

Planning Process for a Regional Transportation Coordinating Council

MEETING #2



MEETING SUMMARY

Date: February 11, 2020

Time: 2:00 – 3:30 p.m.

Location: Mankato Room, Intergovernmental Center, 10 Civic Center Plaza, Mankato, MN

Attendees

- Joe Kapper, SRF Consulting
- Menno Schukking, SRF Consulting
- Charles Androsky, Mankato/North Mankato Area Planning Organization
- Tom Gottfried, MnDOT
- Taylor Fish, Mankato United Way
- Pat LaCourse, Brown County Heartland Express
- Kelly McDonough, Minnesota River Agency on Aging (MNRAA)
- Vicki Apel, SMILES Center for Independent Living
- Kelsey Kosberg
- Ruth Lee, Minnesota Prairie County Alliance
- Nick Winings, Blue Earth Taxi
- Susan Rynda, Le Sueur County DHS
- Mike Pinske, AmeriCare Mobility Van
- Sara Junker, Nicollet County HHS
- Bonnie Buchanan, Jefferson Lines/Land-to-Air Express
- Elizabeth Harstad, Mankato United Way
- Kyle Hoffman, Region Nine Development Commission
- Jessica Miller, Mn DEED
- Ron Decker, True Transit (VINE Faith in Action)
- Naomi Ochsendorf, Watonwan County
- Landon Bode, Mankato Transit System
- Allison Karau, Watonwan County
- Craig Rempp, Mankato Transit System

On the phone or Skype:

- Chera Sevcik, Faribault & Martin County Community Health
- Jim Baker, Transit User

Welcome and Introductions

Joe provided an overview of the agenda and led introductions among meeting attendees.

Background

Joe provided an overview of forming a Regional Transportation Coordinating Committee (RTCC) and explained the purpose and benefits of doing so. The goal is to coordinate transportation for transportation disadvantaged populations across all modes of transportation in the nine-county area in southern Minnesota.

Joe highlighted that this plan would identify specific action items as opposed to high-level strategy and that implementation will begin with phase two. There is funding available for staff or technology improvements, especially in the start-up phases of the RTCC. It is the intention to have an Operational Implementation Plan which outlines the key details of the RTCC ready in June.

Stakeholder Involvement Update

Joe gave an overview of the stakeholder survey. There were 37 responses while the survey was open from January 16 through January 31. There were almost 100 emails sent out with the survey link, but the survey will be re-opened for one week following the meeting as some meeting participants indicated not filling it out, or may know some additional interested parties. The survey identified the following potential RTCC work plan items/coordination concepts:

- Central regional transit hub in Mankato
- Travel training/bus buddy programs
- Coordinated trip scheduling and booking
- Meetings with regional employers
- Regulatory and insurance issues
- Technical assistance (grants, compliance, technology)
- Reservation website and bus tracking
- One Call/One Click Center
- Marketing

Potential benefits include increasing awareness of services, data-driven decision making, coordinated transit and improved access, and advocacy. Concerns about forming an RTCC included having meaningful meetings, time and cost commitments, and maintaining autonomy. Participants in the survey prefer to meet quarterly.

Tom Gottfried of MnDOT acknowledged the many efforts of coordination over the past 30 years. He emphasized that there is no mandate for this effort, but that MnDOT would like to hear from the local providers what policy changes are needed in their regions. This includes performance measures that work for the local area and improving advocacy for policy changes. This effort includes 13 state agencies, but to recommend policy improvements, they will need to hear from the local agencies what will need to change.

Two open house meetings are scheduled: one at SMILES in New Ulm on March 11, and one at MAPO in Mankato on April 9. A third open house date and location is to be determined. Ongoing outreach focuses on interviews and small group meetings with funding partners, program managers, county managers, county officials, advocates, employers, health care providers, and transit agencies.

Peer Agency Review

Activities, membership, staffing, and funding for three current RTCCs in Minnesota as well as similar organizations in Kansas and Wisconsin provided PMT meeting attendees with an idea of what a future Southern Minnesota RTCC could look like. Peer agencies reviewed included:

- Northeast Minnesota RTCC
- Southeast Minnesota RTCC
- St. Cloud Minnesota RTCC
- Flint Hills Coordinated Transit District (Manhattan Kansas)
- Portage County (WI) Aging and Disability Resource Center Transportation Coordinating Committee

The agencies varied in size and scope, which will be outlined in detailed in a forthcoming technical memo. For example, Northeast Minnesota covers eight counties, while St. Cloud covers just four. While the Minnesota RTCCs have staffing levels of 1.5 to 4.5 FTEs, efforts in Kansas and Wisconsin just have a single mobility manager. Some of the different RTCC missions and goals also gave participants an idea of what the Southern Minnesota RTCC could work on. All peer agencies work to execute the strategies in their local Human Services – Public Transportation Coordinated Plans, but the RTCCs would include private partners as well.

Group Discussion

During the group discussion, participants voiced their opinions on what the RTCC should work on and potential goals.

- Participants noted the benefit of sharing knowledge and problem solving.
- By being part of a network, clients could make trips for which it is currently unknown if the need exists. If an agency turns down a customer for one ride, that customer will not return.
- Reducing the barrier of jurisdictional and service boundaries would improve accessibility. Providers currently are not aware of the regularly scheduled trips of other agencies.
- Representatives asked providers to update their services to the United Way 211 Center and the Senior Linkage Line. Advocacy for policy changes on behalf of those not able to advocate for themselves was another benefit.

For each of the desired outcomes, easy to understand performance metrics should be created, but numbers do not tell the individual stories of how reliable transportation can change a person's ability to hold on to a job or participate in their communities. Participants were encouraged to record and share their clients' stories with decision makers.

Visually impaired advocate Jim Baker provided examples of the limits of the current transportation options for people in his situation. For example, to get to Rochester, he has to contact three separate agencies to arrange rides to visit friends and family. He hopes there will be just a single phone number to call for trips he would like to make. People are unaware of which services to call, even social service providers and food pantries do not know what transportation services are available locally. Due to limited mobility, he misses out on community events. Mr. Baker is not the only one in this situation, but it is hard to advocate for change with a disability.

Further discussion focused on how workforce and human service providers can contribute to the effort. A barrier exists due to special transportation funds of DHS only being allowed to be used for specific types of rides. While some employers note transportation as a barrier to attracting workers, some are not willing to be flexible in their shifts to allow for transit or vanpool or carpool programs. These stakeholders (employers, human services, managed care organizations) could be part of the RTCC in the future, so counties are not the only ones committing to the effort. Agencies need to realize that by not funding transportation, the cost will show up in other programs and areas.

Volunteer driver programs offer potential, but they need training and there is a wide disparity in the availability between small and large communities.

The return on investment is not just ridership, but the stories of individual clients who make use of the service to improve their connection to the community. Participants were asked to bring and share their stories to the next meeting.

Geography

The geography of the RTCC will need a minimum of four counties, but it is the intention to have up to eight participants. Sibley County has expressed no interest in joining the RTCC. When more counties and other partners participate, the future local match contributions will be needed to fund the RTCC beyond Phase II will be lower.

Next Steps

The project consultants will continue individual follow-up and develop a membership and organizational structure for the PMT to review.