



Kansas RTAP Fact Sheet

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

Coordinating Rural Transit Requires Thinking Outside the Box

By John Elias

People rarely limit their destinations to political boundaries. Kansas pilot programs ask: Why should rural transit services be that way?

Regional transit coordination pilots under the direction of Lisa Koch at KDOT and facilitated by Joel Wright and Kathleen Harnish-Doucet of TeamTech, Inc., have yielded significant results in little more than a year. In our last issue we detailed how the Flint Hills and North Central pilots will begin coordinated dispatch this summer while the newest pilot in Southwest Kansas is seeking to emulate those two success stories. These Kansas pilots have developed a road map for coordinating transit in rural areas. What process should other communities follow?

Identifying the region

Successful regional coordination requires an understanding of the travel needs in an area. People are rarely limited to city or county boundaries in the places they need to go. The Kansas process begins by determining the transit region through a broad market analysis of employment, education, human service and medical trip generators and destinations. A wide view of a transit market maps the relationships between:

- Journey-to-work patterns.
- Major employers.
- Population density.



- Regional medical centers and other medical care services (or their absence).
- Colleges, trade schools and educational centers.

The process establishes a transit “catchment area” of communities in a region with similar travel patterns and identifies the communities that may benefit from coordinated transit in the pilot areas. The KU Transportation Center has provided the data collection and analysis to support this step in the process. Armed with an idea of regional travel patterns, organizers can reach out to stakeholders to try to bring together parties interested in better serving the region through coordinated transit.

Who should be included?

The Kansas process depends on local leaders for its success.

Market analysis can show the optimal service area but regional coordination cannot succeed without local leadership. The process seeks to involve interested parties in the catchment area early-on through personal visits and meetings. Interested parties include:

- Area transit agencies.
- Other agencies with transportation (e.g., centers for aging or developmental disabilities).
- County/city commissioners.

Stakeholders in a region may see the need for coordinated transit, simply want to make a difference for the mobility needs of the community or wonder how coordination can better serve local residents.

The involvement of local transit providers is critical to the success of regional coordination. KDOT and Team Tech identified interested parties and made face-to-face connections with as many of those as possible to define the goals of regional coordination before early regional meetings were held.

In regional meetings all stakeholders were invited to discuss the goals of regional coordination and work through concerns. Early efforts should be made to combat the fear of change and develop a different concept of what rural

transit could look like. In many communities transit is delivered by scheduled dial-a-ride vans, functioning like a taxi for many users. The coordination planning process encourages stakeholders to see the benefits of regionally marketed transit providing service to current mobility-limited populations as well as expanding service to the general public.

Establish realistic timelines

After establishing the need and area for coordination and inviting stakeholders to envision a regional approach, KDOT and Team Tech established timelines for inventory and exploration. Each transit provider was tasked with sharing vehicle and route inventories. The process realizes that effective coordination builds on the successes of the present. Transit providers and agencies with transportation functions are encouraged to bring their governing rules and regulations to discussions so that the collaboration can take what works best in the region and incorporate it a new coordinated plan. Each person needs to know his or her assignments, with follow-up to meet the timeline.

Committees can do it!

When stakeholders have an inventory and understanding of the current transit network, the real work can begin. Committees are then established to get people closer to the critical transit issues in their region and divide up the work. Periodic committee presentations to the group as a whole can help build a regional consensus about how to move forward.

Stakeholders are chosen for committees based on interest and experience with an understanding that each committee member has limited time and may have a large distance to cover to attend meetings.

Committees must determine regional policies for:

- Fare collection.

One Year Timeline

Build the Case

- Work on understanding a regional transit concept
- Develop an appreciation for central dispatch benefits
- Identify transit needs in the region

Ask: What do we have?

- Current inventory of vehicles
- Case studies – best practices
- Current cost of operations

Develop Elements of a New Vision

- Future budget for regional plan
- Fare plan
- Coordinated route plan
- Plan for contracted services
- Governance plan
- Communication plan
- Evaluation plan

- Coordinating funding streams.
- Creating budgets fair to all parties.

Some services may collect fares, a nominal fee or nothing at all. Fare committees must investigate regional fare policies make recommendations for a combined approach that works. Each agency and community will have its own funding streams and method for allocating transit funding.

Committees must determine the fairest method to receive and allocate transit funding through a new regional budget. After committees investigate the current practice in the region and review case studies from successful efforts across the nation, they make recommendations to the larger group.

In the end, the regional group may need to begin with a phased roll-out. Some transit agencies may be equipped to switch to a regional model more quickly than others while some may wish to see

the success of a smaller scale first phase before opting to join in. A phased approach allows coordinated efforts to start small with the most enthusiastic agencies, providing a solid foundation to build regional coordination.

Lessons learned

The Kansas process provides a model for rural transit coordination on a regional scale. Initial success in the North Central and Flint Hills pilot programs depended on stakeholder support and initial groundwork of the coordinating team. Transit providers who see the value of coordination are the key to success, according to Wright. Other key lessons include:

- Transit provider buy-in.
- Efficient, customer friendly centralized dispatch.
- Coordinated advertising.
- Maintain personal touch.
- Elected official support.

Regional coordination can use centralized dispatch as a tool to gain the support of transit providers, encourage city and county commissioners to see the value of coordination and use those early supporters as enthusiastic phase-one adopters of regional coordination. Their success will encourage others to join in the collaboration and build a strong regional transit system that gets people where they need to go.

Sources

- Interviews: Joel Wright and Kathleen Harnish-Doucet, Team Tech/KS Collaborative; Lisa Koch, KS DOT.
- Peer Exchange Report: “Effective Practices in Human Services Transportation Coordination,” http://planning.dot.gov/Peer/Washington/seattle-providence_2009.asp.

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