

Strategies for Providing Rural Transit

- Is there a lack of quality, reliable, convenient ground transportation in your community?
- Is the lack of mobility in your community stifling economic and social progress or hampering opportunities to improving the well-being of your residents?

If so, your community may want to consider these strategies for providing rural transit.

There is widespread recognition among rural residents, businesses, and community leaders that effective public transportation is vital to attaining social, economic, and environmental objectives. Meeting the demand for public transportation in rural areas poses unique challenges, including conquering greater distances and factoring in lower population density. Comprehensive planning and coordination are essential to providing efficient transportation services in rural areas.

The State Transportation Planning Process (TPP) Involves You!

The U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) program that has the most effect on services for persons with transportation needs is administered by DOT's Federal Transit Administration (FTA). Rural public transit programs receive over \$200 million per year in FTA regular transit, elderly, bus and bus facility project funds. Transit planning efforts are required to be integrated with highway planning activities, which are funded through DOT's Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). In order for public transit projects to receive a share of Federal funds, they must be included in the State's Statewide Transportation Improvement Plan (TIP). The Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21) provides opportunity for States to present a list of highway and transit projects to be advanced in the next 3 years with FTA or FHWA funding. Urban areas normally participate in a similar planning and coordination process with metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs). In some areas MPOs serve rural as well as urban communities.

To initiate involvement in the State's planning process, local officials should contact their State's Department of Transportation, State-level elected officials, and policy makers. To secure funding for planning purposes, contact the National Transit Resource Center for the name of your State's FTA regional representative. In addition to involvement in the State-wide planning process, the following strategies may assist your community with starting up a public transportation system.

Step 1: Create a Local Transportation Advisory Committee

This Committee should be comprised of a broad base of transit champions or stakeholders from the community. This includes MPOs, County Commissioners, Social Service Agency Heads, City Council members, Councils of Governments (COGs), Chamber of Commerce, potential or existing transportation providers, economic development leaders, local business leaders and concerned citizens. Local consensus and community support are vital for success of the project.

The transportation advisory committee should conduct a transportation needs assessment and also identify existing transit resources. A good way to begin this process is to contact the National Transit Resource Center at 1-800-527-8279. Local COGs and/or MPOs are appropriate organizations to prepare plans, collect and analyze data, develop strategies, and allocate funds. The Advisory Committee should develop a profile of transit services. Several options for meeting area public transit needs will

need to be analyzed to identify a strategy that will meet the expectations of the public while also being financially sustainable.

In order to secure a detailed quantitative assessment of transit resources and needs, Transportation Advisory Committees should seek out the advice and services of the Community Transportation Association of America (CTAA) or a similar organization. Often outside expertise is beneficial in working with participants to develop the range of services that will effectively meet the identified needs.

Step 2: Locate Startup Funding.

Federal funds are available to agencies that need transit to support their services. Contact the State DOT for information on Section 5311 Rural Transportation Grants. Identify all local social service agencies, including public health, family and child services, mental health, mental retardation, and rehabilitation. All of these agencies have access to transportation dollars. To receive funds, communities must submit applications and identify any local groups performing similar services.

Step 3: Develop a Transportation Business Plan.

The business plan should address the most appropriate use of transportation resources, the number of vehicles needed in the initial phase of transit operations, the types of services to be provided, and projections of human, physical and technological resources needed to operate the service. The system has to grow its own demand; otherwise a large overhead will cause it to fail. Through grant writing and community planning, the goal is to secure enough funding to operate the first year or two without any locally subsidized public funding. Signed informal agreements provide initial support and evolve into formalized ones prior to system implementation. Incorporate and implement a plan for seeking funds to operate in the following years.

Step 4: Implement the Program.

The right personnel have to be put in place to carry out the operation. This is critical to success. The best candidates are ambitious, community-minded persons who have business skills and can communicate with Federal, State, and local leaders and the general public. Partnerships with local industry, the social service sector, and the business community as a whole have to be developed.

Other Resources

★ Community Transportation Association of America (USDA Rural Passenger Transportation Technical

Assistance Program) [<http://www.ctaa.org>] toll-free hotline: 1-800-527-8279

★ USDA EZ/EC Communities Sustainability Tool box [<http://www.ezec.gov/Toolbox/sustainable.html>]

★ Transportation Toolbox for Rural and Small Communities [www.bts.gov/ntl].

★ Getting Started: A Rural Transit Assistance Program from the FTA, Brief No. 21, Dec. 2001.

★ Developing and Designing Community Transportation Services: A Rural Transit Assistance Program of the FTA, Brief No. 22, Dec. 2001.

★ Office of Family Assistance (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services/Department of Labor-Welfare to Work transportation services at: www.acf.dhh.gov/news/welfare/.

Additional copies of this Technote are available from the Office of Community Development, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Rural Development, STOP 3203, 1400 Independence Avenue, S.W., Washington, DC 20250-3203 (1-800-645-4712). Copies may also be obtained at

<http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/ocd>

1 A list of these resources is included on the CTAA web site at: <http://www.ctaa.org/ntrc/funding> or from your State DOT.

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