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#### *Abridgment*

## Post-Bus for Rural Passenger Transportation and Rural Mail Delivery: An Idea Whose Time Has Come

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Rural areas have a growing need for public transportation, but service is declining due to high costs and diminishing subsidies. The U.S. Postal Service faces similar problems with its rural service. A number of European countries faced similar problems and have solved them, to some extent, by combining public transportation with mail deliveries. Several studies have shown that this approach may be successful in this country. The possibility of reducing the cost of providing both services by combining them demands experimentation.

Rural areas have become increasingly isolated in the last several decades. Declines in rural population and the competition of urban shopping centers have caused the demise of many small-town stores and service enterprises. The resulting rural job loss has been compounded by declining agricultural employment, which has forced many rural residents to commute to urban job locations. Social services, which are important to rural as well as urban residents, locate in cities and large towns where most clients live. Many rural communities have become "bedroom towns" and rural citizens are now dependent in many ways on a distant urban center.

These trends have created a hardship for the rural poor, elderly, handicapped, and young, who cannot operate or afford an automobile. Unfortunately, public transit has been unable to alleviate this problem. Low, dispersed demand and long distances make commercial bus services unprofitable in rural areas. Government-sponsored transportation is costly and funds for it are scarce and decreasing. Certainly this instability warrants the investigation of new approaches to fulfilling the growing transportation needs of rural residents.

#### THE POST-BUS CONCEPT

One possible approach is to combine rural transit with the conveyance of mail between post offices. Postal service, like transportation, is a deficit operation in rural areas. Since both public transportation and postal services involve similar driver and vehicle costs, there would appear to be potential savings for both (and a reduction in the overall need for government subsidies) if one driver and one vehicle could perform the duties of both mail delivery and passenger transport.

Highway contract routes (commonly known as star routes) are contracted mail pickup and delivery routes that serve most rural post offices. In general, star route carriers make runs twice a day to outlying post offices from either a regional mail processing center or a larger post office. Often these distribution points are also regional retail and human service centers. If passenger service

were added to highway contract routes, they could take rural residents into regional centers in the morning and return them to outlying towns in the afternoon.

Another advantage of bus service on star routes is the suitability of post offices as bus stops. Most have a heated lobby where passengers could wait out of the weather. Also, post office clerks would be on hand to answer questions and, perhaps, also to sell tickets. Post offices already provide other community services, such as passport registration and food stamp distribution, so the addition of bus stop services is not unthinkable. Dale Massie, director of Appalachian Ohio Regional Transit Association, a rural system that uses post offices as bus stops, remarks that rural post offices are generally the focal points of rural communication and, therefore, make ideal focal points for rural transportation.

No U.S. Postal Service regulation prohibits the combination of star route service with passenger transportation. In fact, the U.S. Postal Service may pursue contracts with passenger common carriers when their routes and schedules fit postal service needs (39 U.S. Code 5214). A star route contractor may be an individual, a partnership, or a corporation (1). Contractors must abide by the rules and regulations of the Basic Transportation Services Contract General Provisions. Concerning passenger service, the provisions require the following (2):

The mail shall not be delayed to accommodate passengers .... The mail shall be transported in an enclosed, water-proof compartment, equipped with secure locking devices .... If the contractor is authorized to carry passengers, the mail must be carried in a compartment separate from the passengers so that they cannot have access to the mail.

The idea of combining mail and passenger delivery is not new. For instance, the stage coaches of early America performed both duties. In more recent times the postal departments of Britain, Switzerland, Finland, and Sweden have established motorized Post-bus service. The continental services are the oldest; they began between 1910 and 1930. Swedish and Finnish Post-buses operate in rural areas and use vehicles that range in size from 9 to 55 seats (3,4). The Swedish and Finnish buses are owned and operated by the respective postal services. In Switzerland, the post office contracts some routes to private carriers (5).

British Post-buses have operated since the late 1960s (6). The majority of British Post-buses are similar to their continental counterparts; they provide a basic two-way service to and from a town or village. British services differ, however, in that almost all involve house-to-house delivery and collection rather than simply the transportation of bulk mail. The first morning service of a typical British Post-bus will be the delivery run, which perhaps takes two or more hours to cover a 15-mile route. The minibus will then return to base, stopping only to drop off or pick up passengers. An afternoon run follows. This will be a fast run out to the distant end; stops are made on the return journey only for passengers and to collect mail from post offices and wayside mail boxes.

Most of the British Post-buses are in Scotland. There, 126 buses provide a basic public transit service over more than 2500 miles of road. Most of the areas served were without passenger transportation only a few years ago (7). According to the Scottish Postal Board, Post-buses provide a small but useful supplement to post office revenue in areas where traditional postal services are inevitably uneconomic. They do all this at minimum cost to the government or local authorities.

Prime responsibility for providing conventional public transportation in Scotland has been with the Scottish Transport Group. Inevitably, its services require substantial financial support from the local authority and can, therefore, only be justified where there is adequate demand for passenger transportation. This means that Scottish Transport buses, like our intercity buses, link main population centers and serve the more sparsely populated areas directly on those links but do not, for the most part, provide services in the rural areas off the main routes.

In 1971 the Scottish Postal Board recognized that vans used for household mail delivery were valuable resources that were sadly underused. Since a vehicle and driver were needed for basic postal delivery and collection services, the major part of the cost of providing a bus service was already committed. A new government bus grant enabled the post office to buy 11-seater minibuses for little more than the cost of delivery vans. Qualification for a public transportation fuel tax rebate meant that running costs were no higher and, in some cases, even lower. In these circumstances the passenger fares became a net contribution to the cost of running the postal service in rural Scotland, and the development of the Post-bus service in isolated areas became more an imperative than an opportunity.

Our counterpart to the adapted British service, rural mail delivery, does not currently appear to be feasible for transporting passengers, mainly because only once-a-day service is offered. However, highway contract routes do provide similar opportunities to solve similar public transportation problems in rural areas.

#### U.S. STUDIES

The California Department of Transportation has studied the feasibility of passenger service along star routes for rural communities near the city of Redding, a regional commercial center (8). The three star routes investigated originate in Redding in the morning, go out in three separate directions to serve the outlying post offices, and return to Redding in the late afternoon or early evening. The feasibility study was based on contractor operation of passenger service by using six-passenger crew-cab pickup trucks. Estimates of costs and revenues showed potential for increased contractor earnings

if passenger service were offered.

Although the project's final report was enthusiastic, nothing further has been done to establish the service. This is mainly because a subsequent study concluded that demand would be low due to the morning-outbound, afternoon-inbound nature of the routes, which is the opposite of that desired for rural transportation service.

West Virginia's Department of Welfare undertook a more-extensive endeavor in the design of a Post-bus demonstration program for rural Pocahontas County (9). The study proposed that the county be served entirely by a Post-bus system, thus providing a controlled experiment. The regional transportation authority would contract for passenger transportation with the individual star route contractors, therefore the regional transportation authority could manage and coordinate transit services without being responsible for mail transportation. Practically all of the star routes chosen make only one trip from their home post office a day. Five of the six routes deliver household mail along their circuit in addition to bulk post office deliveries. The study noted that the routes were not ideal for passenger service, but could be improved by minor changes that would not significantly alter the postal service's distribution network.

The study determined that seven vehicles would be required, each with right-side driver placement, partitions to separate the driver and mail storage areas from the passengers, heavy-duty construction, and access convenient for the elderly and handicapped. The cost of these along with other expenses, such as contractor payments and vehicle maintenance, was found to exceed estimated revenues, which would include fares and lease fees paid by the contractors for the vehicles. A 50-percent subsidy would be required, but the study claimed that this was lower than the projected subsidies of other operations.

The West Virginia project has also not reached the implementation stage, primarily due to the U.S. Postal Service's unwillingness to participate. The postal service noted no insurmountable legal hurdles in the plan but believed that the administrative problems would be monumental.

Both the California and West Virginia studies chose star routes that are not typical of routes in many parts of the country. Two trips a day are made to all but the smaller, more remote post offices. Box delivery is occasionally a part of star route contracts, but normally it is done by postal employees on rural delivery routes. The choice of star routes with these conditions hurt West Virginia's design study, but its greatest fault was in proposing such an extravagant demonstration project. Certainly the postal service cannot be expected to willingly allow such changes in their services for only a trial period and with no apparent benefit to them.

#### DEMONSTRATION IS NEEDED

The cooperation of the U.S. Postal Service would be helpful, if not necessary, for establishing Post-bus service. Many star route contractors would be reluctant to initiate passenger service themselves or contract under a transportation authority without postal service approval. A transportation authority could efficiently agree on and work out the details of a combination of services directly with the postal service. In addition, changes in route or schedule would improve many highway contract routes for passenger transportation. The postal service would rightly expect rewards for its involvement, perhaps in the form of reduced contract costs or



or transportation authority and the star route contractor could become part of the rebidding or renegotiation process. The postal service and the local transportation provider would agree on a division of costs and resolve conflicts of the two services. The contractor would then be simultaneously responsible for the mail delivery and passenger service contracts. The sale of tickets by post office clerks could also be arranged. Since the postal service has accounting procedures for the return of fees for such things as passports to the proper federal agencies, the return of fares to the transportation authority should pose no problem.

#### CONCLUSIONS

In the United States, rural areas are becoming economically more difficult to provide with postal service and public transportation. European governments faced similar problems and have solved them, to some extent, by combining the two services. Highway contract routes appear capable of providing passenger transportation here. The possibility and probability that total government outlays for passenger transportation and mail transportation could be reduced by combining the two services demand experimentation with Post-bus service.

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