

Finding and Filling the Gaps in Rural Areas

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In Wyoming, some rural transit services, like the Southern Teton Area Rapid Transit system in the Jackson area, operate more frequently during the busy winter season.



FIGURE 1 The major Interstate highways and intercity bus (ICB) routes in Wyoming before the research study was conducted.

Inter-city bus (ICB) service, which provides scheduled transportation between cities and towns, is an important component of public transportation—particularly for residents of smaller towns and rural areas. Since the 1980s, however, ICB services have been on the decline nationwide. In Wyoming, an evaluation of ICB access resulted in a methodology for

determining whether the state's transportation needs are being met, identifying potential routes, and developing new partnerships with transportation providers.

Only half of Wyoming residents (51 percent) have access to intercity bus service. National providers travel along Interstates 25, 80, and 90, and along U.S. Highways 191 and 89. These routes serve only the southern and eastern parts of the state, however; western areas have very little service and central or northern regions have virtually no service (Figure 1, at left). At the end of 2014, for example, service on a long route connecting central Wyoming to more urbanized cities was discontinued.

Because of recent route eliminations and the fact that only half the state's residents had access to ICB services, the Wyoming Department of Transportation (DOT) was concerned that residents' needs were not being met and sought an assessment tool to determine whether ICB services were sufficient and to prioritize funding decisions that could increase service availability. Although ICB providers often are private entities, services generally are subsidized by a mix of federal, state, and local funds, to expand access.



Research and Solution

On behalf of Wyoming DOT, researchers at the Small Urban and Rural Livability Center, a university transportation center located at the Western Transportation Institute at Montana State University, assessed the state's ICB services.

To gather background information, the research team conducted

- ◆ An extensive literature review of ICB service in other states,
- ◆ A survey of other rural states to identify funding practices and barriers to service, and
- ◆ A survey of ICB riders to understand their attitudes and use of services.

Using input from a survey of local transit managers from across the state, the team also performed a connectivity analysis of existing ICB services. As part of this analysis, team members identified corridors that previously had offered ICB service as well as corridors that would connect high-population rural areas to a more urbanized city. These tasks helped to identify routes that could provide what researchers called “meaningful connections” for residents in underserved areas.

In addition to assessing the status of ICB service, the study produced a process that Wyoming DOT can use on a triennial basis to determine if the state's intercity bus service needs are being met. If it was determined that these needs are not met, the study offered a method to prioritize the locations in which service should be implemented—that is, if sufficient funding exists.

The primary steps in this triennial evaluation included the following:

- ◆ Review existing ICB services.
- ◆ Determine level of support for existing services.
- ◆ Determine funding balance available for new ICB services.
- ◆ Using route analysis and consultation, determine funding needs for new services.
- ◆ Determine whether the state's ICB transportation needs are being met.

To assist Wyoming DOT with the final step, the study proposed thresholds for whether ICB customer needs are being met; specifically recommending that Wyoming DOT evaluate whether a minimum of 85 percent of the largest, or most-populated, cities in the state receive some level of intercity service. The figure of 85 percent was selected because it is a threshold widely used for transportation analysis, including setting most speed limits.



PHOTO: WASHINGTON STATE DOT

Application

Applying the findings and tools to Wyoming, researchers determined that only 17 of the largest 28 cities in the state—defined as those with populations of 2,000 or more—have ICB service. That is approximately 60 percent of Wyoming's large cities. To reach the proposed threshold of 85 percent, the study recommended that Wyoming DOT explore adding ICB connections to at least seven more communities.

Wyoming DOT identified many specific corridors for further analysis—all of which lacked any ICB service and would serve communities of 2,000 people or more—and selected potential routes that connect smaller communities with larger cities in Wyoming. Considering these factors, the research team identified six routes for Wyoming DOT to consider for implementation, assuming an availability of funding, service providers, and other essential resources.

The identified routes are summarized in Table 1 (below). Although ridership was not estimated for

Intercity Transit in Lacey, Washington. Washington State's ICB funding program was among those studied by researchers at the Small Urban and Rural Livability Center.

TABLE 1 Proposed ICB Routes and Major Destinations

Route	Cities	Population	Major ICB Destination
1	Lander	7,642	Casper
	Riverton	10,953	
2	Cody	9,740	Billings (Mont.)
	Lovell	2,404	
	Powell	6,407	
3	Thermopolis	3,020	Casper
	Worland	5,366	
4	Lusk	1,578	Cheyenne
	Torrington	6,738	
5	Greybull	1,868	Billings (Mont.)
	Worland	5,366	
6	Newcastle	3,513	Gillette

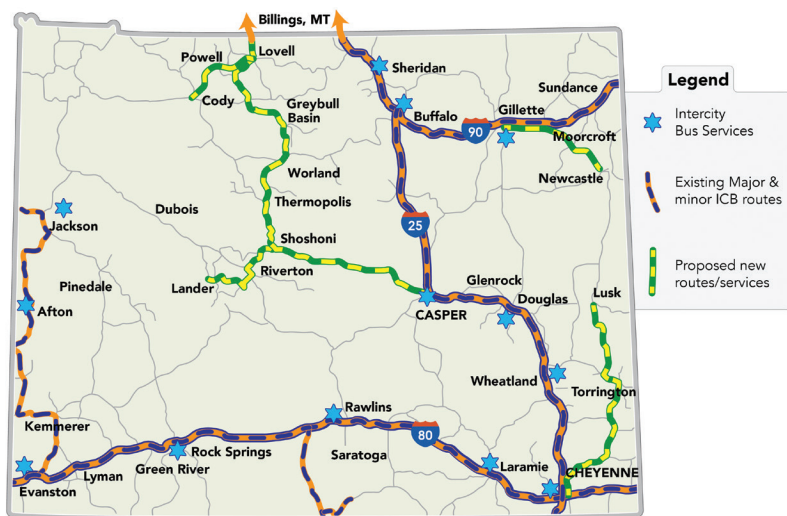


FIGURE 2 Proposed ICB routes in Wyoming (in green).

One of the proposed routes would connect Thermopolis (shown) and Worland to Shoshoni, as well as to another proposed route to Casper; this route extension would serve approximately 8,000 more people.

each proposed route, the population of the cities were noted and estimated implementation costs were discussed in the full report.¹

Benefits

The Wyoming ICB study has resulted in immediate and ongoing benefits. The analysis of services, routes, and connectivity provides a snapshot of the locations of available ICB services and of large gaps in service (see Figure 2, above). This information—along with the triennial review process—serves as an important tool for planning new service, prioritizing route selection, and maximizing the use of federal funds for ICB services.

In addition, the rider survey offered Wyoming DOT a greater understanding of ICB riders: who riders are, where they go, how they get informa-

¹ <http://suric.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/WYDOT-ICB-Study-Final-Report.pdf>.

tion about services, and why they use intercity bus service. For example, more than two-thirds of the respondents reported having incomes of less than \$30,000 per year; this suggests that ICB service provides critical access to long-distance transportation for low-income residents.

For residents of small, rural communities, transportation to larger towns and regional hubs is essential for reaching jobs, health care, shopping and other necessities. If all six of the proposed routes were implemented, approximately 63,000 more Wyoming residents would have access to ICB services in their communities. This would increase the percentage of residents who have access to service from 51 to 62 percent and would exceed the recommended goal of serving 85 percent of Wyoming's largest cities.

Perhaps most importantly, the study has led directly to the expansion of available services in Wyoming. After reading the report, Chris Przybylski of Alltrans (now The Driver Provider) contacted Wyoming DOT to discuss a partnership to implement services on some of the routes proposed in the recommendations. The new service, which began in January 2017, takes riders from Worland to Casper two days a week and from Worland to Billings, Montana, two days a week, with stops in Cody and Powell.

"The report was a great starting point to understand where the needs were and for knowing who to talk to and work with in those communities to get the service off the ground," Przybylski noted.

"It is not often that a study has had such a tangible result—but in this case, the study was directly responsible for bringing a more efficient ICB provider to the Bighorn Basin," observed Talbot Hauffe, Wyoming DOT Transit Program Coordinator. "We are encouraged that, as word gets around about the new ICB service, more and more people will use it."

For more information about the study, contact David Kack, Program Manager, Mobility and Public Transportation, and Director, Small Urban and Rural Livability Center, Western Transportation Institute, Montana State University, P.O. Box 174250, Bozeman, MT 59717-4250; dkack@montana.edu; 406-994-7526.

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Suggestions for Research Pays Off topics are welcome. Contact Stephen Maher, Transportation Research Board, Keck 486, 500 Fifth Street, NW, Washington, DC 20001; 202-334-2955; smaher@nas.edu.



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