

Transportation

Problem:

Reduced physical, mental and economic health for residents due to limited access to transportation.

Limited access to public transit and to special transportation services is a problem for many residents within Washington County. The majority of the county is not served by a traditional fixed route bus system that offers service within a community or to adjacent communities. Demand-response transit services that exist within the county are limited. Consequently, citizens are at-risk for reduced health outcomes if they are unable to access jobs, health care, and the good and services that are essential for daily living.

Access to transportation is critical to maintaining independence, health, and community connectedness. Reliable and safe transportation provides access to jobs and services for all citizens. It also provides mobility for transit-dependent populations, particularly for certain segments of the elderly, disabled (including veterans) and low-income populations. Transit services offer an alternative to automobile travel for others who are unable to drive and for those who prefer not to drive.

For the general public, there is a growing demand for public transit from those who prefer to use public transit over personal vehicle use for commuting and for access to other services and recreational destinations. Not only does use of transit reduce household expenditures on fuel and vehicle maintenance, it reduces traffic congestion and emissions of air pollutants that cause global warming. Reduction of pollutants that cause or exacerbate health problems, from asthma to heart disease, is a public health benefit of transit.

Despite the benefits of a widespread efficient transit system, meeting the transportation needs of all citizens in Washington County is a challenge. The suburban and rural geographic characteristics of the county, as well as the low density development patterns, do not often meet the population thresholds for public transit to be cost effective. Consequently, there are very few local public transit fixed routes in the county. Special transportation services, defined as demand-based, exist but have service limitations. Volunteer-based transportation services also face several challenges, foremost being rising fuel costs and volunteer driver recruitment. The population growth that is projected for the county during the coming years will challenge the existing transit system even further, as will the aging of the population. The burden of rising fuel costs to individual drivers will also increase the demand for more public transit options.



“Transportation provides the vital link between home and a community designed for all ages. It connects individuals to places where they can fulfill their basic needs – the grocery store for food, medical facilities for health care, the worksite for employment, friends’ and families’ homes, recreational sites for social interactions, and houses of worship for spiritual sustenance. Community supports and services, however, are only beneficial to the extent that transportation can make them accessible to those who need them.”¹

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Overview of Existing County Transit System

The transit system in Washington County is typical of a suburban region that is still developing with peak-only express, small vehicle dial-a-ride, few midday circulators, special needs paratransit and ridesharing. The county is currently served by several transit service providers: Metro Transit, Metro Mobility, HSI Transporter, Metropolitan Transportation Services - First Transit, Metropolitan Transportation Services – Lorenz, Northeast Suburban Transit, and Lake Area Bus.

Metro Transit and Metropolitan Transportation Services provide fixed-route transit service. Metro Mobility and HSI provide complementary Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) demand-response services. Metropolitan Transportation Services, HSI, NEST, and Lake Area Bus provide general public demand responsive services.

Fixed Route Transit Service

Fixed route transit service includes any bus service that operates on a regular schedule and follows a consistent route. Fixed-route transit service in Washington County is provided primarily by the Metropolitan Council.

Express Routes

Express service, which operates during peak periods, is designed to serve commuters who live in the suburban area and work in the central cities, primarily downtown Minneapolis and downtown St. Paul.

Reverse Commute

Reverse commute service is designed to provide residents of the central cities opportunities to use transit to travel to employment centers in the suburban area. These routes typically operate during peak hours, but in the opposite direction from the majority of peak hour express routes.

Local Routes

Local service is designed for short trips within the community or to adjacent communities and is usually provided throughout the day. The only local transit route that is accessible to Washington County residents is Route 219 which operates between the Sun Ray Transit Center in St. Paul and the Maplewood Transit Center in Maplewood. This route enters Washington County briefly near the City of Landfall (see Figure 1).

Demand Responsive Transit Service

Complementary ADA Services

As a mandated complementary service to regular route services, Metro Mobility provides, in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), demand responsive service for persons with disabilities that prevent them from using the regular route system. In Washington County, within the area of the Transit Taxing District, the Council contracts for additional ADA services with Human Services, Inc (HSI). The HSI ADA service area consists of Cottage Grove, Woodbury, Newport, St. Paul Park, Stillwater, Bayport, Oak Park Heights, Lake Elmo, Mahtomedi, Baytown Township, Greycloud Township, Landfall, Oakdale, Pine Springs and Wilnerie. HSI Transporter provides services to all Washington County communities through the general public demand response dial-a-ride operation.

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Overview of Existing County Transit System continued

ADA-certified riders share rides with general public patrons on the HSI Transporter. Service is limited to weekdays for the general public. ADA certified riders have access to transit services seven days a week and on holidays.

Demand Responsive Transit Service Continued

Dial-a-Ride Programs

The HSI Transporter also provides general public shared ride dial-a-ride service throughout the entire county. Service by HSI to the non-disabled, senior, and general public population is provided during weekdays only.

Throughout the metro region, approximately 16 other systems operate transit service in their communities. Many of these services were originally formed to meet a specific mobility need for the elderly or disabled, but are now open to the general public. Two of these are small urban systems operating only partially in Washington County, Northeast Suburban Transit (NEST) and Lake Area Bus. Limited service is offered by these providers during weekdays only.

Metropolitan Transportation Services (MTS) and First Transit fund three additional dial-a-ride services in Washington County: Woodbury Public Transit dial-a-ride service operates within a limited service area in and around the city of Woodbury and to the Sun Ray shopping center; Stillwater Public Transit dial-a-ride service operates within a limited service area in Stillwater, Bayport and Oak Park Heights; and First Transit service covers Cottage Grove, Newport and St. Paul Park.

Volunteer-Based Programs

Community Volunteer Service and Senior Centers (CVS) in Stillwater provides transportation to medical-related appointments for Washington County residents who have no other means of transportation. In 2007, 1,468 rides were provided to 148 clients. CVS had 41 volunteer drivers who provided the rides using personal vehicles.

Challenges of the Existing System

Despite the transit services listed above, regularly scheduled local bus service does not exist in most of the county. Although alternative transit services are available, hours of operation are limited, advance scheduling is required, and citizens report that service is not as reliable as fixed route systems. Based on county population growth projections, aging trends within the county, and rising fuel costs, there will be heightened demand for more fixed route as well as demand-response transit services.

One challenge facing the existing transit system is marketing existing demand-response services to the general public and to transit-dependent populations. Many citizens are unfamiliar with demand-response transit services available within the county. Public awareness of these services remains limited because there is no central point of information for all forms of transit and there are few resources to market transit services.

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Community Feedback

Limited access to public transit and to special transportation services was one of the most frequently mentioned concerns throughout the community health assessment public input period from November of 2007 through February of 2008. It was mentioned as a major concern in nine out of fourteen community input events and tools. The concern was voiced primarily by the senior population. However, the desire for improved access to transportation services was expressed by individuals from various age, socio-economic and racial/ethnic groups.

Seniors

One of the primary concerns expressed by seniors in the Senior Survey was limited public transit. The desire for regularly scheduled accessible bus service for rides to clinical appointments was mentioned most frequently. Other destinations included hospitals, dental appointments, grocery stores and social outings. Emphasis was placed on being able to access reliable and affordable service.

Results of the community health assessment on-line survey indicated that 43% or 200 people viewed the transportation needs of seniors as a major concern. Nearly 44% or 203 people indicated that it was of some concern.

The results of an on-line survey conducted in 2008 by the Washington County Transportation Networking Group identified access to transportation as a serious community need. Of the 526 surveys completed, highlights include:

- ◆ 25% missed a medical appointment due to lack of transportation
- ◆ 17% went without medication because they could not get to the pharmacy
- ◆ 27% missed an important social event because they did not have transportation
- ◆ 34% felt isolated or depressed because they lacked transportation

The most important factors when looking for transportation were affordability and availability on short notice (less than a day).

Immigrants

Through focus groups with English-as-a-Second Language classes, recent immigrants cited the following:

- ◆ lack of public transit from suburb to suburb to take English classes and to apply for jobs
- ◆ lack of public transit for elderly immigrants who do not drive
- ◆ lack of transit for children to get to pre-school for families who own one vehicle (which is used by the spouse working outside the home) and where walking is unsafe along busy roads without sidewalks

Youth

Students from 7th and 8th grade classes throughout the county who completed a Youth Environmental Survey offered over 80 suggestions related to transportation within the county. The majority of the feedback focused on improving public transit to include more bus routes and using the existing transit system more frequently, replacing personal vehicle use.

Community Feedback continued

General Public

In the community health assessment on-line survey, access to public transportation services was rated as a major concern by 180 people or 40% of the respondents and of some concern by 36.4% of respondents.

Comments expressed in the on-line survey included:

- ◆ There is no public transportation, especially for low-income and the disabled, particularly in the Stillwater area.
- ◆ Public transportation within the communities is not available for able-bodied people who do not want to use their personal vehicle and thus save on resources. Dial-A-Ride does not work for this group.

In the 2008 Residential Survey coordinated by the Washington County Department of Administration, 43% (216 people) of respondents rated the availability of public transit in Washington County as poor. Public transit was rated lowest among all other county characteristics listed, from parks to affordable childcare to affordable housing.

For the Washington County Comprehensive Plan Update, four open houses were conducted in a 'focus group' format in the spring of 2008 to hear what Washington County residents think about transit service. Most residents felt that transit is essential to Washington County and that the county needs to be aggressive and set the bar high for future transit plans. Comments on specific services included:

- ◆ Residents want increased express bus frequency, longer service span, midday/weekend service, and reverse commute service.
- ◆ Local service routes operating within the county should be established.
- ◆ The circulator service that used to operate in Woodbury should be restored and similar services provided elsewhere.
- ◆ There needs to be evening and weekend service into the central cities for cultural events and other entertainment.
- ◆ Service hours for public dial-a-ride operations should be expanded.
- ◆ Longer weekday service would allow residents to get to and from work.
- ◆ Weekend service should be established.
- ◆ Many residents are uncertain what transit is available and how they can use it.
- ◆ Many residents indicated they do not understand what dial-a-ride service is and did not know that it is available in the county.

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Key Data

Figure 1.

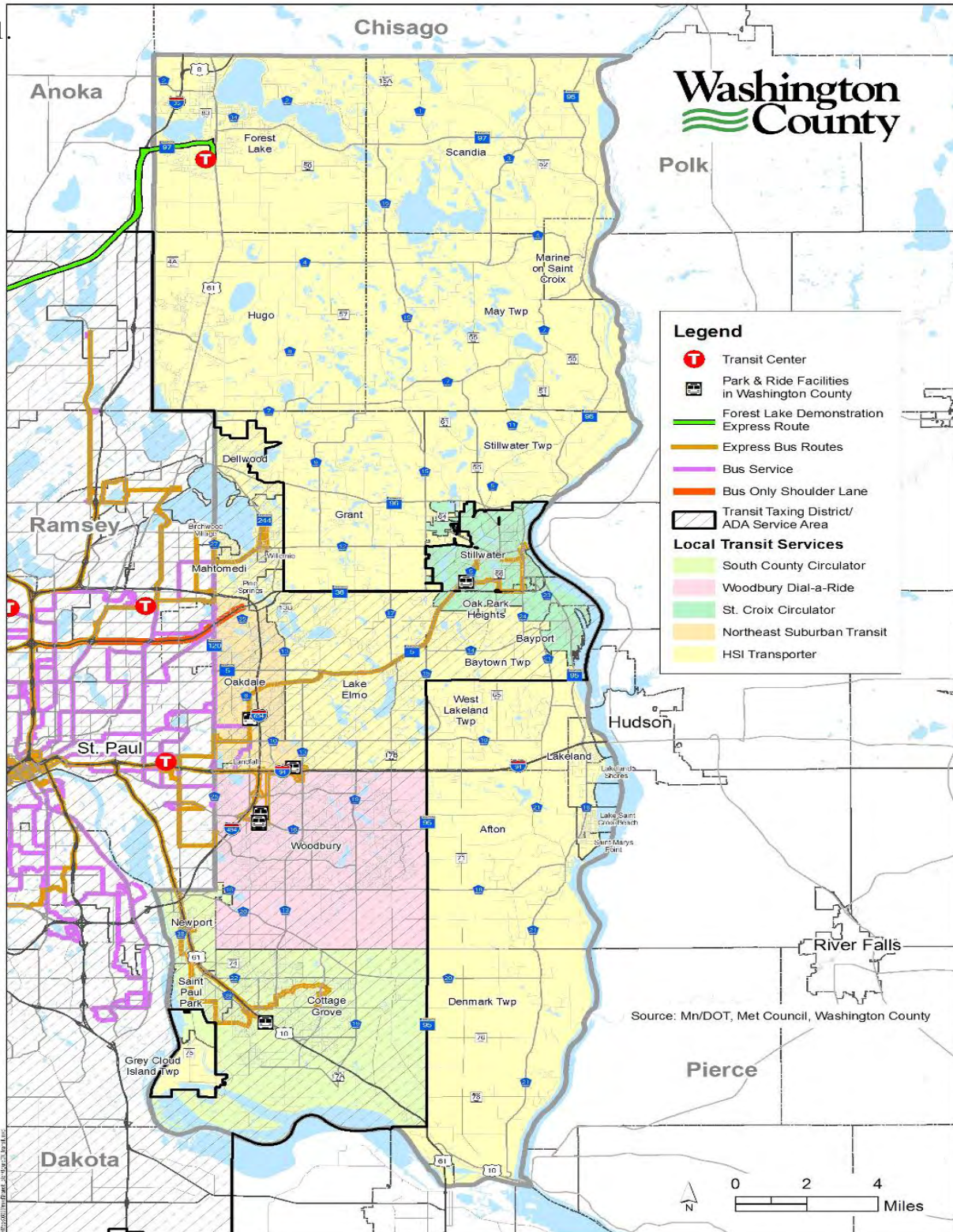


Figure 1 Washington County Transit Service and Facilities²

Community Assets

- ◆ Human Services, Inc. (H.S.I.) Transportation Services
- ◆ Metro Transit
- ◆ Metropolitan Transportation Services
- ◆ Northeast Suburban Transit (NEST)
- ◆ Metro Mobility
- ◆ Lake Area Bus
- ◆ Community Volunteer Services' volunteer transportation program
- ◆ Washington County Transportation Networking Group
- ◆ Washington County transit planners
- ◆ American Red Cross
- ◆ American Cancer Society
- ◆ Minnesota Non-Emergency Transportation Program (MNET)

Community Gaps and Risks

- ◆ There is a lack of adequate funding for investment in transportation infrastructure.
- ◆ Most of the county is not served by traditional bus service.
- ◆ The aging of the population in the county will create more demand for transit and special transportation services. See Aging section.
- ◆ Advance scheduling for demand-responsive transit (dial-a-ride) is required. In many cases, last minute trips are needed or desired by consumers.
- ◆ Limited transportation options exist on weekends and in the evenings for demand response services.
- ◆ Future demand for transit options growing due to rising fuel costs.
- ◆ The risk of reduced health outcomes is likely if residents are unable to get to medical appointments and services essential for daily living (grocery store, pharmacy, social activities, etc). There is a risk for isolation and depression if mobility is reduced or if there is continual dependence on friends and relatives for rides.
- ◆ Public uncertainty exists about what transit services exist and how to access them.
- ◆ Population growth within the county is estimated to increase by 60.3% between 2006 and 2030, creating increased demand for transit. For park and ride users only, demand is projected to increase by 3,000 users during this timeframe.²

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Summary

Lack of public transit throughout the county has been identified as a serious public health threat. Limited access to transportation affects the health and well-being of all citizens, most notably the elderly, persons with disabilities and low-income populations. Reduced mobility puts individuals at-risk for poor health outcomes for both physical and mental health.

The transit system needs to be improved and expanded in Washington County. Although the county does not have direct responsibility for the operation of services, the county can advocate, with its cities and community partners, for better services while promoting more transit supportive land use patterns.

Sources

- ¹“The Maturing of America, Getting Communities on Track for an Aging Population”, National Association of Area on Aging, MetLife Foundation, International City/County Management Association, National Association of Counties, National League of Cities, Partners for Livable Communities
- ² SRF Consulting Group, Inc., Washington County Transit Plan, Technical Memorandum 1, Future Transit Services, Facilities and Programs