

Rural Public and Intercity Bus Transportation Committee (AP055)
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Rural Public Transportation: History and Prospects

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The **TRB** Committee on Rural Public and Intercity Bus Transportation (**AP055**) is concerned with the demand for and supply of passenger transportation in rural areas, including those services provided by the intercity bus service industry. Two terms are important to understand when considering the field of rural public transportation: rural and transportation.

The term “rural” has various meanings, for some it may mean lack of population density or distance to a metropolitan area or the total population of a given geographic area. The most facile definition of rural is “anything that is not urban.” The definition that has been accepted in the rural passenger transportation arena in the United States and, importantly, used by the USDOT for purposes of administering Rural Formula Transit programs is essentially any area that is not “Urbanized”, which is defined as a population of 50,000 or more.

The term “transportation,” while often used interchangeably with the term transit for purposes of the Rural Public and Intercity Bus Transportation Committee (**AP055**), means generally rubber tired vehicles with multiple occupants traveling together or water borne vehicles traveling in an open door general public capacity. The key concept being multiple occupant vehicles but not rail or air services.

Before the mid-1970s, publicly-supported transportation services open to the general public were rarely available in rural communities. Since then, a body of knowledge, research and services has come into being called “rural public transportation.” Over the last five decades, TRB’s Rural Public and Intercity Bus Transportation Committee and its members have helped document, research, and share through regular conferences the unique characteristics of rural public transportation.

EARLY BEGINNINGS

For many years, transportation services for residents of rural communities in the United States were self-provided, or if not, provided privately by family members, friends, churches or private intercity bus companies. Without a private automobile or some connection to other individuals, organizations with a vehicle, or the scheduled services provided by the bus companies, rural residents had limited travel opportunities. With the expansion of auto ownership and the development of the interstate highway system in the 1960s, privately-provided intercity bus services in rural areas began to decline in frequency and coverage. This left an increasing number of rural areas with no alternative but the private vehicle, and those without the income to afford their own vehicle or the ability to drive had few options. This difficult situation began to change in the mid-1960s with President Johnson’s War on Poverty efforts. Congress recognized

that not everyone was sharing in overall societal benefits. 1964 -1965 was a critical year for legislation: passage of the Urban Mass Transportation Act (UMTA) and the Economic Opportunity Act and importantly the Older Americans Act created the foundation for the current rural transportation efforts. But none of this legislation specifically addressed the needs of the transportation disadvantaged, that is, people without cars or those unable to drive a car. It was not until the McCone Commission, investigating the 1965 riots in the Watts area of Los Angeles, that transportation was seen as a means of fighting poverty. The McCone Commission cited the lack of access to public transportation in Watts as a key factor contributing to the serious unemployment, poverty, and social unrest there.

Partly as a result of issues raised by the McCone Commission, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development began sponsoring a \$7 million “reverse commute demonstration experiment” to focus on improving access to employment for the urban poor. A report on this experiment was published in 1970.

It took longer for recognition of the connections between rural poverty and transportation to spread beyond a small core of observers, but mobility issues -- transportation barriers and disadvantages -- soon became a focal point for persons concerned about elderly persons, persons with disabilities, and, eventually, rural communities.

- 1967 the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) authorized the use of their funds to obtain and operate surplus federal vehicles from the General Services Administration (GSA) in a number of rural localities. The number of OEO-sponsored local transportation projects eventually grew to more than 60.
- The Bureau of Public Roads sponsored an evaluation (The Transportation Needs of the Rural Poor, published in 1969) of OEO’s free transit demonstration program in Raleigh County, West Virginia.
- The Highway Research Board (renamed the Transportation Research Board in 1974) convened a small Conference on Poverty and Transportation in 1968 to discuss how these issues were connected.
- The US DOT published a study in 1969 on Travel Barriers: The Transportation Needs of the Handicapped.
- The US Senate Special Committee on Aging, held a series of hearings beginning in 1970 regarding problems and prospects regarding transportation for the elderly. The Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry held a 1971 hearing about the transportation problems of older Americans in rural areas.
- The 1971 White House Conference on Aging, to the surprise of many people, identified transportation as one of the top three problems of older Americans.
- OEO funded a major five-state study of transportation problems of the rural poor in 1971, finding that “a very significant portion of the rural poor have a dire or very strong need for transportation.”
- The Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture sponsored a \$360,800 rural transportation demonstration program in 1973 and 1974.
- The Pennsylvania Governor’s Rural Transportation Task Force published a 1974 report on problems and prospects for rural transportation in the state.
- The West Virginia TRIP (Transportation Remuneration Incentive Program) initiated in 1974 attempted to imitate the food stamp concept with a user side subsidy.
- The US DOT published a 1974 report on Rural Transit Operations and Management.

- The Southeastern Federal Regional Council created a 1974 Expanded Metro Mobility task force designed to expand to rural areas “the kinds of transportation services now generally enjoyed by metropolitan residents.”

These and many other activities set the initial stages for growing interest, increasing activities, and significant advances in efforts to provide effective rural transportation options.

Key Legislative Milestones

The Federal Aid Highway Act of 1973 included Section 147, the Rural Highway Public Transportation Demonstration Program. This was the first official Federal recognition of the transportation needs of rural America as a legitimate concern of the nation’s emerging transportation policy. Funds were appropriated in 1974; in 1975, the first 45 projects were announced and initial operations began in 1976. From more than 500 applications received by FHWA, 102 grants (resulting in 134 projects, at least one in every state) were awarded by 1979. Total expenditures for the Section 147 program were \$25 million, approximately the total funds appropriated by Congress.

The National Mass Transportation Act of 1974 authorized up to \$500 million for grants between 1974 and 1980 “exclusively for assistance [with capital expenses] in areas other than urbanized.” Only \$23 million of those funds had been expended by 1978 when the Surface Transportation Assistance Act of 1978 included the Section 18 program, Formula Grant Program for Areas Other Than Urbanized, which provided the first full-scale Federal assistance program for public transportation in rural areas.

The Bus Regulatory Reform Act of 1982 attempted to address the difficulties faced by the intercity bus industry from declining ridership, deregulated commercial air service, and Amtrak. It diminished the roles of the federal Interstate Commerce Commission and state regulatory authorities, allowing carriers flexibility in entering and exiting routes and setting fares. The unprofitability of rural service was demonstrated by the elimination of intercity bus service to over 11,000 places in the year following deregulation, of which 73 percent had populations of 10,000 or less.

As part of the implementation in 1983 of the Surface Transportation Act of 1982, the Urban Mass Transportation Administration replaced the Federal Highway Administration as the administrators of the Section 18 program.

The importance of the link between rural public transportation and social services was affirmed in 1985 when an amendment to the Urban Mass Transportation Act allowed contract revenue (monies secured through contracts for services with social services agencies, cities, towns and others) to be used as local match on Section 18 Federal funds. This amendment is widely recognized as the rural transportation service inflection point which allowed services to significantly grow and use all the available Federal Section 18 funds. With the ability to use Medicaid Non-Emergency Medical Transportation (NEMT) funds, Older American Act funds and many other sources of contract revenue as match, public services were expanded and valuable coordination of funds and coordinated direct service operations were fostered.

Since that time, publicly-funded transportation services in rural communities have grown significantly from no services in 1970 to 1,333 agencies providing service in 2014. In addition, there were some 270 urban systems providing service in rural areas in 2014.

In 1991, as part of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA), UMTA was renamed the Federal Transit Administration (FTA), and an intercity bus element was

added to the Section 18 program, calling upon the states to spend a percentage of their Section 18 allocation on rural intercity bus service (unless the state had no unmet needs). In 1994 the Section 18 program was codified as Section 5311, the Formula Grants for Rural Areas program to provide capital, planning, and operating assistance to states and federally recognized Indian tribes to support public transportation in rural areas with populations less than 50,000. Section 5311(f) authorizes grants to intercity bus companies, including those that are privately owned. For FY2020, total appropriations for the Section 5311 program are \$673.3 million, of which 15% is set aside for rural intercity bus projects. States have become an even greater source of funds than the US DOT.

Use of the Section 5311(f) rural intercity bus program greatly increased after the FTA issued guidance in 2006 allowing the value of connecting unsubsidized intercity bus service to be used as in-kind match for operating assistance projects. This pilot project was made statutory as part of the 2012 reauthorization bill “Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century” (MAP-21). Currently 29 states are using this method to fund rural intercity bus projects, and another four are in the implementation planning process. Over 600 places are receiving intercity bus service under the Section 5311(f) program. Some of these places benefit from increased frequencies, most would not otherwise have service.

Research projects supported by the Committee or performed by its members have identified many of the benefits of rural public transit and rural intercity bus to individuals and communities. Although some users of rural public transportation choose to use these services even though they have a private vehicle and are able to drive, most rural transit users depend on these services to meet critical mobility needs including access to employment, education, health care, social and religious activities, government services, and family and friends. In much of the rural United States there are no available alternative services available (such as taxis or ride-sourcing), and even if available they are unaffordable for many. Although open to the general public, rural transit is also a critical resource providing transportation to persons who are clients of medical, social services, aging, and other programs through coordination with these programs. Rural public transit availability supports an increased ability for persons to age in place, both for local trips needed to support daily life, and connections to family and friends in distant places (on rural intercity services).

Rural economies benefit from being able to retain populations who might otherwise have to move into larger urban areas or institutions—this includes both young adults who use buses to reach institutions of higher learning or military service, and older populations who are able to stay in the community even if they no longer drive. On a community-wide basis, rural communities with public transportation services have been shown to achieve greater growth than communities without similar services.

BACKGROUND OF THE COMMITTEE

Initially a Task Force of the Committee on Social, Economic, and Environmental Factors of Transportation, the Rural Public Transportation Committee became a full TRB committee in 1977. In a short time, the Committee became the focal point of nationwide interest and activities in rural transportation, incorporating local transportation providers, riders, and agency advocates into the growing community of federal and state officials, researchers, and national advocates who were interested in rural communities and problems of the transportation disadvantaged. In 1979, the Transportation Research Board Committee on Intercity Bus Transportation was formed from a Task Force on the same topic.

In 1991, the Rural Public Transportation Committee was merged with TRB's Intercity Bus Committee and the joint committee was renamed the Rural Public and Intercity Bus Transportation Committee, and this expanded committee continues to be one of the key voices in the nation for transportation needs in rural communities. It is unique in that this committee is the only representation of the private intercity bus industry within the Transportation Research Board's activities, and the Committee's Rural and Intercity Bus Transportation conferences are the one venue where representatives of the rural public transportation community, private intercity bus providers, and tribal transportation providers come together.

The Rural Public Transportation Committee emerged from the First National Conference on Rural Public Transportation in Greensboro, North Carolina in October 1976. This conference was supported by funding from the US Department of Transportation. Annual conferences were held in the following three years; after the 1979 conference, the schedule for the rural transportation conferences was changed to once every two years to accommodate the desire for separate biennial conferences on transportation for the transportation disadvantaged. Since 1981, the rural transportation conferences have been held on a biennial basis. At these conferences, the Committee showcases best practices in rural transportation, disseminates key research findings, and highlights improvements needed to operations, legislation, and technology. A key feature of these conferences is bringing together leaders in transportation services, government, academia, and technology to share their most recent successes and challenges. This process of sharing immediately relevant useful, applicable, and implementable information has been absolutely vital in promoting success in this relatively new transportation field.

TODAY

Our Committee now has 33 official members, including Emeritus, Young, and International Members, and over 100 Friends.

A major on-going activity of the Committee is the biennial national Rural Public and Intercity Bus Transportation Conference. The conference planning subcommittee develops an extensive program based on presentation abstracts submitted in response to a call for presentations in different topic areas. The focus of the conference is the presentation of best practices in the field, including innovative services, technology, programs and research results. The 24th National Conference on Rural Public and Intercity Bus Transportation to be held in 2020 is now in the planning stages.

For the Transportation Research Board Annual Meeting, the Committee reviews and evaluates submitted research and supports presentation sessions. The Committee also has developed rural transportation research topics and problem statements, and is currently active in providing input to the National Cooperative Highway Research Program (NCHRP) 20-122 Rural Transportation Issues: Research Roadmap project.

TOMORROW

Future activities of TRB's Rural Public and Intercity Bus Transportation Committee will focus on research concerning the changing demographic and economic characteristics of rural America and the relationship to passenger transportation. And, as always, the committee's interest in assessment and dissemination of best operational and research practices in rural transportation will continue. The Committee recognizes that, nationwide, increasing urbanization and centralization trends in employment, health care, and technology create significant challenges for the viability of rural communities. The strength and durability of the social and economic

foundations of rural communities is a continuing, and future, essential interest of the Committee. Hence the role of passenger transportation services in evolving, changing rural communities and researching and documenting the demand for and supply of passenger transportation in those rural areas remains the fundamental concerns of the **TRB** Committee on Rural Public and Intercity Bus Transportation (**AP055**).

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