

North Central New Mexico: Development of a Regional Transit District

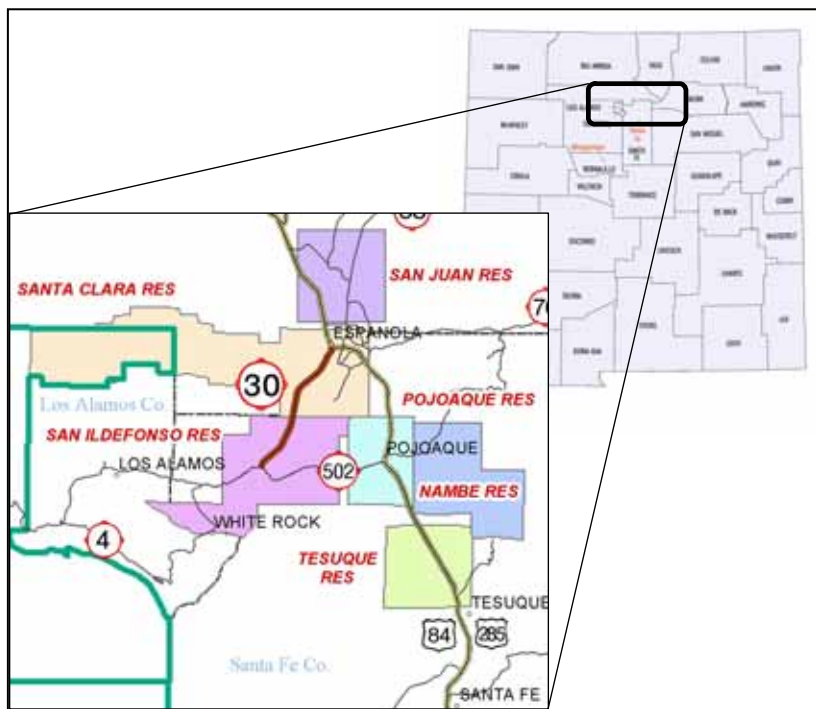
Overview

In New Mexico, the development of the North Central Regional Transit District (NCRTD) provides an example of a strong partnership between tribes and local governments to improve regional planning and coordination on transit services within a diverse area of cities, rural areas, and tribal lands. The NCRTD is a regional transit planning organization that was planned and structured with involvement of representatives of all five of the Indian pueblos in the region and includes representatives from each on the Board of Directors. Strong working relationships and communications between tribal and non-tribal governments are apparent in the structure of the organization, and the cooperative efforts that have gone into addressing common regional transportation needs.

Background

Statewide efforts in New Mexico to include tribes in transportation planning have resulted in improved consultation in recent years. There are 22 Federally recognized tribes in New Mexico, representing almost 20 percent of the land base within the State, and over 10 percent of the total population in 2003.¹

The North Central region of New Mexico is one of the most diverse in the State, characterized by stark economic and demographic contrasts. Within the Native American community, both the smallest and largest Indian pueblos are located in this region. Pojoaque Pueblo has 355 tribal members while San Juan Pueblo has 2,688.² In addition, the two counties in New Mexico with the highest and lowest per capita income, Santa Fe and Rio Arriba respectively, are located in the region. Rio Arriba is one of the biggest counties in land area and remains mostly rural, while Los Alamos is the smallest in the State.



Map of North Central New Mexico
(Courtesy of the ATR Institute and the State of New Mexico)

The pueblos are located in close proximity to two relatively major urban areas, Santa Fe and Espanola. As the state capital, Santa Fe provides a large number of government-related employment opportuni-

¹ U.S. Census Estimates, 2003.

² A proclamation by Gov. Richardson on December 19, 2005 changed the official name of San Juan Pueblo to Ohkay Owingeh. To maintain consistency, this case study refers to San Juan Pueblo throughout.

ties, while the region's largest employer, the Los Alamos National Labs, is located in Los Alamos County. Traffic congestion stemming from dispersed commercial, research, and residential areas has created a demand for transportation services far exceeding that of other comparably rural areas of New Mexico.

Tribal Involvement

Two projects – a highway improvement project in the US 84 / US 285 corridor and a regional park and ride system – demonstrate the tangible benefits of tribal participation in transportation planning efforts. Momentum gained through these successes proved to be important factors in the successful development of the NCRTD.

A Foundation of Working Relationships

In 1996 the New Mexico Department of Transportation (NMDOT)³ assessed an improvement project to the US 84 / US 285 corridor to relieve traffic congestion in the area between Santa Fe and Espanola. The three tribes in the region found road widening to be an unacceptable element in each of the proposed alternatives because it would require additional right of way from the pueblos. Though they had little experience working



**Context Sensitive design of the Tierra Sagrada Bridge, NM
(Courtesy of the New Mexico Department of Transportation)**

together to address transportation issues, tribal leaders lobbied NMDOT to study alternative transportation demand management (TDM) measures. Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) conducted a major investment study of the corridor; this was the first time that all pueblos were involved in a study of this nature.

The Alternatives Analysis Report concluded that widening could be deferred through establishment of a park and ride system and other TDM measures. In addition, the project provided grade separated interchanges with direct access to tribal activity centers. The approach to developing the interchanges focused on context sensitive solutions and involved the pueblos in developing design features and artwork so that the project fit well into the community. This collaborative process not only saved the state DOT over \$1 million in construction costs compared to the widening alternatives, but provided the tribes with more mobility options and access to additional economic development opportunities in the region.

³ In 1998 the New Mexico Department of Highways changed names to the New Mexico Department of Transportation (NMDOT).

Tribal involvement in a proposed state highway project saved the State DOT over \$1 million and provided the tribes with more mobility options and access to additional economic development opportunities in the region.

The park and ride system, which included transit service, proved to be successful and demonstrated that there was a demand for transit service in the region. The park and ride system also illustrated the benefits to working together as a region, and helped motivate the concept of a regional transit district. Sometimes indistinguishable boundaries between the pueblos and the State had resulted in

enrolled pueblo citizens living outside their respective pueblo and non-natives living on tribal land. As an extreme case, the Pueblo of Santa Clara has approximately 10,000 residents, but only about 1,600 are resident enrolled members. Transit service, which had been provided according to government affiliation, was causing varied levels of service to residents and featured significant mobility gaps and overlaps.

Proposal for a Regional Transit District

The proposal for a Regional Transit District (RTD) came in August 2000 during a National Quality Initiative on Transit. Three years later in March 2003, an RTD Act⁴ was signed into law, allowing for the creation of RTDs across the State. Following the passage of this legislation, a NCRTD Organizing Committee was convened by asking all 10 of the governmental units with jurisdiction in the region to pass formal resolutions of Intent to Join and to designate a representative to the committee. NCRTD member governments are the New Mexico Counties of Los Alamos, Rio Arriba, and Santa Fe, the Cities of Espanola and Santa Fe, and five pueblos, including:

- Pojoaque Pueblo,
- San Ildefonso Pueblo,
- San Juan Pueblo,
- Santa Clara Pueblo,
- Tesuque Pueblo.

The NMDOT Research Bureau provided funding to the Alliance for Transportation Research Institute (ATRI) to develop a NCRTD case study and model for district development that could be used by other RTDs developing across the State. ATRI was joined by the Surface Transportation Policy Project and the Regional Development Corporation, which took on the NCRTD as a project that would address development needs in its focal area.

By securing resolutions of Intent to Join and including the pueblos on the Organizing Committee where initial decisions were being made, the NCRTD certification process was able to break down barriers that had obstructed previous consultation efforts. To disseminate information on the certification process and the potential benefits of participation in the NCRTD, the Organizing Committee held one-on-one “study sessions” with elected officials, staff, and the public in each of the ten member jurisdictions. The questions, comments, and recommendations gathered were used by the Organizing Committee to make changes to the organization’s structure, prior to any of the formal hearings required by the RTD Act. Some pueblos expressed concern that the RTD would continue to distinguish users by government affiliation, which in the past had limited the ability of

⁴ New Mexico Senate Bill 34.

transit to serve both enrolled tribal members and other residents living on reservation lands. To address these issues, assurances were made at this point in the process that the RTD service plan would be based on demonstrated population need, not tribal enrollment status.

Organization and Collaborative Structure

Several organizational issues with respect to tribes were carefully studied as part of the NCRTD development process. First, Organizing Committee members from several of the small pueblos were particularly concerned that their needs would be lost in the service plan due to the relatively small size of their populations. For example, the Pojoaque Pueblo has about 300 enrolled members, while the Santa Fe City and County areas each have over 85,000 residents. The “Voting Strength Analysis for NCRTD Members” shown below was conducted using various methodologies and published on the RTD website for distribution among stakeholders. The analysis resulted in a weighted voting formula that divides all members into population divisions of 5,000/10,000/20,000/40,000 and 80,000. While all members receive one vote on the Board of Directors, each additional division gives a member additional votes. This set of thresholds lowers the relative voting strength of the larger members while providing the pueblos an equitable share.

Voting Strength Analysis for NCRTD Members

Member	Population	Population % of Total	Population Units	Total Voting Units	Voting Units % of Total	Ratio of Voting Units % to Population %
Española City	9,791	5.1	1	2	8.3	1.6
Los Alamos County	18,305	9.5	2	3	12.5	1.3
Pojoaque Pueblo	355	0.1	0	1	4.2	42.0
Río Arriba County	29,674	15.3	3	4	16.7	1.1
San Ildefonso Pueblo	644	0.3	0	1	4.2	14.0
San Juan Pueblo	2,688	1.4	0	1	4.2	3.0
Santa Clara Pueblo	1,600	0.8	0	1	4.2	5.3
Santa Fe City	65,127	33.7	4	5	20.8	0.6
Santa Fe County	64,932	33.6	4	5	20.8	0.6
Tesuque Pueblo	404	0.2	0	1	4.2	21.0
TOTAL	193,420	100.0	14	24	100.0	

(Table Courtesy of the Regional Development Corporation)

A second initial challenge to the organization concerned the continued involvement of tribal representatives as the NCRTD became certified, developed a service plan, and sought stable funding. The group decided to elect a tribal representative who had been active throughout the process as the first Chairman of the Board. James Rivera, of the Pojoaque Pueblo, is currently serving a one to two year term. Due to the success of this arrangement and enthusiasm from the pueblos, the Board of Directors plans to amend the NCRTD bylaws to formalize the requirement that either the Chairman or Vice Chair of the Board come from a pueblo, with the other position to be filled by a non-pueblo member.

The Regional Transit District (RTD) tailored its organizational structure to reflect members' diversity and needs. Pueblos are given flexibility to accommodate their governmental processes for review and approval of RTD legal commitments and resolutions.

Throughout the organizing process, ATRI and the Regional Development Corporation acted as facilitators by coordinating representative's input and presentations at committee meetings, investigating funding sources, and conducting a voting analysis. Both Tribes and local governments expressed appreciation for the constructive dialogue that a third party was able to maintain among stakeholders and ability to deflect historical issues throughout the process.

Finally, each NCRTD member signed a binding Member Contract tailored to its circumstances and financial commitments. The organization is governed by Bylaws that describe the duties of the Executive Committee positions and the general intent of the NCRTD. Procedurally, flexibility is provided in the resolution process to allow member pueblos time to analyze decisions and additional time to pass tribal resolutions on matters before voting. Membership in the NCRTD is not permanent; processes for joining and withdrawing are detailed in the Member Contracts and Bylaws.



Moving Forward

Since certification of the district in September 2004, the NCRTD has held regular monthly meetings to develop its service plan and explore funding options and other activities. Meetings rotate among member locations, which promotes awareness of different local circumstances and plans. The Eight Northern Pueblos Regional Planning Organization (RPO) sends a representative who attends as a guest and has served as a technical resource for the RTD.⁵ ADOT and FHWA also attend and have been helpful in suggesting potential funding sources and making NCRTD transit proposals a priority. Ongoing relationships between the NCRTD and other transportation agencies in the region have been critical to its success.

The NCRTD has already benefited from coordinated planning between the pueblos, counties, and cities in the region. A recent Board of Directors meeting pushed the idea of working with the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) to request funding for transit planning. Though none of the representatives thought this has been done before, they are in a unique position to pursue this innovative arrangement because the district includes tribal lands and its board includes tribal members.

⁵ In New Mexico, transit projects are funded through the RPO structure. Thus, collaboration and ongoing coordination have proven vital to securing funding for RTD projects.

Lessons Learned

Structuring tribal involvement into the RTD organization enables tribes and other governmental entities to collaborate on transportation planning in an ongoing way. The NCRTD continues to benefit from taking a regional approach to transit, offering the most efficient service possible to the region's residents. Several factors led to the success of this project, which can be broadly addressed in other regions.

- Emphasizing the link between mobility and economic development throughout the region solidified support for the project early on. Tribal leaders recognized the NCRTD's potential to deliver economic and community benefits.
- Proceeding with the membership process first, the NCRTD held public meetings at each member's jurisdiction to explain the benefits of a RTD and obtained written commitments signed by member governments. Working through structural and organizational issues in the bylaws was next, involving all members in these decisions. Attention did not turn to the "business" of the district, its service plan, until the organization had been defined to the satisfaction of all members and the district had been certified by the State.
- Involvement of unbiased facilitators at committee meetings was a successful means to develop trust among members. Third party organizers can facilitate by coordinating representatives' input and presentations, investigating funding sources, and conducting impartial analyses while avoiding historical differences.
- By holding regular meetings at predictable times, the NCRTD was able to maintain a relatively consistent member attendance. Rotating meeting places exposed the board to the different circumstances of members.
- Structuring the by-laws to require participation of both tribal members and non tribal members in the governing positions demonstrated the NCRTD's commitment to decision making by both sets of governmental entities, thus providing the impetus for continued involvement in the institution by all. The bylaws and procedures recognize that some member decisions would be made by pueblo leadership after discussion within their respective councils, and could potentially take longer to be resolved or decided upon.

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Other Resources

ATRI website on the NCRTD Organizing Pilot Project: www.unm.edu/~atr/ncrtd.html
New Mexico RTD Informational Toolkit: <http://nmtransit.unm.edu/index.html>