

CHAPTER I

Introduction

The Gallatin County Big Sky Transportation District (GC BSTD) contracted with LSC Transportation Consultants Inc. to prepare a Five-Year Transportation Development Plan. The plan specifically focuses on the Big Sky resort area. This report presents a summary of the existing conditions related to transit services and estimates transit demand for the study area. Information in this report includes a description of the community and a review of Snow Express, the resort transit service within the study area. Big Sky transportation goals and objectives are presented in detail and the 2007-2012 Transportation Implementation Plan is documented.



The report focuses on transportation for resort guests, as well as the potential for general public service expansion for year-round service and regional service for both employees and guests.

BACKGROUND

Like many resort communities throughout the western states, Big Sky is experiencing extensive development. Big Sky is located in a very attractive setting with easy access to Yellowstone National Park and the surrounding national forests. Big Sky is also a major destination resort. With the development comes increasing traffic and the associated congestion and safety concerns. Like many of these western resort areas, growth and its effects are a major concern.

The existing transportation infrastructure is limited. There are essentially two roads serving Big Sky—US 191 running north/south and providing access to the area, and Montana 64 which provides immediate access and circulation. US 191 serves as a major north/south route between Idaho and Wyoming. The road is a two-lane facility with curves through the Gallatin Canyon and has infrequent

passing opportunities. Traffic safety has long been and continues to be a major issue in this corridor.

As found in many winter resort areas, some employees must commute long distances. A lack of local affordable housing and an employee base for service jobs requires resort employers to attract employees from greater distances than is typical for small to medium-sized communities. Big Sky employers must hire employees from the Bozeman area to meet all employment needs. Some of these employees must commute using the US 191 corridor; however, a majority of seasonal employees reside in Big Sky in employee housing.

In addition to the need for employee transportation, there is a significant transportation demand among visitors to Big Sky. Big Sky has a permanent population of only about 1,500 residents, but swells to several times that population during the winter ski season. These visitors require transportation services to reach Big Sky and then for circulation within the resort area. Karst Stage and other private operators provide transportation service from the airport near Belgrade. Snow Express provides local circulation service with the resort area, but does not operate year-round. This lack of year-round service affects the eligibility for funding from some sources, such as Federal Transit Administration federal funding.

As the demand for transportation increases, it becomes more important to provide alternatives to the private automobile. This is especially true in resort areas where travel tends to have definite peak patterns which tax the transportation system capacity. The provision of transit and other measures to reduce the demand for transportation can be effective ways of addressing the increasing pressure on the transportation infrastructure.

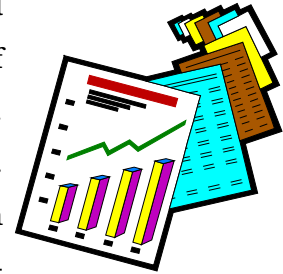
PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to analyze and recommend strategies for Snow Express which will affect the delivery of transportation services over the next five years. This finished product describes the existing conditions in the area 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.

REPORT CONTENTS

Chapter II presents the existing community conditions and includes a transportation system overview. A summary of community demographics and economics is also provided. Chapter III presents the transit needs assessment for Big Sky. A discussion of Snow Express and other transportation services within the area are presented in Chapter IV. Information includes a description of services, ridership, fleet characteristics, and finances.



Chapter V presents the goals and objectives for the short-term and long-term development of the transit system throughout the Gallatin Valley Region, based on the issues presented in the surveys and public comments.

Chapter VI presents a review of the public involvement program in Big Sky, consisting of several open houses and onboard surveys of bus patrons and employees in the area.

Chapter VII presents the alternative systems and services developed by LSC Transportation Consultants, Inc. to improve the transit system. The alternatives range from no changes in the existing service, to restructuring the service, to expanding the service.

Chapter VIII presents the capital alternatives which may be needed in future years. This chapter discusses alternative fuel vehicles which may be appropriate in Big Sky.

Chapter IX presents the potential financial alternatives, along with their advantages and disadvantages. Existing funding sources are reviewed. Additional funding sources are identified, some of which are based upon the experiences of similar

resorts in other states. Institutional alternatives are also presented for future service.

Public education and transit-friendly land use planning concepts are presented in Chapter X. The concepts are related to general transportation issues within the Big Sky area as well as transit-specific issues. Many of the concepts improve auto safety and traffic flows, while at the same time improving transit efficiency and effectiveness. The public education concepts will be reviewed in order to determine the correct manner in which the Big Sky Transportation District can build a transit coalition and develop support for additional funding for transit.

Chapter XI presents the implementation plan which includes the final recommendations and fiscally-constrained plan for the Big Sky transit system.

STUDY APPROACH

As in many communities, Big Sky is taking a closer look at public transit services and is seeking to find the most effective means of providing those services. Currently, public transportation is provided through Snow Express, a contract service operated by Karst Stage in Bozeman, Montana. The current effort focuses on the feasibility of providing year-round 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 Transportation Advisory Board, Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC), Big Sky Resort, Moonlight Basin Ski area, Yellowstone Club, Montana Department of Transportation (MDT), and Big Sky residents.

Project Team

An initial "Kick-off Meeting" was held in Big Sky on February 10, 2005. The meeting was attended by the TAC members, Montana Department of Transportation, and other local agencies within the study area who have transportation concerns for the community. This project team met to discuss project goals, priorities, and a time line for completion of the final study. This team discussed local stakeholders who would be critical in completing the transit study for the area.

A second Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC) meeting was held on March 16, 2005 after holding several public open houses. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss Technical Memorandum #1 and provide feedback and comments to the LSC team.

A third TAC meeting was held on July 7, 2005, again following several open houses. Comments on preliminary recommendations were made and incorporated into this Final Report. A final presentation to the TAC was held September 1, 2005 to finalize this Plan.

Stakeholder Meetings

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

- Big Sky Resort
- Karst Stage
- Moonlight Basin Ski Area
- Yellowstone Club
- Big Sky Chamber of Commerce
- Local residents



These groups represent 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 to provide input for the transit study.

During the February “Kick-off Meeting,” the LSC team briefed the Transportation Advisory Committee on the study process to be undertaken over the course of the study period. Key stakeholders involved with transportation services were identified. Major issues and concerns regarding public transportation were discussed. Following are summaries of the major issues:

- The resort area would like to see year-round transportation, but understands that additional funding is needed for the increased service.
- Transportation service from Bozeman for employees and visitors is viewed as increasingly important.

Introduction

- Increasing ridership for both residents and guests is critical to warrant increased service.
- Revisions to the make-up of the Transit Board is seen as vital.
- Additional transit facilities are needed to ensure smooth operations of buses. Current bus storage is going to end this fiscal year.
- Changes to the image of current buses to compete with other ski resort areas in the United States is key.
- Schedules should be user-friendly.
- Passenger amenities need to be studied to determine the appropriate improvements to bus stops.
- Identification of the barriers to providing year-round service.
- Increased marketing is needed for local residents.
- Long-term dedicated funding is needed to sustain year-round service.