



DATE: March 4, 2016
TO: Rural Transit Coverage Stakeholders
FROM: Becky Taylor, Senior Transportation Planner
SUBJECT: **Rural Transit Coverage Assessment for TSP Update**

Lane County is in the process of updating its transportation system plan (TSP). State law requires TSPs of various transportation agencies, including Lane County. The update process is being funded by the Oregon Department of Transportation. The TSP is a planning document that guides transportation decisions over a 20-year period by providing:

- A set of solutions to address existing and future transportation needs for biking, walking, using transit, driving, freight, and rail
- A blueprint for transportation investments with priorities articulated through policies and a list of construction projects
- A coordination tool with regional and local agencies and governments

The variety of transportation needs of across Lane County requires coordination among multiple agencies, particularly since County roads are the only transportation mode over which Lane County exercises direct jurisdiction. Other transportation agencies, including Lane Transit District, are represented on the advisory committees guiding Lane County's TSP update. It is in the County's interest to support and encourage the expansion of public transit.

Transit in the rural areas plays a key role in responding to the problem of social exclusion. The large distance between services in the rural areas means it is difficult for people without cars to access health care service and other opportunities, such as employment and education. Transit plays a key role in keeping these people engaged in mainstream society.

There is also the need to provide transit to rural areas from the urban core. As the urban areas encourage reduced reliance on the automobile, urban dwellers without a car – either by choice or circumstance -- may not be able to access the recreational opportunities of the rural areas, such as the coast and the mountain ranges that define Lane County. Students, the young, elderly, disabled, and poor are particularly vulnerable populations when it comes to transportation alternatives. Transit also enables tourists to visit rural communities.

Lane County recently completed a round of public outreach to share the preliminary findings regarding existing conditions and future needs. The following analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats regarding transit service within Lane County is based on information collected as part of the TSP update process to date. (For more detailed findings, refer to the project's *Technical Memorandum #5 Existing Transportation Conditions and Technical*

Memorandum #7 Future Transportation Conditions and Needs). The following also incorporates the themes expressed by the public through a variety of community outreach efforts.

This analysis is intended to inform stakeholders about the needs, resources, barriers, and other considerations surrounding the issue of rural transit coverage.

Strengths

The strength of Lane County's transit system is the existing services provided by Lane Transit District, RideSource, South Lane Wheels, Diamond Express, Rhody Express, Friends of Florence Van, Veteran's Transportation, Medicaid, Oregon Health Plan, Senior and Disabled Services, Greyhound Line, and Porter Enterprises, as described below.

Lane Transit District (LTD)

LTD operates 34 fixed bus routes throughout the Eugene-Springfield Metro Area and provides rural service to and from the Eugene-Springfield area for the communities of McKenzie Bridge, Veneta, Junction City, Coburg, Cottage Grove, and Lowell. Rural routes typically have a morning, midday and early evening run. All buses have bicycle racks and are wheelchair accessible. LTD currently transports approximately 15,500 bicycles monthly. Rural LTD routes all operate out of the downtown Eugene station, primarily on state highways and major collector and arterial roads. Following is general route information:

- **91 - McKenzie Bridge** travels along Highway 126 east, all the way to the McKenzie River Ranger Station, serving rural communities along the way. The service makes four trips in each direction on weekdays and two trips on Saturdays and Sundays. Communities served include Walterville, Leaburg, Vida, Nimrod, Finn Rock, and Blue River.
- **92 - Lowell via Dexter, Goshen, Pleasant Hill and Lane Community College** travels along Highway 58, with three trips from Eugene to Lowell and four trips returning, on weekdays only.
- **93 - Veneta** operates on Highway 126, Territorial Road/Highway, Broadway (park & ride), Perkins, and Huston with eight trips in each direction on weekdays and two trips on Saturdays. For this year's Annual Route Review (ARR) LTD is proposing to add two more trips on Saturdays bringing the total to 4 trips and to introduce Sunday service by providing two trips.
- **95 - Junction City** travels on Highway 99, serving the Oregon State Mental Hospital, and continuing to Junction City. There are eight trips on weekdays in each direction and four trips on Saturdays.

- **96 - Coburg** travels on Oakway and Gilham road through the Cal Young neighborhood before continuing on to County Farm Road. It continues on after serving Coburg to provide service along Coburg Industrial Way which is home to the Coburg North Industrial Park. There are seven trips on weekdays. For this year's ARR LTD is considering adding more weekday trips to route 96 to provide more trip options for the new developments happening in the City of Coburg such as Serenity Lane.
- **98 - Cottage Grove** travels generally on I-5 and also serves Lane Community College, and **Creswell**, with nine weekday trips, three trips on Saturday, and two trips on Sunday.

Special Transportation Services

There are multiple transportation services available for elderly, disabled, and other residents with specialized transportation needs in Lane County. Two of the services listed below, South Lane Wheels and the RideSource Call Center, coordinate all the human services' transportation within the county such as transportation for veterans, Medicaid clientele, and other special needs circumstances. The special transportation services include:

RideSource Services

- **RideSource** is a curb-to-curb transit service for eligible riders traveling within Eugene-Springfield, and the River Road area. Special Mobility Services (SMS) is a private non-profit agency that operates RideSource and associated programs through a contract with Lane Transit District. RideSource complies with federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements.
- The **RideSource Shopper** is a once a week shopping service for elderly and disabled residents of Eugene, Springfield and Coburg that offers assistance with grocery and other purchases.

Special Mobility Services also administers the **RideSource Escort** program using their own volunteers and those associated with other cooperating agencies. Volunteers use their own vehicles and receive a mileage reimbursement to transport elderly and disabled residents to and from medical appointments. Areas served include Eugene, Springfield, the River Road area, Veneta, Cottage Grove, Creswell, Junction City and Florence. Whenever possible residents in other rural areas of the County are served.

South of Eugene-Springfield

- **South Lane Wheels** is a private non-profit organization providing dial-a-ride service and a fixed route service to residents of Cottage Grove, Creswell, and nearby rural communities, and transporting the elderly and people with disabilities to and from medical appointments in Eugene-Springfield. Local dial-a-ride service is for seniors and people with disabilities. The fixed route service is open to the general public.

- The **City of Oakridge** contracts with LTD to run a general public dial-a-ride service for residents for local travel needs.
- **Diamond Express** began in March 2003 and offers weekday commuter inter-city bus service between the City of Oakridge and Eugene. The service is managed by Lane Transit District, through a contract with Special Mobility Services, a non-profit agency that also operates the **RideSource** Call Center. The service is funded, in part, by grants from the Oregon Public Transit Division's Intercity Passenger Program. The Diamond Express bus comes into downtown Eugene, allowing customers to make an easy transfer to the LTD system and connects to Amtrak.

Florence Area

- **Rhody Express** is a local fixed route bus service serving Florence and is operated by River Cities Taxi. It has evolved from a special transportation needs service to serving the City's general population Monday through Friday from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. There is also a complementary ADA service in the City of Florence provided by River Cities Taxi.
- **Friends of Florence Van** is operated by volunteers who transport cancer patients between Florence and the Eugene Cancer Center Monday through Friday.
- **Veteran's Transportation** assists veterans in the Florence area.

Other Special Programs

- **Medicaid** offers transportation services to qualifying persons requiring medical services.
- The **Oregon Health Plan** coordinates with service providers to fund medical-related transportation.
- **Senior and Disabled Services**, a division of Lane Council of Governments, coordinates volunteer medical rides.

Intercity and Interstate Bus Transportation

Greyhound Line coordinates operations to provide intercity and interstate bus service from Eugene between bus terminals, to the Amtrak station in Eugene, and to points throughout the state. Greyhound Line travels generally north and south, and Porter operates out of Coos Bay, traveling up the coast through Florence, into Eugene, and to points east.

Weaknesses

Deficiencies in Lane County's transit system that may limit transit use are outlined below. The deficiencies listed below need to be evaluated within the transit funding context. Fiscal constraints create the need to prioritize transit service, balancing coverage needs with the productivity of the system. Some transit service gaps exist due to choices made by local communities.

Lane Transit District is authorized through a state legislative decision to operate throughout Lane County; however the LTD Board has never unilaterally expanded the District's service boundary. Several of these cities joined the LTD district in the mid-1970's while others chose not to be included and therefore no transit service has been provided to these cities.

In 2000, the cities of Cottage Grove and Creswell requested LTD service be extended to serve their residents and LTD created route 98. Discussions within the cities of Oakridge and Florence have occurred, however no formal request has been made to LTD. Once service expansion is requested, LTD will analyze the tax base within the expansion area to ensure adequate resources are available to fund new transit service.

- **Transit Coverage:** The existing transit routes provide adequate service to the populated areas of Lane County. However, rural and coastal residents have few if any transit options. Where transit does exist in rural areas, it is infrequent; service may be only twice a day, with one to five-hour waits between buses, or only during the week, with an occasional Saturday-service. This makes it unreliable for rural residents to access the Eugene-Springfield metro area for employment, educational, and medical opportunities. It is also challenging for urban residents to access the coast and mountain range recreational opportunities.
- **Transit Access:** Transit access should be a comfortable experience for passengers and those considering riding transit. Several streets adjacent to existing transit stops lack sidewalk coverage and safe crossing opportunities. This can create uncomfortable conditions for transit passengers seeking to access their bus stop or final destination. It is also a deterrent for some potential transit users, including elderly users and persons with disabilities.
- **Transit Operations:** The hours of operation should be convenient to encourage transit ridership. Some bus routes provide infrequent service through the rural portions of the County with limited to no buses available on weekends. While transit service is provided every weekday and serves the typical business hour employee, the existing hours of service are not convenient for those making trips outside of typical business hours.

- **Transit Amenities:** Attractive stops with clear signage, user information and amenities help promote transit as an easy, comfortable way to get around. While some stops in Lane County may provide shelter, seating, signage, route information, lighting, and trash receptacles, others only provide a sign designating the stop location. Bus stops can at times be difficult to find, which may discourage ridership. It is also important to provide route information at stops to help riders navigate the system. On the rural services LTD policy allows residents to flag for pickup if there is a safe location for the bus operator to pull off. Many of LTD facilities cannot be installed along rural routes as the roads are not held to the same standards as they are in the city. It can also be unsafe to position shelters along busy highways.

Opportunities

LTD, the City of Eugene, and Lane Community College are currently working to launch a pilot service that would allow riders to connect to a shuttle service from route 95 to Junction City. There are also several opportunities to work with Tribes in the County to support expanded and/or new transit service.

Funding transit service to rural areas would benefit from a source other than payroll tax. Although there is a need for transit service for commuters into the urban areas, public comments received as part of Lane County's TSP Update process indicate that the need for rural transit is predominantly to either:

- enable metro residents to access to the natural recreation areas of the coast and mountain range; or
- to enable rural residents to access medical services and educational opportunities in the metro area

Payroll tax funding translates well for employee commutes; however, in addition to the lack of an employer base in rural areas to support transit, the needs for transit (above) suggest a different funding mechanism should be explored. While there are some special transit services provided for medical purposes, those are limited. Similarly with recreation-related transit, these needs may be better fulfilled through private partnerships with businesses that rely on tourism.

The irregularity of transit services to rural areas suggests that some level of public subsidy is necessary and that the system would benefit from a more comprehensive and coordinated approach. Around the world, collaborative structures such as partnerships are often used to govern rural transportation and accessibility issues. Partnerships in transportation are useful because:

- Local transport and accessibility issues are complex, intersecting with many sectors, levels of government and policy areas;
- Low population densities and resource constraints in rural areas make innovation and flexibility in local transport a necessity;
- All rural areas are different, and strategies need to take into account local problems and opportunities; and
- Effective delivery of projects often depends on the expertise or capacity of multiple actors, from multiple sectors.

For example, in Australia, school buses are the only form of public transport available in many rural communities. Past regulations had prevented people other than school students from access those buses, even when spare seats were available. Those regulations were changed to enable the whole community to access the school bus.

The Florence Chamber of Commerce presented the idea of combining other needs with transportation issues, i.e. training veterans to obtain commercial driver's license for driving refurbished, retired school buses as commercial and commuter routes between the coast and the cascades.

New technology – Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS) – for proving and managing rural transit continues to develop with encouragement from the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) programs. New institutions are emerging and increased collaboration among federal and state transportation and social service agencies are producing innovations in transit and transit-related services. The FTA is working on an interactive web site that will enable transit systems to share their experiences in implementing rural transit ITS.

Threats

Low rural population density makes viable public transport difficult, though people in rural areas usually have a greater need for transport than urban dwellers. Certain rural groups (the young, old or poor) always require public transport. Transport plays a key role in responding to the problem of rural social exclusion. The large distances between services and populations centers in rural areas make it difficult for people without access to private transport. Transport also underpins the economic and employment development strategies of many local communities. Transport enables tourists to visit rural communities or workers to access employment.

There are several special service providers to the rural area. With a large number of agencies and organizations involved in the delivery of public transport, there is a real risk that policy

agendas will be operating at cross purposes without effective collaborative governance. It is also necessary to consider that there are complex intersections between public transportation and other policy concerns, such as employment, health, and education. For example, if medical appointments are being scheduled at times when transit services are not available, it may make more sense to reschedule the appointment than fund a new transportation service.

The primary threat to transit service within Lane County is funding. LTD service is funded through payroll taxes and rider fees. These resources do not sufficiently cover operating costs. Payroll taxes are sensitive to economic cycles and depend on an employer base that is difficult to support in rural areas.

Since 2009, there has been a severe recession/depression in the economy with high unemployment and underemployment. The income of many households was reduced. This may have increased ridership because riding the bus can be less expensive than owning and operating a vehicle. On the other hand, recession may have suppressed ridership through the reduction in job commuting, along with reduced travel to entertainment, dining, and shopping venues.

LTD had been receiving Business Energy Tax Credit (BETC) funds that subsidized the Student Transit Pass Program, which allowed students to ride the bus for free. Middle and High School ridership increased significantly with the inception of the program. In 2011, the legislature abruptly curtailed the BETC program, ending the free bus fare for students. This substantially reduced the number of student riders.

Proximity to resources: Serving rural areas puts LTD operators, customers, and resources at risk due to the fact that they are so far away from Maintenance facilities. We have this issue on route 91 McKenzie. If the bus breaks down on the outbound portion of the route then the response time is greater. There is also a greater length of time before we can send security or transit supervisors.