

ASSOCIATION OF OREGON COUNTIES

Assessment of Oregon Coordinated Transportation Plan Updates Final Plan



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Introduction/Background

This project is sponsored by the Association of Oregon Counties (AOC), on behalf of the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT). AOC contracted with Nelson\Nygaard Consulting Associates to review updates, prepared in 2009, to the original Coordinated Public Transit Human Services Transportation Plans (Coordinated Plans). A total of 36 Coordinated Plans were prepared in 2007 and 2008 in response to federal legislation, the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU), which authorized funding for federal surface transportation programs through Fiscal Year 2009. Starting in Fiscal Year 2007, projects funded through three programs authorized by SAFETEA-LU and administered by the Federal Transit Administration (FTA), including the Job Access and Reverse Commute Program (JARC, Section 5316), New Freedom (Section 5317) and the Formula Program for Elderly Individuals and Individuals with Disabilities (Section 5310) are required to be derived from a locally developed, coordinated public transit-human services transportation plan.

ODOT serves as the designated recipient for JARC and New Freedom funds intended for use in small urbanized and rural areas of the state, and for all of Section 5310 funds. As the designated recipient of these funds, ODOT is required to conduct a competitive selection process to determine use of the funds, and to certify that projects were derived from a coordinated plan. ODOT also administers Oregon's Special Transportation Fund (STF). An administrative rule requires that STF Agencies (the counties, transportation districts and Indian tribes designated by state law to receive the STF moneys) prepare a plan to guide the investment of STF funds. In June 2006, ODOT issued guidance to STF agencies to indicate that the two planning efforts would be combined into a single document, referred to as a "Coordinated Plan."

In a previous planning effort sponsored by AOC and ODOT, the 36 Coordinated Plans were assessed in order to document local efforts at stakeholder involvement, public participation, identification of unmet transit needs, and development and prioritization of strategies. A written assessment was prepared for each plan, along with observations or suggestions as to how future plan updates could be improved or expanded upon. These assessments were provided to the sponsors of the plans to consider for plan updates prepared during 2009.

Key Findings from 2007 (Original) Coordinated Plans

Key findings related to the methodology and process used to complete the Coordinated Plans, and information specific to key unmet needs and identified strategies was also prepared for ODOT's review. A summary of the key findings emerging from the original plans is reiterated below:

Demographic Information

The assessment found that few plans included maps illustrating the location of population centers or showing their proximity to existing transit services. Most plans included relevant census demographic information but did not interpret the information in order to illustrate key points in the plans. Finally, many of the original plans neglected to include demographic information specific to the three populations of concern: elderly, disabled, and low-income individuals.

Stakeholder Involvement

It was noted that most of the local planning efforts build upon and made good use of existing committees, especially the local STF advisory committees. Not all Coordinated Plans included

stakeholders representing the interests of low-income persons, a population of concern for the SAFETEA-LU plans, because use of JARC funds is tied to documentation of employment needs for low-income persons.

Public Participation

All of the plans included efforts to solicit and encourage participation from members of the public; although the level of documentation varied greatly. Some extended minimal effort, such as publishing a notice in the newspaper or offering public comment at a formal public hearing. Others conducted surveys or public workshops to encourage broader participation. It was suggested that future plan updates include, as part of the appendices, documentation of public outreach efforts.

Needs Assessment

Not all of the original plans identified needs specific to older adults, persons with disabilities, or low-income persons. Instead, many plans identified needs more broadly. It was noted that few plans tied the identification of a transportation need to the resulting strategies. Most emphasized the need to preserve existing services or restore service cuts. Interestingly, many of the plans identified common themes with respect to unmet needs. Those mentioned most frequently in the plans included (by number of times mentioned):

1. Additional hours of service, either early morning, later at night, and/or on weekends
2. Out-of-county trips for medical, shopping, recreation, other purposes
3. Service in rural or outlying areas
4. Better awareness of existing services
5. Affordability
6. More frequent service
7. Better intra-city services within a county
8. Higher level of service for persons with disabilities
9. Service for veterans
10. Medical trips for non-Medicaid eligible persons
11. Better coordination of services and programs
12. Replacement of capital equipment

Strategies

Assessment of the previous plans noted that, in most cases, plans did not associate needs to strategies, did not recognize the potential use of available federal funding sources to fund the strategies, did not identify opportunities to develop new funding partnerships to leverage match funds, and did not quantify the benefits of the strategy. Furthermore, the original assessment pointed out the benefits in identifying a broader range of strategies, including the role that mobility management could play to promote coordination. Finally, few of the original plans prioritized the strategies and those that did rarely documented the methodology or rationale for the prioritization.

2009 Coordinated Plan Updates

In December 2008, ODOT staff issued guidance to update the Coordinated Plans (see Appendix A). These guidelines suggested, but did not require, that the findings from the original plan assessment be taken into consideration and addressed as part of the update. These guidelines recognized that some of the weaknesses suggested for the first cycle of planning are time-consuming and require additional resources to implement.

Updates to the 2007 Coordinated Plans were expected to be completed by the spring of 2009. AOC again offered technical assistance by providing consultant support for updating the plans, which were prepared in a variety of ways. Some agencies developed an addendum to the original plan, some prepared a separate document altogether, and some inserted changes directly into the original plan.

ODOT and AOC again contracted with Nelson\Nygaard Consulting Associates to review and summarize the 2009 Plan Updates, and to summarize the key findings and observations. As described further in this report, virtually all the plan updates responded to observations from the original plan review and revised the update accordingly. A summary of key findings related to planning elements is provided below. The summary of each of the 32 updates¹ is provided as Appendix B.

Demographic Information

The updated reports included more maps and demographic information than had been presented in the original plans (it had been noted in many plan reviews that updates would be strengthened by including maps). In many cases, it was helpful to show, even at a minimum, geographic service areas and the proximity of cities and towns. Ideally, the maps would illustrate proximity of concentrations of older adults and low-income households, and compare those locations to the availability of public transit. However, this level of analysis does not always make sense in rural communities where the population is much less dense than in cities or larger towns. Furthermore, it appears that not all the plan sponsors have capacity to generate maps utilizing Geographic Information Systems (GIS) derived from census data, and so more generic maps available on-line were included in the plans.

Unfortunately, the 2000 US Census data is now nearly ten years old. Given the declining economic conditions in many Oregon counties, especially in Central Oregon, census information is not always current or relevant as it does not reflect current unemployment or poverty levels. Therefore, unless other, more recent demographic information is available, preparing maps or otherwise conducting analyses is of little use until new data is available.

Stakeholder Involvement

A comment made in many Coordinated Plans was the need to broaden stakeholder involvement beyond the STF Committee members, and especially to reach out and include members of the business community. Another suggestion for many plans was to include documentation of such efforts in the appendices. The plan updates were mixed in this regard: While some plans did specify efforts to involve the business community, including key employers, others continue to rely on STF Committee members or other stakeholders representing primarily the elderly. Most plan updates did include more comprehensive documentation of stakeholder involvement.

¹ Four plan updates have not yet been submitted to ODOT.

Public Participation

As formal public participation was not an expectation of the plan updates, most did not speak to this. Most plan updates were endorsed or approved by the local STF Committee, and adopted by the respective policy board.

Conducting effective public participation continues to be a challenge in that often it is difficult to engage members of the community in a planning exercise, and significant resources are needed to convene and facilitate meetings that result in meaningful input. Furthermore, public meetings reflect the views only of those who come and participate, and the resulting findings are not necessarily reflective of the community at large.

Needs Assessment

While virtually all the plan updates included a discussion of unmet needs, the identification of needs from the first plan to the update did not significantly change. Most plans confirmed or reiterated the original needs; in some cases, the needs were revised.

Strategies

As a rule, the plan updates evolved significantly since the preparation of the original plans with respect to identifying and prioritizing strategies. Virtually all the plans now do include strategies, and many of them prepared a matrix or chart correlating them to the unmet transit needs identified through the planning process. Additional guidance would be helpful to assist planning sponsors with prioritizing strategies; again, this element was inconsistent in that some prioritized strategies and others did not. Those that did indicate a ranking of strategies did not consistently document the criteria or rationale used to prioritize them.

The plan updates also revealed a wide range of potential strategies ranging from specific local service improvements to broader planning or policy considerations. As with unmet needs, some themes and common strategies emerged and are discussed further in Chapter 4.

Transportation Gaps and Needs

The review of the Coordinated Plan Updates considered whether or not the transportation gaps were updated or revised. Most, but not all, of the updates did review and reconfirm the unmet transportation needs for the respective service area. The gaps were summarized into twelve primary categories, listed below in Figure 1, and were compared to the findings emerging from the original plans. The transportation gaps and needs did not change significantly from the original plan, although the number of times the gap was mentioned fluctuated slightly. The needs mentioned most frequently in the original plans and subsequent updates were: the need to provide additional hours of service for fixed-route and paratransit service, and to provide more out-of-county trips.

Figure 1 Transportation Gaps and Needs

Gaps and Needs	Ranking: Original Plans	Ranking: Plan Update
Additional hours of service, either early morning, later at night, and/or weekends	1	2
Out-of county trips for medical, shopping, recreation or other purposes	2	1
Service in rural or outlying areas	3	6 (tie)
Better awareness of existing services	4	5
Affordability	5	4
More frequent service	6	12
Better inter-city services within a county	7	3
Higher level of service for persons with disabilities	8	8
Services for Veterans	9	11
Medical trips for non-Medicaid eligible persons	10	10
Better coordination of services and programs	11	9
Replacement of capital equipment	12	6 (tie)

Strategies to Address Transportation Gaps and Needs

As mentioned previously, the 32 plan updates presented a wide variety of potential strategies intended to address service deficiencies. These strategies ranged from conducting enhanced planning efforts to the need for mobility management. By far, the most common strategy mentioned was that of maintaining existing services or replacing service that has been discontinued. Many project sponsors, in their updates, related the strategy to a specific need, and suggested performance indicators to measure their success.

Mobility Management

While few of the original plans called out a strategy intended to result in mobility management, many of the plan updates did recognize the need for a mobility management approach. According to the Federal Transit Administration, “Mobility management focuses on service diversity and a ‘family of transportation services’ to reach a wide range of customers versus traditional transit systems that are built on the principle of unified regional service coverage. A “family of transportation services” is a wide range of travel options, services, and modes that are matched to community demographics and needs.” Mobility Management consists of short-range planning

and management activities and projects for improving coordination among public transportation and other transportation service providers.

Mobility management activities may include²:

- (1) The promotion, enhancement, and facilitation of access to transportation services, including the integration and coordination of services for individuals with disabilities, older adults, and low-income individuals;
- (2) Support for short term management activities to plan and implement coordinated services;
- (3) The support of State and local coordination policy bodies and councils;
- (4) The operation of transportation brokerages to coordinate providers, funding agencies and customers;
- (5) The provision of coordination services, including employer-oriented Transportation Management Organizations' and Human Service Organizations' customer-oriented travel navigator systems and neighborhood travel coordination activities such as coordinating individualized travel training and trip planning activities for customers;
- (6) The development and operation of one-stop transportation traveler call centers to coordinate transportation information on all travel modes and to manage eligibility requirements and arrangements for customers among supporting programs; and
- (7) Operational planning for the acquisition of intelligent transportation technologies to help plan and operate coordinated systems inclusive of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) mapping, Global Positioning System technology, coordinated vehicle scheduling, dispatching and monitoring technologies as well as technologies to track costs and billing in a coordinated system and single smart customer payment systems (acquisition of technology is also eligible as a stand alone capital expense).

In all, 31%, or ten of the 32 updates, identified mobility management as a preferred approach. Although they varied in level of detail and in specifying desired tasks or activities, all recognized the need to advance coordination with among existing providers, to strengthen or initiate new partnerships, for example with schools, businesses, and medical facilities. Those plan updates that specified mobility management as a preferred strategy include: Columbia County, Coos County, Josephine County, Klamath Tribe, Lake County, Malheur/Payette Counties, Umatilla County, Umatilla Tribe, Wheeler County, and Yamhill County.

For the most part, there is currently no staffing capacity available to dedicate efforts to advance such coordination activities. Many plan updates (particularly those in Central Oregon and in the Columbia River Gorge region) also recognized the need for a more regional approach and the need to develop common fare instruments, customer information systems, and to otherwise work on improving connectivity beyond the immediate service boundaries.

² FTA Circulars 9070.1F (5310 - E&D), 9050.1 (5316 - JARC), and 9045.1 (5317 - New Freedom), all issued May 1, 2007.

Other Transportation Strategies

A list of suggested strategies included in the plans is listed in the table below (Figure 2).

Figure 2 Examples of Transportation Strategies included in Plan Updates

Strategy
Long Range Planning
Capital Replacement
Regional Tools: common fare structure, marketing, information, emergency planning
Enhance volunteer programs
Expand service hours
Expand service routes, to outlying areas
Improve access to employment centers (Vanpools, JARC)
Coordinate with schools/colleges
Improve inter-city connectivity
Preserve existing infrastructure and services
Creation of new providers
Improved coordination among existing providers
Discounted or subsidized fares for low income
Ensure medical trips for non-Medicaid eligible
Improve pedestrian/bicycle access to transit
Develop Statewide Public Transit-Human Services Plan
Initiate Innovative Grant Program
Develop STF Coordinator Networking Group
Develop Mobility Management Position/Function
Out-of-County trips
Develop Statewide Insurance Pool
Service for Veterans
Information Clearinghouse, linkage with 511, better information & awareness
Develop Park and Ride Plan, other alternatives (feeder service, taxi)
Enhanced level of service on paratransit

Those strategies mentioned most frequently include:

- Preserve existing services and infrastructure
- Replace capital equipment
- Expand service hours
- Develop an information clearinghouse/improve customer awareness of existing services
- Expand services, especially to outlying areas not currently served
- Improve coordination among existing providers
- Provide subsidized or discounted fares for low-income passengers
- Improve employment-related transportation
- Enhance or develop new volunteer programs
- Develop mobility management program

Summary/Conclusion

This memorandum has summarized observations and findings emerging from the review of 32 Coordinated Public Transit Human Services Transportation Plan updates that were prepared in 2009. The intent of updating the Coordinated Plans was to ensure that information included in the plans remains relevant and current, and that ODOT and project sponsors are able to coordinate the development and identification of potential service strategies included in the plans with the availability of grant (state and federal) funds administered by ODOT.

This assessment of the new documents revealed that significant steps were taken to update and improve the quality of information presented by the planning sponsors. Specifically, steps were taken to better document public outreach and stakeholder consultation, to refine the identification of unmet transportation needs, to identify and prioritize potential strategies, and to more closely link strategies or solutions to the gaps. Many plan updates also included performance measures that can be used to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of new programs, and to assist program operators establish an initial benchmark or goal to monitor service delivery.

It is intended that the plans remain “living documents” and that they provide a roadmap and listing of strategic actions to assist local project sponsors in improving mobility for older adults, persons with disabilities, and those with low-incomes. With this in mind, the following suggestions are made for ODOT’s consideration as administrator and overseer of the statewide planning process:

Provide Guidance on Future Plan Updates

As mentioned, the plan updates were prepared in a variety of ways. While it is not necessarily advantageous for all plans to adhere to exactly the same format (in fact, one of the benefits of the statewide process is that the individual plans reflect the unique characteristics and issues specific to their locale), some guidance to ensure consistency when developing key planning elements would be helpful. For example, project sponsors were not consistent in their definitions and use of the term “strategy.” In some cases, strategies and needs were not clearly distinguished. It would be helpful, from a statewide perspective, to encourage a more consistent approach in how the plans are structured and key elements included.

While more plan updates included maps than in original plans, not all sponsors have the technical expertise or staffing capacity to develop maps to show the proximity of populations of concern, key origins and destinations, or other factors that could complement the written needs assessment element of the plans. ODOT may want to consider providing technical assistance to those entities which lack this capacity.

It is also suggested that plan updates be prepared as a document separate from the original plan in order to more clearly compare them and to assess its progress from time to time. The cover or other identifying pages should also clearly indicate the date and/or version of the plan.

Reauthorization of Federal Transportation Legislation

The federal legislation that directed the development of the Coordinated Plans is expected to be reauthorized within the next year or two; efforts are currently underway to consider potential legislative changes. It would behoove ODOT and its partners to closely monitor such discussions, and seek to share their experiences and suggestions for improving the coordinated planning process. For example, it may be suggested that similar planning requirements as were established for programs funded by FTA be sought for inclusion in legislation authorizing key human service programs such as Medicaid, Older Americans Act, or programs funding services for veterans. Future Coordinated Plans might also benefit from including programs funded with rural (Section 5311) funding, including the Tribal Transportation Program, also funded through Section 5311. Finally, efforts could be sought to improve reporting requirements on behalf of recipients of the federal funds that are required to be derived from the plans.

Mobility Management

As mentioned previously, mobility management was raised as a potential strategy by numerous planning sponsors. The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) supports mobility management projects through three programs: Transportation for Elderly and Persons with Disabilities (Section 5310); Job Access and Reverse Commute (Section 5316); and New Freedom (Section 5317). In addition, the FTA defines mobility management activities as “capital” projects, which means they have a lower threshold for local match requirements. This provides an excellent incentive to develop and implement mobility management projects intended to promote coordination.

FTA’s definition of “mobility management” is broad and flexible; accordingly, local project sponsors differ in their potential approaches. As nearly one third of the plans included a strategy to promote mobility management, it would be useful to track and monitor those projects in order to assess their effectiveness and to share the results statewide.

Regional Connectivity

The need to travel from one county to another once again emerged as a key planning issue in virtually all the plans. Some regions (i.e. Columbia River Gorge, Central Oregon) are actively engaged in promoting regional connectivity and in trying to develop tools that can help operators and customers better connect between counties. While in some cases a champion or lead agency has been identified—for example, the Central Oregon Intergovernmental Council (COIC) serves as a regional coordinating entity on behalf of Crook, Jefferson and Deschutes Counties—this is rarely the case. Despite the fact that the need to connect between counties was the need most frequently mentioned, it is not always clear “who is in charge,” or what steps need to be taken.

Again, this is an effort that ODOT may seek to promote through the Association of Oregon Counties or with other organizations representing local governments. As a starting point, ODOT may wish to identify common barriers preventing or impeding connectivity, and work with local entities to develop an action plan intended to overcome these barriers. It would also be helpful to identify regions or areas that lend themselves to regional transit patterns and suggest common strategies (i.e. central phone system, coordinated marketing, joint fare structures, etc.) to promote regional connectivity.

Use of Technology

Few plans spoke to the potential of effective utilization of technology. It would be useful for ODOT to develop a statewide Intelligent Transportation System (ITS) plan for rural and small communities. These programs are least likely to have the staffing capacity or resources to develop individual plans and would benefit from a larger statewide approach.

Human Service Coordination

A goal of developing the Coordinated Public Transit Human Services Coordination Plans is for stakeholders and representatives from human service and transportation agencies to mutually plan for transportation services for the elderly, low-income and disabled. While such consultation clearly did occur in preparing the plans, few plans spoke to ongoing efforts and opportunities to promote coordination long-term. Such efforts are often complex and require ongoing communication and establishment of mutual goals and objectives. All too often, rules or regulations may prevent coordination from occurring, or there may be other administrative barriers that stymie implementation of good ideas.