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# SUMMARY OF FOCUS GROUPS

## 2010 GREATER MINNESOTA PUBLIC TRANSIT INVESTMENT PLAN

November 2010

**Prepared For  
Minnesota Department of Transportation**

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## PURPOSE

As stated in the Public Involvement Strategy, the purpose of the focus groups was to consult with non-transit users for opinions on transit needs within each region.

## TIMELINE

All focus groups were held in March and April 2010. Exact dates varied according to regional needs and availability.

## METHODOLOGY

All focus groups were conducted by Regional Development Commission (RDC) planning staff to ensure opinions were gathered from non-transit users across Greater Minnesota. Each region hosted one focus group. The Region 7W focus group was conducted by consultant staff, as Region 7W does not have a RDC. No Mn/DOT staff members were present at the focus group meetings in order to encourage participants to freely share opinions.

RDC planners used their existing networks to identify and invite 10-12 residents in the region. Target groups for the focus groups included:

- Seniors
- Minorities
- Persons from a low income household (below \$25,000)
- Persons with a disability

RDC planners were required to have one participant from each of the target categories, with a total of six participants falling into one of the target categories. The remaining four participants were not to fall into any of the target categories.

To recruit members of target categories, RDC planners were encouraged to use existing contact lists; however, invitees were to represent themselves and not an organization. To recruit the four other members of the public, RDC planners were encouraged to use the phone book to identify participants. Screening questions were provided to ensure participants were non-transit riders and were not affiliated with the RDC.

RDC planners were provided with a discussion guide that included a series of questions on current traveling experiences; transit perceptions; marketing and availability; future alternatives; and improving or changing transit service. A sample of the discussion guide is included as an exhibit to this report.

## KEY THEMES

The following key themes emerged from the focus groups:

### Current Traveling Experiences

- **Use of personal vehicles:** The majority of participants used their own vehicles for their daily trips. Many had never used or thought about taking public transit.

- **Types of trips:** Types of trips varied by demographic group. Those with children noted an increased number of trips per day due to children's activities. Retired participants noted inconsistent schedules and multiple trips per day for recreation and volunteer purposes.
- **Knowledge of transit service:** Knowledge of existing services varied by area. In some areas, like Bemidji, there was good knowledge of transit services and how they worked. In other areas, there was little to no knowledge.

### Transit Perceptions

- **Convenience:** The overwhelming theme under transit perceptions was convenience. The majority of participants do not use transit because it is inconvenient (e.g. does not go where they need to go, long travel times, long wait times)
- **Independence:** Many participants noted they like their independence and transit does not allow for that.
- **Who transit service is for:** There were many comments that participants did not know services were available to the general public and thought transit service was only for the elderly and disabled. Others felt that only those that need it should use it.
- **Weather:** Participants often used weather as a reason for not using transit, not wanting to wait outside in the cold or the difficulty of maneuvering sidewalks with large snow banks.
- **Personal safety:** Some participants noted personal safety as a reason for not using transit. Others noted child safety as a reason for not using public transit, for example lack of seat belts.
- **Waste of money/use of service:** Some participants had seen partially full or nearly empty buses and viewed this service as a waste of money.
- **Cost of fares:** This was not considered as a barrier to using transit. Most that had knowledge of fares thought they were reasonable.

### Marketing

- **Increased promotions:** The majority of participants felt that additional promotions were needed on the services available.
- **Incentives to ride:** Many participants noted that incentives to ride would increase transit usage. Examples included free service days, discounted passes, or free passes for students. While many suggested incentives, not all indicated that such incentives would increase their likelihood to use transit.

- **Where they get information:** Many participants indicated they would use the phone book to get information on local transit services. Other options included the internet, brochures, and flyers in the community.
- **Where to put information:** Most participants felt that information should be placed on bulletin boards throughout the community, in locations such as grocery stores, churches and senior centers.

### **Future Alternatives**

- **Increased use “in the future”:** Many participants noted they could see an increased use of transit “in the future”. Some noted just a general increase in use, and some noted they would use it themselves. Reasons for increased use included aging, high fuel prices, increased vehicle ownership costs, and lack of parking.
- **Efficiency of service:** Many participants noted a need for increased efficiency of service. This included shorter trips, fewer stops, shorter wait times, express bus lanes, and coordinated services with community organizations and businesses.
- **Expansion of service:** Many participants noted a need for increased services, such as weekend and evening hours, increased service area, and fixed routes versus dial-a-ride.

All RDC summary reports are included as exhibits to this report.

## TRANSPORTATION and TRANSIT FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

### I. INTRODUCTIONS/BACKGROUND - (10 min)

- A. Moderator introduces him/herself to the group
- B. Focus group purpose: feedback from the community about transit needs/expectations
- C. Notetaker – someone will be taking notes to insure we've captured all ideas (names will not be associated with answers – only looking for group feedback)
- D. Have respondents introduce themselves to the group: name, profession, hometown
- E. Focus group context: This information will be used to review our area transit services relative to community's needs/expectations and plan our future investment priorities.

### II. CURRENT TRAVELING EXPERIENCES - (10 min)

- A. When do you typically travel?
  - Leaving from where (general area)? Your eventual destination (general area)? How far/miles are traveled in typical day?
  - Driving by yourself, or as part of a carpool?
  - Ever use the bus? Why NOT?
  - How do you decide to travel primarily by car? What goes into this decision?
- B. *(Optional question if time allows)* What are typical travel conditions you might encounter?
  - Ever do anything to avoid these conditions?

### III. TRANSIT PERCEPTIONS - (10 min)

- A. Overall, what are your *initial* impressions of the bus service in this community (county)?  
*Note to moderator: Could name local bus service as a prompt.*
  - Based on what seen/heard what works well?
  - Based on what seen/heard what doesn't work so well? Why do you say that?
  - Why doesn't the bus work, for you?

### IV. MARKETING AND AVAILABILITY - (15 min)

- A. Do you know how to ride the bus? If you decided to start using the bus tomorrow what information would you need that you do not know already? *Note to moderator: want to know level of knowledge on local bus availability, coverage and cost.*
- B. How informed do you feel about the bus system in this area?

- How would you go about getting more information about bus service in this community? (website, telephone, etc.)
- What information about the bus system would you like to have that you don't know today?
- Would you benefit from bus information/materials in a language besides English?

V. FUTURE ALTERNATIVES- (35 min)

A. Would you expect that people will begin using the bus more in the future? Why do you say that?

- If yes, who might these future, new users be? [age/type of trips?]
- What would it take to attract new riders within this community? Why do you say that?
  - If bus fares were cheaper, do you think more people would ride the bus?
    - Why or why not?
  - If bus service went to more places, do you think more people would ride the bus?
    - Why or why not?
    - Which places do you think should be included?
  - If bus service was available for more hours of the day, do you think more people would ride the bus?
    - Why or why not?
    - Which hours of the day do you think need service?
  - How long is it reasonable to wait for a \_\_\_\_ ? (*Moderator says "bus" or "dial a ride reservation" depending on community*)
- Considering the topics just mentioned; where should transit providers invest next? In what areas/services do you advise they should be putting their (limited) investment dollars?
- (*Optional question if time allows*) If you could tell bus companies to change ONE thing, what would that be? Why?

B. Improving/Changing Transit Service, revisited.

- If you had the ability to create a new bus service, what would it look like?
  - Today/Currently.....?
- Any additional thoughts about what you think could be done to improve/change bus service in this community? What else?
- Is there anything we didn't ask you that you'd like us to know?

IV. CLOSE/ CONCLUSION – (5 min)

THANK RESPONDENTS FOR TAKING THE TIME TO ATTEND – REMIND THEM HOW THE INFORMATION CAPTURED WILL BE USED IN FUTURE PLANNING.

NWRDC, Region 1

Location of Focus Group (Thief River Falls, Pennington County):

Number of attendees: 12 plus moderator and transportation director

## **I. OUTREACH:**

**How did you recruit focus group members? Please provide a detailed overview of your process and whom you contacted.**

I contacted the student senate president from Northland College in Thief River Falls who in turn discussed the focus group request with the student senate from which two members signed up to attend the session.

I discussed the need for non-transit users with the RDC Area Agency on Aging and they recommended contacting senior centers, housing assistance centers, social service directors, and minority groups that would be good candidates for the focus group. The Hallock Senior Center in Kittson County, which currently does not have transit service lined up four people within the county to attend. One of the Kittson County members brought his wife with to learn about the transit issues within the region.

I contacted assisted living centers in Crookston, Warren, and Thief River Falls and asked the directors of those facilities for persons to contact that fit the criteria. I contacted those people to ask if they would have an interest in the focus group. I was able to find a woman who does not drive or use the transit system and she made a great addition to the group. Minority members from the region were recommended and I called them to find a willing person.

**What techniques were successful and which weren't?**

Random phone calling was unsuccessful, the RDC has local connections with people and agencies that made the search go smoothly.

**Please characterize the attendees. How many members of each target group were represented? How would you characterize the whole group's mix of age, gender, etc.?**

The focus group attendees ranged in age from 18 to the 70's. Four members were from the senior group, 1 minority representative, several low income, and several with disabilities. Four members were male, eight female. There were five regular attendees that ranged from executive director positions to janitorial duties.

**Please summarize responses in the following conversation areas.**

## **II. CURRENT TRAVELING EXPERIENCES**

Participants discussed their current modes of travel which ranged from driving themselves, riding with family members, or arranging rides with someone from a work or living arrangement. One participant mentioned that she rode the bus in another location and had a good experience. Several comments were made that they didn't know public transportation was available for them.



### **III. TRANSIT PERCEPTIONS**

Many of the participants didn't know or understand the transit services available in the region. Some questioned how a transit service would or could meet their expectations and traveling times to attend appointments or visit shopping centers. A couple comments were made about rough riding buses and the times needed to wait for bus arrivals. Members from Kittson County were disappointed with bus service because they had attended a meeting where they were told a bus was coming to the county. Unfortunately the funding for that transit provider was cut and relative information was not relayed to the residents of the county. They continue to ask when the bus is coming to Kittson County?

### **IV. MARKETING AND AVAILABILITY**

Participants mentioned the need for more marketing and publicizing of the buses, everyone has seen the buses but didn't realize that they are available for public use. A new design logo like the Pepsi or Mountain Dew buses or paintings on the bus that grab the attention of the potential rider would be helpful in marketing the bus service. Placing informational brochures in paychecks was mentioned to getting the information out on the possible use of the bus system.

Not having buses available at later times during the day makes it impossible for some professions that work evening shifts. The lack of weekend service was mentioned as an inconvenience. Sunday church delivery was also mentioned as a major lack in the availability.

### **V. FUTURE ALTERNATIVES**

Alternative transportation in the rural counties of NW Minnesota is limited. Passenger rail is not an option for daily or weekly short distance trips. The aging population of the state may be forced to move from the rural small towns to larger cities that have daily transit service. Residents would like to see more transit hours available to serve the needs in rural MN.

**Please provide 2-3 direct quotes from your focus group that we may use in the Greater Minnesota Transit Investment Plan (quotes do not need to be attached to names).**

1. "I thought those buses were just for special use people"
2. "We were told the bus was coming to Kittson County"
3. "I think the college kids would use a bus service in Thief River Falls"

### **Analysis and Suggestions**

Please let us at Mn/DOT know how well this focus group experience worked for you. Was the amount of questions right for this time slot? Was it easy to engage participants? Was recruiting participants a challenge (either from "target populations" or "non-targeted populations")? Anything else you'd like us to know about your experience?

The focus group worked well and we had good communication and networking time that could potentially lead to more public forums to discuss transit services with the transit providers. The time frame was a little short, several members stayed after to further discuss transit needs and ideas to fill the bus with riders. There were several questions about the operation of bus systems and how to better market the bus to the public. Participation was very good from the attendees, and several comments were made to add hours of service to the system. The RDC used local connections for finding willing participants so that was not a difficult task. The attendees were very interested in future workshops to discuss transit options with the transit providers and were interested in riding the bus to check out the experience first hand.

RDC: (2): Headwaters Regional Development Commission  
Location of Focus Group (city and county): Bemidji, Beltrami County  
Number of attendees: 9  
Date of focus group: March 18, 2010  
Facilitator: Matthew Dyrdaahl  
Note Taker: Emily Brooks

## I. OUTREACH:

We typically create groups that have a particular interest or expertise in a certain area. Targeting “non-users” was an interesting exercise.

Utilizing existing contacts and partnerships within our RDC guided our efforts in recruiting focus group participants.

### Contacts utilized:

- Diane Engle: Director/Accounting Manager of the Paul Bunyan Senior Activity Center. Diane was able to find two seniors that were interested in participating in the group.
- Shannon Murray: Community sustainability advocate/serves on the Headwaters Food Sovereignty Council. Shannon assisted HRDC to locate a low income individual to participate in the discussion.
- Simone Senogles: Indigenous Environmental Network Development Coordinator. Simone is active with the Native American population and assisted our RDC in locating a Native American woman who was interested in the discussion.
- Donna Palivec: Bemidji State University Health and Sport Professor. Donna forwarded a message to her colleagues about the focus group to generate interest on campus.
- Ashli Bowen: Executive Director, Bemidji United Way. Ashli is active with local non-profits and forwarded a message about our discussion to her list of area non-profit organizations which generated a lot of interest from various organizations.

For our RDC utilizing existing relationships was incredibly successful. We found that people did feel that exploring transit issues would be important. When attempting to recruit members for any event or meeting it is important for our organization to reach out to our existing contacts and continue to build on these relationships.

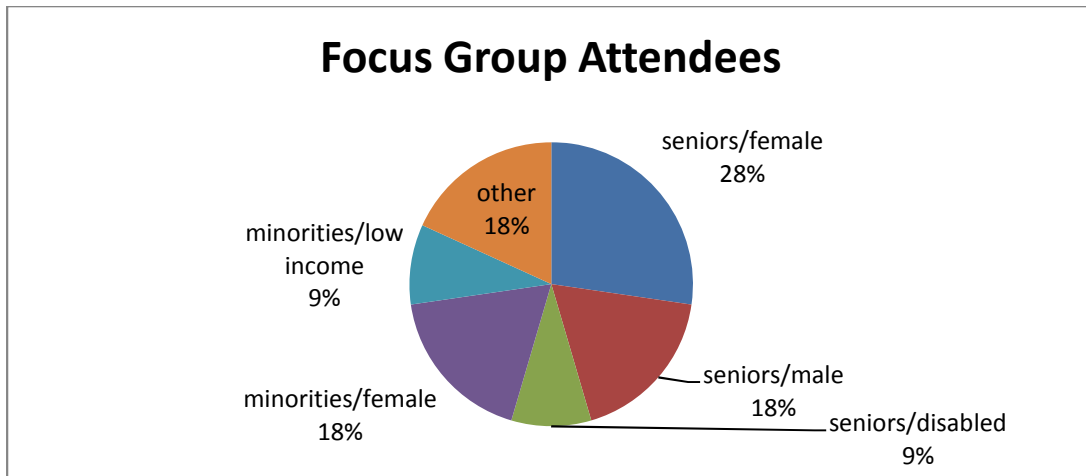
We did not feel calling people that we did not know (i.e. phone book) would be a productive exercise.

Characterization of attendees:

- Seniors: 4
- Minorities: 1
- Persons from a low income household (below \$25,000): 1, also falls into minority category
- Persons with a disability: 1, also falls into senior category
- Other: 2

The group was a little less diverse than we would have liked because many of the individuals who confirmed attendance did not show up the evening of the meeting. However, we had a fairly good mix of individuals all with various backgrounds (most in the non-profit realm). Of the 9 individuals that attended 5 of them were seniors (3 females, 2 males), one of the seniors was also disabled, 2 individuals were Native American (2 women) one of these females was also low income, and two individuals were from a local non-profit organization, were both white and did not fall into any of the

target populations. The group was gender and age dominated with over ¾ of the group representing women, and almost half the group representing seniors.



## II. CURRENT TRAVELING EXPERIENCES

There was a general consensus from the group that most of them use their own personal vehicle to travel to key destinations on a daily basis such as: work, grocery store, school, hospital, etc. The group agreed that their decision to primarily use their car is based upon its convenience and reliability.

Almost half of the group has had personal experience with public transit and/or have knowledge about the service. The group characterized their reasons for not utilizing the bus in the following ways:

- Unreliability
- Inconvenience
- Unfriendly workers
- Overall perception of the bus (this will be expanded upon in transit perceptions)

### Key Findings

- Most people in the group use their own personal vehicle for daily transportation.
- Car is preferred because of its convenience and reliability.
- Prior experiences with transit among most of the group are not favorable.
- Acknowledgement that there is a segment of the population that does not have the luxury of a car.

## III. TRANSIT PERCEPTIONS

Concerns were also brought up about the difficulty in trying to arrange a ride between the hours of 1:00pm-3:00pm daily. During this time frame a majority of the busses are being used at the Occupational Development Center to bring patients into town. This inaccessibility and inconvenience plays a large role in many of the group members' decisions to avoid using public transit.

An interesting point about the possibility of profiling by bus drivers and/or dispatchers was reluctantly made by one participant after some conversation about the perception that it can be difficult to talk to the dispatchers and that the bus is often unreliable. Several members commented that they appreciated the comment, although they did not go into depth about such profiling. The context of the conversation included a discussion about organizations that temporarily house homeless individuals, assist low income/minorities, and assist drug rehab patients. These individuals often rely on transit and seemed to have the poorest experiences with the service.

The group concluded that the current dial-a-ride service is not feasible for the area. Members added that the length of time it takes to get a ride and the poor communication between the callers, dispatchers and the drivers are serious concerns. One member told a story about having to wait for a bus to come and pick him up from the Emergency room for almost 3 hours and by the time the bus finally came he couldn't pick up the prescription that he had needed because the pharmacy had closed.

Group members pointed out the stigma of riding the bus as being dirty or for low income people. Group members added that the overall appearance of the bus leads people to assume that it is "dirty."

Many members spoke about the unfriendly service of the drivers and dispatchers that they have personally experienced or heard about. One woman told a story of a child being closed in a door because the driver was in a hurry, and when she called the dispatcher to tell her what had happened the dispatcher was unsympathetic and brushed the woman off.

#### Key Findings

- Lack of overall reliability of service
- There is difficulty arranging a ride between the hours of 1:00pm-3:00pm daily because the busses are utilized by the Occupational Development Center.
- The bus has a negative stigma because of its appearance.
- Lack of friendly service and amount of time it takes to get a ride is a serious concern.

#### IV. MARKETING AND AVAILABILITY

Not a lot of time was spent on this section. It was apparent that almost all members are aware of how to ride the bus. They all know that it is a dial-a-ride service and if they needed a ride that they would have to call and make a reservation. It was brought up that information is available online.

Note: An information packet that included bus schedules, ride rates, and user guidelines was provided for all attendees.

#### Key Findings

- Even though service hasn't been utilized by most of the group, most of the attendees are aware of the service and how to get more information if needed.

#### V. FUTURE ALTERNATIVES/ IMPROVEMENTS

The group agreed that there needs to be a much more reliable service. Some ideas for improvement included better communication between the caller, dispatcher, and driver, a fixed-route, and utilizing two-way radios again. The group suggested that a fixed route in addition to the dial-a-ride service be established to better accommodate the area.

A participant also added that the transit service needs to “target its market” and find out where people are going the most and adjust transit service and coverage accordingly.

Participants also agreed about improving the hours of service availability. Currently the bus runs Monday-Friday 7:00am-6:00pm, Saturday 8:00am-5:00pm, and closed on Sundays. By extending these hours longer it would help to accommodate more of the low income population that have jobs outside of these service hours.

Suggestions were also made by the group about improving the reliability of service during peak hours (1:00-3:00). This could be met by increasing the number of busses or creating a fixed route schedule where a bus comes every 15-20 minutes to the same location for pickups.

Suggestions were also made about the need for more bike racks on the busses to accommodate multi-modal users.

#### Key Findings:

- A fixed route needs to be established to accommodate more people in the area.
- There is a need for more designated bus stops around town.
- Service needs to be targeted toward where users are going.
- There is a need for reliability of service during peak hours.
- There is a need for quality bus drivers from an interpersonal communication standpoint.
- Accuracy of pick-up times and frequency of busses needs to be addressed.

#### Direct Quotes from Participants:

1. “Driver’s that do go out of their way and are friendly really do make a huge difference.”
2. “There is a definite need for transit in the community, but a way needs to be found to make it accessible to meet all peoples’ needs.”
3. “Target your market and find out where people are going.”

#### Analysis and Suggestions

Overall, the focus group seemed to work well. The time slot seemed appropriate for the amount of questions provided and our discussion was able to end on time. Most of the participants who came had no problem voicing their opinions of transit so it was not difficult to engage them in the discussion. Finding individuals from target/not-targeted populations was completed with ease after utilizing our existing contacts within our organization. Overall, the focus group was a constructive outlet for many of the attendees to vocalize their opinions and feel heard.

Transit Focus Group  
April 1, 2010

### **Overview**

The Arrowhead Regional Development Commission (ARDC) held a transit focus group meeting on April 1, 2010 to gain input into the Greater Minnesota Transit Investment Plan. The meeting was held at the ARDC conference room from 5:30-7:15 PM.

### **Outreach**

ARDC sought participants for this focus group through a variety of means. ARDC staff contacted several community contacts and names were recommended. ARDC then made contact with these people and invited them to the meeting. Putting together this focus group proved challenging because people who have no interest in transit did not care to give up an evening of their time talking about the subject. Focus group members included disabled (1), senior (1), minority (1), low income (2), student (1) and other (3).

Members of all target groups were represented at the meeting. The majority of the focus group participants were female. Age of participants ranged from 23 to 80. The average age of participants was approximately 38.

### **Current Traveling Experiences**

Focus group participants all traveled to their destinations by car. Most focus group members had employment in downtown Duluth and all but two focus group members traveled to the downtown area on a daily basis. Over half of the focus group members had children and drove their children to activities throughout the day/evening. None of the participants used carpooling for personal use but some used car pools as part of their employment.

All members of the focus group were happy with their form of transportation (personal automobile) and liked the flexibility it provides them. None of the participants are likely to change their transportation choices in the near future.

### **Transit Perceptions**

The focus group had a very negative view of transit in general. Below is a list of things focus group participants thought of transit:

- Scary
- Inconvenient
- Have to wait to go somewhere
- Takes too long to get places
- Have to stop at so many bus stops
- Hard to wait for the bus in the cold
- Snow banks are difficult to get around in the winter
- People riding the bus are scary sometimes/ personal security is compromised
- Have to transfer to get places
- Bus doesn't go every where

- Hard to get home from work if one get sick or has to pick up kids
- Always at the bus service mercy
- Long walk to bus stop
- No seat belts for kids
- Costs too much
- Hard to get around town quickly
- Fear of missing the bus
- Fear of getting on the wrong bus

The thing that focus group members kept coming back to was how transit was not convenient for them. Many participants had very busy schedules and mentioned that transit could not accommodate their schedules. The other item that was discussed at length was the amount of time that was needed to use public transit versus driving to/from a destination. Participants felt using personal automobiles was a better use of their time.

### **Marketing and Availability**

Very few focus members were informed about the availability of transit in Duluth. Participants indicated that if they were to use transit today they would need lots of information such as, schedule, cost, methods of payment, bus stop locations, transfer locations, and destination locations. Participants mentioned that they would seek information on the web, phone, and brochures (specifically at the University of MN Duluth).

When asked how they would like to information about transit be made available participants indicated that they would like to see commercials on TV on how to use the transit system. Participants indicated that the senior population would benefit from TV advertising the most. Others indicated they would like to see more brochures mailed to them about transit and how to use it, schedules, bus stop locations, etc.

Some of the focus group members indicated that transit providers could lure potential riders with a coupon for a week of riding free. This would allow perspective transit users the ability to try it out and see if it is something that would work for them. However, when posed the question if transit service was provided for free would you use it – members indicated that it would have no impact on them and they would not change their transportation choice.

No one on the focus group thought that advertising needed to be in another language besides English in northeast Minnesota.

### **Future Alternatives**

Focus group members indicated that they would not be taking transit in the future. Participants mentioned that for transit to increase in ridership that buses and schedules need to be quicker with few stops. Focus group members would like transit investments

in Duluth to focus on smaller buses and few stops (more express routes). Other areas participants indicated they would like to see investment included:

- Improve handicap service
- Improve quality of service
- Newspaper article featuring how to use transit
- Invest in train service to Minneapolis (Northern Lights Express)
- More comfortable seating on busses
- Wifi on buses
- More convenient hubs for transfers

### **Focus Group Quotes**

Below are a few quotes that focus members made at the meeting.

- “Being a single parent I feel vulnerable taking the bus.” – low income participant
- “I feel it would be beneficial for the senior community if TV commercials were aired on how to ride the bus.” – senior participant
- “A great marketing project could be a challenge to ride transit for free promotion.” – other participant
- “Taking the bus is inconvenient and slow, I would rather drive my car to where I am going.” – other participant



RDC: West Central Initiative – Region 4

Location of Focus Group (city and county): Fergus Falls – Otter Tail County

Number of attendees: Nine attendees

## I. OUTREACH:

How did you recruit focus group members? Please provide a detailed overview of your process and whom you contacted.

Focus group members were recruited primarily by individual contacts from WCI and other partner organizations, including: BCOW State Health Improvement Program; Fergus Falls Blandin Community Leadership Network; Minnesota State Community & Technical College – Fergus Falls; Northern Connections; Productive Alternatives; West Central Minnesota Community Action.

WCI staff contacted individuals at these organizations, who in turn assisted in the recruitment of focus group members. Prospective members were to contact WCI for eligibility screening. Methods of communication with prospective focus group members included email, mail, facebook and phone.

What techniques were successful and which weren't?

WCI staff were instrumental in knowing who to contact to assist in focus group recruitment. Without this level of knowledge accessible, it would have been exceptionally challenging to successfully recruit members for the focus group. All methods of communication seemed to work well, once participants were identified.

Not all prospective focus group members directly contacted WCI staff for eligibility screening. This ended up not being a problem in the end as the individuals at WCI's partner organizations were in communication with WCI staff and successfully screened the candidates. One person did not receive their confirmation letter in the mail until after the focus group had been conducted, and thus did not attend. One person did not attend due to a misunderstanding about the location.

Please characterize the attendees. How many members of each target group were represented? How would you characterize the whole group's mix of age, gender, etc.?

All four target groups were represented by focus group members. Focus group members self-identified as follows: Disabled (1); Low-income (4); Minority (2); Senior citizen (2); Non-target (3). It should be noted that some members self-identified with more than one target group.

Overall, the group was predominantly female, with only two male participants. The group's age range was fairly wide-spread, with members in their 20s to senior citizens. The group was primarily from the immediate Fergus Falls area, with a few participants from nearby communities.

Please summarize responses in the following conversation areas.

## II. CURRENT TRAVELING EXPERIENCES

The majority of the group shared that the bulk of their traveling was related to work. Primarily, the distance traveled was shorter trips, but some participants had multiple jobs in several communities and commuted extensively. Other trips were related to extra-curricular activities. All traveling was done by personal vehicles. It should be noted that the senior citizen participant, who is retired, shared that her travel was different from those that worked. She travels more now daily to multiple locations throughout the day for social activities.

The group primarily did not car pool. One member shared they were surprised there is not more planning and coordination.

Most of the group used the bus little to not at all. Some have not looked into the bus options because it is not on a set schedule with set stops, like a "Metro" system so it makes it harder. The ones in the group that used the bus did so because their primary mode of transportation was not available. The group felt that they had more freedom and flexibility by using their own car. Riding the bus works if you have an occasional set appointment that you can schedule a pickup for well in advance, but it isn't a viable option for transport to work due to scheduling issues.

People travel by car because it is convenient and you can set your own schedule. Transit only runs certain hours and is usually not available on weekends. Some of the group drives a car because there is not a bus service in their area. Others felt that there are misconceptions of who is allowed to use the transit system, i.e. disabled, or elderly.

The group listed driving conditions they might encounter included lack of cleared roads even on highways for an extended period of time after a snowstorm. Others included wildlife, farm machinery, white-outs, icy roads, flooding. Some approaches to avoiding those conditions included canceling appointments and staying home, bring cell phone, informing someone you are traveling, buy good tires and keep shovel in the trunk. One other comment was we live in Minnesota and that is what you get.

### III. TRANSIT PERCEPTIONS

The group had a general lack of familiarity with transit use. The ones that were familiar with bus use felt it was expensive and inconvenient based on their schedules.

Initial impressions of transit service that doesn't work well included: Some of the group was not aware that anyone can use transit in the community. The bus schedules are not convenient to early or late shift workers. For part time workers transport to work can be pretty expensive as it relates to the time you work and get paid, do you want to have to pay an hour's wage to ride the bus? Drop off locations don't always align well with where you need to go. One person viewed the buses in town as wasteful; on their day off they see the bus drive by numerous times with only one person, that is wasting a lot of resources. Lack of knowledge of services is a disadvantage as in dial-a-ride versus set routes.

The transit options that work well are for special needs and transport for patients like medi-vans, or airport shuttles. Transit works well if appointments are scheduled, and there are minimal locations that a rider would have to go to.

Specific reasons given why the bus doesn't work for them, is that it is easier to take their car. It is expensive. There was also unfamiliarity with the schedules and routes within the communities. There was also not a convenient route for multiple city transport. A recurring theme and consensus from the group is that the times are not convenient. Most said they would ride the bus if it worked with their schedule. Another reason that the bus doesn't work for them was that the geography of where they need to go is too widespread.

#### IV. MARKETING AND AVAILABILITY

Majority of the group does not know to ride the bus transport that is available in their area. They felt there was a lack of information easily available, but admitted they have not looked into how to obtain that information. They felt the companies need to do more to market their service.

The level at which the group was informed about the bus system in the area varied. Many have lived in the community their entire life and know there is transit. They did not know how newcomers get information. Communities need to take ownership of informing new residents of services. There is a misconception as to who can access transit. Updated information is needed.

They know there is a phone number and if they wanted to know they would call. The information that the group felt they needed to know to ride the bus was the following: Hours, rates, service area, if there is even a bus for their area; how far in advance to they have to make an appointment for pickup.

Finding the information about the bus company would be attained by phone, or internet, newspapers, radio, or through organizations like the CAPs and Human Services. Interestingly a participant also mentioned Facebook as a source of information.

The group felt that there is not need for them personally to have bus information/materials in an different language, but there is need in some communities, but those that need the information translated can usually find someone to help.

#### V. FUTURE ALTERNATIVES

The group consensus on ridership in the future, was depending on external factors like increasing gas prices, cost of cars, and availability of low interest loan programs through the CAPs many would probably ride the bus in the future. They also felt there will be a greater demand and use of transit in the future. The greatest increase in future users will be aging persons, kids in the summertime, and college students.

Approaches to attract more riders within the community would include offering coupons to market and gain interest. Also offer monthly passes instead of cash (that pass would also be discounted), and regular bus routes on fixed schedules. The buses in Fargo are easy to ride and easy to understand maps. The participant rode with an infant and didn't get charged extra. As the community grows the need for more transit will also grow.

The group felt that convenience was more important than fare costs. The only mitigating factor would be money problems and not receiving assistance for transportation.

If the bus service went to more places that would be fine, but the counter is so it goes to more places, but not when you need to get there. Cost impacts weighed in on this factor.

Bus service more hours of the day would create more riders. One participant suggested it would be beneficial to implement a "bar hopping" route to reduce the number of DWI's.

The group all agreed that all the factors are interrelated and dependant on each other.

To the question, “Where should transit providers invest next”, there were several suggestions from the group, a dispatcher to reduce wait times for pickup, look at more funding for loan programs to allow low income to afford to buy vehicles where rural busing doesn’t work.

If they were to create a new service it would be some buses on a regular fixed route with scheduled stop time with retail centers included in the route, a dial-a-ride dispatched pickup and some buses dedicated to group transport such as for senior centers and nursing homes. The use of using hybrid buses should also be looked at. Get away from using fossil-fuel consuming equipment.

Other thoughts by the group included the following: There needs to be better publicity of routes and stops and how-to ride transit in the community. Create or add information to a general website that provides information on transit for other communities in an area or region. Encourage more corporate sponsorship, and electric buses. Improving transit options would increase the ability for people to not be nested and for those who don’t like to drive. Ask college students and younger what they would like to see. Encourage educational institutions invest in transit transportation or develop partnerships with existing transit. Coordinate the issue of redundant systems.

Please provide 2-3 direct quotes from your focus group that we may use in the Greater Minnesota Transit Investment Plan (quotes do not need to be attached to names).

1. “One time my car did not start so I had to request a transit bus pickup. They were late, and I haven’t used them since.” “They could not turn around in my driveway because I lived outside City limits and I had to pay a dollar extra to ride”
2. “I have had to take a cab to work and it cost \$5, why would you use the bus when it costs \$3-4 and you have to schedule the pickup way ahead of time.”
3. “For me as a low income person, having a car in rural America is a most crucial resource.”

### Analysis and Suggestions

Please let us at Mn/DOT know how well this focus group experience worked for you. Was the amount of questions right for this time slot? Was it easy to engage participants? Was recruiting participants a challenge (either from “target populations” or “non-targeted populations”)? Anything else you’d like us to know about your experience?

Was the amount of questions right for this time slot?

The number of questions worked pretty well for the amount of time given. It would have been easy for an inexperienced moderator to significantly go over time, however, given the amount of discussion that took place.

Was recruiting participants a challenge (either from “target populations” or “non-targeted populations”)?

As noted previously, recruitment was made easier by WCI’s knowledge of organizations in the region that could assist with recruitment. Non-target populations proved a bit more challenging, as the persons in that group were not typically affiliated with any outside organization that could assist with recruitment.

Anything else you'd like us to know about your experience?

It was a very interesting discussion. I was surprised at the level of discussion that took place amongst the participants, as well as the level of interest in the topic.

**RDC:**

*Region Five*

**Location of Focus Group (city and county):**

*Staples Police Department, Staples, Todd County*

**Number of attendees:**

*Nine attendees*

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**I. OUTREACH:**

How did you recruit focus group members?

Please provide a detailed overview of your process and whom you contacted.

*I, Transportation Director Chris Etzler, created a list of about 50 area people that I felt met the criteria. I then sorted randomly and asked our Office Specialist to call these folks and to stop when she gets 15 committed.*

*The plan was to go to a phone book cold call if not enough committed. We did get 15 to commit and even called to remind, but six either called the day of or didn't show up. If I were to do it again, I guess I'd try to get at least 18 or 20 to commit in order for 10 to show up.*

*We struggled a bit trying to meet a couple of the target group representatives, but were able to have all represented.*

What techniques were successful and which weren't?

*If I were to do it again, I don't think I would change much. I would like to offer more than a slice of pizza though. It's tough to get people to come to something that they really don't know why they are coming for a slice of pizza on a beautiful spring evening.*

Please characterize the attendees. How many members of each target group were represented? How would you characterize the whole group's mix of age, gender, etc.?

*I felt the group well represented the community and area. It was an excellent mix of personalities and opinions. In fact I think we nailed all of the personalities portrayed in the mock focus group at the workshop!*

*Three of the nine attendees were senior citizens. We had one each representing a minority, a low-income and a disabled. The disabled person was represented by her husband, who is her caregiver.*

*The group was well mixed in age and gender. Not knowing their age for sure, I'd say we had three over 60 years old, three from 40 to 50 years old and three under 40, of which one was about 25. Of that group there were three women.*

**Please summarize responses in the following conversation areas.**

## **II. CURRENT TRAVELING EXPERIENCES**

*Generally the group travels alone or with a spouse in and around the community. The majority of the attendees are working people who travel on a regular basis to and from work or on work related trips. One group member, who is a mother of four children, primarily makes trips around her children's schedules and to and from the grocery store.*

*The retired folks in the group tend to have more of a daily routine of travel in and around the community.*

*No one in this group carpools. One member said he had tried with a neighbor, but too often there were schedule conflicts.*

*All but one person has never used the bus. One attendee used the bus 2 or 3 times about 3 years ago because he lost his license. The group generally stated that the hours and routes were too limited for them. Also mentioned was the distance the bus traveled, that it only stays in town and doesn't go to other communities. And one attendee mentioned that she had too many kids.*

*The group all agreed that they primarily chose to travel by car for convenience.*

## **III. TRANSIT PERCEPTIONS**

*The perceptions of Public Transit were mixed. We heard everything from "I don't know anything about it" to "it's nice to have the service available for those that need and use it".*

*It was a general perception that the bus was for the elderly and disabled and operated by the local health system. It was a surprise to some that it was a public service operated by the county.*

*There was much discussion about a dial-a-ride service versus a fixed route. The general perception was that the dial-a-ride service was not reliable for meeting appointments. There was general consensus that a fixed route service would be more a reliable, even in a small community. Although there were comments related to the complexity of operating a public transit system in a smaller rural community, especially a fixed route service.*

*There was also discussion of the use of such a large bus for what looks like only 1 to 3 riders at a time. The perception is that it is a waste of money. The questions asked were... why don't we just subsidize the local taxi company? The local taxi is a private business, why is the public system competing against him?*

#### **IV. MARKETING AND AVAILABILITY**

*When asked “Do you know how to ride the bus?” The answer was a resounding “No”. Many didn’t know how or where to find the phone number, the hours of service and the cost. The generally were not well informed of the bus system in this area. They all thought that marketing campaigns should be increased.*

*There was discussion of convenience. That due to the hours and scheduling, the bus is not convenient for them.*

*The group thought that the bus should market to such as riders that use the golf course, local parks, etc. They thought a regularly scheduled pick-up time and location for these places would be a good idea.*

*When asked how they would go about finding information about the bus service, we heard a variety of answers. Calling the city or the local health system seemed to be the popular answer. Many said they wouldn’t know where to look in a phone book as well where to begin searching the web. One person said she would tune to the local PEG channel as seen info on there before.*

*Info that they would like to have... Phone number, hours of service, cost, and reliability.*

*During the reliability discussion it was pointed out the on-time issues in Staples may well reflect the fact of the rail crossing in town. With over 50 trains a day passing through town and each blocking the only two crossings in the city from 5 to 15 minutes, it can quickly cause some issues.*

#### **V. FUTURE ALTERNATIVES**

*Though we heard a couple of “No’s” when asked about more people riding in the future, the general consensus seemed to be “Yes”. One person stated that we will see more riders as result of these focus group meetings because the state will raise taxes to respond to their comments, thus improving ridership.*

*Generally improving ridership requires better advertising and the ability to go beyond the community. There was much discussion about being able to travel outside the community for appointments and shopping.*

*They felt that the service area and hours were limited and ridership would improve with and increase in both areas.*

*A comment was made that the service should consider a second vehicle and that vehicle should be a van rather than a large bus.*

*An attendee also asked why the transit service doesn’t coordinate its schedule with some of the larger employers. He stated that there might be an opportunity for a partnership with these large businesses.*



**Please provide 2-3 direct quotes from your focus group that we may use in the Greater Minnesota Transit Investment Plan (quotes do not need to be attached to names).**

1. *“The Friendly Rider? Who ever heard of the Friendly Rider? They ought to change their name.”*
2. *“If you’re going to have public transportation, then have public transportation”  
- Referring to Dial-a-Ride versus Fixed route. Responder felt that Dial-a-ride was not public transportation.*
3. *“Availability is very important”*
4. *“Not something you can use if you have a busy schedule”*
5. *“There is no one solution for all communities”*

### **Analysis and Suggestions**

Please let us at Mn/DOT know how well this focus group experience worked for you. Was the amount of questions right for this time slot? Was it easy to engage participants? Was recruiting participants a challenge (either from “target populations” or “non-targeted populations”)? Anything else you’d like us to know about your experience?

*I was a little nervous going into this that I would have a hard time finding people. It was easier than I thought, but I would make some changes in the future on my end on how to recruit participants. I actually had fun doing it and was pleasantly surprised at how the group seemed to enjoy participating. In fact the young woman who was about 25 years old said she enjoyed it and found it interesting.*

*We finished about 10 minutes early. I think if we would have had a couple of more participants, the timing would have been tight. I did skip a couple questions as well because they were answered at another time during the discussion. But generally I thought the amount of questions was adequate.*

*I had no problem engaging the participants. Might have been a couple spots where I had to get the conversation started with a follow up question or comment.*

*Like I had mentioned earlier in this report, the targeted population participants was a little more difficult. We are in area of a small minority population and to try to find someone to take the time to talk transportation for a slice of pizza.*

*I thought this method was a good way to learn how little people know about a topic.*

## **Mid-Minnesota Development Commission Transit Focus Group Report**

The Mid-Minnesota Development Commission (MMDC) held the focus group meeting in Kandiyohi County. The meeting was held from 5:30 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. on March 22, 2010 at the Willmar Holiday Inn Conference Center. The public transit provider in the county is Kandiyohi County Area Transit (KAT). Community Development Director Matt Johnson, and Executive Director Donn Winckler ran the meeting and took notes. There were ten attendees.

### **Outreach:**

The MMDC utilized the Willmar Senior Block Nurse Program, the Heartland Community Action Agency, the Minnesota River Area Agency on Aging, and its own contact sources to come up with a possible list of focus group candidates. This technique was utilized to help control that we would have quality candidates to choose from. Staff contacted persons from the list of names generated to ask for their participation. Care was taken to be sure we had the target groups well represented.

We had ten persons that attended the focus group. Six persons of the group were elderly, at least four members were confirmed as low income, some of which were elderly. There was one non-elderly person that is wheelchair dependent. Two of the elderly person used walkers. We had one non-elderly minority representative who is of Hispanic heritage. Six of the participants were female, and four were male.

### **Current Traveling Experiences:**

There were a few participants that had some general understanding of how KAT operated through friends using the system, but most participants had little knowledge of the public transit system. The main reason they gave for not using transit was that they used their own cars to get around. They like the convenience, not having schedules, and being able to travel directly to their destination was the reasons given for driving their own vehicles. One person said that they have recommended to others that they use KAT. There was some discussion that a couple of the participants were told by those who have rode the bus that they were afraid of some of the passengers, i.e. "people with mental illness ride the bus."

### **Transit Perceptions:**

Approximately half the focus group had very little knowledge of how KAT operated. One was surprised to hear it was a county-wide service, not just for the City of Willmar. There was a lack of knowledge of the operations of KAT. Those that felt they did have some knowledge of KAT

thought that they generally do a good job. They thought that the cost for riding the bus was reasonable. Some understood that you need to schedule a ride a day before or else you need to pay a higher fare. They heard good things about the senior volunteer driver program that KAT operates. They liked that KAT will go anywhere in the county and had good hours of operation.

Some of the items they heard that does not work well currently with KAT was that rides can sometimes be long, depending on the number of stops and if the lift is needed. They also heard that waiting times can be long. One participant mentioned they saw someone waiting for a bus at a grocery store and when they were done shopping, the person was still waiting for the bus. One person said that they heard that the rides can be bumpy. When asked why doesn't the bus work for you, the answer was basically that they have no need for the service now, but they may need it in the future.

### **Marketing and Availability**

Some of the focus group members had very little knowledge of KAT and its operations. They all would call KAT by telephone if they ever needed a ride. Most seemed aware of KAT's web site. One participant mentioned that schedules are posted at the grocery stores and at Wal-Mart. One participant asked if anyone could ride the bus. Several persons indicated that they know information about KAT is available, but because they do not use the service, they never bothered to take the time and learn. There was also a lack of information about what is offered through the private intercity carriers.

With the question how would you get information about the bus service in the community, the answers were mostly by telephone and by the KAT web site. The local access channel was mentioned by one person.

The question about what information they would like that they do not have today had several key responses. One person asked about how many steps are there to get on the bus, and how high are the steps. There were some lift questions. The group agreed that KAT should have more general articles and radio news explaining about their services so that potential users are more willing to use the service. Newspapers should be used to discuss if any changes are made to the routes, etc.

All the focus group agreed that KAT should have information in Spanish and Somali because of the large populations of both minorities in Willmar.

## **Future Alternatives**

The focus group all thought that KAT will have more riders in the future. The population of the county is getting older. There will be a bubble of persons reaching an age where driving their own vehicle will be too dangerous for them and others. A greater percentage of elderly persons also become disabled and need public transportation. The economy was mentioned as a factor. High gas prices and vehicle costs may keep some persons from owning a vehicle.

To attract new riders, it was suggested that KAT should publicize and offer a free day to let people try riding the bus. Again, it was pointed out that a better job of getting more information out to non-users is needed. All participants thought that the fare amount is not a problem, and a lower fare would not do anything to attract new riders. One person said that rural Minnesotans love their car, and a whole culture change would be needed to have this change.

The group discussed the need for persons to travel to the Twin Cities and to Saint Cloud. It was brought up that the County Veterans bus goes to both locations, but only to the Vet hospitals and only for vets. The senior volunteer program may take seniors to these locations for medical trips. One person mentioned that county transit services should have a way to transfer riders onto the next county's transit bus.

If more hours were made available, the group thought it should be during daylight hours during the summer when more activities are taking place. Persons could take the bus to ball games, and other events. One person said that she does not like parking at the high school for their events and would consider taking a bus if it were offered. Someone else said the bus should go to events where parking is limited. Someone mentioned that Willmar has a new minor league baseball team, the Stingers, that will begin to play this June and that a transit bus may be beneficial for some.

It was obvious that the room was filled with non-transit users when they agreed ten minutes was a reasonable time to wait for a bus.

For the question on future investments, some low cost items were mentioned. Purchasing benches at bus stops was strongly agreed on. They also said that KAT spent too much money on their downtown Willmar bus shelter. More dollars need to go into advertising and education. A more expensive suggestion was to add additional buses running to lower the amount of time a person needs to wait for a bus and ride on the bus once they are picked up. One person asked if it would make sense to have a bus operating that just picked up persons needing to use the lift, as a discussion earlier said it was the lift that slowed down service.

With the question about if a system would start from new – how would you like it to look, a participant mentioned having electric buses. Making sure buses are user friendly for getting on and off was another comment.

In closing one person said that KAT should interview current riders to demonstrate that riding the bus is both easy and a good service. Participants also mentioned that their negative comments are not because they think KAT is run poorly. They think KAT is run well, but their ideas were to help improve an already good system.

#### **Possible Quotes That Can Be Used:**

- 1. “Need a system that is frequent and reliable.”**
- 2. “Transit needs to be marketed so it is better understood”**
- 3. “Have a free day for everyone to try it”**

#### **Analysis and Suggestions**

Overall the focus group approach was a success from the standpoint that all ten people seemed to be engaged in the entire conversation. The questions were well written and the time limits assigned were adequate. I think “cold calling” to get volunteers would’ve been very difficult, as it was hard enough convincing people to participate who were identified as “good candidates” from our extended network. I was also a little concerned the local transit provider was not engaged in the focus group discussion. As people brought up concerns and ideas, they might have been best addressed directly at the meeting.

**RDC:** Upper Minnesota Valley Regional Development Commission (6W)

**Location of Focus Group:** Benson, MN, Swift County

**Number of attendees:** 9, 1 cancelled at last minute

I. OUTREACH:

Focus group members were recruited through personal solicitation.

- ✓ Three senior citizens were contacted
- ✓ Four people who did not fall into any category of senior, minority, low income or disabled were contacted. One of those individuals was who cancelled at the last minute.
- ✓ One minority individual was contacted
- ✓ One disabled individual was contacted
- ✓ One low-income individual was contacted

Having a social service background, had knowledge of individuals who were minority, disabled and/or low income. I also had knowledge that they probably were not transit users, did not belong to any advocacy groups or advisory boards.

When all focus group members were asked if they knew what the RDC does or knowledge of transit or transportation politics, they all stated they did not, almost apologizing for that lack of knowledge. They were encouraged to participate as they were exactly the individuals we were wanting information from.

Focus group members were provided with a brief description of the purpose for the focus group meeting.

The very scripted questions for the telephone interviews were not comfortable to ask and therefore not successful. Informing focus group members that they would be provided with a meal as reward for their participation was very successful.

Summarizing, the focus group members consisted of:

3 senior citizens

1 minority

1 disabled

1 low-income

3 others who did not fall into the "target groups"

The group as a whole are all local individuals who have all lived in the area a long time and will probably remain in the area for a long time, representing a vested interest in the area and its citizens. The gender was all female. Senior citizens of course were 65+. All others were between the ages of 40-60.

## II. CURRENT TRAVELING EXPERIENCES

Focus group members responded that they travel throughout the course of the day. Some work, some are retired, some stay at home. They typically leave from home, rural Benson or in the City of Benson.

Destinations included....work, grocery store, church, café, clinic, drug store, Willmar for additional shopping, drop kids off at school.

Miles...30miles, 5 miles, 2 miles, 8 miles, 15 miles

All answered that they drive by themselves, for the most part alone. There is no carpooling because of some of the remote areas traveled and schedules vary.

1 person responded yes they have ridden the bus when taking their mother to the clinic to make use of the wheelchair lift on the city bus. Others have had no reason to use the city bus because they still drive. Four individuals did say they did have their children take the city bus to preschool, school, summer activities.

How do you decide to travel primarily by car and what goes into that decision? The choices are to walk, ride bike or drive your car. If one wants to get to where they are going, they will drive unless it is a short distance.

Typical travel conditions encountered can include snow, ice, sleet, rain and perfectly sunny days. All use common sense when it comes time to make decisions on when not to drive.

## III. TRANSIT PERCEPTIONS

All thought the city bus service was a wonderful service for all individuals who need it. The bus service has evolved though, initially targeting senior citizens and disabled. The service allowed these individuals to get to their appointments, get groceries, etc. The service now has a much increased ridership of children which can tie up the transit system for large chunks of the day, making it more difficult for the elderly and disabled to get rides. The city transit system will advise folks that they will only be doing school pickups and transportation at certain times so not able to accommodate clinic appointments which can be problematic at times. They also provide transportation for children during the summer for recreation activities.

Some had heard of Prairie Five RIDES, a regional transit system in the area. None really realized that it covers the whole region, even rural areas. Nobody knew how they would be contacted or who to call if the service was needed.

It is not that the bus service does not work for the members of this focus group, but they do not see a need at this time to use it unless for their children or in case of emergency say if a car won't start.

#### IV. MARKETING AND AVAILABILITY

Focus group members stated they would first look in the telephone book for information . They were informed the telephone number is not listed under the city but rather as "Benson Heartland Bus" in the telephone book, none would have thought to look there. If the focus group was to start using the city bus system they would need to know how to contact them, what are their hours, how much is it. Only two individuals had a pretty good idea of some of this information.

Nobody really knew anything about the regional transit system.

The focus group members did not feel very informed about the city bus system or the regional bus system.

Some said they would use the Web to get more information, some would call the city office.

Some of the above mentioned information would be beneficial to know for future reference, such as cost of bus service, hours in service and areas served. None thought it beneficial to have information in a language other than English.

#### V. FUTURE ALTERNATIVES

Expectations were the bus would be utilized more if the price of gas goes up. Ridership may also increase if insurance prices go higher. The demographics of the local area suggests that ridership will increase. Nearly 25 % of the total population is 65+ in West Central Minnesota. The expectation is that more seniors will be riding the bus for all trips, to clinic, grocery store, pharmacy, etc.

To attract new riders in this community more advertising needs to be done. Very little advertising is done now. Suggestions included having posters on bulletin boards around town, more information in the local newspaper, ads on the public TV channel, etc.

Both the city bus and regional bus could do a couple of feature stories on their systems or even a feature on the life of a bus driver, to enlighten the community of the opportunity for transit, the ease in its use and the economical sense it makes to use it.

Families could be encouraged to purchase passes for their loved ones to use or invite a friend on the bus to alleviate any apprehension or concern individuals have about taking the bus.

Focus group members determined that cost is not an issue. The fares are quite reasonable now. The city bus goes throughout the entire town and even outside of the city limits so this does not deter ridership. The regional transit system also is available throughout the entire region but is limited to availability of drivers and vehicles. There are some set routes with the regional system but they could



be increased. Hours should be extended to coincide with the clinic hours on Monday and Thursdays in the city. If there are special events in town they should also reflect the special event hours, example would be the Flag Day Parade, All School Reunion, Kid Day.

All felt it is reasonable to wait for at least 15 minutes for a ride with “dial a ride” in town. On the other end, sometimes elderly will forget they have called for a ride and the bus waits.

It may be wise to invest in smaller vehicles, like vans which require less maintenance.

If the bus service were to change one thing it would be to have a better radio/dispatch system. The city bus driver finds it difficult to hear and people on the phone have a hard time understanding. Better technology.

Regional bus system should look at scheduling more set trips and advertising those. Also have a dedicated bus for senior citizens alone in the city.

#### QUOTES:

- “The city bus is a wonderful service for our Senior Citizens, disabled, and children. We do not want to see it go away.”
- City bus is excellent and great for kids.”

#### ANALYSIS AND SUGGESTIONS

The whole focus group experience went fine. The amount of questions were fine. Recruiting participants was not a problem. I would suggest maybe having those who will be asking the questions to be involved in the formation of them. I think they would have been a little more user friendly. All in all, a good project and those participating appreciated being asked for their thoughts.

**Greater MN Transit Investment Plan  
East Central Regional Development Commission  
Focus Group Summary  
Isle, MN April 9, 2010**

**Introduction**

The focus group convened included ten people who live in Isle, Minnesota. Isle is a community of 707, located on the south shore of Mille Lacs Lake, in northern Mille Lacs County. The focus group could be divided into the following sub-groups: disabled veterans-1; tribal representative-1; low-income-3; over 65-4; under 65-6.

**Current Travel Experiences**

Typical travel destinations identified by the group included the metropolitan areas of St. Cloud and Minneapolis/St. Paul. Additionally, Brainerd was listed as a priority destination. All of these travel points are 60-100 miles from the city of Isle. The main reasons cited for this travel were for medical appointments and to a lesser degree shopping and services. Travel closer to home included Wahkon, Onamia and Mora—all within a half hour from Isle. Onamia and Mora have local medical centers, Wahkon could be considered a “twin community” to Isle—the travel between the two communities would typically be social in nature (i.e. visiting friends, attending church).

A typical day was noted as travel of less than 25 miles from home. All focus group members noted they travel by way of their own vehicle, or they depend on someone with a car to provide the ride. Only one focus group member has used Timber Trails public transit that serves both Mille Lacs and Kanabec counties. Six of ten commented that obstacles (age related limitations or lack of their own vehicle) keep them from traveling further from home or determine their decision to travel at all.

When asked if they use the local bus, all but one responded “No”. When asked why, several didn’t realize there was a bus, and two commented that the amount of pre-planning to schedule a ride (48 hours notice) was not practical in most cases. Other reasons given included: 1) spend way too much time on the bus getting to the destination; 2) too hard to get to the bus collection points (Veteran’s bus); and then there remains the social stigma attached to riding the bus. One focus group member stated “Riding the bus gives you a feeling that you are ‘stepping down’ socially and economically.”

Unanimously, the group chose to either drive themselves or ride in a car with another because of the freedom it presents and lack of timely, time-practical consistent public transit options. Those with health issues noted that traveling with a dozen others to doctor appointments in St. Cloud becomes an 18 hour day—something at physically can’t be handled.

## **Travel Perceptions**

The group, with the exception of the one past rider viewed the availability of transit services as “nonexistent”. The overwhelming response was that all but one did not realize services were in fact available. Of the one focus group member who had local public transit experience, the service was considered to be above average. The driver was friendly and the rider received the level of service she expected.

There is a disconnect between the tribal community and the services available there and what is available to the rest of the area.

## **Marketing and Availability**

When we asked the group what they would need to know to ride the bus, they all wanted to know the times and the cost of the rides and the all important “what would the trip entail”. If they knew how long they would have to wait for example, the wait would be better tolerated, and perhaps become less of an obstacle to use the service.

Collectively, all felt they had little awareness of existing services. Most didn’t know—and in fact accepted the invitation to the focus group in the hopes of being able to voice a concern about not having any service.

Points of information for transit services were identified as 1) Post Office; 2) local newspaper; 3) local grocery store; 4) local churches; 5) local Laundromats; 6) local pharmacy; 7) local senior apartments; and 8) the local municipal liquor store/bar.

## **Future Alternatives**

Consensus was shown around the future usage of transit systems. All felt that “in the future” more people will ride the bus. Most identified the riders as being older adults. No one mentioned workforce rides, but that could have been due to the age group assembled. Only one participant was under 30. The rising cost of fuel, and continued challenges of locating a family member or friend to provide the ride were voiced as reasons more people will utilize public transit in the future. All of the non-drivers in the group acknowledged that they have abandoned travel plans because they could not get a ride. This includes missing doctor appointments and not getting to the pharmacy or grocery store.

Features that were felt to encourage increased usage included: 1) door to door service; 2) weekend service—church, work; 3) keeping the cost to \$10-15 for travel to St. Cloud and \$5 to Mora or Onamia; 3) limiting wait time to 10-30 minutes.

Priority should be given—and limited resources allocated to medical based travel, and maintaining/enhancing the existing services.

## **Improving/changing Transit Service**

It was suggested that feeder rides could pick people up at their door to collect them at one stop in Isle, with transport to the primary destination to lower the overall pickup/transit/transfer times. The group would be satisfied with one stop/one-two days a week if the routes were more direct.

Resoundingly, better and more advertising of services was voiced. It was important to the group that the advertising and information be very local and straightforward. A brochure with a map, fares and times listed plainly was suggested. Keep it uncomplicated.

The group was very appreciative of having the opportunity to talk about the challenges of getting from place to place in northern Mille Lacs county.

## Greater Minnesota Transit Investment Plan Focus Group

**RDC:** Region 7W

**Location of Focus Group (city and county):** St. Cloud, Minnesota – Stearns County

**Date:** April 7, 2010, 5:30 – 7:00 p.m.

**Number of attendees:** 10

**Facilitators:** Linda Gondringer and Samantha Werre, Richardson, Richter & Associates, Inc.

### **I. OUTREACH:**

Focus group participants were recruited using several methods. First, existing internal contact lists were utilized for initial recruiting efforts. These lists included contacts from previous non-transit related projects and relationships with community members.

Second, we contacted regional transportation staff for recommendations on recruitment as advised by Mn/DOT lead project staff. These contacts included:

- Mn/DOT District 3 Transportation Staff
- Region 7E Transportation Planning Staff

Finally, we contacted leaders at several community organizations to recruit participants from the various target demographic groups identified. The community organizations we contacted included:

- St. Cloud APO
- Tri-Cap
- Whitney Senior Center
- Disabled American Veterans - District 9
- Opportunity Services
- Create CommUNITY
- St. Cloud Area Somali Salvation Organization
- St. Cloud State - Multicultural Student Services

Connecting with leaders of community organizations was our most valuable recruiting method, as they provided direct linkages into the target demographic groups. Overall, the combination of our different methods allowed us to be very successful in our recruiting efforts.

The demographic composition of our focus group was as follows:

<i>Target Demographic Group</i>	<i># of Attendees</i>
Low-Income (under \$20,000)	2
Disabled	1
Senior Citizen	4
Minority	0
Other	3
<i>Total Attendees</i>	<i>10</i>

While we made several contacts with organizations in the minority community, we were unable to find a minority participant that met the “non-transit rider” criterion.

In terms of other demographic factors, we had three women and seven men participants. Different age groups were well represented, ranging from the early 20’s to senior citizens.

## **II. CURRENT TRAVELING EXPERIENCES**

- Most participants noted they make several trips in a day, ranging from 5 to 30 miles traveled in an average day.
- Typical trips included from home to work or volunteer locations, running errands, and recreational trips.
- A couple participants noted that they will sometimes walk or ride their bike to their destinations.
- About half of participants noted they have thought about taking the bus, while the other half had never even thought about taking the bus.

## **III. TRANSIT PERCEPTIONS**

- Perceptions of the metro transit system were that it was a good system and worked well.
- Perceptions of the campus transit system were also positive.
- There were some negative perceptions about dial-a-ride. Participants had heard that the service is often not on time and that policies don't always match with the reality of user needs (e.g. bus will not wait if a doctor's office is running late for an appointment).
- In terms of why participants do not use transit, the most common issues related to time and convenience. Most participants noted that they do not have time to ride the bus or that stops were not conveniently located.
- Other issues regarding why participants do not use transit included concerns about personal safety and cleanliness of buses.
- Independence was also noted as a barrier to using transit. Several participants noted they liked their independence and the ability to come and go as desired.
- Some participants noted that living out of town made it impossible to use transit, as the service did not extend to their location.
- Most participants didn't see any cost benefits to using transit. For some, driving their car seemed cheaper than taking the bus. It was noted that if gas prices increase, people may think more about taking the bus. For now, convenience overrides cost.
- Many participants noted that they would be more likely to use transit if they had to. Reasons for needing to use transit included health or aging issues, gas prices, or lack of parking. For all participants, these are not currently issues and therefore they do not use transit.

## **IV. MARKETING AND AVAILABILITY**

- In terms of how people would get information about transit, most participants noted that they would use the internet. Other responses included visiting the transit center, calling the transit service provider for information, or using a telephone book.
- Several participants referenced the transit center and one participant noted they would be most comfortable visiting the transit center in person to get information.
- Participants had seen some transit information on boards at local grocery stores, schools, and other locations.
- Participants thought that more promotion was needed for available transit services and didn't feel that enough information was currently available or convenient to access.

- Some participants noted the need for additional information beyond schedules. They felt that a schedule alone wasn't enough information, as they were still unsure as to how long they would have to wait or exactly where they should go.
- One participant suggested a program that would provide free service or reduced fares one day a month to entice new riders.

## **V. FUTURE ALTERNATIVES**

- Several suggestions were made for investments into the existing transit system in St. Cloud:
  - Add more express bus service to make service faster and more convenient.
  - Create bus-only lanes through downtown St. Cloud to increase efficiency of service.
  - Add more buses to existing routes to make service more convenient.
  - Add hybrid buses to make service more environmentally-friendly.
  - Address cleanliness and convenience issues to make service more appealing.
- One participant noted the need to ensure future planning should take bicycle and pedestrian traffic into consideration.
- Several participants noted that they would recommend additional advertising and promotion efforts for current service.
- Most participants noted that they would like to see the Northstar Corridor train extended to St. Cloud, particularly for recreational trips. The desire to see rail service expanded throughout the state was also noted.

**Please provide 2-3 direct quotes from your focus group that we may use in the Greater Minnesota Transit Investment Plan (quotes do not need to be attached to names).**

1. *"I do not have the time to be on a bus for 20 minutes when I can be in the car for 5."*
2. *"I can decide when I want to come and go and I'm afraid that a bus couldn't help me out."*
3. *"A lot of people don't know where the buses go."*

### **Analysis and Suggestions**

**Please let us at Mn/DOT know how well this focus group experience worked for you. Was the amount of questions right for this time slot? Was it easy to engage participants? Was recruiting participants a challenge (either from "target populations" or "non-targeted populations")? Anything else you'd like us to know about your experience?**

In general, the focus group format worked well for most of the questions and the time allowed was sufficient. This group of non-transit riders did not think they had an "unmet need" because they all had cars and much preferred driving their cars over taking transit.

Recruiting participants from the "target populations" represented somewhat of a challenge. While we were able to make connections with these groups, it was difficult to find participants within certain groups that did not use transit, particularly the disabled and minority groups. Additionally, because the geographic area was large; it was difficult to get participants to agree to drive much distance to the meeting. Therefore, most participants lived in or near St. Cloud.

## **RDC 08 (SRDC)**

**Focus Group Location: City of Worthington in Nobles County**

**Number of attendees: 7, 2 staff to facilitate and record**

**March 8, 2010 5:50 to 7 pm**

Food provided was subway sandwiches, two salads, chips, water and coffee

### **I. OUTREACH:**

**How did you recruit focus group members? Please provide a detailed overview of your process and whom you contacted.** Contacts were identified by leaders in the community: Senior Concerns Committee members who represent low income, health community, persons of color, seniors, human services, persons with disabilities, and housing as well as the Private Industry Council, Southwest Mental Health, the Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership, and employee at Smith Trucking assisted in submitting names of individuals they knew in the Worthington / Nobles County area, based on the parameters identified provided by MnDOT Office of Transit for the Transit Investment Plan.

A total of 59 people were identified in this process. In a prescreening we discarded one because we knew of them with past participation in transit related issues. When called in the survey screening process, 5 were deemed as ineligible because they were seniors and the quota for seniors had been met / lived just outside of the Nobles County boundaries.

It was very difficult to find people who were willing to participate in a subject they said they knew nothing about. We received comments such as “you should have (the taxi or bus) that takes people to medical appoints there”, or “No (not interested), because I don’t know enough about it to participate”.

**What techniques were successful and which weren’t?** Even though people were identified though the process identified above, the cold calls for the telephone interviews were very difficult because people did not want to participate if they knew nothing about transit. It felt as though we had to convince them that that was the reason we needed them to come. To contact people who were in the 18 to <65 category it was necessary to try make the initial contact at work, and try to follow up at night or on the weekend.

We struggled to get the quota of white people between the ages of 18 and 65 with no physical disability. Most people on this category needed to be home with their family or worked. Two people who were interested in coming asked if we had arrangements for day care for their children. When we said we did not, they declined participation. The phone calls where people hung up on us were also very frustrating and discouraging.

After achieving the forum quota through the telephone survey, a letter was sent to those indicating they would participate. On the morning of the focus group meeting a phone call was made to each participate (not all were reached). At the meeting, two of the participants’ commented that they appreciated the phone call that morning, because they had forgotten about the focus group meeting.



**Please characterize the attendees.** How many members of each target group were represented?

- Senior (age 65+): three participants, one female two male
- Physical Disability: the participant did not come due to illness
- Minority: one male (18 – 65 age category)
- Low income, Income <\$20,000: one female (65 plus age category)
- Non minority, income >\$20,000, no physical disability, between ages of 18 and 65: two female participants, the other two participants called in - one had a funeral to go to and the other had to work.

**How would you characterize the whole group's mix of age, gender, etc.?** There was a good mix of age and gender; we really missed the input from the individual with a physical disability. The majority of people were from Worthington one was from outside of Worthington in the County.

## **II. CURRENT TRAVELING EXPERIENCES**

The local trips – around town – are the majority of trips in Worthington. In a typical day, the majority of responses were travel in a range of 5-10 miles each day, one indicated they travel 30 miles each day. Most agreed they travel more in the summer and less in the winter due to weather (cold, ice, snow).

- Work related trips 7-8 am and 4:30 to 5:30 (two people)
- Shopping, medical, visiting types of trips 2-3 times per week at 10 am until early afternoon. (two people)
- Have tried to use the bus for work (to and from) but is only available once per week, can only work for 6 hours instead of 8 due to bus route hours. So I drive.
- 6-10 am and from 1 to 4 pm, and evenings. This answer was from people who are not retired and have to travel to work and for work related trips. (2 people)
- Weekends 9-10 am. Participants discussed Sunday service, but most said that most of the churches have their own bus so service is not needed to go to Church.
- Other more occasional trips about once per month for most participants beyond Worthington area: include Sioux Falls (SD), Mankato, Marshall, Fulda, Cedar Rapids (IA), Waverly (IA), Cities, Renville, Jefferson (IA) and Des Moines (IA). Reasons for these trips include Dr Appointments, visiting family/friends, job related.
- Occasional trips in Worthington included giving friends a ride, drive around the lake, in city for job, shopping – ie Hy-Vee, church, school events, and events.
- All participants drive self, one gives a ride to someone else every day to work.
- Previous use of Taxi? Two participants indicated use 1-2 times in past because car was not working, one said she had used it when it was cold outside.
- Previous use of the bus? One said yes, used a couple of times because of the high price of fuel.

- Why do you take your personal vehicle? Convenience; don't bother anyone; independence and more control.
- Traffic conditions: snow, fog, ice, cold. How do you avoid these? Stay home, reschedule, call MN511, test drive the road to see if it is safe.

### III. TRANSIT PERCEPTIONS

Initial impression Taxi: see it all the time; need to be on-time, can't wait for ½ hour; hear complaints of waiting time; 3-4 taxis; added a van – good for families; cost; may miss appointment if it is late; not wheelchair accessible. Works well? On time (sometimes), more vehicles more drivers, get to appointments – sometimes. They have the sober cab – haven't had to use it. Not work? Fewer hours on Friday and Saturday, between 8:30 and 9 is busy taking kids to school.

Bus: nice drivers; on time; never see it; what is the cost – is it subsidized? Who can ride it? Would not know who to call; display schedule where it can be found / seen. Works well – is on time.

Why does it not work for you: still drive own car, have to get to work – regardless of weather, have not had reason to use it,(Taxi) – if the rider is late there is a charge – it is harder to take the taxi to appointments.

### IV. MARKETING AND AVAILABILITY

Where would you get information about the services? Taxi – city hall because it is subsidized, bus? SMOC, The Towers bulletin board, Telephone book – but don't know where to look or which one, would go to SMOC because am more comfortable going to a non-profit for information.

What do you need to know about the service? Status of funding, cost of ride and reasons for increasing rates, hours of service, Are they listening to complaints?, phone numbers, yellow pages under taxi, bus transportation; which phone book?

Language other than English: Spanish, Lao, Burmese, Karen.

### V. FUTURE ALTERNATIVES

Will people use the taxi / bus more in the future? Why: Age, sight / physical limitations, new immigrants, cost of gas

Who will the new users be? Immigrants, people who lose job (save on maintenance, insurance, repairs), older adults, younger – college age students who are familiar with buses/transit.

Attract new riders – how? pleasant drivers, good service, discounts, frequent rider miles, collaborate – example- to and from grocery/ grocery delivery, economics keep tightening will drive people to these types of services but only those who really need it should use it. Because of economics there will be less subsidized and more for profit transit business.

If the ride cost less, do you think more people would ride? Would this increase the subsidy? You have to plan your schedule around the availability, would be nice to have a regular schedule ie Avera on Monday, SF on Wednesday – a regular route that could be counted on. More riders if service was friendlier or if there were people who spoke other languages,

If there was service to more places, would people use the service? concern about expanding service – economic reality. Need reliable options (demand is needed and continued funding) you should not offer a service and cut it. Places that should be included: Adrian, Round lake, Brewster, Rushmore, Bigelow, Wilmont, Sioux Falls SD, Fulda, Jackson, Luverne (VA hospital).

More hours, would more people ride? Answers ranged from it is sufficient to we need more of Friday and Saturday. Most felt uncomfortable answering because they don't know current routes, services, costs. On

Reasonable wait time. Responses varied from 15 minutes to 1 hour. One said they knew of standing reservations. Everyone agreed it was the individual responsibility to call early, plan and have patience.

Future investment: the overwhelming answer could be termed as outreach (hours of operation, cost, location in phonebook, paper, bulletin boards (housing, stores, etc). the non-transit riders did not know where to look for information about transit service. Specifically for the Taxi, a bigger vehicles so the rider(s) would not have the “crammed” feeling. And collaboration – go beyond county lines, Worthington to Luverne or Fulda to Worthington, use school buses for longer hours and provide scheduled routes.

If you could change one thing... What would it be and why?

- Collaboration with others – such as Swift, Hospital, Clinics, Walmart – for multiple funding resources.
- More presence in the community.
- More drivers when demand is high.
- Fine tune the system(s), be more efficient and don't expect more funding, be practice, riders have to adapt to the system that is available – set hours will make this happen, the system does not have to change (people do).
- Outreach on when it is available and how to contact / access
- Friendly service (“...you can be crabby if you are the only game in town”.)

Additional thoughts on how to change / improve service in the community?

- Meaner & Leaner
- Common sense – schedules and sticking to them, collaboration, plan ahead vs flexibility
- Communicate within the community – use information, transportation friends, neighbors.
- We may need to change our lifestyle.
- Improve road conditions (ie 2<sup>nd</sup> Ave, Oxford Street, Mall parking lot)
- We will be having hard surface roads changing to gravel due to economic conditions.

**Please provide 2-3 direct quotes from your focus group that we may use in the Greater Minnesota Transit Investment Plan.**

1. “My son has friends who live in the Cities for school; they don’t own a car, so they take the taxi more.”
2. (attracting new riders) “A pleasant driver, sometimes we get a real crab.”
3. “My health will dictate if I would use it (transit)”.
4. “People may have to adjust to what is available.”
5. “When businesses are successful they look for ways to help the community. I don’t see their (transit) presence in the community.”
6. “Can anyone ride the bus? I don’t know who to call to use it.”
7. “Where do I find it in the phone book? Which phone book?”

### **Analysis and Suggestions**

It was difficult to move through the questions rapidly enough to make sure everyone had an opportunity to speak. We moved pretty quickly with 7 people and ended with the set questions at 7:02 pm; and they stayed and asked questions or talked until 7:10 after – when we wrapped up and thanked them for coming.

Recruitment of participants. This was a challenge. Two staff assisted with this task. We were going to ask our support staff to do the contacts, but after the first few and the difficulty planning staff had, we felt the questions being asked that would have been referred back to us would have made more work. We did rely on our network of people we know to assist in identifying potential candidates and we did the follow up calls. The most difficult group was four participants from the 18 to 65 category. They are busy people with jobs and most with families. We did have the required number, however when it came down to the meeting, one backed out due to a funeral and the other had to work.

The participants wanted to ask questions about the transit – its availability – so they were interested – but I was unable to answer the questions because it would have given the answers before I had asked the questions.

Ease of Engagement of participants. The majority of the participants were willing to speak their thoughts. I did not start with the same person each time. One participant was timid, but found that she became engaged if she did not have to speak first. Body language spoke volumes on some of the questions – one participant crossed arms and leaned away at times during the focus group, more often during the future alternatives discussion.

### **Thoughts, Concepts, Issues, Suggestions RDC 08 Staff came away from the discussion is:**

- Concern with the economy situation that if changes (expansion) are initiated there will be no money to continue implementation.
- Many of the participants viewed the transit system (bus/taxi) as subsidized. Only people who needed to use it should be using it. People who could afford to drive should not use it because it is only for people who need subsidized rides. The concept of increased number of riders increases the income, thus reducing the need for subsidy was not an understandable concept. There may need to be some improved communication informing on this.

- There seemed to be the attitude that I don't need it (transit) because I can drive and can afford to drive. With the way the economy is going more people will likely need to use it, but they will need to plan ahead and adjust their schedules to fit the service we have. If it doesn't work for people they should be getting rides from family and friends. At the same time many participants conveyed the feeling that the taxi/bus was subsidized and only people who need to use subsidized rides should be using it, they don't need subsidized rides. Some people who don't need the subsidy would take advantage of it.
- One person recognized that people new to the community / area do not have friends and family, and informal transportation is difficult. Even when there is informal transportation (friends and family) – it can be difficult – an example was given: To apply for a job in Windom (over in adjacent county) they may have to wait a couple of weeks for someone to be able to drive them there.
- The group said they did not know where to find the information about rides – taxi or bus. Discussion included it should be in the phone book – then which phone book? No-one actually came out and said it, but they alluded to having the schedules, call numbers, cost of ride posted in places people go (stores, shopping, dr offices, etc) – one did say that the information is posted on the bulletin board of their high rise living building.
- They said they see the taxi all over town but never see the bus. A bus would be good for a route. One person said that years ago there was a route but it did not work. How do disabled people get around (in Worthington)? That van with the wheelchair lift (MediVan). People in the community do not know the difference between the taxi that they see and the bus that they do not see, and assume that the accessible vans (MediVan) are part of the taxi / bus.
- There really is no consistent place in the phone directory for the transit systems. I found it ironic that the participants said this and then added which phone book because there are at least two phone books, sometimes more for anyone with a land line. Not spoken at the meeting – an afterthought on my part: People who only have cell phones for phone service do not have phone books. We have many people who only have cell phones.
- People may be more likely to use transit in the winter, due to inclement and cold conditions.
- Younger people who have lived in the cities w/o a vehicle are used to transit and are more inclined to use it.
- Community presence. This was referring to both visibility of the vehicles, but also the driver / transit representative in person – perhaps at events and to recognized as the transit or ride person / people.
- I should send both a thank you card and information about both the taxi and heartland express bus to the focus group participants?

**Region Nine Development Commission  
Transportation and Transit Focus Group**

**Focus Group Location: Intergovernmental Center, 10 Civic Center Plaza, Mankato, MN**

**Number of attendees: 10 focus group participants, (3 Region Nine staff to facilitate and record)**

**March 18, 2010 5:30 to 7:00 pm**

**I. OUTREACH:**

**How did you recruit focus group members? Please provide a detailed overview of your process and whom you contacted.**

- Minorities – Two agencies who serve minority populations were contacted, Greater Mankato Diversity Council and LA-MANO. The guidelines for participation were reviewed to see if they had consumers who might have an interest in participating. The list of potential participants was narrowed down based on the fact that an interpreter would not be paid for through this grant and some communities of color have concerns about contact with governmental agencies. The potential participants were contacted by LA-MANO and **one** person agreed to participate.
- Seniors – The Minnesota River Area Agency on Aging (MNRAAA) was contacted and guidelines were reviewed to see if they had consumers who might be interested in participating. The list of potential participants was narrowed down based on health and hearing issues. Potential participants were then contacted through MNRAAA. **Two** people agreed to participate.
- Persons With A Disability – The SMILES (Southern Minnesota Independent Living Enterprises) Center for Independent Living was contacted. The guidelines were reviewed to see if they had consumers who might be interested in participating. The list of potential participants was narrowed down based on ability/level of participation (for example, if someone is able to speak or communicate through another avenue to make their opinion known). Potential participants were contacted through SMILES, **two** people agree to participate.
- Persons From A Low Income Household – The Minnesota WorkForce Center in Mankato was contacted, specifically the groups that work with people who are laid off. The guidelines for participation were reviewed to see if they had consumers who might have an interest in participating. Contact with potential participants was conducted via staff, **one** person agreed to participate.
- Members Of The Public – Staff from Region Nine Development Commission contacted various community groups and educational institutions: Renewable Energy Task Force, Early Childhood, Minnesota State University, Mankato and Bethany Lutheran College. Six people responded, conversations about the specific participant criteria narrowed this down to **four** participants.

### **What techniques were successful and which weren't?**

The technique of contacting organizations and agencies who served specific populations was very successful. The technique used to find members of the general public was also successful. Cold calling people from the phonebook was not successful. People are very suspicious of cold calls with the nature of the world today.

One very successful technique which resulted in all 10 participants attending was confirmation of the meeting. An email with date, location, etc. was sent out four days prior to the Focus Group. The day of the Focus Group, all 10 attendees were contacted by telephone to remind them.

An issue all 10 participants wanted clarification on was if they would be openly labeled for their target group at the meeting. For example, would Joe Smith who was representing persons with disabilities have a sign in front of him labeling him as such. Once there were assurances that this was not the case, people were willing to participate.

**Please characterize the attendees.** How many members of each target group were represented?

- Senior (age 65+): two participants: both female
- Physical Disability: two participants: one male and one female
- Minority: one participant: female
- Low income, Income <\$20,000: one participant: female
- Non minority, income >\$20,000, no physical disability, between ages of 18 and 65: four participants: one male and three female

**How would you characterize the whole group's mix of age, gender, etc.?** There was good representation in the various age groups, with the youngest participant in their early 30's and the oldest in their mid-70's. With eight female and 2 male participants, we had a greater showing in the female category; however, the two male participants provided great feedback to the process.

The mix of Focus Group Participants met all the requirements.

## **II. CURRENT TRAVELING EXPERIENCES**

When do you typically travel? The unanimous response to this question was "everyday". When asked about their eventual destination, responses varied from place of employment, to medical appointments, library, school, children's activities, and volunteer services. Most traveled within the Mankato area, but a few lived outside Mankato and traveled to Mankato for work. One participant commuted approximately 20 miles one way each day. She was very interested in a possible transit service from her home community to Mankato.

When asked about carpooling options, many indicated that this was not something that would work for them since their work schedules typically varied from the schedules of others. Many also commented that they enjoyed the “freedom” of having their own vehicle, especially if they needed to run errands during or after work.

Using the city bus was also not something that participants typically considered. Many commented that they did not even know that Mankato had a public transit system, while others agreed that it was nice to have the “independence” that driving a personal vehicle provided. Some members were afraid that they would not arrive to appointments in time, if they used public transit, while others reiterated their desire to be more “independent”.

One participant noted that the ethnic community does not use public transportation due to cultural and language barriers.

There was also overwhelming agreement that residents do not know the bus schedule and this is a deterrent to riding. They also commented that many senior citizens do not have access to internet to find out the bus schedule.

### **III. TRANSIT PERCEPTIONS**

Initial impressions:

- don't pay attention to public transportation
- Schedule is inconvenient, if you miss it, it could be another hour before another bus arrives
- Used to have more frequent stops
- North Mankato – very long waits/process
- Part of the culture of the city, people don't use it. Larger cities it is a part of life.
- Short distances here, more convenient to drive
- Hardly ever see the buses
- Saw a bus once, but have never seen any signs indicating where the bus stops
- People assume the bus runs in a limited area so don't look into it
- Would use the bus more if there were frequent stops
- Bus system doesn't work for people's schedules – night shift, etc.
- Hard to access bus routes
- Buses are empty around town, use more gas efficient vehicles
- Rather intimidating if you have never done that before.

When asked “what works well”, the overall response was “nothing”. Many agreed that there is little



known about the transit service itself, the routes, cost to ride, etc... There is no grapevine for people to learn about the local buses.

The next question asked of the group was “what doesn’t work so well?”

- Limited schedules
- older/handicapped hard to get to bus stop and onto bus
- Sidewalks are unsafe in the winter, disabled people hesitate to try to use sidewalks to get to bus stops
- Weather is a factor, rain/snow
- Hard for people to pay, getting out change
- Getting in and out difficult

Again, many agreed that the limited stops, lack of knowledge regarding routes, uncertainty of reliability, and their desire to be more independent were all reasons that they did not utilize public transit.

#### **IV. MARKETING AND AVAILABILITY**

The group really focused a lot of attention on the need for additional marketing of the current services. When asked if they would know how to ride the bus, most agreed that not only would they not know how to ride the bus, they would not even know where to call to get a schedule. They agreed that unless there was an incentive to riding, most people wouldn’t use it. They thought it would be a great idea to make a commercial, similar to the Blue Cross/Blue Shield “Do Groove” commercial, encouraging people to use transit. They would also like to see the bus system communicate with various agencies and colleges about the bus system. They thought it would be a great idea to have bus passes in college student’s orientation packets to make them aware of the system and encourage them to use it.

There was also consensus that information about the transit service in Mankato should be available in different languages, including sign language. There are currently over 30 languages spoken in the Mankato area. The group discussed the possibility of having some type of symbol indicating where the bus stops (for example, a ⬠ might mean that this bus stops at the mall).

#### **V. FUTURE ALTERNATIVES**

In the future, there may be a greater reliance on transit if gas prices escalate again. The participants were also hopeful that people would recognize the environmental benefits of riding the bus. They discussed the impact that the growing “boomer” population could potentially have on the transit system; especially the idea that people who can’t drive will rely more and more on public transportation. Other factors impacting ridership were the fact that Mankato offers free (or very

inexpensive parking) so there is less incentive to ride the bus to work. They also discussed the fact that Mankato is relatively rural/small and uncomplicated, and that driving a personal vehicle isn't as "stressful" as it might be in a larger metropolitan area.

A future trend may also be a greater focus on providing transit to residents outside of the Mankato community. Is it possible for Mankato to extend their services to residents of neighboring communities? Could the transit system offer rides to rural residents? Is it possible to coordinate services with senior citizen facilities, local communities, non-profits, etc...? Overall, the group agreed that greater marketing is needed to inform residents of the existing service.

When asked what might be done to attract new riders, the group responded with options such as longer hours, more frequent stops, less complicated transfers, and cheaper fares. They also talked about coordinating rides with apartment buildings, etc... for regular trips to the grocery store. There was also conversation about "specialty trips", for example, where the transit service might schedule a "Christmas shop hop".

After discussing ways in which to attract new riders, the group noted that any wait longer than 10 minutes would disengage potential users from utilizing the transit system. In the winter time, they were unwilling to wait any longer than 5 minutes. They also noted that their decision to ride would be impacted by the number of transfers required from Point A to Point B.

The next question focused on where transit providers should be focusing their limited funds. The group overwhelmingly agreed that the greatest investment should be made in the area of marketing. They all agreed that very little is known about the schedule, fares, routes, etc... and that ridership could potentially increase if the public were more aware of the availability of services. They talked about putting flyers in local utility bills, handing out free passes at summer reading programs, and targeting certain populations (minority and low income).

Before closing for the evening, the group was asked, "If you had the ability to create a new bus service, what would it look like?" Some participants focused on the environmental impact of transit. They wanted to see solar buses and more emphasis put on the fact that transit is more environmentally friendly than multiple cars on the roadway. They also discussed the need for smaller buses (many of the larger buses are nowhere near capacity) or else the need to bump up ridership. They discussed implementing charter buses for various events.

Suggestions for improving the existing services included adding car seats to the bus and addressing the safety issue of young children riding alone.

Members were curious about the availability of transit from Mankato to the metropolitan area for work, shopping, flights, etc...

**Please provide 2-3 direct quotes from your focus group that we may use in the Greater Minnesota Transit Investment Plan.**

“I don’t want to adjust my life schedule to the bus schedule, I want the bus to accommodate my life”.

“Whoever has to drive the farthest in the family gets the good gas mileage vehicle”.

“I don’t use the bus because I need my independence”.

**Analysis and Thoughts**

We were able to begin our session by 5:35 p.m., but it was difficult to move through the questions in the time allowed and still allow everyone an opportunity to speak. I often found myself moving on to the next question for the sake of time, even when participants may have had more to contribute to the conversation. We did finish for the evening at exactly 7:00 p.m.

Many of the participants were curious about the current availability of transit. They had a lot of questions about the system itself, which I was not in a position to answer. Not only was there not time, but I felt it would have led the conversation for future questions.

I was pleased at the degree to which all participants shared their thoughts and opinions. Everyone was equally engaged in conversation, and no one person “stole the show” or “laid in the weeds”. When the participants were leaving for the evening, a couple of them said they may even try using public transit!

It was interesting to hear the conversation at the table when asked if their transit habits would change at all if gas prices were to soar to \$4.00 a gallon. Not one person said that this would change their decision to drive their personal vehicle. There was a definite mindset that the participants wanted the feeling of independence, to be able to come and go as they please, without being “burdened” by a schedule. It was also interesting to hear them refer to Mankato as a “small, rural community”. Mankato serves as the regional hub of southern Minnesota. Many of the rural communities (less than 2,500 in population) rely on Mankato for employment, shopping, medical appointments, etc... Residents from these small communities do not like to travel in Mankato, because they think it is too big. Mankato residents, on the other hand, feel that their size is what propels people to use their personal vehicles, versus using public transit. Roads are relatively easy to navigate. There is little to no congestion throughout most of the day (certain spots are worse than others). You can travel from one end of Mankato to the other within 10 minutes.

There was a higher level of concern over the limited availability of transit for certain segments of the population. Mankato has been experiencing growth in the minority population demographic. This segment of the population has a greater reliance on public transportation, since many of them do not have the ability to drive in Minnesota. However, language and cultural barriers seem to be keeping them from using the system to its full capacity.

Overall, there was a definite lapse in adequate marketing for transit services in the area. No one knew where to find a schedule, what the fares were, how to identify routes, or where to even find this information.

# Transportation & Transit Focus Group Responses

March 18, 2010

## Typical Travel

Most home travel is done morning and afternoon to and from work (some of the participants have flexible work and volunteer hours). Additional travel is done from home to downtown activities and to church. One person commuted from Byron to Rochester, 8-10 miles.

All respondents drove their automobiles by themselves and did not carpool (one exception that used R&S Transport, a private taxi-like service, \$12.50 per trip). She didn't drive because of medication and other health issues.

Most had used bus service briefly or in another metropolitan area. Some had never used it, wanting to remain flexible and independent. Reasons not used include fixed schedules, price, and unavailability in their area.

In deciding to travel primarily by automobile our focus group noted flexibility, after work activities with children, etc, and flexible work hours as reasons. One participant indicated that he started work before the local bus routes began.

## Perceptions

The focus group agreed that local bus service is highly influenced by Mayo, and they believed that the commuter bus service is exclusive to Mayo employees. One group member commented that the fare is priced to keep "riff raff" out, and that the system is geared to bring in fewer riders than the potential. Many had questioned how the Rochester Bus Service and the commuter bus service worked together. The group believes that bus fares are too expensive and as population grows, they may need to use local bus service as parking spots become limited.

## Marketing and Availability

There was a good mix of those who knew where to find information on how to ride the bus and those that didn't have a clue. Everyone knew there was a website, but not many had used it. We provided a demonstration of the local bus service website and the information available to everyone. The following is the necessary information and comments about information availability:

- Route Schedule?
- Fares?
- Rules?
- Where's the right bus?
- Correct change?
- Branding-Is it really a city bus?
- It seems a private bus company has a monopoly
- Is taxi service, R&S Transport, other private services transit?
- Where does the bus stop? Different for different people?

#### Future Alternatives, Changes and Suggestions

A focus group member's vision includes a mega bus, Minneapolis to Chicago for \$1.00 fare. "Unless the local bus company changes routes and schedules we won't ride." The group believes if the fares were less expensive more people would ride. There is a need for multi-language signage and information about city bus schedules and connections. Some members suggested a link on the Mn/DOT District 6 website to the Rochester city bus lines website. The city of Rochester is going through some growing pains, and transportation is a huge issue for the whole area. The group suggested reduced fares for older adults.

It appears that Mayo has excessive control of both Rochester local service and suburban-like commuter service.