



# Kansas RTAP Fact Sheet

A Service of The University of Kansas Transportation Center for Rural Transit Providers

## Getting the Ball Rolling on Rural Transit Innovation

By Chris Wichman

*A look at original practices in Kansas and around the country.*



**W**hat makes a rural transit system innovative? The recently released TCRP Synthesis 94 describes innovation simply as a “change for a useful purpose.” In most of the cases cited in the Synthesis, managers found innovation to just be common sense—the obvious response of an organization to meet ever-changing demographics, technology and economic factors. However, the timing in initiating change can significantly influence the success of a rural transit agency. Some agencies change out of necessity as a reaction to a problem and some change as a proactive measure. Which describes your agency? This article will summarize key takeaway points and case studies from the TCRP Synthesis 94, review the innovative shift to regional governance in regional governance in Kansas rural transit, and provide tips for making your organization more innovative.

### What innovation looks like

Innovation in rural transit can be generally separated into **organizational innovation** and **service innovation**. Agencies, as organizational innovators, are those that can remain flexible and responsive to community transit needs, and are well positioned to innovate.

- Service innovation is defined by TCRP as:
- New, different and unique techniques;
  - Techniques newly applied to a rural transit setting but not necessarily unique; or
  - Modification of an existing practice with a nuance or twist that makes it different.

It is safe to say that few practices in rural transit are truly original or new. As the TCRP Synthesis states, in most cases one transit agency’s “innovation” is simply a practice borrowed from elsewhere. Your agency should not shy away from learning innovative practices from agencies around the country.

- The TCRP Synthesis offers six criteria for evaluating innovation in rural transit. These include:
- 1) Innovative agency characteristics,
  - 2) Service responses to changing demographics,
  - 3) Involvement in the transportation planning process,
  - 4) Alternative service modes,
  - 5) Outreach, education and training, and
  - 6) Leveraging funding opportunities.

The TCRP Synthesis used these criteria to identify unique case studies on organizational or service innovation. The following sections profile two of those case studies and discuss innovative activities also taking place in Kansas.

### Organizational innovation

A good example of organizational innovation comes from Addison County Transit, a one-county program in Central Vermont. A change in management led this agency to reinvent itself. A new director took over and immediately issued a mission and goals statement to reflect his desired direction for the agency (see sidebar, next page). In his words: “I gave my staff responsibilities

for results and worked to ensure they had the resources to achieve them, things they didn't have before. Once results started happening, then it became self-reinforcing.” This is a case of proactive change in organizational culture. Innovation was inspired by strong leadership. Addison County Transit staff soon noticed that the community was supportive of more vibrant transit service. In this case, it simply took strong leadership to kick-start innovation.

Kansas has its own example of organizational innovation in the pilot programs developing in Kansas for rural transit agencies. Transit managers, local elected officials, and other key stakeholders in each of those pilot regions have come together to provide leadership in expanding service and increasing coverage throughout the state. Joel Skelley, state multimodal planner with KDOT, said that the shift towards regionalization has allowed providers to become more operationally coordinated to avoid redundancy in service while also covering service gaps by using resources more efficiently. Skelley cited the lean economy as the primary cause for the shift to regionalization, but also mentioned increased use of technology in communications and scheduling, as well as changing demographics that have fueled demand for transit. Local transit providers in Kansas are looking to the pilot programs to most efficiently maintain transit supply as circumstances change around the state.

Kansas transit agencies statewide also are developing a common measurement system with benchmarks to provide feedback for participating agencies, called “TRACK.” Performance monitoring is closely related to the regional efforts for efficiency. Skelley said TRACK is a new web-based entry format for inputting operational measures, customer demographics, safety and fiscal efficiency data. The data will be entered into a website by local providers, which will then be tabulated and reported out monthly or quarterly by KDOT. This system will simplify the process of data collection for both KDOT and local providers, and it represents a major innovation to Kansas rural transit.

### **Service innovation**

A good example of service innovation highlighted in the TCRP Synthesis comes from the TRAX transit service of the Ark-Tex Council of Governments in northeastern Texas. As a result of losing Medicaid funding, TRAX was forced to change its service to attract new riders. The agency sought new funding geared towards demographic groups that were previously not a priority. TRAX reoriented services to receive JARC and New Freedom funding for projects. The agency has broadened its scope to include transit services for the general public for job access and coordinating with human service agencies for persons with disabilities. This

## **A New Direction for Addison County Transit**

New Mission and Goals Statement:

- Gain the trust of business, political and community leaders.
- Take advantage of the community's transit attributes: college, tourism, commuters and transit-friendly attitude.
- Build quality service and generate ridership and a constituency.
- Earn the respect needed to work with other organizations as peers.
- Leverage funds from diverse sources.

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change in their transit market required TRAX to be more innovative in outreach and education as well.

The agency also started a “Meeting on a Bus” program to allow residents in the service area to hold meetings on vehicles rather than requiring people to travel to meetings at a central location. This innovation in outreach has eased the transition in expanding service to a new transit market.

As for service innovation in Kansas, several regions have already reinvented their transit service. They transitioned from what was once solely human service transportation to comprehensive community public transportation service using multiple funding sources, building and expanding transit facilities, and reaching out to all demographics. Flint Hills Area Transit in Manhattan, OCCK in North Central Kansas, RCAT in Hutchinson, and Finney County Transit are just a few examples of agencies that have 1) expanded service to include fixed routes, 2) built transit-specific facilities in recent years and 3) built tremendous community support.

Skelley cited partnerships as a key to service innovation. For example, Flint Hills Area Transit has partnered with local institutions (Kansas State University and Fort Riley) to improve fixed route service. In Finney County efforts have been made to partner with major employers including the meat processing industry. Skelley recommends that local transit providers identify the opportunities for partnerships and start the conversations necessary to provide expanded service.

### **Fostering innovation in your agency**

TCRP's Synthesis 94 recommends that transit agency managers inspire an organizational culture conducive to innovation. Encourage your staff to come up with or search for new ideas and practices implemented in neighboring communities. Allow all ideas to be vetted in staff meetings to encourage creative thinking. However, you must be able to recognize plausible ideas given the realities of your service area and funding constraints. Not all innovations can be applied in every case. Identify

the innovations that can meet your needs and explore the necessary steps toward implementing those innovations.

Innovative thinking requires agencies to think outside the constraints of day-to-day operations. The TCRP Synthesis 94 recognizes that certain agencies are better positioned than others to think in the future tense. If your situation allows you to look ahead, encourage the creativity of your staff. For example, give them a number of “what if” scenarios, such as: What if we implemented the “Meeting on a Bus” program in our service area? Would this method of outreach work for us?

Simply being open to new ideas is a first step toward innovation. Once your agency begins to think through new ideas and take small steps to meet changing circumstances, it will reinforce a culture of innovation.

## Conclusion

A culture of innovation starts at the top. The key driver of innovation and change in all of the TCRP Synthesis 94 case studies was a dynamic, entrepreneurial agency manager. As an agency manager, you must be able to understand and anticipate future patterns, trends and needs of your service area. This will allow your organization to change or innovate in a timely manner rather than continually play catch-up.

The innovators profiled in the Synthesis are continually looking for new partners, new services and diverse funding sources. To be a successful innovator, the Synthesis advises managers to operate their transit services like a business. Like any business, your organization must be on the lookout for the next advantage or opportunity for improvement. Transit agency managers must serve as community agents of change by exploring all resources,



*ATA bus director Ann Smith (right) explains the new schedule to Riley County Commissioner Karen McCulloh. A grand opening and ribbon cutting for the new fixed route public transportation for the Flint Hills, was held on the Kansas State University campus on April 20, 2012. Smith says that 10 years of hard work created the service that has grown to provide more than 20,000 rides in the last two months; and they expect to transport a whole lot more now with this expansion of service. With the leadership of Smith, Flint Hills ATA has been entrepreneurial in creating partnerships to provide expanded service to meeting customer needs.*

embracing beneficial technologies, maintaining diverse revenue streams and providing a service that meets the needs of customers.

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## Sources

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