



CHAPTER I

Introduction

Flathead County, on behalf of Eagle Transit, contracted with LSC Transportation Consultants, Inc. to prepare a five-year Transportation Development Plan Update. The plan specifically focuses on general public transportation issues throughout Flathead County. The plan also examines transit needs, alternatives, and programs for the communities within Flathead County.



General public transportation service in Flathead County is provided by Eagle Transit which operates several transportation services. For some residents in Flathead County, this service is their only link to work, shopping, health care facilities, education, and other necessary services. The project focuses on transportation for the general public, elderly, disabled, and education/employment trips.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to analyze and recommend strategies for Eagle Transit which will affect the delivery of public transportation services over the next five years. This study describes the existing conditions in the county related to public transit services, discusses service and other alternatives for meeting needs into the future, identifies the locally-preferred set of alternatives, and presents an implementation plan for the next five years. A final purpose of this study is to identify those local coordination opportunities which may be present both now and into the future. These may include coordination with the Flathead Nation and Glacier National Park.

REPORT CONTENTS

Chapter II presents the results from the public involvement program. This included open houses, onboard passenger interviews, a web-based online survey, presentations to the Advisory Board, and presentations to local community leaders.



Chapter III presents the existing community conditions and includes a transportation system overview. A summary of community demographics and economics is also provided. This is based on past studies (including the previous TDP completed in 2001). A discussion of Eagle Transit’s existing transit services and other transportation providers within the county is presented in Chapter IV. The transportation provider information includes a description of services, ridership, fleet characteristics, and finances.

Chapter V presents updated Eagle Transit Goals and Objectives for service. These Goals will become the adopted goals which will help to guide Eagle Transit’s system development in the next five years. Chapter VI presents the transit needs assessment for Flathead County. Chapter VII presents the alternatives for service analysis. Alternatives range from status quo to fixed-route service in Kalispell. These alternatives were used to develop the Final Preferred Plan.

Chapter VIII presents a brief analysis of the feasibility of partnering with Glacier National Park to provide general public transportation service within the Park. Chapter IX presents a discussion of capital needs for Eagle Transit to continue and expand operations. Chapter X presents an analysis of the institutional and financial alternatives which may be suitable for Eagle Transit.

Chapter XI presents an overview of current land use planning concepts as they relate to transit service operations as well as a discussion of development review as Flathead County continues its vast growth. Finally, Chapters XII and XIII present the Preferred Operations Plan, Implementation Plan, and schedule.

STUDY APPROACH

Eagle Transit is taking a closer look at how services are provided in the county. Since the last TDP, service has had to be reduced several times due to financial constraints. A key element in the plan is a clear evaluation of the unmet needs of the local community residents. The current effort focuses on the continuation of providing public transit services to meet the community's needs. One important step toward providing an integrated community-wide transportation system is involving key players such as the Eagle Transit Board, key stakeholders, the Montana Department of Transportation, human service agencies, school district representatives, other transportation providers, and local residents. The process will follow the following general planning approach used by LSC.



Project Team

An initial “kick-off meeting” was held in Kalispell, Montana on September 27, 2005. The meeting was attended by members of the Eagle Transit Board and the Montana Department of Transportation. The project team met to discuss project goals, priorities, the public participation process, and a time line for completion of the final study. The project team also discussed which local stakeholders would be critical in completing the transit study for the area.

Presentations were made throughout the planning process following submittal of technical reports. These meetings took place in November, December, and January

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during regularly scheduled Advisory Board Meetings. The project team was kept informed on the progress of the study and was very involved in the making of key decisions for Eagle Transit's future service.

Stakeholder Meetings

The group of local stakeholders identified by the project team included the following organizations within the study area:

- Flathead Area Agency on Aging
- Flathead Valley Community College
- Flathead County Representatives
- Glacier National Park
- Montana Department of Transportation
- Big Mountain Resorts
- Local School Districts
- Flathead Regional Medical Facility



The stakeholders represented both organizations that provide transportation services and those that may have a specific transportation need. As part of the process to identify local transportation issues, these stakeholders were contacted throughout this process to provide an opportunity for input into the transit study. The stakeholders were invited to attend the various board meetings and public meetings being held throughout the study period.

Opportunities for Public Involvement

Throughout the planning process, public involvement is key to the success of the Transportation Development Plan. At critical points during the process, public meetings were announced and held where citizen participation is openly welcome and appreciated.

Six public open houses were scheduled during the project. The open houses offered the community an opportunity to provide public input regarding transportation issues which should be addressed as part of the Transportation Development Plan. Community residents were asked to comment on the existing and future transit services in Flathead County. The public was given the opportunity to state which transit service and other alternatives they think are necessary to address the identified issues and meet the established goals.

The following list includes some of the ways the public was made aware of the study and opportunities for comment:

- Planning Board meetings
- Newspaper releases on the third Thursday of each month
- Chamber e-mail lists
- Hospital employee e-mail list
- College employee and student e-mail list
- County employee e-mail list
- City/Town Council meetings
- Survey questions
- Community open houses
- Radio announcements

The public participation process is discussed in detail in Chapter II.

EAGLE TRANSPORTATION DEVELOPMENT PLAN, 2002-2007

In 2001, Eagle Transit, in cooperation with LSC, developed the five-year transportation plan (covering the years 2002 to 2007). The purpose of the plan was to identify and itemize the transportation needs of Flathead County and Eagle Transit. LSC used this document to develop a basic foundation of the transportation needs and resources in the county. The update of this document looks at past recommendations and determine why, or why not, these were not implemented in the past five years. Goals and Objectives adopted during this last process were updated.

The plan's main focus was on itemizing projects for federal transportation funding. The major type of project identified in the document was improved checkpoint service and capital projects. The following lists the recommendations made during that planning process:

- Increased demand-response service
- Modify existing checkpoint service
- Change day of service from Whitefish to Kalispell service
- Increase marketing efforts
- Eagle Transit to remain primary provider
- Add bus washer to staff
- Continue to monitor service
- Provide comment cards on buses
- Provide bike racks on buses
- Purchase shelter for 600 Liberty Street
- Develop web page



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- Separate administrator phone line
- Become involved in development review process

Many of these recommendations were implemented during the past five years; however, some of these did not occur. These recommendations were reviewed further to determine if they could be implemented in the upcoming five years as well as to determine the level of effectiveness of these recommendations.

SUMMARY OF THE ISSUES AND PROJECT GOALS

During the September “kick-off meeting,” the LSC team briefed the Eagle Transit staff, Board, and other agencies on the study process to be undertaken over the four-month period. Major issues and concerns regarding public transportation were discussed. Following are summaries of the major issues which arose through the meeting and during discussions with Eagle Transit Staff:

- May need to extended hours and days to seven days a week.
- Identify the need in Flathead Valley core.
- Coordination among the local agencies, especially Glacier Park.
- Continue to build ridership and look at increasing employment and medical trips.
- Flathead Valley Community College continues to play a large role in service and must be addressed both as local trips and regional trips.
- Vehicle insurance costs for the individual agencies and how that is a barrier in implementing transit services in the region.
- Education level regarding the types of transit services that exist in the county.
- Fare structure for service may need adjustments.
- Monitoring system may need to be looked into.
- Coordination among the agencies has begun, but requires additional development in order to meet the needs of the communities in the county. Major coordination opportunities in the future may exist; however, the current service issues need to be addressed first.
- Increased marketing is needed for local residents.
- Long-term funding continues to be a problem.
- Capital problems with new buses need to be addressed.
- Transit service continues to face the challenges of real-time pick-ups and educating riders to arrange trips in advance when possible.

- Commuter services may need to be looked at.
- Labor issues recently have hindered service to some extent.
- Community continues to grow and so must Eagle Transit to keep up with growth.

MAJOR PROJECT ACTIVITIES

There are several “major” project activities which were looked at during this TDP Update. Many of these “activities” highlight the items which may need immediate attention (6 to 12 months).

Coordination

Glacier National Park (NP) has undertaken a feasibility analysis for near-future transit service throughout the park. This initiative is a mitigation activity during an eight-year reconstruction effort on the Going to the Sun Road, which spans from the western edge of Glacier NP east to the Blackfoot Reservation. The feasibility analysis recommends three routes which cover this corridor, with a main transit facility located near the south side of Lake McDonald. Up to 20 transit vehicles will be purchased for this endeavor; however, a transit service provider has yet to be identified. Throughout this planning process, an analysis of the feasibility of Eagle Transit contracting with the National Park Service to provide service from the western entrance to Logan Pass is detailed more in Chapter IX. This feasibility will identify capital and operating advantages to operating the service for the National Park. The greatest advantage is the ability to leverage additional federal funding with current FTA 5311 funding. The Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient, Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users, or SAFETEA-LU, the current Transportation Bill, has identified a new program called *Alternative Transportation in Parks and Public Lands Program (3021)* which is designed to develop public transportation in national parks with the goal of improving mobility and reducing congestion and pollution. The Glacier initiative is expected to be fully funded operationally from an increase in park entrance fees which are set to begin in 2006. The transit vehicles have been earmarked through Congress, thereby creating a prime opportunity to leverage additional 5311 funding through the entrance fee revenue to be used as local match. The Park has stated it wishes to

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use federal dollars as efficiently and effectively as possible which could, in turn, enhance the general public service offered by Eagle Transit.

Other coordination opportunities include coordination with the Flathead Reservation transit system. The Tribal Government has expressed interest in looking at coordination opportunities with Eagle Transit. Many tribal members commute to Kalispell and other communities for work, as well as medical and shopping trips. LSC is currently contracted to provide planning assistance to the Flathead Nation. As the Flathead Nation finishes their Plan, it is unlikely that any short-term coordination will be pursued due to cost constraints.

Efficiency and Effectiveness

Efficiency is a key component in any organization, and transit providers look at efficiency as the only measure of providing a quality service. However, efficiency must be balanced with effectiveness. Transit providers must remember that they are providing a public service for the good of a community or area. Efficiency is vital to the success of a system; however, other measures of performance must be looked at as well. Providers must set goals and objectives which reflect the type of service they are striving to provide. General public providers are designed to serve the general public; however, in many small communities, the general public rider is not who is using the bus or who will use the bus in the future. The service really is there to serve the transportation-disadvantaged. While “choice riders” are the goal of systems, the focus of service is to provide to those persons and areas who need the service the most and have the greatest propensity to use the service, thereby increasing the efficiency of that service.

Goals

Transit Goals and Objectives are the backbone of any good plan. Service enhancements and options are developed based upon the goals of the local Transit Board. For example, if a goal is to increase commuter service, regional commute options will be developed and analyzed. If a goal is to maintain funding levels, a constrained plan will be developed and implemented. Therefore, a careful deliberation of the future goals and underlying objectives represents a very prudent approach. These goals were developed through working with the Transit Advisory Board.