

Chapter 4: The Role of Transit in Rural Livability

This section presents observations and insights from the study into how statewide transportation planning can strengthen the role transit plays in creating livable rural communities. Statewide planning guides transportation resource allocation decisions that play a major role in creating livable communities in rural areas -- from meeting basic mobility and accessibility needs to supporting economic development and provision of health and human services. This section considers how those entities that are directly or indirectly involved in the provision of rural transit participate in transportation planning that supports livability through rural transit, and presents relevant best practice examples from the *Transit at the Table III* case studies.

4.1 Defining Livability for Rural Transit

This description of transit’s contribution to livability in rural communities builds from several key resources, listed at the end of the document, including the Livability Principles of the DOT-HUD-EPA Partnership for Sustainable Communities:

- Enhance economic competitiveness
- Support existing communities
- Provide more transportation choices
- Value communities and neighborhoods
- Promote equitable, affordable housing
- Coordinate policies and leverage investment

This section identifies how SDOTs, RPOs, transit agencies, and local communities use planning to support transit’s advancement of the Livability Principles. Although these entities may not directly identify “livability” as their priority, they consistently articulate goals related to key elements of livability - preserving rural community identity, and retaining and attracting residents, employers, and visitors, by providing transit options to important destinations.

As demonstrated in the *Transit at the Table III* case studies, rural transit can meet livability goals by providing equitable access to work, education, health services, and other destinations, particularly for residents with limited mobility options because of income, age, health, geographic isolation, or other factors. By broadening access, rural transit plays a major role in the health, quality of life, and economic viability of rural communities.

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This research identifies three key themes for how planning can support transit’s contribution to rural livability:

Accessibility

- Although transit is one, often relatively small component of rural transportation networks, it provides service, including through intermodal connections, that addresses equity, quality of life, and access to lifeline services.
- Transit is a critical link to key destinations in rural livable communities: jobs, community and health services, affordable housing, education, and natural, cultural, and recreational opportunities.
- Access is a significant challenge for rural communities because of long distances between destinations, which can require mobility across large regions or between dispersed urban and rural areas.

Economic Development and Community Preservation

- Rural communities depend on economic development to preserve their character and vitality. Transit contributes by improving access to jobs and services and sustaining or attracting growth and services.
- Transit further assists rural communities to enhance economic viability by retaining and attracting new residents and employers through expanding transportation choices and reducing congestion and pollution.

Environmental Sustainability

- Environmental sustainability is closely related to the quality of life in rural communities -- transit contributes to improved air quality, reduced GHG emissions, and increased energy efficiency.

This section draws upon research for *Transit at the Table III* to explore how these themes can be advanced by rural transit, supported by statewide transportation planning and its varied participants.

4.2 Livability and Statewide Planning for Rural Transit

Chapter 2 identifies five ways in which statewide transportation planning considers and supports rural transit. These aspects of planning strengthen transit’s ability to contribute to livability in rural communities. For example, State livability goals incorporated within the statewide planning process can support local decisions to direct flexible Federal transportation funds to rural transit investments that also meet local goals. These statewide goals, whether for balanced land use, environmental quality, or economic development, can be focused or expanded to also meet local needs. Table 3 provides a continuum of how livability can be achieved by rural transit in each of the five transportation planning categories, ranging from “early or basic” to “advanced or evolving” approaches identified by the study team.

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Table 3. Continuum of How Statewide Transportation Planning Support Rural Transit and Livability

Category	Baseline (Basic Approach)	Advanced/Evolving Approach
Goals	Mobility and accessibility for transit-dependent populations	Livability and sustainability: community-wide economic development, equity, environment, multimodal and intermodal connections
Planning Products and Processes	Plans and processes focus on mobility, safety, and air quality	Plans that incorporate livability goals and funding processes that include livability criteria
Institutional Relationships	Limited interactions for funding and compliance between DOT and transit agency	Informal and formal collaboration and two-way communication across multiple entities and jurisdictions
Funding	FTA programs	Leveraging of other sources, including non-DOT public and private
Service	On-demand, intra-jurisdictional service to medical and other human services	Regularly scheduled, regional and intercity service to a variety of destinations

4.3 Roles of Government

The contribution of transit to rural livability goals varies among the communities studied and involves multiple partners and investments of funds from multiple sources, reflecting the diversity of these communities. *Transit at the Table III* found that different entities play different roles in planning for rural transit, including in pursuit of livability goals.

Federal

A number of Federal agencies, including the Departments of Transportation, Agriculture, Interior, Health and Human Services, and Commerce (specifically the Economic Development Agency), are integral to supporting economic development and access to medical services and employment in rural areas. For U.S. DOT, this study focused on FTA rather than other DOT modal agencies.

State

DOTs and other State agencies support rural livability through statewide transportation planning by setting statewide livability goals; incorporating livability criteria into expenditure of funds from State and Federal programs; directly designating funds or creating incentives or requirements to expand transit and intercity bus programs; providing technical assistance and training; and conducting studies.

Regional

Many RPOs or other similar regional agencies provide significant links between land use and transportation, including transit; RPOs are often responsible for community and economic development and other programs and can support SDOTs by providing technical assistance, training, and allocation of funding to local communities.

Local

Local governments and transit agencies report success in partnering with businesses and universities, conducting marketing campaigns to change the perception of transit, and leveraging non-transportation

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funding opportunities to improve how rural transit supports economic development, quality of life, and access.

4.4 Case Study Examples

The study identified a broad range of ways in which State, regional, local agencies, and transit providers participate in the statewide transportation planning to ensure that transit supports livability in rural areas. These activities meet the Livability Principles, occur within the planning framework described above, and provide a valuable resource for peer State, regional, and local agencies. Examples include:

- Georgia’s DHS and SDOT coordinate to direct Federal funding to rural transit and designate staff to participate in regional coordinated human transportation service committees, which develop the plans required for Federal funding. These committees are creating long-lasting and effective partnerships between public health and transportation officials that will help ensure access to health care services by all, including those with low incomes.
- PennDOT’s LUTED Initiative has led RPOs to incorporate regional LUTED plans into their LRTP and CEDS, which are Federally-funded by the Economic Development Administration. As a result, RPOs are able to use different funding sources and take a more comprehensive approach to planning and programming projects that address access and economic development.
- ADOT reports a new emphasis in statewide plans on livability, including Complete Streets concepts and shifting commutes from rural areas to urban areas from highway to public transportation – both intercity bus and rail – to address job access and air quality.

This summary highlights how the transportation planning process in three States supports livability through rural transit. The full case studies for these and five other States can be found online at the FTA/FHWA Transportation Planning Capacity Building website (<http://www.planning.dot.gov>).

Maine

MaineDOT’s statewide LRTP, *Connecting Maine* (2008)¹⁹, identifies economic development, as well as sustainability and connections to land use, as goals for transportation. The plan’s framework consists of 38 Corridors of Regional Economic Significance for Transportation focused on multimodal intercity connections, but many of the cities are classified as rural or the corridors pass through rural areas. In addition, MaineDOT has supported the creation of innovative Island Explorer bus shuttle systems, which are intended to advance local economies by attracting and serving tourists while also meeting local community needs, including access to jobs and improved air quality. For example, the Island Explorer, which serves Acadia National Park, meets both MaineDOT’s economic development goal and the NPS’s visitor experience and environmental quality goals by providing transportation for tourists, tourism industry workers, and fisherman.²⁰

¹⁹ For additional information, visit <http://www.maine.gov/mdot/connectingmaine/index.htm>.

²⁰ See FTA’s rural livability showcase study, <http://fta.dot.gov/documents/maine.pdf>.

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Figure 6. Left: Island Explorer, Downeast Transportation/Acadia National Park. Right: WSDOT Sustainable Transportation



Sources: Volpe Center and WSDOT

MaineDOT has also promoted rural transit and transportation choices through a website, Explore Maine (<http://www.exploremaine.org/>), which provides comprehensive information about the wide variety of reliable travel options (air, bike, bus, car, ferry, and train) and connectivity between modes within Maine, with an emphasis on how to access remote places otherwise inaccessible by car. The promotion of alternative transportation is consistent with the Maine Climate Action Plan (<http://www.maine.gov/dep/air/greenhouse/>), which also promotes effective land use decisions and lists transit ridership as a potential performance measure.

Washington

Washington State takes a proactive approach to integrating transportation, including rural transit, with sustainability, climate change, and livability goals, policies, and programs. Under the 2009 Executive Order 09-05 Washington's Leadership on Climate Change,²¹ the State Departments of Ecology, Transportation, and Commerce collaborate in a manner similar to the DOT-HUD-EPA Partnership for Sustainable Communities, but with a specific charge to identify strategies to reduce VMT and GHG emissions from the transportation sector while considering air quality and impacts on the economy.

One way in which WSDOT supports this initiative is by promoting carpooling, vanpooling, and public transportation services, including intercity bus. The State vanpooling program is not limited to urban areas: several rural regions also take advantage of the program. For example, Job Lift (http://www2.olycap.org/Employment_Assistance.php) is a partnership vanpool program with Olympic Community Action Program and Clallam Transit that provides transportation to low-income individuals living in Olympic Peninsula's rural western areas. The program, supported by the State and FTA's JARC grant program, consists of three vanpools providing service that includes up to 45 trips a day to provide

²¹ For additional information, visit http://www.governor.wa.gov/execorders/eo_09-05.pdf.

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low-income individuals with access to job sites, training, and interviews, as well as daycare.²² Intercity bus provides a critical link with rural transit service to provide residents with transportation options and access to key destinations statewide, including work, health care, and education sites. Good communication and coordination by the providers, combined with small but targeted investment by WSDOT, has led to a successful network that helps support rural communities.

Figure 7. Job Lift Van Pool Program – Washington



Source: Olympic Community Action Program website.

South Carolina

South Carolina has examples at the State, regional, and local levels that reflect the incorporation of livability into project prioritization, funding, and the provision of everyday transit services. In April 2010, FHWA South Carolina Division, in partnership with SCDOT, FTA, and number of other Federal agencies, hosted a workshop entitled "Beginning the Conversation about Livability." The event resulted in an open and lively discussion about livability, what it means, and how it can become an integral part of future transportation planning efforts in South Carolina.

At the State level, consideration of transit as an alternative or of transit accommodation is a required criterion for the prioritization and ranking of projects to be funded in the STIP. In addition, communities are able to add their own criteria to the project selection process, including livability criteria such as improving access to public and civic destinations, resulting in connectivity and open space; creating walkable neighborhoods; or investing in established communities.

²² For information on rural transit and livability in Mason County, to the south, see FTA's rural livability showcase study, http://fta.dot.gov/documents/Rural_MasonCounty.pdf

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Figure 8. Aging, Disability, and Transportation Resource Center Ribbon Cutting and Vehicle



Sources: Fast Lane (U.S. Secretary of Transportation Blog and Susan Richards, SR Concepts)

Regional agencies are able to leverage SCDOT and Federal funding to provide improved access to health care and jobs through provision of rural transit. The Lower Savannah Council of Governments has combined U.S. DOT and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services grants to fund an Aging, Disability, and Transportation Resource Center and equip transit vehicles throughout the region with intelligent transportation systems technology. Federal funding sources for the project include a 2005 transformation grant²³ from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid, facilitated by the Lieutenant Governor's Office of Aging; U.S. DOT Mobility Services for All Americans Initiative (<http://www.its.dot.gov/msaa/>) planning and implementation grants; and ARRA funding for the building. Similarly, SCDOT provided FTA Section 5304 (Statewide Planning) funding to support a successful FTA Bus Livability grant application by Lowcountry Council of Governments, Lowcountry Regional Transportation Authority, Beauford County, and the University of South Carolina at Beaufort. The grant will help fund local circulator service that is also being supported by nearby military facilities and the local tourism industry.

²³ For additional information about Transformation Grants, visit <https://www.cms.gov/MedicaidTransGrants/> (Accessed January 2011).

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Figure 9. TriCounty Link's Link to Lunch Service

Commuter Solutions
LINK TO LUNCH!

Link to Lunch picks up *every 8 minutes*
from 10:45 a.m. until 1:15 p.m.
Monday through Friday

RIDE FREE
August 10 - September 4, 2009
and register to win free
meals from your favorite
Moncks Corner restaurants

Try it - you'll LINK it - a lot!

For more information call 899-4096
or visit us at
www.ridetricountylink.com

Source: TriCounty Link (<http://www.ridetricountylink.com/downloads/TCL-LinkToLunchFlyer-080409.pdf>)

Local transit agencies in particular have been able to both promote and leverage livability goals to partner with universities and employers to provide expanded service. TriCounty Link, which provides service to three counties in southeast South Carolina, has found success in changing people's perception of transit as a desirable choice to improve access to jobs and other destinations by providing convenient and innovative services, such as no-cost transfers with the CARTA, free wireless on its commuter buses, and the innovative Link to Lunch²⁴ service, providing weekday trips to lunch sites for workers and other residents.

4.5 Conclusion

By considering the role of transit in rural communities, statewide transportation planning can make important contributions to the livability of these communities. This chapter showcases many of the ways that statewide planning, with active participation by State, regional, and local partners, can support transit and more livable rural communities. This document summarizes insights related to planning, transit, and rural livability from research conducted for *Transit at the Table III*. FTA hopes that the

²⁴ For additional information, visit <http://www.ridetricountylink.com/commuterRoutes/LinktoLunch.html>.

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examples highlighted will assist SDOTs, RPOs, local governments and transit agencies to plan for transit that will improve livability in rural communities nationwide.