

12 DEFINING PREFERRED ALTERNATIVES

CONSIDERATIONS

This study identifies service alternatives for District 3. In determining the appropriate group of programs for regional commutes, a few things must be acknowledged:

- Existing District 3 transit operators may not have the resources or political support to provide service across jurisdictional boundaries. They are focused on serving local trips, and outside of St. Cloud, the Brainerd-Baxter area, and the Northstar rail corridor, most of the transit operators are providing service to transit-dependent riders, who are not necessarily the full market of individuals who would opt to ride a regional commuter bus service.
- Vanpools, which may be among the most effective solutions for some of the long distance commutes, are not in operation or administered formally by any agency or organization within District 3. Vanpools serving District 3 communities operate into the Twin Cities and are administered through the Metro Vanpool program. Nevertheless, some creative solutions have developed, with the Grand Casino Mille Lacs reporting that several of its staff members pooled their resources to purchase a used van and now commute together in this vehicle.
- Based on relevant research and this study's survey findings, parking and congestion constraints, as well as increased fuel costs, encourage individuals to seek other commute transportation alternatives. For intra-district commutes, the only existing constraint for many people is the high price of gasoline. In the project focus groups, individuals reported spending as much as \$500 per month on fuel alone for their commutes. Cost sensitivity will be a major factor in determining how many people would choose to rideshare or use transit.
- In most of the rural portions of District 3, commuter options will be very limited. Strategies to facilitate ridesharing in these areas may have some merit, but may not significantly impact commuter mode choice. Neither commuter transit nor vanpooling will be cost-effective or meet productivity performance standards in most of District 3's smaller communities.

Even with some of these challenges, this study finds some opportunities exist for new services. Defining whether these new services merit implementation based on costs, funding availability, administrative structure, and other characteristics must be determined. Five key factors which are used to describe the potential for regional commuter services in Central Minnesota include (1) demand, (2) opportunity for connectivity, (3) feasibility, (4) growth potential, and (5) enabling tools. Each of these is discussed in the following sections.

Demand

One of the most critical questions in determining whether to carry forward any of the preferred alternatives is whether there exists sufficient demand for regional service. Chapter 5 provides insight into the generally modest levels of interest in commuter transportation in District 3, and follow up meetings in St. Cloud and Baxter with regional employers found that few of them see a need for regional commuter services. Nevertheless, surveys with park-and-ride users found that about 10% of them would be very likely to consider using a vanpool if it were available to them.

Ultimately, the issue of demand is whether a particular strategy will make an impact. This will depend on its success in meeting study goals, and perhaps larger goals in the region for reducing congestion, allowing for more compact development in places like St. Cloud and Brainerd, or reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Impacts can also be assessed based on the well being of people who choose to use a commute option instead of driving alone, including physical and mental health, productivity, and other opportunity costs of not driving alone.

The ridership estimation tool shows the potential for bus ridership, based on assumed demand, in only one corridor exclusively within District 3: Cold Spring-St. Joseph-St. Cloud, assuming the St. Joseph-St. Cloud connection has the greatest potential for success in achieving performance standards with regard to cost and ridership.

Two other bus services are recommended for consideration based on demand alone: Buffalo to Minneapolis, with modest ridership projections and St. Michael to Minneapolis, with more robust ridership assumptions. These services could operate along separate corridors, as modeled, or could be consolidated into a single service from either city.

Bus and rail ridership is growing in the St. Cloud to Minneapolis corridor, which requires a transfer from the Link bus to commuter rail, but future rail service that eliminates that transfer should be considered. The current service in this corridor discourages use of transit because it requires a transfer, and assumes that some individuals may already be making a transfer in St. Cloud to reach the Link service or in Minneapolis to a Metro Transit service once they alight Northstar rail. A direct rail link between St. Cloud and Minneapolis would provide much better service in this corridor. As ridership continues to grow in the Northstar corridor, particularly with new stations added in Ramsey (and potentially in Coon Rapids), the rail line will offer greater utility for commuters in the St. Cloud area, making it much easier for individuals to make a seamless trip between St. Cloud and Minneapolis.

Opportunity for Connectivity

Although a number of services were identified as potentially feasible based on demand, the potential for connectivity with existing work schedules, school schedules and transit services in District 3 and in the Twin Cities is an important consideration. The ridership demand for commuter services assumes that they are designed to meet the needs of riders. Whether transit services are implemented to match service schedules and work schedules will impact the potential effectiveness — and use — of the various services.

For the link between Sauk Centre and St. Cloud, for example, Tri-CAP currently provides lifeline service along the full corridor, one day per week. However, local demand response service is available every day in Sauk Centre and Melrose, beginning by 7:30 AM which could be used to access a vanpool, but could not be used at the end of the day upon a vanpool's return because service terminates at 4:00 PM in Melrose, 4:45 PM in Sauk Centre. Likewise, a combination of RiverRider and Buffalo Allied Transit service can provide local connections in Buffalo, but St. Michael, which has a good potential for transit use, has no local service. RiverRiver services

actually parallel existing Northstar service and could be used, perhaps, as a feeder from some of the communities in Wright County.

Efforts will need to be made to better coordinate existing services. One potential strategy for Central Minnesota is to bring together all of the transit operators to discuss how they might, either individually or together, work to provide service in the corridors deemed most feasible for transit service and what their roles might be in the provision of vanpools in the region. This could be done through a formalized transit coordination council: some agencies will likely need to champion transit and vanpool efforts in order for them to be successful.

Feasibility

While commuter service use and ridership (Chapter 9) are potential elements of determining whether a service is feasible or not, some locally prioritized criteria will also impact whether or not a service can or should be implemented:

- **Financial considerations.** Many feasibility decisions must be based on an agency's financial capacity to operate services, and the capacities of the various jurisdictions in Central Minnesota to fund the services. Ridership aside, the potential costs and availability of funding for a new service will have the most significant impact on its success. Specific services in specific corridors may have a greater likelihood of funding from certain sources, which may make those services more attractive to implement. For example, JARC funds can be used to support the capital and operating costs of transportation programs that connect welfare recipients and low-income residents to jobs and training. The New Freedom program provides funds to allow transportation providers to develop services and facilities for people with disabilities that go beyond those required by ADA. These funds can be used for purchasing vehicles, expanding paratransit services, providing funds for human service transportation (which may meet some commuter transportation needs), providing voucher programs, and funding volunteer driver programs, among others. Some of these funding sources might be successfully applied in those corridors where traditional commuter transit may not be as effective, but where human service agencies have identified other types of regional transit needs. Likewise, routes going into Minneapolis might meet standards for funding from the Metropolitan Council, depending on the service. Being able to leverage state funds with local funds will also play a role in determining which services will be most likely to be implemented.
- **Public and political priorities.** Local support for regional commuter transportation will be essential, especially if locally generated funds are required for the implementation of new services. The survey of 1,200 households found only modest support for commuter bus services (less than 20%), while commuter rail service received greater support (34%). Two-thirds of the region's residents indicated they prefer to drive and saw no need to use transit for any purpose. Thus, the data does not support a significant level of interest in regional commuter services, which has a negative impact on the potential effectiveness -- and feasibility -- of regional commute options.
- **Roadway capacity.** Based on the evaluation of highway traffic volumes and MnDOT's Interregional Corridor (IRC) system, which established a policy to connect major employment and trade centers, traffic congestion is not a significant issue in District 3 in terms of its potential positive impact on encouraging people to change their commute behavior. Commuters from District 3 to the Twin Cities are those most likely to encounter freeway or highway congestion on their way to work or school, with noted

delays on I-94, Highway 10, Highway 55, Highway 169 and Highway 65. Although some of the delay exists within Wright, Sherburne and Isanti Counties, much of the congestion is in Anoka and Hennepin Counties, outside of District 3. There is some delay in the St. Cloud area, but none of it was found to be significant enough to have a major impact on an individual's mode choice. Thus, for purposes of this evaluation, roadway capacity was not found to be a major factor and no provision is provided for major capital investments in highway capacity improvements to accommodate regional bus services, vanpools, or carpools at this time. Nevertheless, HOV lanes that would support carpooling and vanpooling, as well as provide a travel time advantage for transit, may be considered in the future as a way of facilitating those services that are carried forward to implementation.

- **Ease of implementation.** It is much easier to pilot a regional bus service than it is to introduce a new rail corridor between Big Lake and St. Cloud. Likewise, it is easier to operate a regional bus service in an area that is already served by transit operators than in an area without potential operators of the service. The possibility that Metro Bus, River Rider, Heartland Express, Tri-CAP, or Timber Trails could operate service in certain corridors reduces the need to consider contracting with a charter bus provider or establishing a new agency to operate service. Equipment purchases and staffing can make implementation more complex, but it is usually easier to implement service near where it already exists. Because an operator already provides service in a corridor does not necessarily mean the operator is the appropriate one to oversee a vanpool program or to operate a large-scale commuter operation, because they may not have the equipment and staffing capabilities to do so or may be seen as too "local" (not having a regional perspective).
- **Potential for coordination.** For any service that crosses jurisdictional boundaries, it will be important for agencies and governments to work together. Some of the responsibilities to implement a regional commuter service may require that a variety of jurisdictions coordinate, perhaps through the establishment of a transit coordinating council or other type of joint partnership. It may require developing regional service policies, coordinating information and marketing resources, developing a set of uniform ADA eligibility requirements, uniform fares, etc. The feasibility of a cross-jurisdictional service will rely on the ability of multiple agencies to work together and share resources.

Based on these various feasibility characteristics, a secondary review of the alternatives is warranted. Given the limited number of potential corridors, rather than providing a rigid ranking of these feasibility factors, a set of assumptions has been made about each of the corridors (Figure 12-1). Based on this assessment alone, there is no clear direction for which services should and should not be implemented and all could potentially be phased in over the long term. Overall, vanpool services are assumed to be easier to implement and carry less financial risk than transit services. They also require less coordination among potential partners because a vanpool program can be centralized.

Figure 12-1 Qualitative Feasibility Assessment

Corridors Considered based on Demand (Ridership)		Major Service Alternative(s)	Feasibility Factors				
			Financial	Public/Political Priorities	Roadway Capacity	Ease of Implementation	Potential for Coordination
A – Baxter/Brainerd Area	Pequot Lakes-Nisswa-Baxter/Brainerd	Vanpool	◆	▼	▼	▲	▲
B – St. Cloud Destination	Sauk Centre to St. Cloud	Vanpool	▲	◆	◆	▲	▲
	Cold Spring via St. Joseph to St. Cloud	Transit	▲	◆	◆	◆	▲
C- Other Intra-District Links	Buffalo via Monticello (to Minneapolis)	Vanpool	▲	◆	▲	▲	▲
D – Minneapolis/St. Paul Destination	Annandale to Minneapolis	Vanpool	▲	◆	▲	▲	▲
	<i>Sub-corridor:</i> Buffalo to Minneapolis portion of this corridor	Transit Vanpool	Bus ◆ Vanpool ▲	Bus ◆ Vanpool ◆	▲	Bus ◆ Vanpool ▲	▲
	St. Michael to Minneapolis	Transit Vanpool	Bus ◆ Vanpool ▲	Bus ▲ Vanpool ◆	▲	Bus ▼ Vanpool ◆	▲
	Mora to Minneapolis	Vanpool	▲	◆	▲	▲	▲
	St. Cloud to Minneapolis	Transit Vanpool	Rail ▼ Vanpool ▲	Rail ▲ Vanpool ▲	▲	Rail ▼ Vanpool ▲	▲

Legend: ▼ Less important, higher cost, less potential; ◆ Somewhat important, medium cost, some potential; ▲ More important/lower cost/greater potential

Growth Potential

The alternatives evaluated in this study assume some characteristics that are based on inputs for the ridership estimation tool. These characteristics, however, should not dictate the ultimate operating plans for each corridor. It may be appropriate to implement services at different levels than those identified in this study: shorter service spans, increased headways, bidirectional operations, different vehicle types that cost more or less to operate, etc.

It will be important to invest in services that have a potential for longer-term success. Many regional services are developed over time. When significant numbers of vanpools operate in a corridor, it is appropriate to consider transit services which might better address the needs and cost expectations of the vanpool users. Likewise, regional transit services often develop because a local fixed route system, like Metro Bus, is encouraged to provide service to adjacent communities and begins to expand its service area. Oftentimes, jurisdictions that should be funding that transit service are not doing so, so it becomes necessary to take a more regional approach to allow for equitable funding of a regional service.

Enabling Tools

What are things that can enhance a set of commuter services' ability to attract people to them? The importance of marketing is often overlooked in the development of regional commuter services. The District 3 survey found that large numbers of Central Minnesota residents are unaware of even local transit options, and few know where to go for information. The TRC prides itself on being a source of information about transportation options in Central Minnesota, and individuals are aware of transit in St. Cloud and in the Twin Cities, knowing they can go online to get the information they need. In the focus group in Brainerd, several participants indicated they were unaware that local transit service existed. In a Cambridge focus group, most participants were aware of Heartland Express service, but few thought it would meet their needs.

Signage for park-and-ride lots is often difficult to find and MnDOT's odd distinctions between "official" and "unofficial" park-and-ride lots can be confusing to potential users. There is no central source of detailed information about park-and-ride lots and almost no information could be found within District 3 (on websites, in informational materials) about vanpools available to the Twin Cities. Many resources are currently available but are underused because people are not aware of them. Implementation of any new commuter transportation services should include a significant marketing and outreach component.

CONCLUSION

A number of potential services are identified; only a few are likely to provide significant benefits and achieve proposed performance standards. The preferred corridors are carried forward for purposes of implementation considerations and to define a financial strategy. Ultimately, whether these new services are developed will depend on a number of factors, most importantly whether funding is available and whether an organization or agency can champion their implementation.