

# **Opportunity Link Public Transportation Implementation Plan**

by

David Kack

Mobility & Public Transportation Program Manager

Western Transportation Institute

College of Engineering

Montana State University

Project Summary

November 10, 2011

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **Get on the Bus –Connecting small communities on Montana’s Hi Line**

#### **Introduction**

Frontier and rural areas face many challenges, including transportation within small towns and to larger communities. People in frontier areas need reliable transportation for a variety of purposes, including employment, educational opportunities, medical needs, and recreational activities. Access to transportation services is a key component of sustaining the livelihood and enhancing the vitality of smaller communities within a rural region.

#### **Problem**

In the “Hi Line” region of north central Montana, transportation is a major barrier for people attempting to obtain or retain employment, receive an education, and access medical care and other basic services. Blaine and Hill counties along Montana’s Canadian border had been without public transportation services for nearly 20 years. A previous transit system consisted of limited service connecting only 2 towns, Havre and Great Falls, and eventually went out of service. While medical, employment, and retail services were available in the Hill County seat of Havre - population 9,700 - the low population density in the outlying areas (1.5 residents per square mile) made it difficult to establish a transit system that would allow residents to access Havre services. Further, the Rocky Boy’s Native American reservation in Hill County and the Fort Belknap reservation in Blaine County both struggled to provide transit services within or outside the reservation borders.

#### **Solution**

Opportunity Link, Inc., a nonprofit organization based in Havre, Montana, strives to create and implement strategies and encourage community-driven partnerships to reduce poverty in the north Montana Hi Line region. Initiating a regional transit service in this area had been a key goal of the agency, and in August 2008, efforts began to bring this plan to fruition. Dubbed North Central Montana Transit (NCMT), the proposed service aimed to connect Havre (the largest city in the region) to Harlem, Chinook, and the Fort Belknap Indian reservation in Blaine County, as well as making a connection with the Rocky Boy’s reservation (Box Elder and Laredo). Additional service would connect all of these communities to Great Falls, Montana – 114 miles from Havre. Great Falls is the only urban community in the area, and has larger medical, educational, and retail facilities.

Opportunity Link enlisted the public transit research expertise of the Western Transportation Institute (WTI) at Montana State University based on its past experience in establishing public transportation systems to provide project management and to create a plan for implementing public transportation on the Hi Line. WTI developed a coordination plan to show the existing

resources available for a transit system, and how the various stakeholders would work together to implement and support the proposed service. The plan was developed through community meetings, as well as meetings with key partners, such as the Tribal and County governments. The coordination plan also included the system's partner agencies and organizations, the communities and areas to be covered by the bus system, as well as the proposed routes and services. Specific operational details were accomplished through route planning tasks which included identifying specific origins and destinations, as well as the best routing to connect those points. This information was then compared against a draft budget, so that service levels and the overall cost of the service were within the proposed budget. The routes and service levels were modified several times as updated budget information became available.

As part of the process, stakeholders formed a Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC) comprised of elected officials and representatives of senior centers, transportation agencies, medical, education, social service, community-based, and minority advocacy organizations in Hill and Blaine counties, and tribal agencies from the Fort Belknap and Rocky Boy's reservations. The North Central Montana Regional TAC approved the coordination plan in February 2009.

### **Application**

Opportunity Link submitted the application/coordination plan for Montana Department of Transportation's Operating Grant Program with the help of WTI. In the application, the TAC requested \$75,000 of Federal Transit Administration operating funds and three 21-passenger buses. Local funding came from partners including Montana State University-Northern, Blaine and Hill counties, Northern Montana Hospital in Havre, and other local agencies/organizations.

On August 24, 2009, one of the new NCMT buses, with 18 passengers on board, made its maiden voyage with more than 200 supporters cheering it on. In the first week of operation, NCMT provided 139 rides, and followed up the second week with more than 200 rides, and received its first request for placing marketing materials on the bus. In March 2010, NCMT ridership had increased to an average of 300 to 400 rides per week, with monthly totals averaging nearly 1,600 rides. This weekly statistic was equal to what some had predicted the monthly ridership would be. By June 2010, monthly ridership had increased to 2285, and a fourth route was added to service the local Havre area.

### **Benefits**

In urban areas, public transportation (transit) is often viewed as a means to address congestion issues. By contrast, in rural and frontier areas, transit is often needed to provide mobility for those who lack access to basic services (grocery store, medical care, education, etc.). However, despite the critical need, public agencies have traditionally considered transit systems to be unfeasible and unaffordable in areas with such low population density.

Recognizing that the successful creation of a transit system can expand viable transportation options within a region - providing economic and environmental benefits for the community and a higher quality of life for residents - the Federal Highway Administration and the Federal Transit Administration awarded Opportunity Link and its partners the 2010 Transportation Planning Excellence Award for NCMT. This biennial awards program recognizes outstanding initiatives across the country to develop, plan, and implement innovative transportation planning practices. NCMT won both the Planning & Leadership and the Tribal Transportation Planning categories. The success of NCMT has shown how, through partnerships and coordination, public transportation can succeed in rural and frontier areas.

For additional information, contact David Kack, Western Transportation Institute, 2310 University Way, Building 2, Suite 2, Bozeman, MT 59715; telephone: 406-994-7526; email: [dkack@coe.montana.edu](mailto:dkack@coe.montana.edu).

The success of this project has been recognized nationally and covered in the following

Rural Connections, Volume 6, Issue 1, September 2011, p. 27-30. Rural Connections is published by the ©Western Rural Development Center out of Logan, Utah. [http://wrdc.usu.edu/files/publications/publication/pub\\_9828019.pdf](http://wrdc.usu.edu/files/publications/publication/pub_9828019.pdf)

TR News, Number 270, September – October 2010, p. 38-39. TR News is produced by the Transportation Research Board Publications Office in Washington, DC. <http://www.trb.org/Publications/Blurbs/164353.aspx>