

Berrien County Transit Consolidation Feasibility Study

Kick-Off Meeting Summary

INTRODUCTION

To initiate the Berrien County Transit Consolidation Feasibility Study, a kick-off meeting was held on June 1, 2011 with key stakeholders from throughout the area. This meeting provided the opportunity for local stakeholders to provide input through both discussions during the meeting, and by completing a questionnaire. This detailed input will be used as a foundation for future work on the study.

This summary report provides an overview of the input obtained during the meeting, as well as an overview of upcoming steps in the study process.

KICK-OFF MEETING RESULTS

Concerns or Transportation Needs to be Addressed by the Study

While much of the input on transportation needs crossed various issues and aspects of the study, participant comments focused around the following needs:

Connectivity

Meeting participants stressed the need for seamless mobility. In addition to improved connectivity between the four transit systems that now operate in Berrien County, meeting participants highlighted the need to connect to other modes of transportation to current bus services. Participants noted the need for accommodations for bikes on buses, for bus services that allow customers to access destinations where they can use their bicycles, and the placement of bike racks at bus stops. In addition,

there is a need to have transit services connect with the trains that serve St. Joseph, New Buffalo, and Niles to allow access to local hotels and attractions. Participants also mentioned the need to connect transit services with carpool parking lots, as well as the need to connect with services in areas outside the County.

Accessibility

Participants noted the need for all constituent groups to have accessibility to reliable transportation. Specifically, they mentioned the need for greater accessibility at bus stops to allow customers with wheelchairs to board and disembark. There is also a need for more sidewalks and improved pedestrian access to bus stops, as well as improved bicycle access to current bus services.

Service Quality

Participants stated the need for more timely routes and more coordinated services. They noted the need for reliable transit services in order to establish trust with the public. There was also a call for improved scheduling of current services.

Service Design

Meeting participants noted the need for an assessment of the type of transit services that should be in place in various areas of the County to ensure efficiency and effectiveness. While services need to be efficient, it was also noted that services needed to be flexible to meet transportation needs. Challenges noted included providing an appropriate level of service in both small urban and rural areas of the County, coordinating public transit routes with human service agency-provided service, and coordinating transit services to provide greater mobility in the County without increasing costs.

Service Expansion

Participants noted the need for expanded transportation services, especially to access jobs beyond current hours of operation. They also noted unserved areas of the County. Meeting participants also mentioned the need to plan service improvements in order to meet the mobility needs of the growing older adult population in the County.

Affordability

While noting the need for expanded and more coordinated services, meeting participants expressed the need for services to remain at a low cost to riders. An assessment of the fare structure should be a component of the study.

Turf Issues

Meeting participants noted the possible challenges in coordinating four systems in the County, as well as connecting these services to areas outside the County. In addition, participants expressed concern about an apparent lack of cohesiveness between various communities in the County. There are several governing bodies, and many local agencies that will need to be considered during the study process. Some noted that it was important that the study consider all areas of County, not just focus on St. Joseph and Benton Harbor.

Marketing

Participants mentioned that public transportation is underutilized, and the need to get people to embrace it as a cost effective environmentally-friendly alternative to cars. This will involve removing the possible stigma of riding public transportation through a more effective marketing campaign. In addition, participants noted that services should be better marketed to tourists and other seasonal visitors to the area.

Funding/Sustainability

Participants noted the obvious need for funding to both sustain current service and to expand services to meet additional transportation needs in the County. Some noted that there will need to be discussion about funding so that people in the community are aware that funding constraints will preclude serving every area of the county seven days a week.

Obstacles that May Be Encountered during the Study Process

Kick-off meeting participants noted a variety of factors that may impact the study process and should be taken into account. These potential obstacles include:

- Funding needed for a consolidated and integrated system.
- The fear of and resistance to change, particularly the need to convince stakeholders how improved coordination with benefit their community or agency. In addition, the possible impact on people currently working for the four transit agencies needs to be carefully assessed.
- Challenges communicating with key stakeholders and ensuring their participation throughout the process, and making sure the entire community is involved so everyone can be heard.

- A narrow study focus that doesn't take into account potential for expanded transit services.
- Possible turf wars and local control issues, with community leaders/municipalities/systems possibly feeling like they are losing or giving no more than they are getting.
- Stakeholders for each transportation provider being protective of their system, staff, funding, etc.
- The extensive rural areas of Berrien County, as well as large geographic area that public transit needs to serve.
- As in most areas of the country, many residents use automobiles and have none or limited experience with public transportation.
- Michigan has a very strong "home rule" history, so in addition to four transit systems, there are numerous local units of government, two metropolitan planning organizations, and a number of school districts with widely varied interests and priorities.
- There are different areas of the County with different expectations and needs.
- The availability of funding to build the necessary transit system.
- A feeling of loss of control by the transit agencies.
- The realities of transit services, i.e., that it is not a taxi service and there are some areas that will continue to underserved by transit.

Perceptions People in the Community may have about the Study

Meeting participants were asked what perceptions people in the community may have about the study. Some noted that many residents are unaware of the study, and therefore it will be important to include information on the process in local newspapers. Other participants mentioned that the broader community may be indifferent because they see transit as only a service for people with lower incomes, older adults, and people with disabilities, and not for the entire general public. Social agencies, though, are hopeful that services will be expanded and easier to access to serve the people they work with on a daily basis. Some participants thought the many in the community would feel it's needed and a long time coming. Others mentioned that community is open minded, and is looking forward to expansion of current services.

Other comments on community perceptions included:

- The proposed study process of two years is too long.
- There may be concern over any potential tax increases or any additional costs that may arise from the study.
- This is not really a study if foregone conclusions are already in place.
- People will be concerned that consolidation of services equals loss of service, and that fares will increase.
- Transit agency employees are worried about not having a job.
- Stereotypes about transit customers may come into play.
- Some people in the community may feel relief that something is being done so people in the community will have reliable transportation.
- Some in the community may feel there is a lot of money spent on studies, and not on services.
- Some people may have unrealistic expectations of services that can be provided through a more coordinated or consolidated system.
- Some people who will benefit most from this study may not even know it's going on.

Other Stakeholders that Should be Involved in the Study Process

While a wide variety of stakeholders were represented at the kick-off meeting, participants were asked to identify others that should also be involved. There was overall belief that the whole community needs to be involved, and in particularly people who use public transportation on a regular basis. In addition, the following stakeholders were identified by meeting participants:

- Employers and business owners
- Hospitals and medical centers
- Operators of other modes of transportation, including train, intercity bus, airports, and colleges

- Convention and visitor's bureau
- Michigan Association of Railroad Passengers
- Tourist agencies
- Older adult and senior service providers
- Elected officials
- Governing and advisory boards of the transit agencies
- Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) Bureau of Passenger Transportation
- The City of Benton Harbor
- South Bend, IN area transit systems and regional governments
- Business community, Chamber of Commerce Community organizations/groups - Rotary, Lions, Elks, etc.
- Local media
- Universities and schools

Most Effective Methods for Getting Information out to People in the Community Regarding Meetings and Requests for Their Input

Meeting participants were asked for their input on the most effective methods for getting information out to the community regarding the study. They identified a wide approach that would include:

- Appropriate websites
- Local newspapers and radio
- Direct communication by email and phone
- Community flyers and newsletters
- Social media such as Facebook
- Community locations and services, including senior centers, apartment complexes, churches, tourism agencies, Cycle-Re-Cycle, colleges, public libraries, and retail outlets
- Attending organizational meetings of human services organizations and constituent groups using the services.

Areas for More Clarification

Meeting participant were asked to identify areas of the study that may need to be clarified, particularly for people outside the transportation industry. Participants noted a variety of areas that included how the study will:

- Look at all modes of transportation to ensure connectivity.

- Consider the need for MDOT and county road commissions to incorporate alternate means of transportation (pedestrians, bike, wheelchairs).
- Result in more clearly communicated transit schedules and easy to read-and-use maps that are available throughout the County.
- Describe the relationship between populations using public transportation and the potential for passage of successful millages.
- Include greater education to the community on the availability of public transit services.
- Provide easy to use information on funding options and opportunities.
- Present anticipated costs and levels of service so that the public knows what to expect.
- Provide recommendations for reducing dependency on individuals needing to own a car and availability of multiple transit options.
- Explain the benefits to the community of more efficient and effective public transit.

Continued Participation in the Berrien County Michigan Transit Consolidation Feasibility Study

Lastly, participants were asked if they would like to continue to participate in the study. All 31 participants who completed a questionnaire responded that they would like to remain involved.

NEXT STEPS

As discussed at the kick-off meeting, work will begin on the evaluation of the operations of the four current transit systems in Berrien County. This work includes individual interviews with the transit managers in conjunction with the kick-off meeting. To further familiarity with the four transit systems and as part of the initial project tasks, other next steps will involve:

- Review of Operational and Financial Data
- Detailed Analysis and Evaluation of Current Services
- Review of Relevant Studies and Plans

- Interviews with the Transit Systems in Neighboring Areas
- Review of Relevant Case Studies of Coordination/Consolidation Projects in Michigan and across the country.

The results of these tasks will be documented in the project's Technical Memorandum #1. A second meeting with local stakeholders will be scheduled to review and receive comments on the findings from this memorandum.