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# Meeting the Transportation Needs of Rural Communities

## Lessons That Cannot Be Learned from Urban Transit

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Rural transit did not become part of the social milieu of the United States until 1964, when President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty produced an array of new federally supported services. Rural transit has a short history—about 50 years—but urban transit and its planning have been around for much longer. The Industrial Revolution in the 18th and 19th centuries meant that people no longer worked at home and needed a way to travel to factories, which urban transit provided (1–2). When in the 20th century mass-produced

automobiles became the preferred mode of travel and employers and employees moved to the suburbs, however, the transit industry started to lose its share of the market and did little in response to attract new passengers or keep old ones. Transit rapidly became the conveyance for those who had no other choice (3).

Rural transit then burst onto the transportation scene, new and somewhat

Above: Federal services introduced by Johnson's War on Poverty in the mid-1960s ushered in new attention to rural transit.

The Industrial Revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries created a need for urban transit, as people sought ways to travel to factories for work.



Photo: Philly History.org

amorphous (Figure 1, below). It was the result of a combination of factors—some shared with urban areas, such as the dominance of the automobile as a mode of travel, and some unique, such as the need to support travel over long distances to services and trades. Unlike urban transit, rural transit has no prescribed federal planning requirements for a transit development plan; that is, a wide range of activities and service types can emerge to fit the multitude of unique conditions found in rural America. Even the term “rural” has various meanings: for some, it may mean the lack of population density; for others, it may mean distance to a metropolitan area or total population of a given geographic area.

The accepted definition of “rural” used in the field of rural passenger transportation in the United States—and used by the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) to administer Section 5311 Rural Area Formula Program Grants—is any area that is not urbanized; that is, any area that does not have a population of 50,000 or more.

## Rural Transit Is Not Miniature Urban Transit

Rural transit is not miniature or scaled-down urban transit. The term “rural transit” refers to a service available to the public in a vehicle of varying types and dimensions. The vehicle generally is rubber-tired or waterborne. By comparison, urban transit can have these same attributes, but also can include light rail, heavy commuter rail, trolleys, and more.

To think of rural transit as miniature urban transit unfairly characterizes the differences between rural and urban communities and their transportation needs. Early rural transit advocates perceived a degree of unfairness and felt the amount of funding rural transit was receiving in comparison with urban areas was not equitable. They believed that it was not fair for rural transit to receive no federal funding support when urban transit was receiving federal support.

In 1977, before the Surface Transportation Act of 1978 was enacted—the most significant legislation supporting rural transit—the Rural America Organization stated that although 60% of low-income need was



Photo: Peter Schauer

The first annual Missouri Transportation Workshop, sponsored by OATS, took place in September 1975 at Camp Cloverpoint in Kaiser, Missouri.

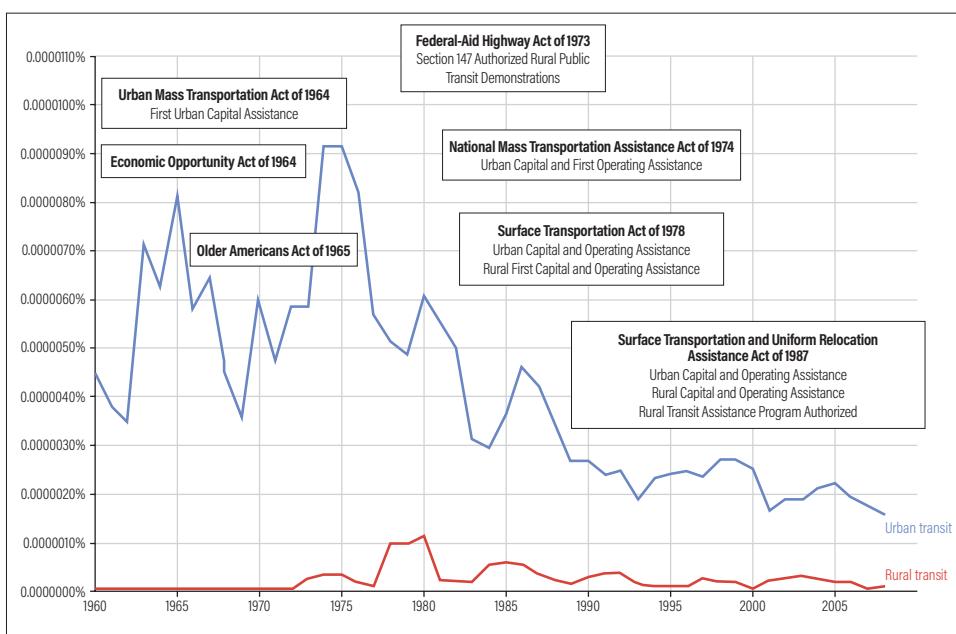
found in rural areas, only 6% of federal outlays for public transportation in fiscal year (FY) 1976 was allocated to rural areas (4).

The inequity of the distribution of funds was a rallying point for a growing number of rural transit providers and social service advocates in the late 1960s and early 1970s. These groups emphasized the need for rural passenger transportation, which became evident in the early 1970s as a result of the social services established by the Older Americans Act of 1965 (OAA) and by the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 (EOA). These two pieces of legislation established state units on aging and local Area Agencies on Aging

(AAAs) and authorized the formation of local Community Action Agencies (CAAs), respectively, as part of the War on Poverty.

AAA units established senior gathering places (senior centers), which included nutrition sites for dining and other health and recreation programs for senior citizens. Similarly, CAAs established a wide range of social services—including job training, youth development, energy assistance and home weatherization, and more—to eliminate poverty and its root causes. According to the Connecticut Association for Community Action website, “the Community Action Program would serve the role of helping members of the community access the services they needed on the community level, with the ultimate goal of guiding the people benefiting from the services to independence and sustainability” (6).

Central to both OAA and EOA was the independence and sustainability of the people they were intended to serve. OAA enhanced the independence and sustainability of older people to live in their own homes and EOA enhanced the independence and sustainability of low-income people. Both CAAs and AAAs quickly recognized that independence and sustainability could not be achieved without accessibility to services, and they set about



**FIGURE 1** Significant milestones in rural transit (red) and urban transit (blue) and their relative term mention in books, 1960–2008 (5).

Note: Highway Research Board was renamed the Transportation Research Board in 1974.



Photo: Knox County Government

Rural transit programs enable seniors in Knox County, Tennessee, to live more independently and to pursue interests.

establishing formal and ad hoc transit programs for the people who needed their services. The number of rural services of all types grew exponentially (7).

A variety of service types were implemented, even voucher-type services that used private taxis. Some services had purpose-built vehicles with specialized wheelchair lifts, and others simply provided services with government surplus military buses.<sup>1</sup> CAAs and AAAs both made accessibility a high priority; the ultimate goal of their transportation efforts was ensuring that all their services were accessible.

## Planning and Understanding Demand

How much transportation can allow a rural person to have an independent and sustainable life? Even after approximately 40 years of federal involvement in rural public transit—and 50 years of federal involvement in urban transit—it has not been rigorously established what exactly constitutes sufficiency in mobility or accessibility in order for transportation users to maintain a minimum standard of living (8). Thus, rural transit struggles to make the case for public financial support based on conventional transportation planning programs, as the strict focus on maximizing the mobility of people and goods does not work.

<sup>1</sup> Highlights of the development of AAAs and CAPs—creative, innovative programs that ranged from West Virginia's TRIP program, modeled after food stamps, to a wide range of paratransit services—are presented in the history of TRB Rural Committee. For more, see Schauer (10).

With no federally mandated planning practices for early rural transit development, advocates instead argued that plans should be based on people's need to access social and medical services in order to have sustainable and independent lives. Simply making sure that people and goods can move does not translate into accessibility of needed services and goods. Conventional mobility planning has resulted in a transportation system that primarily supports private automobile travel—but how does this serve those without access to a car?

What would it mean, then, to refocus transportation planning on accessibility rather than simply on mobility? Without set standards, this would be difficult. Even the most obvious service standards (for example, seven-day-a-week transit service that offers an alternative to an automobile and allows a person to live a sustainable and independent life) are extremely rare in rural settings—and even in urban settings, for that matter.

Without measurable standards such as those for highways, it is difficult to define rural public transit as a utility versus a social service. The utility-versus-social-service ar-

gument about transit perhaps allows urban transit to be called a utility, based on its necessity for commerce, labor movement, and the environment. Rural public transit functions more as a social service, and the funding mechanisms described below further bolster this conclusion.

## Discovery Through Demonstrations

For advocates and state DOT officials in the early 70's, it became clear that rural public transit required a different approach to planning and implementation of services. Transportation planners would have to respond in new and different ways, particularly when planning for persons who are elderly or disabled, of whom there are proportionately more in rural than in urban areas (9).

When CAAs and AAAs developed early transportation services, these agencies were not quantitatively or logically sophisticated. Their programs needed participants and participants needed the programs but could not access them, so CAAs and AAAs initiated passenger transportation services to support their



Photo: David Wilson, Flickr

Missouri's OATS Transit provides deviated-fixed routes and medical, senior, toddler, preschool, and general rural transportation to 97 counties in the state—making it the largest and most unique system of its kind in the country.

general mission of independence and sustainability. Since many people could not sustain their lives independently without transportation, the agencies provided whatever passenger transportation their budgets would allow, rather than conducting a thorough analysis of community needs. Eventually, more-sophisticated and more-frequent analysis was performed as more federal funds became available and as some states began to require planning procedures, but these analyses were not necessarily more precise in their approaches to quantify need or demand.<sup>2</sup>

Because of this, early practitioners of rural public transit or rural specialized passenger transportation typically used two traditional methods of planning and implementing services: demonstrations and peer group comparisons. The most successful of the demonstration approach is Missouri's OATS program (previously the Older Adults Transportation Service, now formally titled Operating Above the Standard), the largest rural public transit system in the United States.

In the early 1970s, the Missouri state unit on aging reportedly offered funds to a group of senior citizen advocates to study the problems of older adult transportation in Missouri, but the advocates instead pursued a demonstration grant of \$30,259 for the actual operation of a small bus service. The August 9, 1971, minutes of the OATS founding committee documents the discussion of the founders, in which they concluded: "We will be a demonstration project and if we can show a need for this program and it is a success we can then expand to other counties and ask for a larger grant." From that small beginning—with three 15-passenger maxi-vans operating in four counties—OATS eventually grew to its current size: 800 vehicles and 700 employees providing services in 87 counties, with an operating budget of \$28,992,420 (9). The need for OATS has been demonstrated.

<sup>2</sup> For more on problems of predicting need or demand for rural public transit, see Schauer (10). For more on problems of predicting need and demand for persons with disabilities, see Rosenbloom (7).

**TABLE 1** Percent of Total Operating Budget for Rural Public Transit (10–11)

FUNDING SOURCE	1985 (%)	2015 (%)	TREND
Federal	26.5	34.0	↑
State	11.0	19.0	↑
Local	43.7	26.0	↓
Fares	27.8 <sup>a</sup>	9.0	NA
Contracts	NA <sup>a</sup>	10.0	NA

<sup>a</sup> Data for contracts and composition of fares in 1985 are not available. It is likely that fares included contract revenues.

Validating need and demand through demonstrations was formalized through the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1973 Section 147, the Rural Highway Public Transportation Demonstration Program. This was the first federally funded initiative for rural transit to recognize the transportation needs of rural America as a legitimate part of the nation's emerging transportation policy. In 1974, funds were appropriated and by 1979, 134 projects were awarded—at least one in every state. Some of those projects continue to this day, but more than a few were discontinued or consolidated into larger efforts as rural public transit funding became available through the Surface Transportation Assistance Act of 1978, which included a funding source specifically for rural public transit in its Section 18.

By this time, a wide variety of services had dedicated funding sources, so transit advocates began asking questions to evaluate these services to get a better sense of the need, demand, and operational costs for services. These all became pertinent questions, especially for state officials who were concerned about substituting U.S. DOT Section 18 funds for previously dedicated U.S. Department of Health and Human Services social service funds provided by AAAs, CAAs, and similar organizations.

Although the data are not conclusive, the trend has been toward increased federal and state support of rural transit as a percentage of operating costs and a reduced percentage from local sources. Of course, the amount and total operating costs of services have increased since 1978, but in general, federal and state dollars for rural transit have increased both

in aggregate and as a percentage of operating costs (see Table 1, above).

Despite those concerns, states supported the concept of rural public transit but were somewhat stunned to find that they were having difficulties obligating all their new Section 18 funds. Upon examination, it turned out that this was due to the requirement that operating grants be matched 50% with local funds. For example, a \$100,000 project with a grant request for \$50,000 in Section 18 operating funds had to be matched with \$50,000 in local unrestricted funds. For many potential rural transit projects, it was impossible to secure 50% hard-cash, local funds for a match.

## Local Match Redefined

The redefinition of "local match" was a boon for rural transit. This began in the state of Texas, which had obligated only 35% of its FY 1980 funds as of May 31, 1983 (12). Transit advocates and service providers in Texas were understandably concerned until Austin-based transit consultant Peter Canga devised a solution to the local match problem that ultimately changed the nature of rural transit. Canga understood both the heritage of rural transit as a social service and the workings of federal grant programs; through creativity and persistence, he was able to secure a memo from the Federal Highway Administration dated August 1982, which stated: "funds obtained by a Sec. 18 operator through purchase of service contracts with a human service agency may be used for local match without any restrictions" (12). The implementation of this new matching procedure required a 1985 amendment to

# Public Transit in Native American Communities

## Early Beginnings and Progress

The Johnson administration provided additional social service funding to American Indian tribes and reservations and, in 1968, called for an end to previously active tribal termination programs (1). As a result of Johnson's War on Poverty, tribes started providing transportation to specific social services in the 1960s.

In addition to the growth of social services and the accompanying need to transport people to those programs, the emergence and growth of tribal rural public transportation also was heavily influenced by public transit demonstrations. In 1975, as part of the Federal Highway Administration's Section 147 demonstration program, 11 demonstrations were conducted for tribal organizations within Indian reservations and communities (2).

Although seven of the 11 Section 147 projects ended when the demonstrations terminated in 1979, many stakeholders hoped the others would find continued funding through the newly available Section 18 of the Surface Transportation Assistance Act of 1978 (3). Some expressed concern that, because Section 18 was allocated by formula to states and there was a "history of

bad relationships between the Tribe and the state," tribes would not receive a fair and equitable distribution: "state pass-through funding is also a departure from the historical practice in which the sovereign Indian tribes always maintained a unique and direct relationship with the Federal government" (3).

In the face of these concerns, the Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin, through a feasibility study provided by the Wisconsin Department of Transportation in 1980, implemented a coordinated Section 18 program. Menominee Regional Public Transit (MRPT) "represents a synergistic partnership of agencies on and off the reservation" that enabled the service to provide transit to Indians and non-Indians (4). Today, MRPT is one of the largest and most successful public transit services of any type in the United States.

Most tribes did not access Section 18 funds because local matching funds were lacking and because of other concerns about signing required federal certifications and assurances, particularly transit labor protection certification 13(C). In 1999,

the Urban Mass Transportation Act that, interestingly, did not apply to urban transit grants (10).

### Origins of the Rural Transit Assistance Program

#### RURAL TRANSPORTATION INFORMATION

Although they were not subject to project-intensive federal planning requirements, rural transit providers still wanted to implement best practices and interact with other practitioners. They lacked a widely recognized single source

of information, however. In late 1980, the Community Resource Group in Springdale, Arkansas, set about collecting information through a system called Rural Transportation Information (RTI), a practical rural transit technology transfer program (13). The RTI program consisted of the following:

1. A file box with files labeled for unbound material,
2. A file system for bound material, and
3. A file box and system for contacting people in the rural transit field—a collection of some 300 names, from

such notables as Arthur Saltzman and Norm Paulhus to local transit managers like Terry Young.

A training conference on how to use the RTI program was held in March 1981 in San Antonio, Texas. Attendees remarked that this was the first time that rural public transit was recognized as an identifiable field of endeavor and study. RTI became the model for the Rural Transit Assistance Program (RTAP).

RTI and the directories of practitioners, administrators, and experts supported the advancement of rural transit as a recognized field of study. At the same time,



A Menominee Regional Public Transit driver assists a passenger at the Tribal Health Clinic, Keshena, Wisconsin. (Photo: Peter Schauer)

it was reported that only 18 of 562 federally recognized tribes received any funding from the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) rural transit program.

It was not until the FTA tribal transit program came into effect in 2006—with a discretionary funding program and a direct funding and application route to FTA, thereby circumventing states—that tribal transit programs grew vigorously, to 132 programs in 2015 (5). In 2012, the tribal transit program was revised to include a discretionary and formula component (6).

The growth of tribal public transit and the recognition of its importance is summarized in the following report from the National Congress of American Indians on a survey of transit services on reservations: “far from being a mere detail in the tribe’s efforts to improve their material well-being and standard of living for their members, viable transit systems is the glue that holds tribal economies and societies together” (7).

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many advocacy and interest groups beyond those associated with AAAs and CAAs became active in the advancement of both the study and funding of rural transit. The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s National Rural Development Council, the National Rural Coalition, the National Rural Center, and (most notably) Rural America all became strong advocates for the funding and implementation of rural public transit. Rural America seemed to capture the most attention with their 1979 report “Research Report 3: Rural Transportation—A Modest Proposal,” which offered a different way to plan and implement rural transit (14).

### TRANSPORTATION CAMP

The advocates who started the successful OATS demonstration in Missouri also recognized that a new way of thinking was needed, and they subsequently founded a concept called “Transportation Camp.” For three years beginning in September 1975, OATS sponsored a transportation camp and workshop that brought together hundreds of nonexperts to focus on the rural transit needs of the entire state, not just of the four counties that OATS initially served. OATS rural transit pioneers invited elected officials, state and federal officials, and actual transit riders to Camp Clover

Point in Lake of the Ozarks State Park for a three-day camp to discuss transit needs. This was part of the new way of thinking: to involve the potential users in designing and managing the service.

The OATS transportation camp was true citizen advocacy—the highlight and focal point of the event was a discussion of each county’s transit needs, as prepared by a local resident of that county (15). The people who needed the service organized and advocated to meet their needs and those of their community.

In 1982, Rural America received an Urban Mass Transportation Administration

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Photo: TriMet, Flickr

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, federal, state, and local agencies met with community members to design and manage rural transit programs that would fit the needs of county residents.

(UMTA) discretionary grant to advance rural transit. The UMTA Administrator at the time had desired more practical materials on the implementation and operation of rural transit, so with Rural America's community-based advocacy, a work program was developed. This program combined elements of the OATS transportation camp, RTI, and peer-to-peer exchanges and ultimately resulted in creation of the National Association of Transportation Alternatives (NASTA), the first organization focused on rural public and community transportation. Eventually, both NASTA and Rural America combined to form a new organization, Community Transportation Association of America, which continues today.

In 1987 the Surface Transportation and Uniform Relocation Assistance Act was passed. The transit appropriations bill included \$5 million per year for five years to implement RTAP, which in many ways formalized the RTI concept along with elements of Rural America's first UMTA discretionary grant. According to the 1987 UMTA Acting Director Alfred DelliBovi, "RTAP will have a wide range of activities such as training courses; 'circuit riders' to give onsite training on safety, maintenance, management, etc.; peer-to-peer networks; information exchanges such as computer bulletin boards; and newsletters" (16).

RTAP has continued well beyond those initial five years and serves as a reminder of the effectiveness of peer group assistance and the evolution of rural transit. Through an advisory board of state RTAP managers and rural transit practitioners, the program remains focused on practical and rural transit training needs. The systematic manner in which RTAP has catalogued information and shares it through a website, conferences, and one-on-one technical assistance has made it a unique resource that has no equivalent activity in the field of urban transit.

## Conclusion

Rural transit emerged via forces quite different from those that gave rise to urban transit. Urban transit has had a long-standing role in cities that dates back hundreds of years; rural transit came about only decades ago, spurred by the lack of commerce, available services, growth, and development in rural areas. People in rural areas needed services, and social service providers discovered that they needed to be transit providers. Social service agencies still are key providers of rural transit, through contracts that provide large revenues to match federal grants.

Without the 1985 amendment to the UMTA that allowed social service contract revenues to be used as a match, it is

likely that transit would have a different, less-expansive role in rural America. It was advocacy by people—often riders of rural transit who brought issues of equity before Congress in the early 1970s—that resulted in dedicated federal funding. Today, researchers, policymakers, and politicians explore rural and urban equity issues, and the need for transit funding of all types remains paramount, especially to the people addressed by the OAA and EOA.

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