

NEXT STEPS

The adoption of the Transit Plan for Washtenaw County by the WATS Policy Committee is just the beginning of the process for improving public transit for the county's residents, employees and visitors. In order to have a positive impact on the accessibility of the county, improve mobility and provide a stimulus for economic development, the plan will need to be funded and implemented.

The Plan Recommendations can be organized into two categories of improvements.

Funding, Administration and Planning

This category of improvements examines the funding needs and recommendations, administrative recommendations and a recommendation for improvements for planning.

Administration

“Establish a mobility management function as referenced in both the Urban and Rural Coordinated Human Services Plans, to provide information, referrals and coordination of transportation options.”

It is not enough to have good quality service, there needs to be a mechanism to assist the public, particularly the senior and persons with handicaps with identifying how to maximize their use of public transportation and make it pleasurable, convenient and easy to negotiate. Funding for this position may be made available through allocations and grants of such funding as Job Access and Reverse Commute and New Freedom as well as other annual allocations of funds.

“Establish a county wide program to promote and assist commuters and employers by providing information about a full range of commuter choices.”

Funding for transportation improvements has begun to decline and the ability of the State and local transportation providers to make significant improvements to either the highway or local system to address congestion is also declining. At the same time the cost of making improvements and the cost of fuel for commuters is increasing at a much faster rate that has been experienced in recent history. Providing transportation choices and making commuters aware of the choices is essential to stimulating the State's economy and allowing it to compete regionally, nationally and globally.

A function similar to the Ann Arbor Chamber's getDowntown program have offered and publicized a wide range of commuter choices in the Ann Arbor Downtown Development Area. An agency or authority that provides assistance for commuters and employers for all of Washtenaw County could administer a program that similarly identifies and pairs commuters with a range of commuter choices. This service should complement the existing programs and promotions.

“Create the organizational framework that enables the implementation of the other recommendations.”

Although it is probably needed as service expands the plan does not recommend nor anticipate any particular structure. Options include the reorganization of AATA into a county wide authority with board representation that reflects the new “service area” or whether this might be a new authority in addition to AATA and the other service providers.

Funding

“Establishing a local, equitable, sufficient and long term dedicated funding to expand the identified services.”

Providing funding is essential to implementing any service improvements and for providing a sustainable system. However, funding must be tied to an Authority or Authorities with specific transportation providers identified. The funding must be approved after local community input and buy-in for the funding mechanism and to the improvements tied to the funding ask.

“Advocate for increased capital and operating funding at the State level to provide a funding source to address the needs identified by the State Long Range Plan.”

The current funding mechanism at the state level is broken. It does not guarantee that the ten percent of the Michigan Transportation Fund (MTF) revenue which is eligible to be allocated to the Comprehensive Transportation Fund (CTF) is actually deposited in the CTF. The Legislature regularly diverts a portion of the funds eligible for the CTF to fund the latest budget crisis. The other problem is that as the State’s communities see the value for transit and service is increased, there is no mechanism for the state funding to commensurately increase. This penalizes and restricts transit improvements throughout the state. Ensuring that the CTF is fully funded is a critical first step to providing a consistent revenue stream for transit operations.

In addition to or as a result of the diversions, the State no longer provides the match for urban system capital purchases of buses. For the rural areas (areas under 200,000 population), the federal funding available for operating and capital purchases are managed by the State and are awarded on a competitive process which hampers the ability to plan and provide high quality rural service. The urban areas (over 200,000 population) are not eligible for federal operating assistance but are allowed to spend capital dollars for capital preventative maintenance. This allows flexibility but requires the agency to choose which to fund.

Planning

“Encourage land use decisions that support existing and future transit service such as concentrating development and providing non-motorized facilities that link to transit.”

Land use is another critical component to the success of the recommendations. Without changes in how the developments and redevelopment in Washtenaw County are constructed, the density along the major community connector corridors and within the activity centers will not be high enough to sustain high quality service. This will require allowing a mixed use high density overlay along corridors and flexibility of zoning in and adjacent to the activity centers throughout the county. Since it is often difficult to make such significant changes to communities master and zoning plans, assistance will need to be provided countywide to individual communities promoting the value of transit oriented development.

Transportation Improvements

The recommendations for service include improvements to the existing service in the county, new county wide service and new inter-county service

Existing Service Improvements and Expansions

“Increase frequency, provide direct routes and expanded service hours for existing fixed route service, particularly in the eastern portion of the Ann Arbor Urbanized area (the City of Ypsilanti and parts of Ypsilanti and Superior Townships and western Wayne County.)”

In order to support more frequent service even in the City of Ann Arbor will likely require increased density along the major corridors and in the activity centers in the downtown, near the University of Michigan campuses, Eastern Michigan University, Briarwood and Arborland areas. There are still some areas in the urbanized area where service exists that would allow mixed and higher density land uses. In addition there are also areas that are ripe for redevelopment that could be supportive of increased transit service if designed to allow easy access for pedestrians, is dense enough with activity to support frequent transit service. According to Mary Kay Christopher of MKC Associates, “6-7 housing units per acre will support a fixed route bus every 30 minutes”.

“Provide improved service between major human service providers; between health service facilities; and connecting housing and employment opportunities.”

Washtenaw County completed a survey in September 2006 on behalf of the Human Service Community Collaborative in an effort to identify how much of each agency’s budget was being spent to provide transportation assistance to their clients. Although about \$172,000 was spent on cab and bus fare, more than \$900,000 was spent using other means to provide assistance to clients due to lack of direct service, time to reach destination and number of destinations to reach in one day. A service that provided more direct service between the human service providers and residential and employment locations would reduce the funding needed to assist clients.

New County wide Service

These three recommendations work in concert to support the highest level of public transit possible.

“Establish demand response/ life line service throughout the County centered around the cities and villages where it does not currently exist.”

The provision of lifeline public transit which provides for trips needed to sustain life (doctors, pharmacies, grocery stores and employment) will become more critical as the population ages over the next two decades. The demand response service is also essential to provide as a feeder service for the community to community service that links activity centers outside the urbanized area including the cities and villages to fixed route service.

“Establish fixed route service linking service linking cities and villages to the Ann Arbor urbanized area.”

There are nearly 72,000 residents of Washtenaw County who commute to work within the County. The majority (slightly more than 41,000) is within the current AATA service area, however, nearly 28,000 commute from urban to rural, rural to urban or make a rural to rural trip within the County

for work. More than 18,000 travel from the rural areas of the county to the urbanized area for work. Commuters would be able to travel to the closest activity center by walking, biking or auto to catch a bus to the urbanized area.

“Establish park and ride lots within each city/village as appropriate to serve as an intermodal connection and to consolidate trips for fixed route services.”

To support the community connectors and the economic stability of the activity centers, the establishment of park and ride lots would be required. The lots with the demand response service would feed the community connectors to the urbanized area.

New Regional Service

“Provide service linking adjacent counties with the Ann Arbor urbanized area within Washtenaw County particularly for employment and health services.”

The provision of service linking Washtenaw County to adjacent counties is critical due to the high volume of employees who travel into the county for work. In particular, the ability of linking western Wayne County communities would provide service to those communities that currently opt out of SMART service because they are not destined for Detroit but travel into Washtenaw County for employment, shopping and recreation. SMART could reinstate service into Washtenaw County providing service between western Wayne County and the Ann Arbor urbanized area. However, if AATA were to operate service outside the county, AATA would need an agreement with SMART to operate this service. Where possible, the provision of this service using the existing rail lines would be supported.

“Provide service to residents linking intermodal connections, particularly intercity bus, rail stations and Wayne County Metropolitan Airport.”

The Wayne County Metropolitan Airport is the largest regional commercial airport in the country that does not have public transit service for passengers. This severely limits the transportation options for anyone flying out of that airport or anyone visiting the region. In order for the region to compete for tourists, conventions and employers, the provision of efficient low cost public transportation is essential. This recommendation supports the provision of commuter service between Ann Arbor (eventually Chelsea) and Detroit.

County Wide Transit Summit

In order to begin the discussion, WATS will join with members of the State legislature and AATA to host a Transit Summit in Washtenaw County in early 2008. This Summit will begin to explore the options for implementing the recommendations, funding the improvements and what agency or agencies should take the lead for the implementation.

Inclusion in the 2035 Transportation Plan for Washtenaw County

In the spring of 2008, WATS will initiate the development of the 2035 Long Range Transportation Plan for Washtenaw County. This plan encompasses all modes of travel except air to be used to

identify candidate improvements for federal, state and local funding. The 2035 Plan must be fiscally constrained to available revenues and thus will require a prioritization of the implementation of the proposed recommendations.

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