



Pennsylvania

Overview

Public transit is wide-spread throughout Pennsylvania in rural as well as urbanized areas and is relatively well funded. Every county of the State has shared-ride/demand response service, and most have fixed route service as well. Rural transit agencies are often members of their respective rural planning organization (RPO) technical committee. Some RPOs are integrating several of their plans, including their land use, long-range transportation plan (LRTP), and economic development plans.

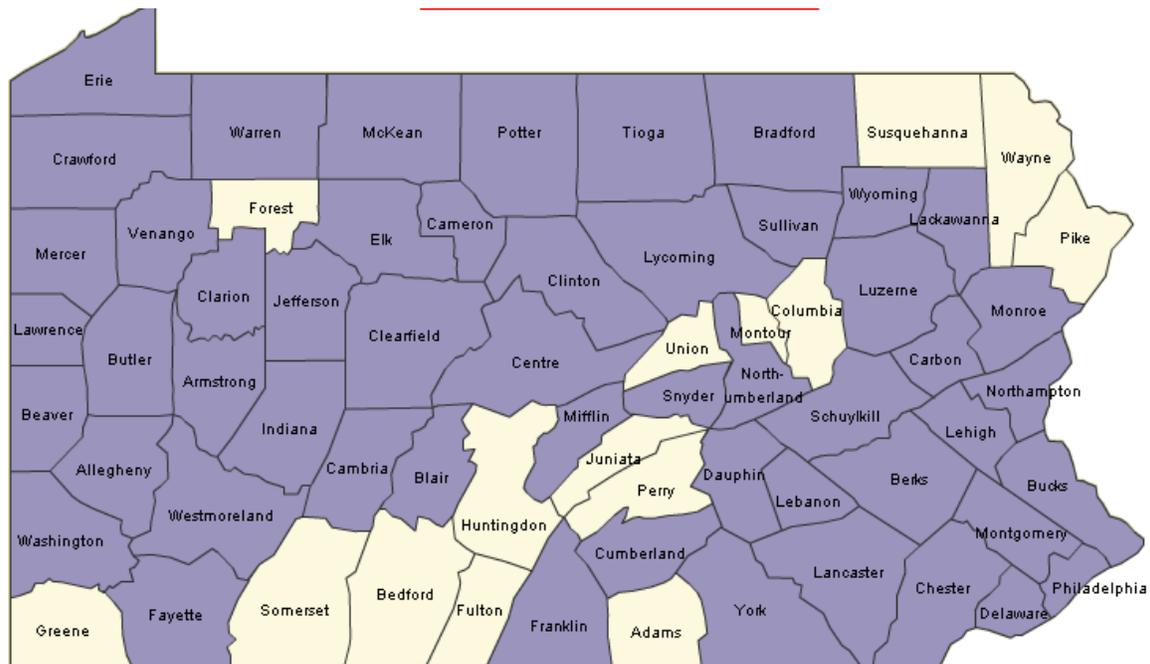
Pennsylvania transit systems are funded through State legislation passed in 2007 that established long-term funding for transportation within the Commonwealth. This legislation has translated into a 50 percent increase in operating funds available to both rural and urban transit systems. In part due to this legislation, the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) allocates annual flex funds to both rural and urban transit providers to cover capital projects. The State has also used American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funding for rural transit, including intermodal centers that will house intercity buses.

While funding for transit is relatively significant, coordination and communication is important between the agencies and entities involved in the provision and planning of rural transit. Pennsylvania has a strong public transportation association that administers a training program funded by the State. This association is also credited with providing advocacy that has allowed transit to come together in the State with one voice. PennDOT emphasizes involving local and regional rural transportation agencies in its planning processes. The department's LRTP involved an extensive public outreach effort that included a development team with two rural transit representatives and representatives from several organizations dependent on rural transit. The RPO staff was involved in the process through steering committees and reviewing draft documents.

Context

Rural Transit

Rural fixed route and demand response transit services are extensive in Pennsylvania. PennDOT operates and maintains an [interactive map website](#) that displays what services are provided by each county and provides county listings of transit operators and services. This website makes it easy for residents to identify where transit is available, even in isolated areas. All counties have shared-ride/demand response service run at the county level and the majority of counties (78 percent) have fixed route bus service (see Figure 1). The fixed route service is most typically operated by an independent agency with oversight by the city, town, or county.

Figure 1: Fixed Route Bus Service in Pennsylvania Counties (Shaded Purple)

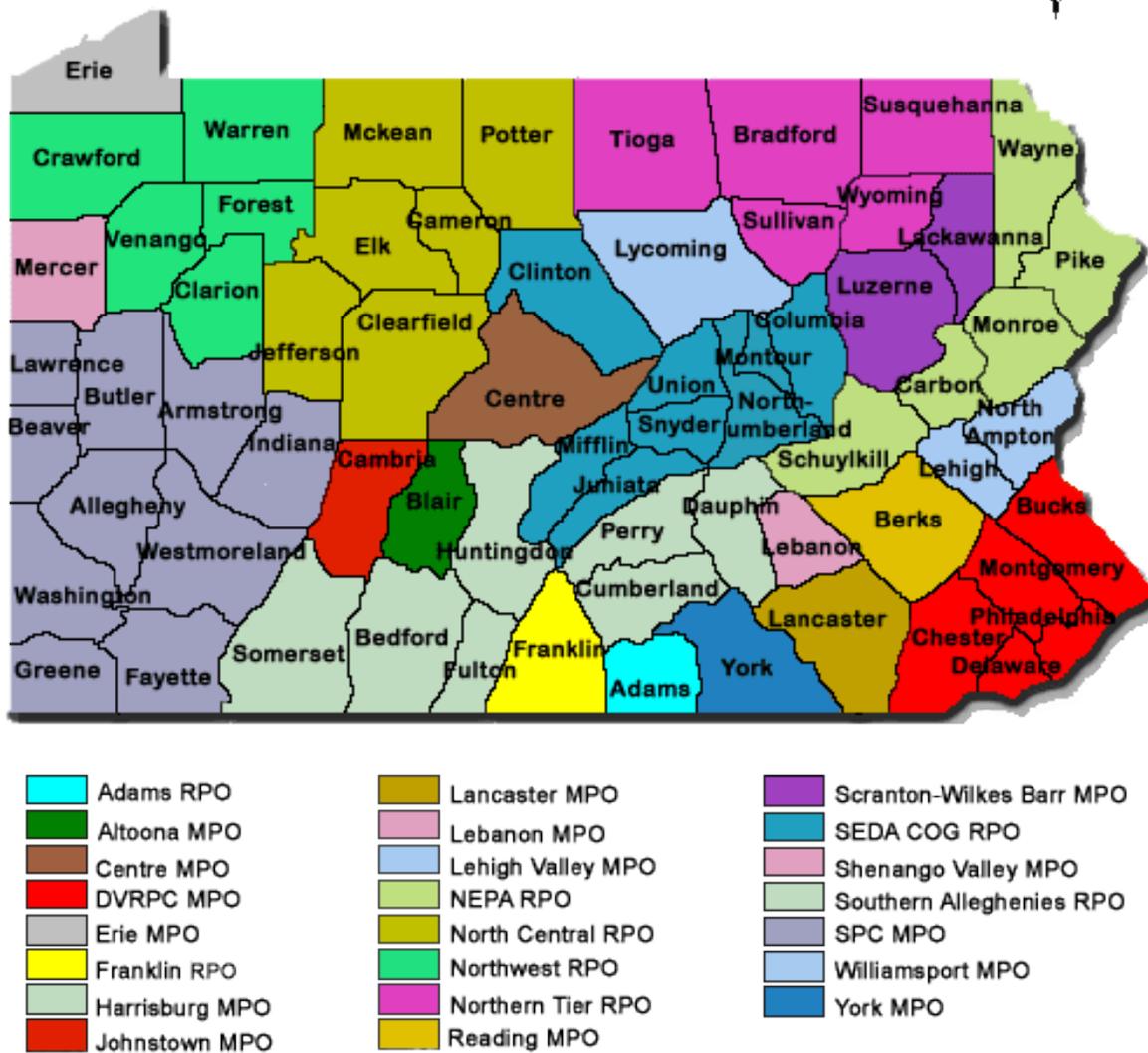
Source: [PennDOT interactive transit map website](#)

Institutional Structure

PennDOT has two primary departments that work on rural transit: the Bureau of Public Transportation and the Center for Program Development and Management. The [Bureau of Public Transportation](#) administers State transit funding programs, manages Federal transit funding programs, provides technical assistance and training to rural transit providers, and coordinates and collaborates with partner agencies and organizations. The Bureau has a staff of 25 divided among four divisions: specialized transit, rural (five staff total), urban, and administrative. The [Center for Program Development and Management](#) (Programs Center) develops and manages the Commonwealth's transportation plans, programs, and projects in coordination with partners. Key activities include updating the State LRTP and the State transportation improvement program (STIP) and managing regional LRTPs and TIPs, congestion management plans, and other planning documents.

Pennsylvania has eight RPOs and 15 metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) (see Figure 2). The RPOs were designated in 1992 to fulfill the requirement of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) to establish a transportation planning process to serve areas outside of urbanized boundaries. RPOs have the same role and responsibilities as MPOs, although Federal funding and requirements do not apply.

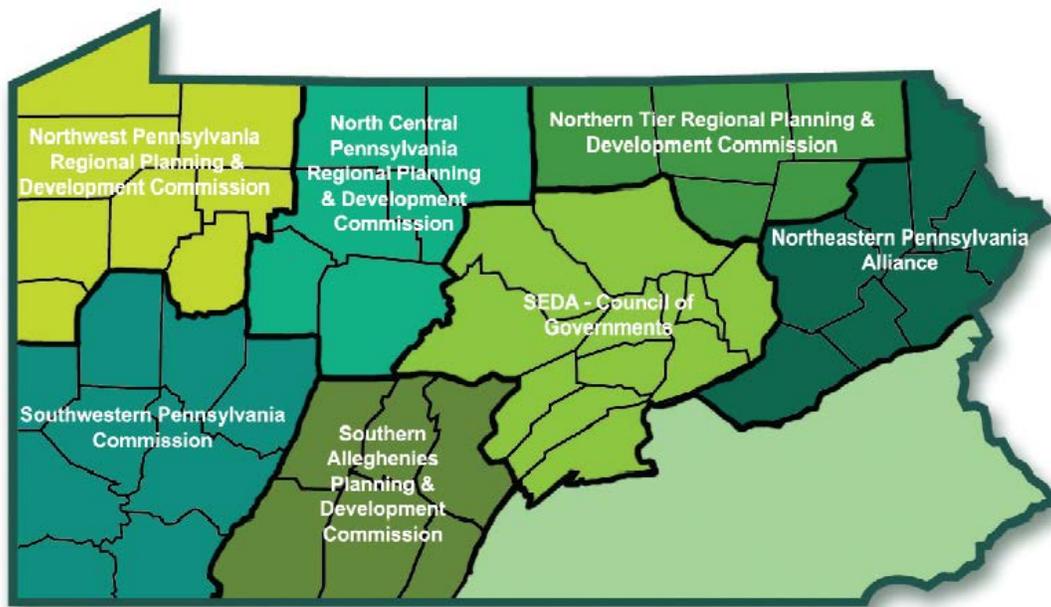
Figure 2: Borders of Pennsylvania’s RPOs and MPOs



Source: [PennDOT website](#)

Sharing similar borders to the RPOs, Pennsylvania’s seven [local development districts](#) (LDDs, see Figure 3), are multi-county planning and development districts designated by the [Appalachian Regional Commission](#) (ARC). The ARC is a Federal-State partnership aimed at improving economic and community development in Appalachia. Under PennDOT, the LDDs operate as RPOs; and one operates as an MPO. The LDDs serve 52 counties (out of the State’s 67) and vary in terms of the number of counties and MPOs that they cover. The LDDs are funded by the ARC, PennDOT, other state agencies (e.g., Department of Community and Economic Development), and the county governments within each LDD’s jurisdiction. Multiple funding sources from agencies with different missions allow LDDs to bring transportation perspectives to economic development and vice versa.

Figure 3: Pennsylvania Local Development Districts



Source: [Local Development District Network website](#)

Funding

Tables 1 and 2 summarize Federal and State funding for transit in the State. State funding for transit was over two times the amount of the State's Federal funding in fiscal year 2009. Pennsylvania is one of the few states that provide State funding and Federal Section 5311 funds to intercity bus service. Additionally, the State received \$4.5 million in ARRA funds for intermodal centers that will house intercity buses.

Table 1: Federal Transit Funding in Fiscal Year 2009 (in millions)

Funding Program	Operating	Capital
Section 5311 (Formula Grants for Other than Urbanized Areas)		
Rural	\$11.0	\$6.0
Intercity bus	\$3.0	
Section 5310 (Transportation for Elderly Persons and Persons with Disabilities)		\$5.7
Section 5307 (Urbanized Area Formula)		
Section 5309 (Bus and Bus Facilities)		\$0.25
Section 5316 (Job Access and Reverse Commute)		\$2.5
Section 5317 (New Freedom)		\$1.2
Federal Total	\$14.0	\$15.7

Table 2: State Transit Funding in Fiscal Year 2009 (in millions)

Funding Program	Operating	Capital
Shared Ride	\$33.4	\$0
CTC Capital	\$4.1	\$0
Welfare to Work	\$1.9	\$0
Rural	\$17.4	\$2.5
Intercity Bus	\$1.5	\$0.08
Persons with Disabilities	\$4.4	\$1.9
State Total	\$62.7	\$4.5

Participation of Rural Transit in Statewide Planning Process

PennDOT

Bureau of Public Transportation staff interact with rural transit operators daily by phone for technical assistance throughout the year and also conduct one visit per year for State and Federal compliance review. Most technical assistance requested prior to ARRA was for system/route review to identify new trip generators and improve efficiency and for board training to increase understanding of board responsibility and accountability. As a result of ARRA, technical assistance now also focuses on bid preparations and project management for large construction projects.

“PennDOT is open and receptive. In the past 10 years, they have gotten better each year. PennDOT will schedule one-on-one time to discuss projects.” – Rural transit official.

Programs Center staff members are each assigned a geographic area to oversee planning processes in conjunction with MPOs and RPOs. Transit agencies are tasked with planning on their own so there is limited direct interaction between PennDOT planning staff and transit agencies. Rural transit operators contacted were generally unfamiliar with the Programs Center, although some recognized that

“We tell [rural transit agencies] that you need to be at the table at the RPO so when you need something, they know who you are, and so that you are involved in the planning process.”
– PennDOT official.

PennDOT staff from the Center helps transit operators to program projects to the TIP and STIP. Some RPO and PennDOT staff are trying to streamline the transit TIP process by, for example, developing an easy-to-use template that will be consistent with the highway and bridge TIP and STIP.

The Bureau of Public Transportation staff strongly encourages rural transit operators to attend RPO meetings; as of 2010, PennDOT requires them to attend meetings held on TIP updates. However, Programs Center staff report that most rural transit operators actually only attend when they have a request or something to present.

Rural Transit Agencies

Rural transit agencies and operators look to PennDOT for technical assistance and funding guidance. One transit operator said that “PennDOT has made a lot of effort to get operators involved and to keep

grantees and rural properties informed and involved” through, for example, surveys, coordinated vehicle fleet and software purchases, webinars, and video conferencing.

Transit agencies and operators expressed appreciation for the value of planning documents. PennDOT is developing a tool for rural operators to develop their own capital plans. Some agencies and operators use capital plans to secure funding for facility projects and fleet replacement through presentations to towns, counties, and Congressional representatives; others use the plans to focus on route evaluations and think strategically about future service.

“PennDOT has good people who will do anything they can to get your question answered. Someone is always there willing to pick up the phone and spend whatever time necessary to help.” – Rural transit official.

RPOs and Local Development Districts

Since the passage of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) in 1992 and its requirement to establish a transportation planning process to serve areas outside of urbanized boundaries, the State has partnered with RPOs. It has charged them with the same role and responsibilities as MPOs, while recognizing that Federal funding and requirements may not apply. Thus, the RPOs have a formal agreement with PennDOT, known as the Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP), and are responsible for the TIP, LRTP, and human service coordination plan for each region. RPOs also provide technical services to transit agencies within their jurisdiction.

“MPOs, RPOs, and PennDOT [planning staff] work together on a number of working groups. It is a marriage, though sometimes dysfunctional, and transit is not always a part of it.” – RPO official.

RPOs occasionally interact with the Bureau of Public Transportation on an as-needed basis, such as when a request or question arises regarding Federal funding or the TIP. RPOs interact with PennDOT’s Programs Center much more frequently.

Rural transit agencies are often members of the RPO technical committee. RPOs work with transit agencies to place projects on the TIP but the degree of inclusion of transit projects and the involvement of the RPO, PennDOT, and Federal Transit Administration (FTA) varies. Some transit agencies rely on the RPO to help with projects and planning while others prefer to proceed independently and only contact the RPO to put projects on the TIP and to get access to funding.

One RPO has successfully reconvened a group established to develop the region’s human services

An RPO is a “jack of all trades and master of none.” – RPO official.

coordinated plan. The group, known as the Coordinated Public Human Services Committee, meets twice a year, including an annual application process meeting. The group provides a forum for transit operators to talk to each other about what they are doing, the services they are providing, and where there are opportunities for coordination.

MPOs

RPO-MPO relationships vary throughout the State. Some RPOs have contracts or memoranda of understanding with an internal or adjacent MPO to provide transportation planning; some RPO staff sit

on MPO committees, and some RPOs only coordinate on a project-to-project basis. In general, RPOs report that they coordinate freely with MPOs when problems bring interests together.

State Transportation Association

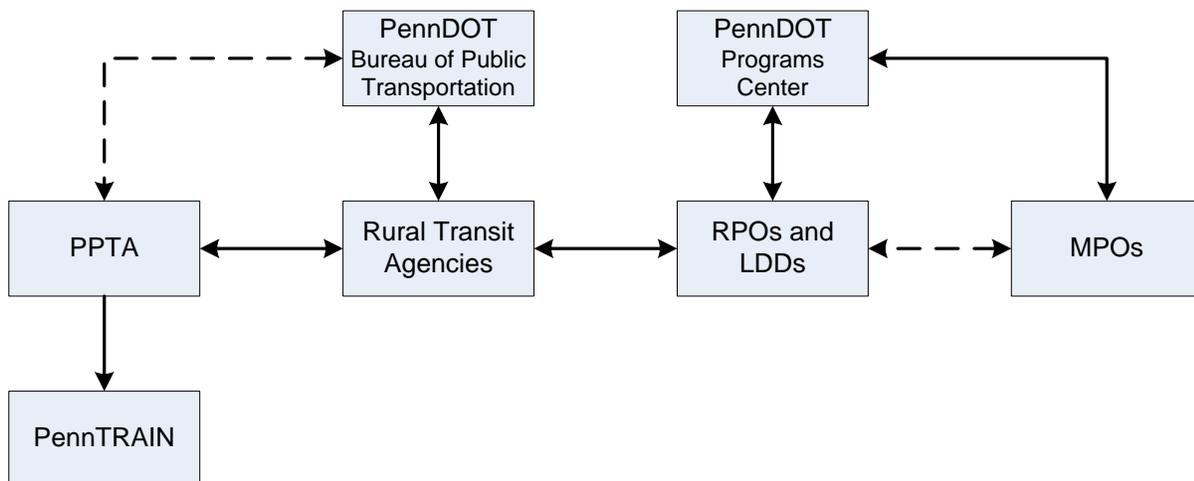
The Pennsylvania Public Transportation Association (PPTA) is a “professional trade organization which provides leadership, resources, support and technical assistance,” According to its [website](#), PPTA administers the [Pennsylvania Transportation Resource and Information Network \(PennTRAIN\)](#), a training program funded by the Pennsylvania [Rural Transportation Assistance Program \(RTAP\)](#) and the PennDOT Planning and Research Program.

PennDOT refers to PPTA as “a tremendous partner” that “wherever possible tries to engage urban and rural membership” in statewide efforts. Rural transit operators credit PPTA with providing advocacy that unites transit with one voice, facilitating member-to-member contact, and providing “a wonderful place to network, get ideas, and learn what colleagues have done” despite distances between operators within the state.

Summary

Figure 4 shows the relationships and connections between agencies involved in rural transportation planning in the State. Solid lines represent stronger connections and dashed lines represent less strong connections.

Figure 4: Relationships between Agencies Involved in Rural Transportation Planning



Major Planning and Project Initiatives

Statewide Plans and Initiatives

The [Pennsylvania Mobility Plan](#) is the State's long-range statewide transportation plan through 2030. It is in its third year of implementation and has a six-year lifespan, designed to coincide with the governor's term. The Mobility Plan's development involved an extensive public outreach effort that included a development team with representatives from two rural transit agencies and from several organizations dependent on rural transit such as Area Agencies on Aging. RPO staff were also involved in the process through steering committees and reviewing draft documents, but were limited in their ability to represent transit due to staff limitations and competing issues. The Mobility Plan's objectives were intentionally designed and written to be mode-neutral so rural transit is not explicitly and separately addressed. Instead, the focus is on connectivity and working across and between modes.

The [Land Use, Transportation, and Economic Development \(LUTED\) Initiative](#) was a statewide effort to integrate transportation and land use for economic development. The LUTED initiative has direct ties with the encouragement of livable communities. LUTED began in 2003 with a statewide conference and continued in 2005 with regional conferences in which specific objectives and actions steps were identified. As a result of the conferences, the State charged each RPO to complete a regional action strategy and implementation plans.

Since the conferences, the State has been less involved with the initiative, and RPOs vary in their completion of the plans and their ability to control or influence the three elements – land use, transportation, and economic development. A 2010 National Association of Development Organizations report, [Integrating Land Use, Transportation, and Economic Development in Pennsylvania](#), documents the actions taken by three of RPOs. Some RPOs have integrated their LUTED plan with the LRTP and comprehensive economic development strategies (CEDS) and have been using their planning processes to identify needs and coordinate and prioritize projects for funding and planning. One RPO posits that the next step is to develop and weight criteria for selecting projects to take into account the impact of those decisions. Transit agencies feel that highway and bridge projects still dominate and that a more significant impact on this balance could result from transit involvement at the individual county level, such as helping change subdivision land ordinances to require questions about transit considerations to pique the interest of local developers.

The [Human Service Transportation Coordination Study](#), a statewide assessment of the current shared ride and demand-response services offered by counties, was mandated by legislation ([Act 44 of 2007](#)) and involved PennDOT and the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, Department of Aging, and Office of the Budget. The main finding of the study was that regional consolidation of management and service delivery would provide the greatest opportunity for improved efficiencies and cost savings as well as increased service, quality, and availability. As such, the State is considering conducting a pilot project to evaluate cost savings.

Although the study itself was regarded as a good idea, the regional consolidation proposal has been somewhat controversial. RPOs, transit agencies, and others involved in human service transportation have questioned the methodology, the actual level of cost savings and other benefits, and the appropriateness for all situations. Some skeptics of the proposal worry about giving up autonomy, control, and flexibility in return for savings that may not materialize due to cancellations, weather, and

other unexpected events. Others feel that the existing system is working and could be improved in other ways, such as addressing restrictive funding requirements.

Regional Plans and Local Initiatives

In the development of the TIP, there are different processes in place for each RPO region that impact which transit projects are included or not included and how PennDOT, FTA, the RPOs, and the transit operators interact. These differences appear to contribute to the uncertainty reported by transit agencies about the role of the TIP within their region. Some transit operators see the TIP as a wish list; others see it as a list of only projects that have been guaranteed funding, and others see it as a list of all proposed projects regardless of funding source or status.

In terms of environmental initiatives, including reducing greenhouse gases and improved energy efficiency, there is some action taking place at the local transit agency level. Rural communities are interested in preserving the natural beauty of their environment for quality of life and economic development. Bus replacement requests for alternative fueled vehicles and for downsizing to smaller vehicles and incorporation of “green” elements into facilities – such as geothermal – are becoming more common; several agencies took advantage of the recent transportation investment generating economic recovery (TIGER) grants and ARRA funding. Two transit agencies reported interest in green facilities and vehicles due to their relationships with local universities, which are interested in “everything green,” including transit. One transit agency located in a rural attainment area was able to use CMAQ funds to build a park and ride facility that resulted in fewer vehicles driving into a neighboring nonattainment area.

Observations and Challenges

Staffing and technical capacity

The number of staff availability of staff time, and level of staff technical capacity are all important challenges identified and faced by PennDOT, RPOs, and transit agencies. Having more staff would enhance PennDOT’s visibility and ability to conduct outreach and develop relationships and would allow more RPO and transit agency participation in meetings and planning initiatives. More technical staff capacity at transit agencies would reduce their reliance on external technical assistance for essential business operations and capital plans and would allow them to follow up and participate more actively in broader initiatives. While there is a need for external assistance, the scarcity and varying quality of contractors in rural areas causes some agencies to bring some operations in-house when possible. PennTRAIN is seen as one successful strategy to address these issues to some extent.

Geography

PennDOT observes that consistent boundaries between DOT modal districts, RPO regions, and other designated districts would improve effective coordination and funding of transit projects. Distance is a primary reason why transit operators are not able to attend PennDOT meetings. One rural transit official said, “The only reason why we don’t attend PennDOT meetings that we could be part of is sheer distance: a three and a half hour drive for a two hour meeting doesn’t make sense.” Distance is also a challenge in terms of cost of services for a large geographic service area and scattered distribution of passengers. One rural transit provider commented that “Distance keeps us from coordinating more.”

Funding

Although funding levels for rural transit in the state are relatively high, funding eligibility and billing requirements are regarded as not flexible enough for the service provided and the audience in need. For example, if a service takes a customer to the doctor, the service cannot also take the customer to the pharmacy after the doctor's visit because the funding does not allow multiple stops within the same trip. Some agencies address this type of problem by providing a deviated fixed-route service (2 to 3 miles); but as a result, the overall route becomes longer.

“Even if we have access to funding, we still have to jump through a lot of hoops.” – RPO official.

Perception and expectations

RPOs and transit agencies all reported that highways and bridges dominate the conversation in terms of planning and funding. In addition, there is a perception of limited transit needs by local governments. One RPO staff member observed that, “The prevailing attitude among county governments is that there is limited need for transportation and [existing] services are completely adequate. Providers see that there are more people who need service than can have access.” At the same time, however, there is an expectation by riders that transit in rural areas will be door-to-door, frequent, and low cost.

Coordination and communication

Transit coordination in some regions works well, but in other regions, neighboring providers can be competitors. Some transit agencies reported good working relationships among transit agencies, in particular to coordinate service at border areas, share in vehicle purchase options, and exchange ideas. However, in some regions with overlapping or adjacent rural and urban or small urban service, there are significant challenges in collaboration and coordination since these agencies can compete for riders and service areas.

Communication and transparency between the various entities involved in statewide transportation planning, in particular in terms of integrating operations and on-the-ground transit needs with planning, were cited as an area in need of improvement.

Conclusions

- Public transit is widespread throughout Pennsylvania in rural as well as urbanized areas.
- Rural transit agencies and RPOs have good working relationships with PennDOT.
- Rural transit agencies are often members of RPO technical committees.
- A lack of staffing makes it difficult for agencies involved in the planning and provision of rural transit to conduct their work and examine ways to improve their work and coordination of services.
- PennDOT allocates annual flex funds to both rural and urban transit providers to help cover capital projects.

- The State is using Federal ARRA funding for rural transit, including for intermodal centers that will house intercity buses.
- Bus replacement requests for alternative fueled vehicles and for downsizing to smaller vehicles and incorporation of “green” elements into facilities are becoming more common; several agencies took advantage of the recent transportation investments to generate economic recovery, including TIGER grants and ARRA funding.
- Rigidly defined funding sources limit opportunities for rural transit and human service to coordinate.
- There are opportunities for improved coordination and communication between some of the agencies and entities involved in the provision and planning of rural transit.
- PPTA administers PennTRAIN, a training program funded by the RTAP.
- The department’s LRTP involved a development team with two rural transit representatives and representatives from several organizations dependent on rural transit.
- Some RPOs have integrated their LUTED plan with the LRTP and CEDS using processes to identify needs and coordinate and prioritize projects for funding and planning.