

Get on the Bus

Connecting Small Communities on Montana's Hi-Line

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In frontier and rural areas, reliable transportation within small towns and from small towns to larger communities is one of many challenges, as residents pursue employment, educational opportunities, medical needs, and recreational activities, and make other necessary trips. Access to transportation services is a key to sustaining the livelihood and enhancing the vitality of smaller communities in a rural region.

Problem

Transportation has been a major need for people living in the Hi-Line region of north central Montana; residents often must travel to obtain or retain employment, receive an education, and gain access to medical care and other basic services. Blaine and Hill Counties along Montana's border with Canada were without public transportation services for

nearly 20 years. A previous transit system had offered limited service connecting two towns, Havre and Great Falls, but eventually ceased operation.

Havre is the Hill County seat, with a population of 9,700, and offers medical, employment, and retail services. But the population density in the outlying areas is low—1.5 residents per square mile—so that establishing a transit system that would allow residents access to services in Havre was difficult. In addition, two Native American reservations, Rocky Boy's in Hill County and Fort Belknap in Blaine County, had struggled to provide transit services within and outside their boundaries.

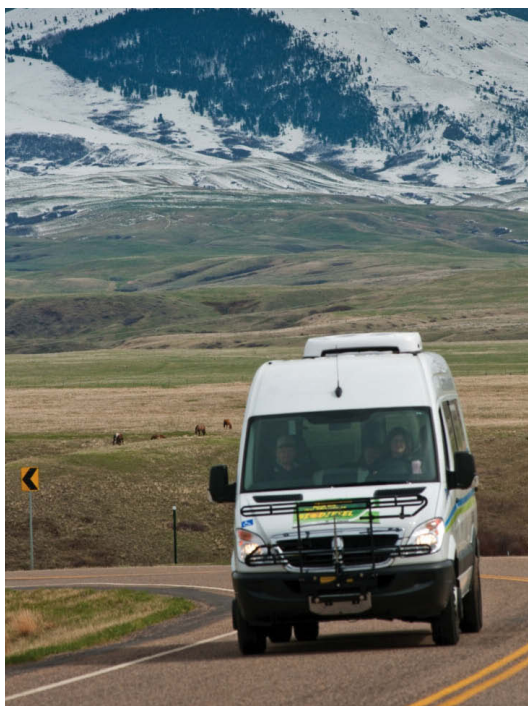
Solution

Initiating a regional transit service in this area had been a key goal of Opportunity Link, Inc., a non-profit organization based in Havre. The organization strives to create and implement strategies to reduce poverty in the Hi-Line region and to encourage community-driven partnerships. In August 2008, efforts began on the development of a transit service.

Dubbed North Central Montana Transit (NCMT), the proposed service aimed to connect Havre, the largest city in the region, to Harlem, Chinook, and the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in Blaine County, and to Box Elder and Laredo in Rocky Boy's Indian Reservation. Additional service would connect all of these communities to Great Falls, Montana, 114 miles from Havre. Great Falls is the only urban community in the area, with larger medical, educational, and retail facilities.

Opportunity Link enlisted the public transit research expertise of the Western Transportation Institute (WTI) at Montana State University-Bozeman. The WTI team was asked to provide project management and to develop a plan for implementing public transportation on the Hi-Line.

WTI's coordination plan considered the resources available for a transit system and how the various stakeholders would work together to implement and



NCMT bus provides much-needed service in a remote rural area. In addition, buses have piloted the year-round use of a locally grown and produced 5 to 20 percent biodiesel blend, processed by the Bio-Energy Center at Montana State University-Northern.

support the proposed service. The plan was developed through community meetings and through meetings with key partners, such as the tribal and county governments. The planning process also included the system's partner agencies and organizations, as well as representatives of the communities and areas to be covered by the bus system, in considering the proposed routes and services.

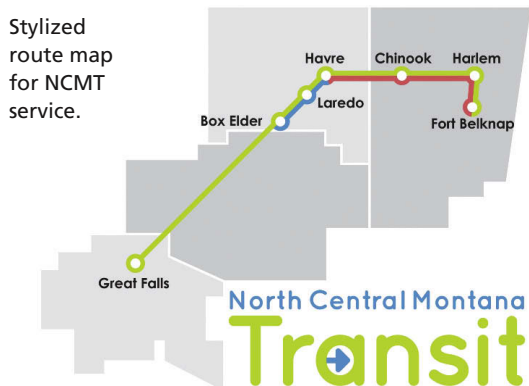
Route planning tasks addressed specific operational details, such as identifying origins and destinations and the best routes for connecting those points. The cost of operating these routes was compared against a draft budget, and adjustments were made to keep service levels and the overall cost of the services within the budget. The routes and service levels were modified several times as updated budget information became available.

As part of the process, stakeholders formed a Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC) consisting of elected officials; representatives from senior centers, transportation agencies, and medical, education, social service, community-based, and minority advocacy organizations in Hill and Blaine Counties; and representatives of tribal agencies from the Fort Belknap and Rocky Boy's Indian Reservations. The North Central Montana Regional TAC approved the coordination plan in February 2009.

Application

With the help of WTI, Opportunity Link submitted the application and coordination plan to the Montana Department of Transportation's Operating Grant Program. In the application, the TAC requested \$75,000 for operating funds from the Federal Transit Administration and three 21-passenger buses. Partners including Montana State University–Northern, Blaine and Hill Counties, Northern Montana Hospital in Havre, and other local agencies and organizations provided local funding.

On August 24, 2009, one of the new NCMT buses, with 18 passengers on board, made its maiden voyage; more than 200 supporters cheered it on. In the



first week of operation, NCMT provided 139 rides, followed by more than 200 rides in the second week, when the line received its first request for posting marketing materials in the buses. As of March 2010, NCMT ridership had increased to an average of 300 to 400 rides per week, with a monthly average of nearly 1,600 rides. The weekly totals matched what some had projected for the monthly ridership totals.

Benefits

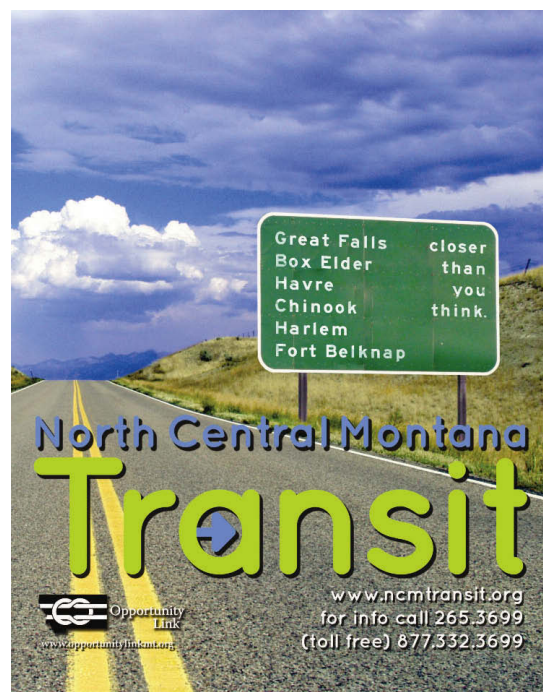
In urban areas, public transportation, or transit, is often viewed as a means to address congestion. In

rural and frontier areas, however, transit is often needed to provide mobility for those who lack access to basic services—such as the grocery store, medical care, or education. Despite this critical need, public agencies traditionally have considered transit systems infeasible and unaffordable in areas with low population densities.

The successful creation of a transit system within a region can expand viable transportation options, providing economic and environmental benefits for the communities and an improved quality of life for residents. For this reason, the Federal Highway Administration and the Federal Transit Administration recognized Opportunity Link and its partners in NCMT with the 2010 Transportation Planning Excellence Award. The biennial award recognizes outstanding initiatives to develop and implement innovative transportation planning practices. NCMT was honored in two categories: Planning and Leadership and Tribal Transportation Planning. NCMT has shown that public transportation can succeed in rural and frontier areas through partnerships and coordination.

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NCMT poster campaign emphasizes the more convenient connections between major rural origins and destinations.

Suggestions for "Research Pays Off" topics are welcome. Contact G. P. Jayaprakash, Transportation Research Board, Keck 488, 500 Fifth Street, NW, Washington, DC 20001 (202-334-2952; gjayaprakash@nas.edu).