

Chapter 4: Identifying Needs

COORDINATED PUBLIC TRANSIT-HUMAN SERVICES TRANSPORTATION PLAN
FRENCH BROAD RIVER MPO & LAND OF SKY RPO

OVERVIEW

The needs and issues identified in this chapter were largely collected from community input sessions held in 2015 by MPO and RPO staff in coordination with local staff, stakeholders, and the public. This chapter first identifies statewide issues which affect all parts of the region and would require coordination with the state or other jurisdictions outside of the region; issues that are more specific to our region; and issues that are more local in nature.

STATEWIDE ISSUES

The State of North Carolina is- and has been- growing and urbanizing at an increasing rate.

Year	Population	Population Proportion Urban
1990	6,694,000	50%
2000	8,082,000	60%
2010	9,562,000	66%

While this growth is a result of a number of beneficial factors concerning living in North Carolina (good climate, relatively low cost of living, increasing number of jobs, etc.), this

explosive growth can stress existing systems as demand increases and cause shifts in state and federal funding.

SHIFTS IN FEDERAL FUNDING

The North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) Public Transportation Division has studied how the on-going shift to a more urbanized state is effecting federal transit funding allocations in what they call a "Graduation Study." The Graduation Study makes recommendations for transit operators in areas becoming more urbanized that are seeing reductions in FTA Section 5311 (Rural Operating Program) and may need to start utilizing more Section 5307 (Urban Operating Program).

The French Broad River MPO has addressed this issue at the request of several transit operators in the region that are eligible for 5307 funding but have not fully utilized the funding prior to FY 2018. The MPO's 5307 Suballocation Formula Study was completed in 2017 and will allow Buncombe County and Haywood County to begin to utilize 5307 funds for their systems. The City of Asheville and Henderson County will continue to utilize 5307 funds; Madison County and Transylvania County declined to participate in the

5307 study at this time, but may look into it again in the future.

INTER-CITY BUS SERVICES

Another statewide issue that was identified by stakeholders and the public is the lack of intercity bus service that serves Western North Carolina to connect Asheville with nearby urban centers such as Charlotte, Raleigh, Winston-Salem, Boone, Greenville, South Carolina, and Knoxville, Tennessee. Some of the demand for these trips comes from recreational demand (a desire to visit these destinations by bus) but other trips were requested due to the need for special medical trips.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES

Also identified in Chapter 3 is the population growth across North Carolina. While not every part of the state is experiencing the same rates of growth (some parts are decreasing in population), the French Broad River MPO and Land of Sky RPO areas continue to see growth, especially in senior residents. Keeping up with the growing and changing populations requires greater and smarter investments in infrastructure.

REGIONAL ISSUES

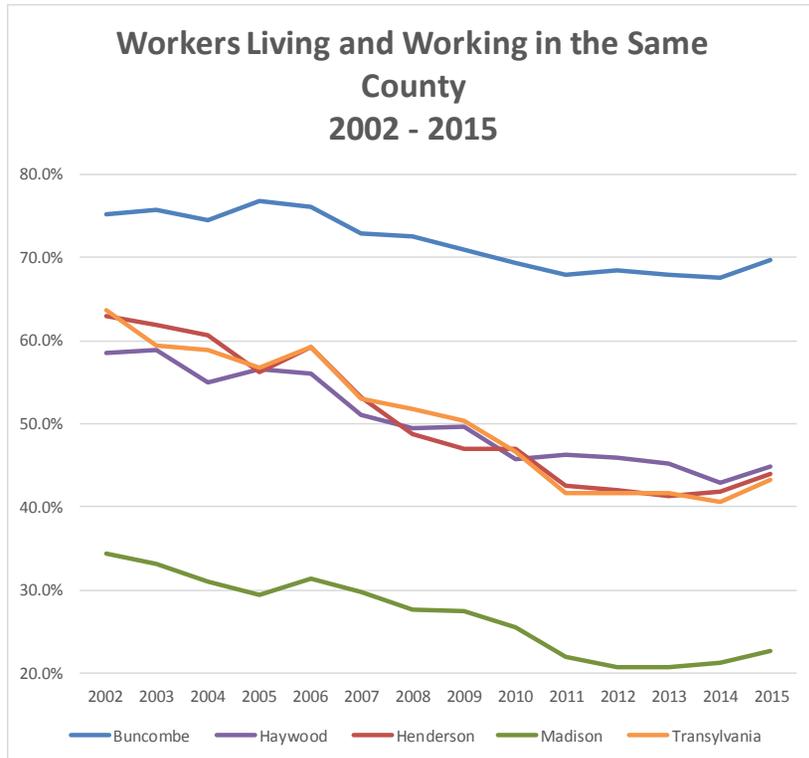
The five-county region faces a number of issues that make safe and efficient transit and human transportation services difficult. These include topographic issues due to the Appalachian Mountains as well as funding challenges from increasing costs and decreasing governmental assistance.

REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION

One of the biggest challenges in the five-county region, as identified by stakeholders and the public, is providing efficient regional transportation options. Political boundaries are increasingly irrelevant in terms of transportation needs. Workers are increasingly commuting across county boundaries, jobs are increasingly clustering in urban cores, and many medical and other service providers are consolidating facilities. However, the availability of transit services differs across the region based on the transit provider with limited regional transit options.

In every county meeting, regional connections were pointed out as needing improvement or creation. Employment trips between Asheville, Hendersonville, Waynesville, and Black Mountain

were identified as a need, but also improving the quality and frequency of on-demand trips being made across county lines.



(U.S. Census Bureau LEHD Origin-Destination Employment Statistics, Accessed August, 2017)

Some of these regional connections do not necessarily need to be made by bus service but can be accomplished through park 'n ride lots. Several park 'n ride lots currently exist across the

region, but several stakeholders and members of the public pointed out that more park 'n ride lots could be useful. Some lots are often at or beyond capacity and some lots could be made more appealing through increased awareness, security, and aesthetic improvements.

IMPROVING COORDINATION

Transit options are available in every county in the region, but some stakeholders and members of the public noted that coordination between the different transit agencies could be improved. This would work in two different ways: (1) improve the coordination of trips between transit operators to improve efficiencies and; (2) improve rider awareness of transit and other transportation options across the region.

The first improvement is starting to be addressed through coordination activities being targeted through Buncombe County. Many different transit agencies in Western North Carolina make trips into Buncombe and Henderson counties for medical trips and often sit idle for hours until the client is done with their medical visit. Instead of sitting idle, those vehicles could provide local trips for Buncombe or Henderson County (or others) to ease the burden on local resources as well as the

cost to the van provider's transit agency. Improving this coordination sounds simple, but would require upgrades to ride-tracking software across the region to make coordination and communication seamless and easy for the various transit providers.

The second improvement would be to improve rider awareness of transportation options around the region. This was a larger focus in Buncombe County meetings, but the general idea would be to provide marketing materials and staff training to better inform riders of other transit agencies and how riders can access those services.

TOPOGRAPHIC AND CONNECTIVITY CHALLENGES

The mountains of Western North Carolina are beautiful, unique, and- can be- a major challenge to efficient transportation. Besides offering roadway grades that are challenging to larger transit vehicles, the roadway network also lacks connectivity in places- in part- due to the barriers to building roads.

The lack of connectivity plays a major role in transit in two ways: (1) demand-response transit clients may be on roadways with one-way-in and

one-way-out which can be difficult to deal with if there is an accident or other roadway blockage; and (2) transit vehicles may have few options when on congested roadways.

LOCAL ISSUES

Local issues in this section are those that would largely be dependent only on action from transit operators or local governments (although state and federal funding may play a role).

SERVICE IMPROVEMENTS

Some of the most frequently requested improvements are grouped together as "service improvements." These include increasing route/service frequency, improving bus shelters, expanding service areas, and expanding service hours. Every meeting in the region had each- if not all- of these pointed out as a primary need.

Stakeholders and members of the public often pointed to increasing the availability of service. Both fixed-route and demand-response transit providers were urged to increase the hours of operation to include nights, weekends, and holidays- beyond what is already provided. Haywood and Transylvania County were

specifically recommended to develop new fixed-route services while Buncombe and Henderson were largely urged to either extend the geographic coverage of routes and/or increase their frequency.

While many of these improvements would go a long way to improving transit in the region, it should be noted that increasing service is something that requires significant budget increases for more capital and increased operations.

TARGETED OUTREACH AND IMPROVEMENTS

Many of the improvements requested at input meetings included general transportation improvements for demographic groups with transportation challenges. Many of the groups noted are the same as those noted in Chapter 3 of this plan: Seniors, Zero Vehicle Households, Low Income Individuals, Individuals with a Disability, Low English Proficiency Households, and Veterans.

While many of the services available already cater to some, if not all, of those groups, stakeholders and members of the public noted that efforts to specifically target those groups and make

transportation less of a burden should continue or be improved. Suggestions for doing this included offering fare discounts, vouchers, improving non-emergency medical trips, non-medical trips, trips to jobs or potential jobs, and making infrastructural changes to accommodate individuals with disabilities.

MULTI-MODAL CONNECTIONS

One concern noted in all of the counties- but especially in Buncombe and Henderson- was the ability to access transit by those walking or riding a bike. In areas with fixed-route service, sidewalks and bicycle facilities are not always a guarantee which makes accessing transit and other transportation services less safe and considerably less convenient.

Several meeting attendees suggested improving multi-modal connections through expanding multimodal networks: sidewalks, bike lanes, multi-use paths, and improved curbed ramps that meet ADA standards. Other suggestions included upgrading buses to accommodate other modes as well as providing training classes to potential commuters.

CONCLUSIONS

After more than ten meetings held throughout the region, it is clear that the transportation needs facing transit agencies and human services are immense and require coordination on several different levels.

Some issues go beyond just the region and are either beyond the control of most regional agencies or require increased coordination with state and federal partners in order to develop transportation opportunities that are currently lacking.

Some issues require a greater regional focus, such as providing more convenient regional transportation services for an area that increasingly needs to move across political boundaries.

Finally, many issues require an immense amount of local resources and coordination. The sheer number of issues as well as their scope may require decades of planning and development in order to effectively address.