

**Developing Community Access to Transit in Washington County Planning Project
Final Report and Recommendations – December 2010**

Major Findings and Recommendations:

1. Public Perception & Dependence on Medical Trip Reimbursement

Finding: Public transportation remains an unfamiliar option among most residents and businesses. Available transit services are heavily reliant on the MaineCare medical reimbursement system, which adds to the perception that only income- or age-qualifying individuals are eligible to use the existing services. This significant reliance on the medical reimbursement system works against the mainstreaming of transit in several ways, including:

- a. Non-riders: The public image that services are only for the very needy, not them
- b. Riders: As the sole client base, the entitlement attitude can become prominent among dependent populations who expect society to cover their needs 100%, further deepening the rift between those who pay and those who ride.
- c. The resulting brain warp by all involved that the system is primarily a service for dependent individuals that can occasionally serve the general public *rather than* recognizing that we have a public transportation system with subsidies as needed for those needing help to fully access it (e.g. food stamps rather than specialized low income food stores).

WHCA has worked to change this perception with the new SunRides branding of its transit service but few new riders who are not engaged with the MaineCare system have come forward. Other members of the First Light Transit Steering Committee were disappointed that the SunRides rebranding took place without consultation at the same time that the First Light Transit branding was being developed.

Recommendation: Rebrand public transportation as First Light Transit System with regular rates emphasized and footnote that MaineCare reimbursement is an allowed form of payment. Publicize comparative costs of using an automobile and riding with others to market new way of thinking about transportation. Co-brand all transit providers and emerging carpool system as a member of the First Light Transit System and build brand recognition.

2. Rider Satisfaction

Finding: Those that do ride either West Bus or Sun Rides are very satisfied with their service. In-town shopping trips are highly valued by the core of riders who use them. Riders also tend to be loyal to the services and drivers with whom they are familiar.

Recommendation: Both providers are to be congratulated for their quality of service and customer satisfaction.

3. Increasing Utilization & Coordination of Existing Capacity

Finding: The fixed route services provided by West Transportation are underutilized and would greatly benefit from a feeder system that could get riders to and from Route 1 for pickup. Federal regulations only allow West to travel ¼ mile from Route 1 for passenger pickup. As the population ages, there are more and more people who cannot drive a car and can afford to pay for transportation. On the feeder end, there are opportunities for taxi services and additional compensated volunteer drivers, many of whom rely on the additional income provided by the medical travel reimbursement system. On the destination end, a more cohesive system could be set up with medical providers and local transit providers such as the Lynx, who have demonstrated willingness to coordinate on case-by-case bases. Barriers include:

- a. Lack of a system, including providers, marketing and coordination
- b. Lack of more organized coordination with medical providers to schedule regular patient visits by geography to facilitate shared transportation
- c. Need for shuttle system in-town Bangor-Brewer
- d. Competition among providers for medical reimbursement to pay for costs of the service, including dispatch and coordination
- e. Conflict between culture, communication and administrative systems of West Bus and WHCA that interfere with collaborative opportunities, notably:
 - a. Lack of rapid response phone dispatch capacity at West Bus discourages referrals
 - b. Lack of willingness of WHCA to accept phone authorizations for bus drivers to administer ride vouchers for rapid response and streamlined administration; West Bus uses such systems easily with Penquis CAP and Downeast Transportation Services

Recommendation: As recommended in prior Biennial Transit Plans, a ride broker that assigned riders to the most efficient service, coupled with a unified billing system and major promotional campaign with common goals of increased ridership shared by all providers regardless of carrier distribution, might turn this around. Ideally a zip car system would be added at major destinations such as Ellsworth and Bangor-Brewer to enable a variety of errands to be accomplished by riders who can drive a car, joining taxis, BAT and the Lynx to enable in-town transportation as needed. Such a service might make a more direct run from Calais to Bangor far more attractive. The comparative dollar costs need to be clearly advertised and service timed for maximum convenience, perhaps alternating schedules on different days to provide choice for short and long in-town times.

4. Carpooling

Finding: Regardless of marketing for additional bus riders, the Team finds that the greater opportunity to lessening single occupancy travel lies in establishing and marketing a carpooling system which helps people find compatible neighbors with whom to share rides on a regular basis accommodating a variety of transportation needs and schedules. Route 1 sews Washington County together. Existing transit stops supplemented by other markets at intersections along Route 1 could be transformed to First Light Transit park & ride lots (recommended locations attached). Parking lot users would be encouraged to patronize the stores providing the parking and hopefully sales would increase.

Recommendation: This program could be started on a pilot basis led perhaps by the Social Capital team of Washington County: One Community. A part-time coordinator working 10-20 hours/week (ideally more at first) to get the program running could staff a ride board and identify initial riders who are willing to carpool at least once/week to some regular destination, whether work, shopping or entertainment and document their experiences.

Ideally Washington County: One Community, a unit of Washington County government, would officially sponsor *First Light Transit* as a collaborative endeavor. However, further research is needed regarding liability agreements with Washington County government, West Bus, WHCA and participating park & ride lot owners and a more formalized governance system would need to be put in place (even if just making the current collaborative arrangement operating under the WC:OC Infrastructure & Social Capital Team “official”).

While all parties appear to be enthusiastic, the program should not be launched without at least a part-time coordinator and plan in place. Further research is needed on the information & matchmaking system for informal carpooling. Ideally the newspaper insert

and *First Light Transit* handout anticipated earlier in the project would be broadly distributed and the system would begin with a loud public fanfare both carpooling and riding the buses.

5. **GOMAINE**

Finding: *GOMAINE* (also marketed as *Job Link* by WHCA) has not been promoted very much in Washington County. The county has few significant employers with common shift times and employee hometown origins to establish a vanpool service unless it picked up riders along Route 1. Encouraging a carpooling service among a small number of individuals from a similar area who can communicate about attaching shopping and other errands on certain days would likely have more success. One of the key selling features of *GOMAINE* for workers with children or other dependent family members is the guaranteed ride home. Only Calais has a taxi service to deliver the guaranteed ride home, making marketing even more difficult. Given that *GOMAINE* is a statewide program, there is an obligation to find a solution for the guaranteed ride home feature providing there is evidence that commuters would carpool. Again, we believe that the market for other rides beyond employment is at least as large and should be combined with if not immersed within a *GOMAINE* promotion effort.

Recommendation: *GOMAINE* must secure guaranteed ride home providers statewide. Washington County lacks a car rental facility; car rental could be added to an auto repair or sales facility. *GOMAINE* could put this service out to bid, work with Enterprise to establish services in Washington County or coordinate with Sunrise County Economic Council and other business development providers to identify businesses willing and able to provide transportation services. Perhaps a cooperative or other form of taxi service could be established to facilitate insurance and other likely hurdles to drivers getting into the transportation service business. Perhaps West Bus could add such a feature to its transportation service line.

6. **Increasing the Pool of Drivers (Paid and Volunteer)**

Finding: The need for additional paid and volunteer drivers remains and may be even more acute than it was 2 years ago. This planning project did not extend much effort in solving this problem given other priorities and limited resources. Beginning in 2009, WHCA committed to a stipended volunteer transportation coordinator system in the Eastport area that is doing well and may serve as a model for other communities. Such systems are highly dependent on finding the right coordinator with an outgoing personality that encourages socialization.

Recommendation: Bring the market for drivers to the Workforce Investment Board, Career Center and Eastern Area Agency on Aging. Perhaps combine with taxi businesses opportunity advertising through the Down East Business Alliance, Sunrise County Economic Council, Women, Work and Community and other business support avenues. Consider offering an affordable and accessible training program for transportation services. Perhaps market via a short video of some existing drivers who can speak to enjoyment and adequacy of reimbursement system as applicable.

7. **General System Coordination**

Finding: WHCA operates a highly sophisticated call center using specialized software in its Ellsworth office to schedule rides, reimbursement providers (most notably self-drivers) and bill the Department of Human Services for eligible rides. This system works well, administering a combination of van, volunteer driver and self-drive reimbursement. WHCA riders cater to a largely repeat clientele who rely on MaineCare or other subsidized program reimbursement. This system does not work well with regard to feeding the fixed route

service operated by West Bus, resulting in duplication of trips to Bangor. One of the reasons for this is that West Bus does not staff a phone center to enable fast response to ride assignments. It is arguable that more staff time would be spent trying to make trip arrangements with other providers than it costs to provide the trip, especially if the trip is shared with other SunRides riders. Another is that it is easier for a client to just get in one vehicle for the entire trip and have the same provider return them home.

Given the enormous investment in WHCA's dispatch and billing system, it would make sense to house a ride brokerage service there. However, there is zero confidence by West Bus and outside observers that WHCA staff would assign rides on a carrier-neutral basis due first to the current payment system and secondly to organizational loyalty. WHCA proposed an "Information Station" service along these lines in the Fall of 2009 to MaineDOT that was opposed by West Transportation.

Recommendation: One solution, especially given the geography of this project to be Washington County, is for an independent ride broker to be hired and supervised by a neutral oversight board including but not limited to representatives from each of the service providers who would develop policy and conduct reviews of how well the system was functioning. The coordinator would have to have a close working relationship with all providers including the WHCA dispatch staff since such a large volume of rides is processed through that system. If the service would result in increased ridership and reduced ridematching burden on the participating providers, it would make sense for each provider to pay for a share of the coordinator from MaineDOT general operating support funds. Additional funding might be raised by private sponsors or donors but ideally the price for rides provided would cover a share of the cost of covering the broker.

Ideally a "First Light Transit System" pass could be used on any participating service with a central billing system. For those paying for rides, a prepaid debit card system might work similar to TransPass to facilitate transactions. Drivers are also able to keep log books when rides are billable to MaineCare.

8. Conclusion

The First Light Transit Steering Committee remains committed to addressing the issue of increasing transportation choices for Washington County residents and visitors. The reliance on MaineCare reimbursement as the fiscal backbone of the system needs to be turned around for a viable public transportation system to develop. Given the psychological barrier to using buses and scattered population, we believe the greatest opportunity for reducing transportation costs and increasing access is through establishment of an effective carpooling system. Should a coordinator position be created for the carpool system, adding a brokering role for transit providers would ideally be added to the position. In either case, a marketing effort will need to be conducted. However, the carpool system could be tested quietly with willing pilot riders before it is fully launched. Social marketing similar to that working for Washington County: One Community's "The Biggest Loser" campaign may well be the most effective route to changing ingrained habits. As gas prices rise again, the cost savings of carpooling will increase its attractiveness. Any ride broker system must have safeguards to ensure that referrals are made fairly to all providers; protocols for assigning rides must be approved by a Steering Committee representing all providers. The system must ensure that the costs of referring, transferring and billing for rides are fairly apportioned overall without creating unnecessary administration. In the end, if good will, flexibility and common sense are allowed to prevail and the provider members see themselves as a team with a common mission, the system can work.

Note: See Recommended Next Steps on Following Page