human Service Agencies

Human service agencies that provide and/or fund transportation services can be good coordination/consolidation partners. In the Blue Earth study, VINE Faith in Action brought transportation expertise, a history of providing transportation services in the region, an interest in coordination, and strong stakeholder support to the 3C study.



It is important to remember that in areas without such resources, human service clients' transportation needs may be met more appropriately through networks other than public transportation systems, such as Regional Transportation Coordination Councils.

Lessons on Service Planning and Costs

Develop Optional Levels of Service

Stakeholders are likely to appreciate a choice between a Chevrolet and a Cadillac service plan. In the Blue Earth study, the service plan presented service alternatives for a new regional transit system in Low and High Level of Service (LOS) Scenarios. The Low LOS Scenario featured the introduction of new demand-response services to unserved areas within each county and volunteer driver services for the most rural areas. The High LOS Scenario added inter-county deviated route services to expand connections and opportunities to travel throughout the region. In the Kandiyohi/Renville/Meekeer study, the service plan offered several optional routes to provide additional service if funding was available.

Provide Cost Estimates for Each Service Option

Cost estimates, particularly of the local share for which counties and municipalities will be responsible, are of great importance to local stakeholders. Elected officials in particular will appreciate knowing how much service a specific amount of investment will buy.

Moreover, it is important to ensure a cost neutral or cost savings plan. At the outset of the Faribault/Martin study, members of both County Commissions clearly expressed that they did not want their respective counties to increase their financial contributions for transit services, yet were interested in opportunities to enhance service and increase ridership. Their stated preferences were to learn about how to (1) enhance service and (2) increase cost and service effectiveness; both of these would need to be pursued without increasing financial obligations for the service in the immediate term. While cost savings is always a desirable outcome, the commissioners understood that it may not be possible.

Utilize MnDOT Support to Reduce the Amount of Local Funding Needed

Stakeholders may expect the local share of new or expanded transit services to be prohibitively high; it is important to spell out how much the availability of funding for new services from MnDOT can reduce that local share. In the Blue Earth study stakeholders were surprised at how reasonable their investment would be.