

Chapter 3: Observations and Challenges

This section describes several common themes that emerged from the case studies, with examples. This is not a comprehensive analysis of the detailed research in the case studies, but serves to highlight the key themes that emerged as most prevalent and relevant to the study, which were not covered in the categories above. The themes featured are:

- Success in the context of limited and constrained resources
- Changing perceptions of rural transit
- Performance measures
- Tribal transit

3.1 Success in the Context of Limited and Constrained Resources

Case study participants reported that they are consistently being challenged by the limited availability and flexibility of funding and staff, population growth, and long distances. These challenges have direct impacts on the ability of a transit agency to provide service that meets community needs and goals. However, some rural transit agencies are finding successful ways to combat these challenges.

Availability of Funding

Availability of funding is limited for rural transit at the Federal, State, and local levels but is particularly difficult when the State source is not dedicated and protected, such as what occurred in Arizona when lottery proceeds were redirected from transit to the General Fund in 2010. The local match, as mentioned above, is also a main challenge especially for rural communities. Funding can also be made difficult by the need for rural transit to compete not only with other rural transit but also with highway and bridge projects and urban transit.

Funding Flexibility

Funding flexibility can be an issue because of rules that either prohibit or make it administratively onerous to provide service across jurisdictions, combine multiple funding programs, and combine human services and public transportation trips and riders. Consistent boundaries between DOT, RPO, and other designated State districts would help in reducing staff time needed to pursue funding. Washington's consolidated grant process and application allows applicants to submit one application for Federal and State programs and has been well received.

New Systems and Small MPOs

The problem of funding is viewed as particularly acute for new systems and new small MPOs. New small MPOs occur in areas of rapid population growth, mostly in western States and in non-urbanized areas near urban centers. If a community has not established a transit system prior to receiving MPO designation, it loses its chance to access operations funding through the Section 5311 program. In order

Transit at the Table III – Observations & Challenges

to prevent this, ADOT has been proactive in encouraging formation of new transit systems in non-urbanized areas that are approaching a population of 50,000, so as to access operating funds and prepare for the additional requirements and funding opportunities that will be made available to the community once its population surpasses 50,000.

Long Distances

Long distances between destinations and from major population centers contribute to increased operating costs, restrict access to training and skilled staff, and limit the ability to participate in State and regional meetings. Although ADOT staff attempt to conduct field visits and attend local meetings in person, they rely on the RPOs to help with outreach and have increased their use of webinars and voice and email communications. Additionally, ADOT has begun developing a network of certified trainers so that professional improvement courses and other transit training can be conducted locally, reducing travel by transit professionals to Phoenix or Tucson. PennDOT and the Pennsylvania Public Transit Association are both credited by rural transit agencies with successfully communicating despite geographic distances.

3.2 Changing Perceptions of Rural Transit

Case study participants report that perceptions of transit in rural areas are becoming more positive as rural transit agencies, with the support of SDOTs, RPOs, and others, are having success communicating to the public – as well as government officials – the important role that rural transit can play in economic development, the environment, and quality of life. However, participants also noted it is equally important to communicate the costs associated with such benefits.

Outreach Tools

As mentioned previously, the success in changing perception stems in part from efforts on marketing, education, and innovative services. Marketing requires a balance between communicating the need for financial support and providing professional, desirable services. Education related to the benefits of rural transit investments has primarily focused on the role of transit in enabling communities to grow and the benefits of reduced air pollution and GHG emissions. Innovative services focused on employment or other destinations and provision of a convenient and enjoyable experience that attracts choice riders while also supporting transit-dependent riders.

Combined Strategies

TriCounty Link in South Carolina has had success using all three strategies to promote its service. First, the agency hired a community outreach person who travels throughout the region to educate people on the difference transit can make. Second, the agency changed its name from the Berkeley, Charleston, Dorchester Rural Transportation Management Authority (BCD-RTMA) to TriCounty Link and adopted a new logo and mascot, Linky. Third, TriCounty Link developed a high-frequency lunch-time circulator service in an employment center and set up a reciprocal commuter agreement with Charleston Area Rapid Transit Authority (CARTA), which means TriCounty Link passengers are now able to transfer at no-cost between TriCounty Link services and CARTA, and vice versa.

SDOT Support

SDOTs can positively impact the perception of rural transit in a variety of ways, including advocating at local meetings, conducting studies that demonstrate the benefits of transit in all areas, and providing incentives in terms of funding or technical support. States have used websites to make information about transit, including rural transit, more accessible to the public. Two of the case study States provide

Transit at the Table III – Observations & Challenges

successful examples of websites that provide the public with information on the availability and benefits of transit. PennDOT operates and maintains an interactive map website (<http://www.dot.state.pa.us/BPTMAP/index.htm>) 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. MaineDOT's Explore Maine website (<http://www.exploremaine.org>) provides comprehensive information about the wide variety of reliable travel options (air, bike, bus, car, ferry, and train) and connectivity between modes within Maine, with an emphasis on how to access remote places otherwise inaccessible by car.

3.3 Performance Measures

Five of the case study States (SC, GA, IA, and WA) reported using some type of performance measures for transit in funding allocations. South Carolina, Iowa, and Washington all use performance measures in allocating FTA Sections 5310 and 5311 funds. Iowa also uses performance measures to allocate State transit funding. The performance-based formulas include measures of passenger trips, farebox recovery, miles, and cost. Georgia uses a small subset of measures as requirements for eligibility for Section 5311 and additional capital requests.

South Carolina and Washington both produce annual public performance reports for use by transit providers, the legislature, and local and regional governments. The reports allow both SDOTs to track performance, provide transparency and accountability, inform the State legislature, guide State priorities and initiatives, and identify needs and challenges. For example, SCDOT's Transit Trends report states that because of the rural nature of the State, there is a significant need to direct resources to the particular challenges of rural transit. Minnesota also has an annual performance report that covers all transportation. It includes bus service hours as a measure for rural transit. The Greater Minnesota Transit Plan similarly contains performance targets for service hours to meet 80 percent of the State's estimated demand for public transit. Minnesota has found that it is necessary to think differently about performance measures for rural as opposed to urban transit because of the characteristics of rural transit, such as distance and purpose, as described previously.

In Iowa, transit agencies submit quarterly reports on progress in terms of the selected performance measures, while Georgia transit agencies submit a monthly report used internally by GDOT and transit agencies to track progress toward goals and service performance, and identify any issues.

3.4 Tribal Transit

Throughout the U.S., a growing number of Tribal governments provide transit in rural areas. Of the case study States, four (AZ, ME, SC, and WA) shared experiences of working with Tribal governments on rural transit. Although this study is not focused on Tribal transit, it is important to recognize that it plays an integral and significant role in rural transit. Participants recognized this fact and the challenges and opportunities Tribal transit provides for statewide planning for rural transit.

Of the case study States, Arizona has the most significant Tribal presence. There are 22 Federally-recognized Tribes, which control nearly a third of the State's land and which are predominantly located in rural areas. The former ADOT Public Transportation Division Director firmly stated that Tribes are very important for Arizona. The current ADOT Multimodal Planning Division Director clearly stated that one "cannot talk about rural transit in Arizona without talking about Tribal transit." Three Tribes have systems funded by Section 5311 and at least five have been recipients of the Tribal Transit

Transit at the Table III – Observations & Challenges

Program. Most Tribal transit services, however, are provided by the Elder Programs of each Tribe, through the Section 5310 program.

Several SDOTs and RPOs reported working with local Tribes on transportation, although transit was more limited in part due to the nature of the Tribal Transit Program, which does not require coordination of the application process with the SDOT or by its recipients with other transit entities. However, there have been a number of successes. The Yakima Nation in Washington contracts with a private non-profit to run its system, which is funded by the Tribal Transit Program and connects with the rest of the non-profit's system within the City of Yakima, as well as the transit system for the adjacent Tri-Cities (Kennewick, Pasco, and Richland). Within Arizona, the extensive presence of such Tribal transit has resulted in several statewide interagency partnerships and engagement efforts by ADOT, including the Arizona Tribal Strategic Partnering Team¹⁷ and support of the 2009 National Tribal Transit Conference.¹⁸ Despite these successes, there are still opportunities to improve access to funding and technical assistance, staffing, coordination across jurisdictions, and development of relationships.

¹⁷ For additional information, visit <http://www.aztribaltransportation.org/ATSPT/index.asp>

¹⁸ For additional information, visit <http://www.navajotransit.com/component/content/article/1-latest-news/47-tribal-transit-conference-2009.html>