

Rural and Urban Transportation Coordination



There are many reasons why rural and urban transportation organizations may want to coordinate. This technical brief prepared collaboratively by National RTAP and Shared-Use Mobility Center (SUMC) describes how to plan, fund, and sustain rural and urban transportation coordination projects and provides case studies of successful initiatives.

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Introduction

Transportation needs are quite different in rural and urban areas. Unlike densely populated urban communities, residents in rural areas and small towns do not usually have access to a wide range of mobility options. According to the Small Urban and Rural Center on Mobility (SURCOM) 2022 Rural Transit Fact Book, the most rural counties have higher percentages of older adults (22%) and people with disabilities (18%). On the other hand, the most urban counties have higher percentages of households without a vehicle (10.3%). Despite these statistics, all residents need a reliable mode of transportation. Through the coordination of services, both rural and urban residents can get to where they need to go and there is connectivity between rural and urban areas.

Data on rural and urban transportation coordination is scarce. In 2006, the University of Montana Rural Institute identified 4,835 Section 5310 recipients in 49 states and the District of Columbia and surveyed them on aspects of transportation coordination. 29% of respondents participated in a mixed urban and rural coordinated transportation system and 5% participated in a consolidated system (Seekins, 2006). SURCOM found that in 2020, the most recent data available at the time of this writing, urban transit agencies provided 31.2 million rides in rural areas (SURCOM, Rural Transit Fact Book, 2022).

Coordinating rural and urban transportation can improve transportation for people with a wide range of needs. For example, urbanites may want to “escape from the city” to spend the day at a state park in a rural area. People in rural areas may want to apply for jobs in an urban area and having public transportation available may be the only way they can get to work. There may only be one dialysis facility in a county, and both rural and urban patients need to travel to receive care.

Benefits of rural and urban transportation coordination include:

- Regional connectivity provides access to healthcare, jobs, education, social services, shopping, and more to residents across a region, whether urban or rural.
- Reductions in regional service gaps (transit deserts)
- Possible cost reductions for transit partners
- Potential to reduce costs to travelers, possibly boosting ridership

- Increases in tourism and shopping for both the rural and urban areas are possible, leading to economic gains for all communities involved

Planning

The first step in planning any type of transportation service is taking a thorough look at the needs of the communities the agencies will be serving. A Coordinated Human Services Transportation (HST) Plan is an excellent place to start as it has already done much of this work. Transit agencies should look to partner with other agencies that are geographically situated to coordinate services, share common goals, and may be able to fill service gaps.

Who should be involved in the planning process:

- Rural and Urban transit agency leadership
- Associations of Governments (AOGs) in rural areas
- Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) in urbanized areas¹
- Regional Planning Organizations (RPOs)
- Councils of Governments (COGs)
- County governments
- Volunteer Transportation Organizations (VTOs)
- Regional Areas Agencies on Aging
- Intercity bus and other private transportation providers
- Employers, schools, medical facilities, and other community organizations
- Mobility managers

In a coordinated system, it is important to decide early on how operating costs will be paid. Will they be shared equally among the partners based on travel needs and use, or are urban areas able to take on a larger proportion of the costs? How will local matches be handled throughout the coordinated system?

The following are examples of planning for rural and urban transportation coordination. Valley Regional Transit (VRT) in Idaho provides most of its service in the urban area, but some of the specialized services operate in rural areas. There is a department within VRT dedicated to filling the gaps in the traditional transit service by working with several partners to find solutions to transportation issues in the community. In Oregon, Ride Connection, a nonprofit organization that serves multiple counties including both rural and urban areas, has a planning staff that provides coordinated planning services, benefiting the participating agencies. Their Travel Options Counselors gather information and work to determine the full range of available transportation options for riders and connect them to other regional services if needed.

Intercity transportation, such as Greyhound, FlixBus, Peter Pan Bus, and other carriers, regularly transport riders to both rural and urban areas - partnering with Intercity carriers is a good way to start coordinating service between areas.

Challenges identified by agencies that coordinate rural and urban transportation include:

- Consistency in costs of rides
- Urban areas may be able to offer evening and weekend trips, while many rural areas cannot

¹ In urbanized areas with populations greater than 50,000, federal law requires the establishment of a Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) to carry out the development of transportation plans and programs.

- Riders are often unsure of who to contact for information
- Difficulty in sharing administrative staff, buses, fuel, or drivers with the other agencies
- Differences in insurance coverage between the rural and urban systems
- Marketing varies among the services, or marketing of the coordinated service is difficult to develop
- Separate contracts may be needed for each partner in the coordinated service system
- Different service providers and operation models, (e.g., hours of operation, eligibility requirements, limited to specific jurisdictional boundaries)
- Lack of governmental support for this type of coordinated service

No Kid Hungry, in its brief *Bridging the Gap: Building Authentic Partnerships Between Urban and Rural Organizations*, described a Kids Eat Free shuttle bus that serves both rural and urban communities. The brief provides the following guidance for developing partnerships between rural and urban communities, and organizations in the following ways:

- Gain a deep understanding of the historical and cultural context of the region, both rural and urban
- Identify partners and common goals and work toward a shared vision
- Set partnership expectations early and often
- Commit to long-term partnerships

Funding

The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) provides many active grants and has also funded demonstration projects to test public transit coordination initiatives. These include, but are not limited to:

- Formula Grants for Rural Areas - Section 5311
- Urbanized Area Formula Grants - Section 5307
- Metropolitan and Statewide Planning Program - Section 5304
- Enhanced Mobility of Seniors & Individuals with Disabilities - Section 5310
- Public Transportation Innovation Program - Section 5312
- Innovative Coordinated Access and Mobility Grants (ICAM)
- Public Transportation on Indian Reservations Program; Tribal Transit Competitive Program
- Tribal Transit Formula Grants - Section 5311(c)(1)(B)

These Demonstration Project funding programs have also funded transportation coordination initiatives. They are not currently active at the time of this writing.

- Integrated Mobility Innovation Program (IMI)
- Accelerating Innovative Mobility (AIM)
- Enhancing Mobility Innovation (EMI)
- Mobility on Demand (MOD) Sandbox Program

Note that rural program funding (Section 5311) may not be used to provide service exclusively within an urban area.

Section 5304 (Metropolitan and Statewide Planning Program) funds can be used for statewide transit planning needs for areas outside the urbanized MPO boundaries.

Recipients of FTA grants need to comply with all applicable requirements, including local match.

Funding may also be available through federal agencies such as the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) or the Department of Labor (DOL). The CCAM Program Inventory lists agencies that may potentially be able to provide funding for coordination initiatives. State funding may be available as well, through the State DOT and/or the State Transit Association.

Case Studies

Case Study - URSTA / UTA

The state of Utah is the 11th largest U.S. state in terms of square miles and has five urban counties and 24 rural counties. Two statewide agencies in Utah, URSTA and UTA are working toward coordinating transportation throughout the state. URSTA, the Utah Urban Rural Specialized Transit Association was formed in 1988 and is governed by a board of directors that meets on a quarterly basis. URSTA's goal is to build a strong network of fixed-route and specialized transportation services. URSTA provides training, education, advocacy, and networking for transit providers and their employees in Utah and the surrounding states. UTA, the Utah Transit Authority, has a service area that spans six counties and is the largest transit authority in the state. UTA is also governed by a board of directors. URSTA and UTA work closely together, and many individuals serve leadership roles in both organizations. For example, Christy Allen is the chair of URSTA's Coordination and Legislative Committee and is also the Manager of the Coordinated Mobility Department for UTA.

These two organizations provide outreach to rural and urban transit organizations at many venues, including Transit Day on the Hill, Association of Counties Meeting, Utah Transportation Conference, and others, and perform stop-bys at individual transit agencies. Before conferences, URSTA hosts a training session for all Utah mobility managers so they can network and potentially work together. URSTA also offers all Utah transit agencies train-the-trainer travel training instruction. URSTA, UTA, and Utah Department of Transportation are collaborating on a multi-year statewide study and database of all transportation providers that will pave the way for further collaboration among Utah's transportation providers.

UTA and the Utah Department on Aging launched a unique voucher program that utilizes Out and About Funds. UTA oversees the program to distribute the vouchers to mobility managers. Riders with disabilities can request trips, and the mobility managers will help arrange the trips using the vouchers. Many of the riders utilizing this program are from rural areas and need to travel to large urban healthcare facilities. This program even funds trips that are 100 miles away and has served over 350 people. Fares are a flat rate of \$2.50 – whether the trip is 1 mile or 100 miles. UTA is currently working on an E-Voucher system where electronic vouchers can be distributed through an app. The system will be able to pre-approve a client for a certain number of trips. The app's software will track the trips and pay the driver. The rider will be able to use transit agencies, volunteer drivers, taxis, Ubers/Lyfts, etc. There will be no fee for transit agencies to use the software. Once launched, this program will make it seamless for riders with disabilities to travel to and from any rural or urban areas.

UTA also has a phone referral line where riders can call one number and find accessible service, including traveling from a rural to an urban area. Another rural/urban transportation coordination

endeavor is for staff. URSTA is providing scholarships for bus mechanics in rural areas and UTA is providing transportation to the training sessions.

Case Study - North Sound Transportation Alliance

The North Sound Transportation Alliance (NSTA) is a collective made up of transit agencies, local governments, elected officials, nonprofit organizations, and community stakeholders from Whatcom, Skagit, San Juan, Island, and Snohomish counties in northwest Washington. The region has a mix of rural and urban areas, and many locations, particularly in Island and San Juan counties, that require ferries to access. Recognizing the need to improve how people travel throughout these five counties, NSTA was formed in 1996 with support from a grant from the Washington State Legislature to collaborate on strategies and solutions to enhance transportation connectivity.

NSTA has four objectives to work towards connected regional transportation:

1. Collect travel and system data to identify needs and measure performance.
2. Improve regional connections and sustain and expand services.
3. Enhance mobility through sustainable, equitable, and innovative transportation solutions.
4. Inform the public about transportation services to enhance awareness of the regional transportation network.

The collaborative focuses on bus transit, passenger rail, health transportation, active transportation, and ferry service - which is particularly important for this area, as ferries are key to connecting rural island communities to the mainland.

Furthering the collaborative's objectives, NSTA oversees various projects to improve interagency and intercounty coordination. Many of these projects involve research studies or planning work, with special attention given to facilitating interjurisdictional and intermodal connections. One major initiative that emerged from the NSTA's collaborative efforts is the County Connector Transit Service, which began in 2005. Building on an NSTA study on commuting habits and intermodal connections, Whatcom, Skagit, and Island Counties received a \$2 million state appropriation to implement the County Connector Transit Service and link the region with an intercounty bus network. The County Connector is a joint initiative between Whatcom Transportation Authority, Skagit Transit, and Island Transit providing connections to vital services through six distinct routes that travel between the three counties. The County Connector has also been expanded to include travel to Everett, an urban area in Snohomish County, and a major employment center in the region.

The Whatcom Council of Governments (WCOG) administered a survey to County Connector riders over ten days in March and April 2015 to examine the impacts of the service. Of the 1,812 riders during this period, 1,450 participated in the surveys. Although the County Connector service has expanded since this study was performed, the results of the surveys shed light on how this service improves mobility, enhances access to employment, and makes a positive environmental impact. Notably, survey results indicate that the majority of riders of the intercounty routes use the service to commute to and from school or work. Furthermore, when asked how respondents would have made trips without the County Connector buses, around 35% said they would have driven, while more than 30% said they would not have made the trip at all. These results show that the

County Connector service takes a significant number of cars off the road, improving congestion and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. As of the time of the study, WCOG estimates that the County Connector service reduces 11,400 vehicle miles traveled per weekday, and over 1 million pounds of carbon dioxide annually.

The County Connector exemplifies how the collaborative efforts of NSTA have facilitated inter-jurisdictional travel and provided rural communities access to urban areas that were previously difficult to get to without a car. This type of interagency coordination is key to accessible and connected transportation access for both urban and rural communities.

Additional Notable Initiatives:

- The rural Heart of Iowa Regional Transit Agency (HIRTA) Public Transit in Iowa contracts with an urban system for its vanpool program to offer those services in their seven counties. Central Iowa also provides more than 600 miles of interconnected multi-use trails that connect urban centers to rural areas and natural resources.
- Idaho Transportation Department has its rural agencies partner with, and coordinate stops with, urban services.
- Connected Colorado is a project of Colorado DOT that is developing and building a centralized digital mobility hub that enables greater use of the statewide transit by connecting rural and urban transit providers.
- Jefferson County, Oregon worked with Cascades East Transit (CET) to provide transit service to the entire region, which included both rural and urban areas. CET met grant criteria by qualifying with the necessary Rural-Urban Commuting Area (RUCA) census tracts.
- Public agencies and community groups in Tompkins County, New York are working to integrate the transportation services offered by various mobility providers to better connect the surrounding rural communities with downtown Ithaca transit options.
- The Jayhawk Area Agency on Aging (AAA) Topeka, Kansas Coalition Team project worked on coordinating across county lines, including both rural and urban providers.
- The Nebraska Department of Transportation chose to incentivize vanpooling throughout the state by establishing Go NEWhere, a vanpooling program.
- Vermont has a statewide coordinated system that encompasses all modes of transit and includes many rural and urban communities.
- The Utah DOT Rural Public Transit Program uses a Unified Transportation Plan to achieve the following goal: agencies work together to develop common goals, planning time horizons, performance measures, and financial assumptions that comprehensively address both rural and urban needs.
- The Urban Rural Transportation Alliance (URTA) in Maryland was a non-profit private transportation provider that provided medical, employment, and other trips for 27 years through 2004.
- While the service area is largely rural, Arc on the Gulf, Inc. in Florida also provides transportation to many urban areas to meet rider needs, including but not limited to, Tallahassee, Gainesville, Orlando, Jacksonville, Tampa, and many more locations throughout Florida and even Alabama.

Recommended Practices

The following practices are intended to assist transit stakeholders in planning for rural and urban transportation coordination:

- Open communication is crucial between partners. Address problems promptly. Treat relationships with all network providers as collaborative and supportive.
- Leverage existing networks to bring rural and urban agencies together to discuss coordination needs and opportunities.
- Work with established intercity carriers who already have service in both rural and urban areas.
- Create transfer stops between rural and urban areas.
- Explore data specifications as they provide a common framework to communicate across providers and coordination of services. Under development, the Transactional Data Specification is helping to fill this need through a handful of demonstration projects.
- Technology and data sharing are important considerations when coordinating rides across service areas (for example, using a shared scheduling system).
- Share mobility management and travel training functions.
- Systems can display the rural and urban systems they coordinate with and connect with on their websites.
- Develop a plan with interagency responsibilities for data reporting.
- It may be easier to start small by just coordinating one aspect of transportation, such as travel from a rural area to a nearby urban college campus.
- Consider implementing a centralized way for coordinating agencies to purchase vehicles, fuel, and other operating needs. This organization can also potentially arrange for volunteer drivers throughout the service area. Insurance may be available at a lower cost through statewide or regional insurance pools.

Conclusion

While there are challenges to implementing transportation coordination across rural and urban areas, there are also many long-term benefits to both the partners involved and the riders in all areas. Once the service is established, it is important to continue to track performance metrics to determine whether the coordination is consistently meeting the goals of the program and the needs of all the community members.

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Further Information

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