

5 Transit Needs Assessment

The main focus of the first stakeholders meeting was to discuss the status of transit in the Meramec Region and to identify needs. That discussion was followed by surveys of providers, non-providers and potential and existing public transit clients that provided additional needs and identified gaps in service.

A total of 260 potential and existing transit clients completed surveys. There were responses from every county in the region. The most responses—99—came from Washington County. The average age of those responding was 54.67 years; 61 percent was male and 59 were female.

Of those responding, 65 percent were able to drive and 35 percent were not. Additionally, 66 percent had drivers licenses; 34 did not.

Of those responding, 150 people—nearly 58 percent—used a personal vehicle as their primary mode of transportation. Some 64 people—nearly 25 percent—listed public transit as their primary mode of transportation. Forty-eight of those responding (18 percent) rely on family and friends' vehicle as their primary means of transportation

Of the 260 responding, 32 people—only 12 percent had used public transit; 219 had not.

Question 12 of the public transit customer survey asked “What changes could be made in public transit that would allow you to use the service for the first time or to use the service more often?” Eleven options were offered, and the respondent was to rate each option as not important, desirable, important and very important.

The 11 options were:

- More flexibility in scheduling;
- Increased service from a park and ride lot to work;
- Increased service hours;
- Increased weekend service;
- More express service (very few stops);
- Employer pays part of cost;
- Guaranteed ride home;
- Service close to my home;
- Accept different forms of payment;
- Cleaner buses; and
- More attractive buses.

Based on the survey, respondents said that guaranteed rides home, services close to home, more flexibility in scheduling rides and increased service hours were important to increasing their use of public transit.

Some 49 percent of those persons responding said a guaranteed ride home was very important. Some 47 percent of respondents said service close to home was very important. Some 30 percent of the respondents said more flexibility in scheduling rides was very important. Lastly, 25 percent of those responding said increased services hours were very important.

The list of transit needs and gap in services issues were summarized as follows:

- Need increase in funding for public transit. No funding increase in at least 17 years in Central Missouri Area Agency on Aging (CMAAAA).
- Need a dedicated state source to fund public transit services.
- Limited funding is available for work-related transportation. Funding needs to allow for job related transportation services
- Need more medical transportation; especially need an increase in frequency and no-wait time
- Need to remove barriers to services. Funding sometimes restricts who can be served.
- Need more availability of public transit region-wide—especially weekends and evenings. Need increased service hours.
- Need more services in concentrated rural area. Medical visits difficult to coordinate. Shopping trips to larger shopping centers are limited
- With increase in baby boomer population, expect to have

more needs for services and more need for medical calls/rides in mentally handicapped population (expected that 7 out of 10 will have a chronic disease)

- Some areas lack public transit services; for example, Maries County.
- Need coordination effort between services and communities
- Need web-based scheduling system/ Need links between agencies providing similar services. Need assistance in coordinating/scheduling trips. Important component becomes more difficult with multi-agencies
- Need to resolve insurance/liability issues to allow for sharing of vehicles between agencies.
- Public transit services need to be expanded to include life enhancement, such as recreational activities and shopping.
- Need more options to assist with van purchases and to assist local agencies with 20 percent match for vehicles. (Match requirement on handicapped vehicles higher)
- Need to provide transit awareness
- Need to consider location of essential services (DFS/jobs/dialysis) in-town (in-county trips more costly)
- Need more private partnerships to support transit services with employers and retailers, such as Wal-Mart
- Need to support 211 services
- Need services closer to clients' homes to increase usage
- Need guaranteed ride home to increase usage
- Need more flexible scheduling for clients.

The issues can be summarized into four main areas: Funding, Gaps in Services, Coordination and Marketing. A brief discussion of each follows:

Funding Issues

A large portion of the dollars that fund public transit in rural Missouri is federal grant dollars or contracts that are paid using federal dollars. These dollars have not increased for several years, and there is no dedicated source of state funds to support public transit services.

According to the Missouri Public Transit Association, 1996 was the first year in Missouri's history in which state general revenue funds were allocated to support public transit in Missouri. Gov. Mel Carnahan signed HB1004 on June 11, 1996, which provided \$7.7 million to replace federal funds lost by Missouri transit providers in urban and rural areas.

In some situations, the funding restricts how the funds can be used and who can be served. For example, funding

is limited for job-related transportation services and life enhancement services. Even grant programs have match requirements, which can be prohibitive for start up and small services. Public-private partnerships—especially those with potential employers may provide a solution to expanding job-related transportation.

The passage of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) in 1991 brought the overall funding level for transit to its highest mark in more than a decade, the demands for transit funding are much greater. Transit ridership nationwide continues to reach record levels, while federal funding sources for transit continue to decline. Other factors relating to the need for increased funding for transit are broad-reaching, and include:

- **Environmental Concerns:** Though not as obvious in rural Missouri, the health and economic threats of dirty air are a growing national trend. There is a direct link between poor air quality and motor vehicle use, especially single occupant vehicles. Transportation sources cause 40-60 percent of pollution that produces ozone, and 70-80 percent of carbon monoxide emissions.
- **Congestion:** While rural congestion exists, it is vastly different from urban congestion. However, transportation delays—regardless of where they occur—result in wasted fuel and lost time, both of which translate into dollars. According to Missouri Public Transit Association (MPTA), public transit can help reduce the loss. Every full van removes 13 cars from traffic; every full bus replaces 40 cars; and every full rail car removes between 75 and 125 cars from busy roadways.
- **Economic Development:** One in four people in the U.S. cannot afford to own a car, and that was before rising gas prices. While public transit is critical to moving workers in metropolitan areas, it plays a lesser role in rural areas, due in part to its limited availability. The importance of job-related transit services is likely to increase in the coming years as an aging workforce continues to work and as the need for workers increases. Public transit is important to economic development as a Bates College study found that every dollar invested in public transit results in a three dollar return in business income.
- **Elderly Transportation Issues:** According to a study by the U.S. Department of Transportation, the most severe impact of transit reductions falls on the elderly and disabled population. Many elderly use transit to go to work, to recreational and social activities, to church, and to medical facilities. Because many are unable to walk long distances, demand-responsive transit offers the elderly increased mobility they would otherwise not have. By the year 2010, it is projected that the number of retired people in the state will reach 1.3 million.

Gaps in Services Issues

The more densely populated parts of the region have more public transit options than the lesser populated areas, such as Maries County. All areas lack evening and weekend services. There is a need to provide for more trips of all kinds. Greater access would make scheduling more flexible as more trips would be available. Some Meramec communities have access to transit services only once a week, hence does not provide for work trips. There is a need for job-related transportation services and additional medical transportation with reduced waiting times.

Coordination Issues

In the Meramec Region, there are several client-specific transportation service, largely privately owned and operated. This would include church buses, school buses and the like. Even public transit providers—like OATS and SMETS—do not provide evening and weekend services. Therefore, vans sit idle. One of the bigger obstacles for coordinating transportation—and sharing vehicles between agencies—is insurance coverage and liability. Most insurance companies do not have affordable and flexible coverage that allows the sharing of vehicles and the use of volunteer drivers. This is most likely an area that will require state intervention to resolve. Additionally, the funds by which a vehicle is purchased can place limits on usage and ridership. Again, it may require state intervention to work with the federal government to allow federally purchased vehicles to serve other clients if they are being used in a coordinated system. With fewer restrictions, more people could be served and services could be expanded to include more life enhancement trips.

Scheduling and vehicle availability between agencies and communities are also coordination issues identified through the needs process. A centralized web-based system was suggested for better coordination.

Education and Marketing Issues

While additional transit services are needed, there is a large portion of the population that do not use public transit services—even though they meet the criteria set forth by the various services. Persons in the Meramec Region—like the rest of Missouri are fiercely independent and want to maintain their independence by driving themselves. However, rising gasoline costs, increasing insurance costs and health concerns sometimes restrict a person's ability to continue to drive their personal vehicle. Some who would use a given service simply do not know that it is available or how to schedule a ride.

Education is needed to teach potential users about transit services, their availability and how to use them while marketing promotes those services and shows potential users and prospective donors about the success of the system and

efforts to support the system. Both education and marketing are needed to increase mobility.

Stakeholders gathered again to develop strategies to address needs and gaps in services. Those strategies were distributed to the original mailing list to prioritize. Some 82 prioritization surveys were returned. The following strategies are recommended to improve transit coordination and increase mobility. Those priorities that share numbers received the same points score when priorities were tallied.

High Priorities (in order of priority)

1. Explore new technologies in transportation, especially in fuel usage, fuel affordability, vehicle types and modes of transportation.
2. Maintain existing levels of service, which may include replacement or additional vehicles.
3. Increase existing levels of service, which may include additional vehicles.
4. Enhance/expand opportunities to benefit and improve services for disabled persons.
4. Increase community awareness of public transportation.
6. Increase federal funding for transportation.

Medium Priorities (in order of priority)

7. Provide incentives to encourage the purchase / use of vehicles that are more energy efficient; alternative fuel vehicles.
7. Extend and expand service to include service hours, geographical area and include employment centers.
8. Increase the use of vehicles already being used as public transportation i.e.: coordination and scheduling. Address insurance / liability issues of sharing insurance and vehicles.
9. Encourage enforcement of speed limits.
10. Encourage / provide incentives for ride share programs, coordinated scheduling, etc

Low Priorities (in order of priority)

11. Support transit as a tax-based service through the state to provide a dedicated funding source. This would provide more flexibility in providing employment and life-enhancement activities.
13. Explore state and federal funding options for transportation. i.e.: toll roads, 4-lane highways with truck lanes, interstate highways with rail.
14. Encourage capital purchases to expand / modernize information technology services.