

Putting Transit to Work in Small Towns and Rural Places

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“What do you do when people need a ride to kidney dialysis?” asked Jim Moulton, director of Addison County Transit Resources (ACTR) in Middlebury, Vermont. “You can’t just tell them no.”

This is just one of the many questions that Moulton, like many other rural transit providers, must deal with daily. Transit agencies in rural areas and small towns face unique challenges in providing transportation and increasing mobility choices for their residents:

- Many rural places are characterized by long distances between destinations and small town residents often must travel a long way to reach specialized services or venues in larger towns and cities.
- The rural population in America is older than average, and older Americans experience more mobility challenges as their ability to drive wanes.
- Small towns and rural places have become increasingly isolated from larger population centers as intercity bus and rail access has declined over the last several decades. (ractod.org/wc9xxf)
- The cost of transportation in small town communities is high given the long distances they must travel, and their household budgets are tied to the cost of gasoline for the family car, the primary – and in many cases only – means of getting around.
- According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, more than 1.6 million rural households do not have access to a car and

are transit dependent.

These factors suggest that small towns and rural areas would benefit from transportation alternatives and enhancements. Yet there seems to be a myth that rural communities are not as reliant on transit and do not need the same investments in transit. But the rural transit providers we spoke with beg to differ.

According to Connie Garber, transportation director of York County Community Action in Maine, “We all are headed for the same goal: a more robust economy that helps all of the people in the communities we serve.”

In Addison County, Vermont, for example, almost 73 percent of ACTR’s riders are transit dependent. In addition to fixed-route bus services, ACTR relies on a bank of 40 volunteer drivers that take residents to much needed life saving treatment or a simple run to the grocery store. Without volunteer programs like these, rural transit agencies would not fare well because of the limited funds and resources.

In Maine, Garber estimates that volunteer drivers provided more than \$16 million worth of time in 2011. That is a significant investment that demonstrates the flexibility that is needed to deal with rural transit issues. Garber was also involved in the creation of a trolley line, the Shoreline Explorer, which significantly helped residents to get to work in a local tourist area. Garber, along with the local Chamber of Commerce and other stakeholders, collaborated not only to increase access to jobs for local employees, but also to contribute to the economic viability of local businesses and connect various communities in the area.

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In an upcoming report on small towns and rural areas, Reconnecting America reveals stories of transit agencies enhancing transit mobility, providing a means for people to sustain themselves, and creating transit investments that contribute to strong local economies.

The report focuses on small towns and rural areas – loosely defined as places with populations of 50,000 or less. Based on our initial research we found that small communities are taking a new approach to economic development by using new intermodal transit centers or downtown circulator buses to catalyze private investment in main street areas and improve connections between people and jobs.

We also found that transit investments often require piecing together funding from many sources, especially in today’s constrained financial climate. Transit agencies must be flexible to deal with daily demands that come with being a smaller system. And as Garber put it, “Funds come in little boxes, but people don’t.”



The ACTR Shuttle Bus System is made up of six different bus routes including connections to Rutland and Burlington. Their Dial-a-Ride (demand-response) System takes commuters, elders and persons with disabilities, Medicaid-eligible residents and many other vulnerable populations to work, doctors’ appointments, grocery stores and meal sites.

Table 1: Snapshot of Agencies Interviewed

LOCATION	AGENCY	POPULATION	PROJECT	FUNDING SOURCE
IMPROVED BUS NETWORK				
Addison County, VT	Addison County Transit Resources	37,000	Coordination with various partners on a ferry, increased shuttle routes	Federal (Rural Transit Assistance Program), State, Philanthropic
CIRCULATOR				
York County, ME	York County Community Action (Shoreline Explorer)	197, 000	Trolley Bus	Federal, State, Local (business and individual)
INTERMODAL TRANSIT CENTERS				
Spearfish, SD	Prairie Hills Transit	10,400	Transit Facility with day care	Federal (ARRA), land contributed by the City
INTERCITY TRANSIT/RAIL IMPROVEMENTS				
Fredericksburg, VA	Virginia Railway Express	25,000	Commuter rail track expansion	Federal (stimulus funds)