

Planning for Public Transportation in Rural Communities

by Hannah Twaddell

According to the Community Transportation Association, “More than one-third of America’s population lives outside of urbanized areas. Nearly 40 percent of the country’s transit dependent population – primarily senior citizens, persons with disabilities and low-income individuals – resides in rural areas. Yet in many of these communities, public and community transportation are limited or absent.”¹

Taking the First Step: Gauging Potential Transit Markets

Chances are that your community already has some type of transit service in place, whether it’s a federally-funded public transit system, a church-sponsored volunteer driver program, shuttle buses run by retirement communities, or vans operated by human service agencies. These services may be working pretty well as is, but your community can probably get more mileage out of them by figuring out ways to coordinate routes and leverage resources.

Below are a few questions and ideas you could explore just to begin conversations about your community’s potential markets for new or expanded transit services. This isn’t a full-fledged needs assessment by any means, but it might help you form a base of information and find some champions who can launch a real planning process with assistance from the U.S. DOT Rural Transit Technical Assistance Program (RTAP).²

¹ CTA home page, August 2009; www.ctaa.org.

² Along with partner organizations such as the CTA, the RTAP (www.nationalrtap.org) provides fact sheets, resource guides, and on-site technical assistance to help rural communities assess opportunities, identify appropriate services, and assemble the resources to implement and maintain their programs.

³ “Moving Rural Residents to Work: Lessons Learned from Implementation of Eight Job Access and Reverse Commute Projects,” Eileen S. Stommes, Dennis M. Brown, and Capree M. Houston, Economic Research Service, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, December 2002.

1. Is a growing percentage of your population disabled and/or moving into its golden years?

One in five rural Americans is disabled, and 14 percent of the country’s rural population is elderly. Rural older adults (and their families) worry about how they will manage if they become unable to drive. Few families have the time or money required to chauffeur their aging parents and relatives to all the places they need or want to go. Moreover, without other transportation options, older adults can deteriorate quickly due to isolation, depression, and

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health problems that are exacerbated by difficulty getting to places like grocery stores and medical appointments.

2. What is the transportation status of your community’s low-income households and those who are unemployed?

Many low-income people in rural areas have trouble getting or holding onto jobs because they don’t have adequate, reliable transportation to get to work. Nearly 57 percent of the rural poor do not own a car. This equates to about one in every 14 households in rural America.³

You can’t phone in for jobs like bagging groceries, cleaning hotels, and waiting tables. If your car breaks down or your ride fails to show up on a regular basis, your employer will have to look for someone to take your place (the resulting employee turnover is hard on businesses, too). What’s more, as fuel prices

rise, those who can drive need to spend a far greater percentage of their small paycheck on gas than people who live closer to work and/or have higher-paying jobs.

3. Where do potential transit riders live in relation to jobs, shopping, health care, and other important destinations?

Try overlaying some key destinations on your map, such as major employers, colleges, hospitals, and shopping centers. You can enrich the information with Census data about your county’s commuting patterns.

Once you’ve assembled your maps, look for “pockets” of these demographic groups and/or activity centers that might serve as focal points for shared transit services. Or the pattern may be quite dispersed, in which case door-to-door “demand response” services may be more feasible for older adults and people with disabilities, along with “transportation demand management” (TDM) commuter strategies such as park and ride lots for carpoolers.

MOVING FORWARD: SOME KEYS TO SUCCESS

1. Share Resources

Successful transportation initiatives in rural areas require coordination among a variety of partners, from government agencies at local, regional, state, and federal levels to nonprofit organizations, private businesses, and residents. In addition to learning how services are planned and funded, advocates must figure out each organization’s mission and how it can be advanced by investing in transit. In other words, what’s in it for them? But the most important element of a rural transit program is a team of enthusiastic, dedicated, and savvy advocates.

“There are varied approaches to pooling resources and using economies of scale to everyone’s advantage:

- it may be as simple as sharing information on transportation.
- it may be joint training or maintenance efforts.
- it could be creating a centralized dispatching operation.
- it might be the selection of a lead agency to oversee the transportation efforts of several agencies.
- it could be creating a brokerage to broker transportation services among separate providers.
- it might mean creating an independent agency to provide all transportation for a community.”⁴

2. Coordinate Services

Rural human service agencies have the challenge of serving a widely dispersed group of people who often have difficulty reaching a central location for the help they need. Many agencies can arrange transportation for their target population, but funding restrictions may prevent them from transporting others. So, the social service agency can transport a low-income rural child to its Head Start program at the community center, but cannot also take his mother to work across the street, nor his grandmother to the doctor’s office next door. Agencies and clients find this type of situation frustrating, confusing, and inefficient.

Some 3,700 urban and rural transit services for older adults and people with disabilities are funded by the Section 5310 program of the Federal Transit Administration (FTA), which is working to improve coordination with other federal agencies that support transit for target populations.

Check with your state transit agency or the Community Transportation Association to see if your county’s federally-mandated “coordinated human services

⁴ “Getting Started – Creating A Vision & Strategy For Community Transit,” FTA Rural Transit Assistance Program, Technical Assistance Brief No. 21, Spring 2009; www.nationalrtap.org.

⁵ TCRP Report 56, *Integrating School Bus and Public Transportation Services in Non-Urban Communities*. Multisystems, Inc., et al., Transportation Research Board, 1999; www.trb.org.

⁶ TCRP Report 34, *Assessment of the Economic Impacts of Rural Public Transportation*, Jon E. Burkhardt, James L. Hedrick, Adam T. Magavock, Transportation Research Board, 1998; www.trb.org.

plan” is underway, or already done. You can help move it forward by encouraging dialogue among staff from local and regional human services and transportation agencies.

“In some non-urban communities, school districts are transporting students – particularly in high school – via public transit. In other areas, the general public is being transported on school buses when the buses are not in use for student transportation. And, in a few communities, students and the general public are riding on school buses at the same time.”⁵

3. Tout Transit’s Economic Benefits

In an article published by the Rural Assistance Center, “Transportation Needs in Rural Communities” (March 2004), Pamela Feldman noted that, “improving access to public transportation in rural areas can stimulate economic development, thereby increasing employment opportunities. It can attract jobs and businesses to the community and provide better access to business and other community facilities.”

A comprehensive Transportation Research Board study of America’s 1,200 rural public transportation systems found that they netted their counties more than \$1 million in annual earnings, eleven percent more than earnings in rural counties without public transit.⁶ For every additional dollar spent on transit (typically by a transit agency), rural areas derived, on average, about \$3.10 in benefits. The highest cost-benefit ratios were achieved by expanding access to jobs, fostering independent living, and providing transportation to critical health services.

Given the costs of high employee turnover, the businesses in your region may well be interested in helping to create or expand carpools, vanpools, shuttles, or other alternatives to private automobile travel for their employees, students, or customers.

Transit agencies that have successfully implemented services to support economic development, such as FTA’s Job Access and Reverse Commute program,

emphasize the importance of involving employers at every stage of the planning and implementation process. Your state DOT or regional planning council may also have a TDM program that can help you organize these discussions and put together strategies.

SUMMING UP

Despite efforts by local, state, and federal agencies to expand resources and cut down on red tape, developing a rural transit system is still a major undertaking. But transit services are not only vital for older adults, people with disabilities, and low-income families, they can also strengthen the local economy. It’s worth investing some creative energy and resources to help rural people get where they need to go. ♦

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What’s Rural?

Obviously, there are a wide range of “rural” communities, and transportation issues will vary – depending on geographic, demographic, and income differences among communities. My aim in this short article is to provide you with a general overview of rural transportation planning-related issues.

In terms of federal transit grant programs, rural areas are defined in the negative. That is, they are all areas that are not “urbanized.” An urbanized area (often referred to as an UZA), in turn, is a geographic area (designated by the Census Bureau) consisting of a central core and adjacent densely settled territory that together contain at least 50,000 people, generally with an overall population density of at least 1,000 people per square mile. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, there are some 465 urbanized areas.