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RTAP: A Rural Transit Assistance Program of the Federal Transit Administration

GETTING STARTED — CREATING A VISION & STRATEGY FOR COMMUNITY TRANSIT



You need transit service in your community. Or, you want to expand the existing service. You may be tempted to think that all you need are buses and drivers. You may even have a pretty good idea about who needs a ride and where they need to go. Take a few words of advice from a famous college basketball coach.

*The will to win is not nearly as important
as the will to prepare to win.*

By taking the time to involve your community and collectively identify the values, needs and vision its members have for transportation services, you will build a solid foundation of support for transit that can be both initially successful and sustainable into the future.

This Rural Transit Assistance Program technical assistance brief describes how to prepare to win. It will help translate your vision — what your community wants — into a lasting reality. The elements of start-up are basically the same for rural, small-urban and specialized transportation services. Throughout this brief, therefore, the use of the term *community transit* is meant to encompass all three population and service demographics. (Operational issues are discussed in a companion Technical Assistance Brief entitled *Developing, Designing and Delivering Community Transit Services*.)

The seven-part process described below applies to either starting a new transportation system or expanding and modifying existing transportation services. In both situations, the development of values, needs, vision and strategy empower the community and give it a sense of ownership — what we call the buy-in. The creation of stakeholders forms the foundation on which the transit system defines its mission and operates.

PART 1

Identify Key Community Stakeholders

The first step is to identify and bring together key community leadership that has a stake in transportation services. Ask yourself, who has a vested interest in transit alternatives to the automobile? These stakeholders will provide both valuable informa-

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tion and build your foundation of support. They may include:

- Existing public and private transportation providers
- Regional and local political leaders
- Railroads and intercity bus lines
- Human service agencies with transportation needs
- Employment transportation and welfare-to-work agencies
- Employers within the region
- Merchants and consumer outlets
- Business and community professionals
- Chambers of commerce
- United Way and other service organizations
- Fraternal organizations
- Hospitals and health care providers
- Environmental groups
- Head Start, daycare and pre-school programs
- Elementary and secondary school systems
- Colleges and universities
- Regional, community and state planning agencies
- Real estate developers and agencies
- Providers of recreational services
- Tourism industry
- Economic development agencies
- Independent Living Centers and advocates for individuals with disabilities
- Churches and religious leaders
- Public works departments
- State and regional transportation agencies
- Riders and users of transportation services
- Aging organizations
- Others as deemed appropriate

In all likelihood, the individuals and institutions listed above will benefit from an efficient transportation network which supports their special interests. Further, they are often committed to broad community quality-of-life issues that extend beyond those special interests. If given a voice in the development of transportation services, they have the potential to be advocates who will cultivate resources to make their vision a reality.

The next part of the process will probably incur some costs. Now is a good time to seek funding resources for planning. Contact the National Transit Resource Center, 800.527.8279, for the names of persons in your state's Department of Transportation, the Federal Transit Administration's (FTA's) Regional Office or FTA headquarters for information on sources of planning dollars.

PART 2

Call a Meeting of the Stakeholders and Identify Your Champions – A Core Leadership Group

At this preliminary gathering, a small core leadership group of transit champions — a stakeholder transportation steering committee that is representative of the interests of the larger group — should be established. The Steering Committee members will be highly visible leaders. They should be committed to meeting with smaller groups of stakeholders and engaging in other community consensus-building activities. The Steering Committee needs a strong sense of collective goals, challenges, and strategies. The group may gain insight through a visit to a nearby transit system providing service to similar interests. Or, the committee may conduct surveys and other research.

PART 3

Develop a Consensus of Values

Once stakeholders have been identified and involved in the process of thinking through community transportation needs, the next step is creating a consensus — a general agreement about the values that will drive the transportation development process. This may not be easy because of the diverse interests of the large number of stakeholders involved. The steering committee's groundwork — whether it has been a series of small group meetings, individual conversations or public forums — will help identify priorities, similarities and differences among competing visions. Newsletters and e-mail can help achieve the necessary communication among stakeholders. Here are some questions that may help the group define community transit values:

- How do we put customers needs first?
- What are our measures of accountability?
- Will we put a premium on service? Efficiency? Profitability?
- Will innovation be encouraged?
- Will there be quality-of-life in the workplace?

For example, the California Association for Coordinated Transportation subscribes to the following core values:

- We help each other;
- We believe mobility is essential to freedom and the quality of life of everyone;
- We seek common ground;

- We promote coordination of funding and services;
- We are professional;
- We are problem solvers; and,
- We promote camaraderie.

Developing a consensus on values, like other activities discussed in this brief, may be best achieved through some form of third-party facilitation carried out by an individual experienced in the facilitation process. This individual could be a professional consultant or someone from the local community who is both a skilled facilitator and trusted to be impartial.

The agreed-upon values are critical. They provide the compass to guide future activities. Values can be used as a tool in conflict resolution when the transit service is being designed. Values help maintain the focus on the mission. The actual values consensus process has two steps:

- 1) Each stake holder identifies the individual values that motivate them to be concerned about transportation issues; and
- 2) Through group facilitation, written consensus is reached.

Step two can be accomplished in a single meeting of stakeholders. The resulting consensus should be formalized and publicized to the larger community through newspapers, radio, television and other appropriate communication channels. An example follows:

Community leaders working to develop a transit system to serve the citizens of Lakeview County today agreed upon three basic values that will guide its efforts: Lakeview's transit agency will be sensitive to its customers' needs, adaptable to its customers' changing needs, and will ensure professional performance in its management and operations through training, technical assistance and modern technology applications.

How does this translate into future action? Being sensitive to customers needs could be as basic as establishing a regular mid-day, fixed-route service to shopping areas or medical facilities. It might even mean training elderly and/or first-time riders on how to use the system. Being adaptable to customers' changing needs might dictate service that is willing to change its schedule frequently and make the special effort to inform everyone of the changes. The professional performance value impacts an array of workplace conditions.

If your system is presently operating and you are working to expand your services, the value consensus could be: *Lakeview Transit System will collaborate with all community interests to eliminate transit service redundancies and redirect resources to expand service to underserved areas.*

PART 4

Analyze the Community's Transportation Needs

After the values consensus is reached, the stakeholder transportation steering committee will need more exact data on transportation needs and available transportation resources before it can effectively develop a vision and strategy for the future. Funding for these activities may be sought from your State Department of Transportation's allocation of Federal Transit Administration (FTA) Section 5313(b) State Planning and Research Programs and the counterpart Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) program, as well as the two percent planning set-aside for the Indian Reservation Roads Program for Native American Tribes. For contact names, call the National Transit Resource Center at 800.527.8279.

There is no single technique to collect data from which you can reliably and accurately predict how many persons need transit service in a community. The most effective way of identifying need is to use a combination of demographic models, peer comparisons, community interviews and surveys. Start with obtaining data previously collected by your Metropolitan Planning Organization, State Transit Officials, State Transit Associations and through previous local efforts.

Demographic Models

Demographic information provides the basis for transit-needs models. For example, profiles of transit riders in rural communities that have existing transit service indicate the characteristics of persons most likely to use transit if it were available. The demographic information that is most useful in predicting ridership (your transit needs) and used in most models is total population, elderly population, non-elderly low-income population, zero- and one-car families and persons with disabilities. All of this information is available through the U.S. Census.

A workbook on estimating demand for rural passengers has been developed through the FTA Transit Cooperative Research Program (TCRP). (To order, please see resource list at the end of this brief.) Other models include the Peterson and Smith Regression Model, US Department of Transportation regression model for zonal demand, the Peat Marwick, Mitchel & Company Elderly and Disabled Demand Model and the Institute for Traffic Engineers trip generation methodology.

Peer Comparisons

Another method of forecasting rural transit ridership is through peer comparison. Information about transit systems in communities that are similar to your community can suggest what types of services and utilization to expect. Peer systems are often selected through the "Users' Manual for Assessing Service-Delivery Systems for Rural Passenger Transportation," another Transit Cooperative Research Program

(TCRP) publication. You can select a system with needs similar to those of your community based upon a wide variety of criteria such as population, land area and various socioeconomic statistics.

Survey Community

A third methodology for determining transit needs is surveying and/or interviewing community leaders, employers, social services agencies, existing transit riders and a great many other key players. Survey data can be collected through paper surveys, one-on-one interviews or focus groups. Also, the groups and interests represented on the steering committee will have information on transit needs and should be major resources in the information collection process.

Further information on needs assessment models cited above and accessing U.S. Census data can be obtained from the National Transit Resource Center at 800.527.8279.

PART 5

Identify Community Transportation Resources – Financial, Capital and Human

People may assume that their community has no transit options. Yet, on examination, there is a van that carries some elderly residents to the senior center, a different van that brings children to and from a Head Start program, etc. Researching possible transportation resources - financial, capital and human - provides an important reality check.

Financial Resources — For availability of federal and/or state funds, your state Department of Transportation is a good place to begin. More than 90 departments of the federal government provide funding for transportation, often for specific groups or circumstances. For more information go to www.ctaa.org/ntrc/funding or call 800.527.8279.

Financial resource research also should include potential local government and private-sector funding programs. These programs will include dollars that are traditionally used to fund transportation such as public transit (where it is already functioning) and human services transportation, as well as less traditional sources such as welfare-to-work funds and economic and workforce development programs. Also, your local colleges may need transportation and could be a source of funds. Part of this identification of funds will require existing agencies that provide or pay for transportation (for example, the senior citizen or Head Start van referred to earlier) to identify what is presently being spent or could be spent on transit if a system were available. Funding identification can become a difficult task, requiring a combination of extensive research and creative exploration of non-traditional resources. The stakeholders steering committee can be very helpful in this process.

Capital Resources — The identification of existing transportation services and capital equipment is the next resource

requiring attention. Local government agencies and regional development organizations can be helpful in this process. Existing transportation services providers may include public and private transit, taxis, human service agencies, car and vanpools, health care providers and a wide variety of other small and large organizations. Often faith-based organizations, Community Action Agencies, Medicaid transportation providers, school districts, job training programs, senior services, programs serving individuals with disabilities, Head Start and many other organizations will have transportation resources which can potentially be tapped into. The existing transit service providers need to be analyzed in terms of hours and days they provide rides, the geographic area they serve, how much they spend on their transit service and whether their transit service could be expanded and utilized by others.

Existing transit vehicles being used by these organizations should be identified in terms of type, size, age, mileage, capacity, accessibility, insurance issues and annual cost to maintain and operate.

Additionally, existing vehicle maintenance resources, scheduling and dispatching resources, facilities and other supporting transportation resources should be identified. For technical assistance in resource identification, go to www.ctaa.org/ntrc.

Human resources — Human resource identification involves locating talented and skilled individuals within the community who can become a part of any future transportation efforts. If too few are identified, plan for how a pool of workers can be trained to form a local transit agency.

PART 6

Spell Out the Vision for the Future of Transit in Your Community – Your Mission Statement

Once values have been agreed upon, transportation needs analyzed and transportation resources identified, it is time for the stakeholders transportation steering committee to create a vision for the future of transportation in the community.

Springing from your previously agreed upon values, the vision and resulting statement should develop in one session. A draft of the vision (mission) statement should be reviewed and agreed upon by all the involved parties in the community prior to finalization. Your mission statement should be publicized in much the same fashion that the values were previously communicated.

The mission statement should, at a minimum, address the following issues in very general terms:

- The expected time frame for vision becoming reality.
- The type and purpose of transportation services that are proposed to be provided.

- The geographical area in which the services envisioned are to be provided.
- A very general description of the model or models for delivering transit service under exploration, including whether the service might be provided by a single operating transit agency or through a collaborative delivery with many public and private partners coordinating their activities under an umbrella agency.
- A commitment to fiscal responsibility and a general description of the financial support that has been identified or may be used to fund transportation development within the community.
- An affirmation of the commitment to safety, customer service and the general improvement of quality of life in the community.

At this time there are a variety of choices regarding professional leadership of your agency. With financial resources determined, you may be ready to hire a director or a consultant for a period of time. Get advice from existing agencies that are your peers and tap into the Peer Program run by the National Transit Resource Center at 800.527.8279. You can post a classified ad seeking one or more transit professionals by going to www.ctaa.org/classifieds. There is no charge for this service.

PART 7

Create a Strategic Plan for Transit Development

The logical next step, once the general vision of the stakeholders has been created and captured in a mission statement, is developing a strategy or road map for translating the vision to reality. This strategic planning process may best be achieved by breaking the steering committee into small sub-committees based on expertise.

The strategic planning process should include the proposed or existing transit agency leadership and staff. For newly-forming or reorganizing agencies, it is time to get staff on board before you move forward on the plan. They are the ones who will actually carry out the ongoing work necessary to implement a strategic plan. This process will require staff support time and will involve operations levels of detail which are not an appropriate responsibility of Steering Committee members.

It is also time for new agencies to establish a volunteer Transit Board of Directors or some form of oversight group for the agency. This Board may or may not be drawn from the members of the Steering Committee. But the members should be in tune with and endorse the values and vision consensus. If a system (new or expanded) is to operate with coordinated transit services (see below), this oversight body of Directors will guide the collaboration and coordination process to fruition. For information on non-profit boards and governance, go to the National Center for Nonprofit Boards web site at www.ncnb.org.

All stakeholders should be kept abreast of major strategic initiatives. Actual approval of these strategic initiatives, however, will fall on the shoulders of the new or existing Transit Board of Directors or the oversight body. Specific steps in the strategic planning process include:

Developing long-range goals

To carry out the mission statement, a set of long-range goals will be needed. Long-range goals will most likely stay in effect throughout the duration of the transit development effort. These goals should reflect concerns about coordination of community resources, service-delivery models and modes, transit organization leadership and development, human resources, service design, vehicles and equipment including maintenance, facilities and property, customers and communities to be served, marketing and financial viability.

Designing short-term objectives

Each long-term goal should be supported by a series of short term objectives that are created on an annual basis and assist in leading to the ongoing achievement of the goal they support. These short-term objectives need to be both specific in nature and coordinated with the fiscal budgetary process so as to ensure funding for their completion.

Assigning accountability

Each objective must be supported by an annual action plan that answers the questions of who, what, when, where and how. Developing the action plan must involve the entire transit organizational team or the collaborating transportation provider teams in a coordinated system in both creation and accountability. Why? It creates buy in – a sense of ownership. It is these individuals who will ultimately carry out the implementation work.

Monitoring progress and reengineering, if necessary

Vision and strategy should combine as a dynamic and fluid force in your community transportation effort. To be a true blueprint for success, your strategic planning must be constantly monitored and periodically revised to keep it on track and headed for its long range goals. This periodic process of re-evaluation and the establishment of new objectives and action plans will require, at the very least, the annual assembly of the stakeholders steering committee and/or the Transit Board of Directors and the agency's leadership. Frequent monitoring of benchmark achievements and timelines, with an eye to learning from both success and failure and reacting accordingly, is critical.

The Value of Collaboration and Coordinated Transit Systems

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services spends over two billion dollars annually on transportation services

for people with disabilities, the young, the old and those with low income. As public transit addresses its ability to provide rides for those who need them, there are major efforts in place to coordinate its activities with this health and human services network. Additionally, programs to move those on public assistance into the workforce offer other coordination opportunities. The benefits are many. Coordination can: (1) increase cost effectiveness, (2) improve program efficiency, (3) provide riders with more opportunity, (4) maximize vehicle use and expand services, (5) professionalize the service and (6) reduce duplication of effort. It's a matter of bringing your community's disparate transportation resources together in new and innovative ways to better serve everyone's transit needs.

Coordination has many models and means different things in different communities. At the core, it involves agreements or contracts between a professional transportation provider and those organizations and agencies needing transit services. Through collaboration, community transportation resources can be more predictable and stretched to give all aspects of the community better transit services. Meanwhile, human service agencies can focus on their specific services without the drain on their time and resources to provide transportation.

Making coordination a reality begins in the stakeholder-identification and needs-assessment phase of the process. The Stakeholder Steering Committee will be responsible for helping identify and overcome barriers such as turf, communication issues, resource identification issues, vehicle ownership and insurance issues, funding issues and regulatory issues. If it is to be effective, the Steering Committee must be comprised of representatives of your community's array of agency and program interests.

Coordination can take widely varied approaches to pooling resources and using economies of scale to everyone's advantage:

- It may be as simple as sharing information on transportation.
- It may be joint training or maintenance efforts.
- It could be creating a centralized dispatching operation.
- It might be the selection of a lead agency to oversee the transportation efforts of several agencies.
- It could be creating a brokerage to broker transportation services among separate providers.
- It might mean creating an independent agency to provide all transportation for a community.

Coordination can occur in stages or all at once. The National RTAP has prepared a video and workbook, Transportation Coordination: Making it Work for You, that will help

communities understand different approaches to coordinated transit services and the benefits to be gained. Copies can be obtained from the National Transit Resource Center at 800.527.8279.

The bottom line is that the form coordination takes in your community is what works best to maximize and professionalize resources so they better meet the mobility needs of all citizens.

CONCLUSION

The future of community transit will be determined partially by how well transit systems move from the firefighter mode of day-to-day crisis management into the visionary mode of planning for and creating the future. The future successes of your community transit will be affected by the amount of non-traditional support and ownership in the transportation mission can be cultivated in the political and business sectors. This Technical Assistance Brief presents a structure to make both these things happen within the local community. You add the grit, determination and commitment.

RESOURCES:

The National Transit Resource Center maintains a peer-to-peer technical assistance network, tapping into a wealth of experience from professionals in the community transportation field. For more information, visit the CTAA website at www.ctaa.org/ntrc/services/, or contact the National Transit Resource Center at 800.527.8279.

Community Transportation Resource Guide prepared by Community Transportation Association of America, Washington, D.C. Call 800.527.8279.

Complying With Federal Regulations: A Primer for Rural Providers, Rural Transit Assistance Program, prepared by the Community Transportation Association of America, Washington, D.C., November, 1996).

Comprehensive Financial Management Guidelines for Rural and Small Urban Public Transportation Providers, American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, Inc. Multi-State Technical Assistance Program, Washington, D.C., September, 1992.

Guidebook for Planning Small Urban and Rural Transportation Programs COMSIS Corporation (Jeanne Williams), Pittsburgh, Pa., June 1990.

Maryland Transportation Coordination Manual prepared by the KFH Group for the Maryland Mass Transit Administration, Baltimore, Md., January 1998.

National Transit Resource Center Glossary available on-line at <http://www.ctaa.org/ntrc/glossary.shtml>.

Non-Emergency Health Paratransit Planning and Operations Manual, Oliver Lindsay, Detroit, Mich., 1998.

Rural Rides: A Practical Handbook for Starting and Operating a Rural Public Transportation Farmers Home Administration, United States Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C., October, 1978.

Small Transit System Management Handbook Michigan Department of Transportation Lansing, Mich., December 1985.

Transportation Acronym Guide US DOT Bureau of Transportation Statistics, available on-line at www.bts.gov/btsprod/tag/index.html or call 703-848-7335 to order.

Transportation Expressions US DOT Bureau of Transportation Statistics, available on-line at www.bts.gov/btsprod/expr/expsearch.html or call 703-848-7335.

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