



Transportation and Housing

Gro-WA Work Component C



Introduction

In economically depressed Washington County, many working-age adults are unemployed or underemployed because they do not have reliable transportation to commute between their rural homes and regional employment centers. Limited public transportation service is available in Washington County (<http://www.gro-wa.org/rural-transit-agencies>), but it is operated primarily to deliver social service clients to their appointments and thus does not adequately meet the larger business needs of the region (<http://www.gro-wa.org/workforce-transit-challenges>). The task force for this component looked at ways that existing public transportation services and carpooling activities could be restructured and improved to better connect the potential workforce in Washington County with available jobs.

Much of the work involved a synthesis of recommendations from previous public transportation studies, and close collaboration with other groups in Downeast Maine that are pursuing similar transportation access goals. A task force kickoff meeting in May 2013 and a November 2013 two-county (Washington-Hancock) transportation summit in Machias attracted representatives from federal, state and local government, the transportation industry, social service agencies, healthcare and healthcare advocacy organizations, regional economic development and planning councils, and public transportation users (<http://www.gro-wa.org/downeast-acadia-transportation-summit>). Both of these venues served as public forums for a diverse group of stakeholders (<http://www.gro-wa.org/transportation-and-housing-workgroup-members>) to collectively identify and prioritize transportation needs for workforce development throughout the region.

Regional partners for GROWashington-Aroostook were actively involved in both the kickoff meeting and the transportation summit. A GROWashington-Aroostook consultant delivered a presentation of her research on model transit programs and practices throughout the United States that generated considerable discussion among the nearly 100 attendees at the summit (<http://www.gro-wa.org/workforce-transit-options>).

GROWashington-Aroostook partnered with the Downeast Community Transformation Grant implementation team and numerous regional stakeholders to plan and execute a successful summit. During the six-month summit planning process, task force members helped to forge new partnerships and collaborative projects between the regional healthcare community, community-based volunteer coordinators, social service agencies, and transportation planners around a shared interest in improved transportation access for ALL Washington County residents. Participating organizations and individuals continue to meet monthly as a multidisciplinary Transportation Team to develop ways and means to implement some of the key initiatives and policy recommendations that emerged from the kickoff meeting and regional summit.

Several requested research projects are still underway:

- Analyze existing public transportation services and trends over past three years
- Analyze populations with high combined housing and transportation costs
- Compare Washington County transit programs and ridership to other counties in US with similar demographics



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- Complete assembly of a regional transportation access plan, using data and policy elements to address the Sensible Transportation Policy Act and the Growth Management Law (to ensure that local municipalities can adopt the plan and meet these legal requirements)

Findings

Rural working-age adults in Washington County, particularly those in lower socioeconomic brackets, often find themselves trapped in a financial Catch-22: they need a car to get a job, but they need a job to get a car. In addition, many would be unable to keep their current jobs if they were unable to drive or find a ride. Current routes and schedules for public transit do not adequately serve the regional business community and its workforce. If transit operations could be revamped to better meet the needs of rural work-ready adults (while continuing to serve the primary customer base of contracted social service agency clients), the economic ripple effects would be widespread:

- transit agencies would increase their ridership and route efficiency;
- a larger number of rural workers would have access to affordable and reliable transportation options (making it easier for them to find and keep good jobs);
- rural municipalities served by public transportation would see a stabilization and perhaps even an increase in their population and tax base; and
- the region's merchants and service providers would prosper, as there would be more workers with steady jobs and disposable income to spend.

GroWashington-Aroostook surveyed the best programs and practices across the nation to determine strategies that might help to expand workforce access to public transportation in Washington County. According to a [2011 national study](#) by the Transit Cooperative Research Program, the major factors driving innovation in rural public transit programs include:

- Agency characteristics that recognize and reward managers and staff for creative problem-solving and continuous process improvement;
- Flexible and relatively rapid responses to changing demographics;
- Increased agency involvement in the transportation planning process;
- Alternative service delivery modes and techniques;
- Outreach, education and training; and
- Developing and leveraging new transit funding opportunities.

Alternative service delivery innovations offer the greatest potential to rapidly adapt Washington County's existing rural public transit system to better serve the needs of regional businesses and their workforce. GroWashington-Aroostook developed a PowerPoint presentation and an annotated resource sheet to highlight some of the model policies and programs that have worked well for other rural regional transit systems (<http://www.gro-wa.org/workforce-transit-options>). Many of these initiatives would be relatively easy, quick, and inexpensive to implement in Maine. For example, [an agency in rural Vermont](#) was able to significantly expand its transit service hours, routes, and operational efficiency by harnessing a creative multi-organizational mix of existing transportation assets, volunteers, and organizational resources, rather than developing a traditional transit service expansion plan which might have taken years or even decades to fully implement.

Please refer to "Suggested Actions" section to review some of the alternative service delivery modes and practices that could help to improve transportation access for workforce development in Washington County.



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Analysis and Basic Conclusions

Washington County currently has two public transit operators, Sun Rides Transit and West Transportation, each with its own service model. The Washington Hancock Community Agency (WHCA), operator of Sun Rides Transit, adheres to the traditional non-profit social service agency model, as do the majority of rural public transit operators in the US. It receives federal public transit funding, but its primary mission is to provide transportation for MaineCare recipients and other contracted clients of state and federal social service agencies.

All Sun Rides Transit routes open to the general public are “demand-response,” meaning that each ride request must be scheduled 24-48 hours in advance and the transit agency provides door-to-door transit service, similar to a taxi ride, from the client’s home to each scheduled appointment and back home again. WHCA operates a fleet of buses and vans, and also recruits, trains and reimburses a cadre of volunteer drivers to cover the large geographical distances between its clients’ homes and service destinations. Some clients are allowed to drive themselves to medical and social service appointments, and receive a mileage-based reimbursement from WHCA.

The general public is theoretically free to schedule rides with WHCA, although less than six percent of the current riders are unsubsidized, fare-paying customers. The average working person cannot use Sun Rides as a commuter service, for several reasons:

- general-public riders are taken on a space-available basis only, so even a ride scheduled well in advance will be bumped if the transit vehicle can be filled to capacity with contracted clients;
- unsubsidized fares are too high for low-wage workers to use the service on a daily basis;
- demand-response systems often serve rural communities just one day a week, with fluctuating departure and arrival times.

The sporadic nature of demand-response service typically eliminates public transit as a viable option for workers with inflexible daily hours, shift workers, and those with unpredictable on-call or overtime work responsibilities; in other words, for the majority of the rural workforce.

West Transportation operates the other public transit service in Washington County. This incorporated firm has adopted a public-private partnership model. It receives federal transit funds to operate a daily fixed-route (i.e., scheduled) public service between Calais and Bangor and back via US-1 and US-1A, as well as several smaller intercity fixed routes. It also markets its services to social service agencies (particularly for the longer trips to Ellsworth and Bangor). Thus the ridership on West Transportation routes is a mix of general public and contracted agency clients. Any revenues in excess of operating expenses generate corporate profits.

Fixed-route transit is much more predictable and reliable for the general public, and many workers would be willing to commute an hour or more each way in return for dependable daily transportation. However, West’s current fixed routes and schedules are too limited to accommodate the average 8-to-5 worker, let alone those on shift work or non-standard



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schedules. As currently configured, neither WHCA Sun Rides nor West Transportation are adequately meeting the transportation needs of the rural workforce in Washington County.

Ride-sharing programs are more flexible and far less costly to establish and operate than either fixed-route or demand-response transit service. They can be adapted to serve the needs of flex-time, overtime, and shift work employees, at least on a part-time basis.

<http://www.gomaine.org/> GoMaine offers free public computerized ride-share matching, trip planning services, helpful commuter tips for bicyclists and transit users, designated park-and-ride lots for carpoolers, and state-subsidized vanpool services.

To determine the potential market for a future commuter-oriented rural transit service or ride-sharing program in Washington County, GROWA planners analyzed socioeconomic data for households located within a 30-minute drive from the four largest employment centers in the county: Calais, Eastport, Machias, and Milbridge. (<http://www.gro-wa.org/income-distance-to-employment>).

The analysis focused on households with annual incomes of \$75,000 or less. This value was selected to include the entire HUD-defined low-to-moderate income population regardless of the size of any individual household, while also capturing a significant proportion of middle-class commuter households. Households earning less than \$75,000 comprise 80 percent or more of the existing households living within 30 miles of the largest employment centers in Washington County. They suffer greater financial impacts than more wealthy households due to the escalating cost of gasoline and vehicle ownership, and they stand to realize the greatest potential economic benefit if improved public transit or regional ride-sharing programs can increase their access to new and better job opportunities (or reduce their daily commuting costs to existing jobs).

More than 80 percent of all Washington County households living within a 30-mile radius of major employment centers currently earn less than \$75,000 per year, and these statistics will not change radically within the next five years. Washington County's service center communities are also statistically older than both the Maine average (42.7) and the county average (46.1). This is not surprising, as older residents tend to use more service center amenities, and moving closer allows them to access more services while driving fewer miles. Retirees (and younger adults with disabilities that preclude driving) will also benefit from any improvements to public transit and ride-sharing programs that are primarily intended to promote workforce development.

Current workers in the four service center regions might be induced to switch from their individual daily commutes to a new ride-sharing program or public transit service, assuming the service was available, affordable, and convenient. In the transportation survey of Washington County residents in 2009, approximately 42 percent responded affirmatively when asked, "Would you like to share rides to save money?" About 23 percent stated that they would not want to share rides under any circumstances, and the remaining 35.5 percent said "Maybe, if..." where they were encouraged to fill in the open-ended response with their personal reservations about ride-sharing.



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Suggested Actions

Innovative strategies and practices could greatly enhance the current level of service for all transit operations in Washington County, particularly in their capacity to serve working-age adults. The current emphasis on agency-contracted clients can be attributed to a chronically inadequate federal transit funding formula, offset by fairly generous contract reimbursement incentives that help to ensure the availability of rides for social service agency clients.

These financial realities have forced rural transit service managers to strictly prioritize their services and focus solely on the ridership and routes that generate enough revenue to allow them to continue operations. These traditional rural service delivery models – both fixed-route and demand-response – have created unintentional barriers that have effectively excluded rural workers from the opportunity to choose public transportation for their daily commuting.

At present, the “public” best served by the rural public transportation system is a very narrow subset of the total population. This is true all over the United States, not just in Washington County. However, other rural transit agencies have found ways to increase their efficiency and ridership that might work in Washington County. This assumes, of course, that the agencies delivering the transit services (currently WHCA and West Transportation) are willing to undergo changes – some minor, some fairly radical – to their current operations, in return for potential increases in ridership and efficiency. The new, externally managed MaineCare brokerage system pays transit providers only a small portion of the client reimbursement fees they were previously receiving through direct contract. Both agencies may be operating too close to a financial break-even point to risk expanding their services to accommodate workforce transit, even if the changes are likely to produce greater efficiencies and enhanced revenues over time.

Several alternative service ideas from other places are summarized below from the research. They all have some potential to expand access to public transportation and workforce development in Washington County.

- “Fixed-schedule” service – combines the convenience of demand-response service with a published daily schedule, making it more predictable and reliable for general public riders
- Immediate-response “Dial-A-Ride” service (works best as a community-based system in relatively compact population centers, with a strong local volunteer base if volunteer drivers are used)
- Establish transit stops at formal and informal “Park and Ride” lots
- Ride-sharing and vanpooling programs, often using GIS to match drivers to riders; some vanpool programs can be “self-organized” by a group of employees living in the same general area
- Innovative use of off-the-shelf transit scheduling software for [automated demand-response ride booking and real-time digital driver scheduling](#)
- Child-oriented transit service: hire a transit attendant to escort young children on rides to daycare/school/appointments, thus allowing the parent(s) to work
- Dues-paying, 24-7 non-profit ride service with incentives for pre-scheduling, flexible scheduling, and shared rides; successfully operating in [Portland, Maine](#) and surrounding communities
- Quick, easy, and cheap: provide easy-load bike racks on ALL vehicles in the public transit fleet!



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Interpolating from the 2009 survey results, it appears that up to 60 percent of working residents in the four service center regions could be induced to trade in their single-occupant daily commutes for a transit ride or ride-sharing arrangement, at least for a portion of their work week. A marketing campaign to “convert” existing commuters to public transit, carpooling, or vanpooling would also benefit job-hunters, who could seek new or better employment in the service center region as a direct result of improved access to reliable daily transportation between home and work.

Implementation already occurring

Washington County has already achieved positive public transportation and carbon-reduction outcomes that directly relate to the GROWashington-Aroostook project. Here are a few:

- The First Light Steering Committee issued a report with numerous recommendations for rebranding and improving transit service to increase ridership among the general public (Developing Community Access to Transit in Washington County <http://www.gro-wa.org/transportation-and-housing>).
- Maine Rural Partners issued a white paper in February of 2012 for the Community Caring Collective that reinforced and expanded on the initial recommendations from the First Light Steering Committee, and provided insightful analysis and a preliminary action plan for transitioning from a transit system heavily reliant on MaineCare reimbursement, to a system that would draw most of its ridership from shoppers, daily and occasional commuters, and non-drivers who can afford to pay for transportation, although it would continue to serve MaineCare and other social service agency clients. The report also recommended enhanced regional support for carpooling (including increased marketing efforts and at least a part-time paid coordinator position to match rider requests with drivers in their local area) as the most practical and cost-effective strategy to reduce single-vehicle travel within the large and sparsely populated expanses of Washington County (<http://www.gro-wa.org/transportation-and-housing>).
- A ridership survey by Maine Rural Partners documented that most people who use West Transportation and WHCA Sun Rides are highly satisfied with their transit experience, and appreciate the great customer service that the drivers provide (<http://www.gro-wa.org/assets/files/transportation-housing/WC-Transportation-SurveySummary-2009.pdf>).
- The regional transportation summit held in Machias in November 2013 attracted nearly 100 attendees and fostered new and lasting partnerships between the healthcare community and the transportation planning community in Washington County and Hancock County. The core working group continues to meet monthly to work on implementation of the key initiatives and policy recommendations from the summit (<http://www.gro-wa.org/downeast-acadia-transportation-summit>).

Additional resource needs

Additional work proposed for this component was compromised by the decision of the Maine Department of Housing and Human Services (DHHS) to transition in 2013 from a system of direct contracting and reimbursement to transit service providers for transport of MaineCare clients, to an external brokerage system with the management firm selected via competitive contract bid. As a result, rural transit agencies in Washington County are now getting only a fraction of the per-client reimbursement rate that they used to receive, with the bulk of the reimbursement going to the contracted brokerage firm. The agencies have historically used revenues from MaineCare clients to subsidize underfunded expenses of maintaining rural transit



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service, and they are operating very close to the break-even point following the loss of this significant funding stream.

Meanwhile, the current brokerage contract awardee, Coordinated Transportation Solutions (CTS), has struggled to provide timely and high-quality service throughout Maine ever since the brokerage opened in October 2013; DHHS has already announced that the current contract will not be renewed in June 2014, but Maine will stick with CTS until a new broker is selected. The chaos and uncertainty surrounding the brokerage system, including complex individual agency contract negotiations with CTS, have significantly disrupted normal public transit operations in Washington County for well over a year. System managers have been preoccupied with brokerage issues and the resulting fiscal impacts on staff and programs; as a result, they have not been able to fully participate in the GROWashington-Aroostook project to the extent that they might have wished. Until a new brokerage firm is established and all of the existing contracts are renegotiated with the new broker, rural transit agency managers are likely to be more interested in regaining fiscal and operational stability than in engineering change and expanding their services to better promote workforce development.

On March 28, 2014, Washington Hancock Community Agency is submitting a detailed bid to the Office of MaineCare Services to become the designated transportation broker serving Hancock and Washington Counties. The Washington County Council of Governments supported this proposal by letter dated March 14, 2014. If awarded this contract would return this brokerage service to an agency that has provided regional MaineCare Non-Emergency Transportation since 1975.