

Executive Summary

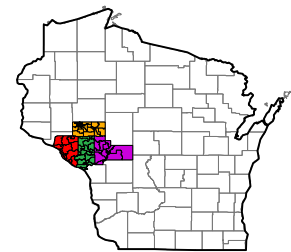
The Community Transportation Association of America (CTAA) contracted with LSC Transportation Consultants, Inc., to conduct a Technical Assistance Project focusing on transportation services within the four-county area of Buffalo, Jackson, Eau Claire, and Trempealeau Counties.



The study focuses on general public transportation issues within the four-county study area, herein referred to as the Western Dairyland Study Area. General public transportation service within the study area is very limited, and has only recently been provided by the Wheels for Work program. This program has provided access to employment for many disadvantaged residents of the study area. For some residents of the community, this service may be their only link to work. The demand for these programs is only one indicator of the need for transportation services in this rural area of Wisconsin.

STUDY AREA

The WDEOC in west-central Wisconsin serves the Counties of Buffalo, Eau Claire, Jackson, and Trempealeau. The study area is approximately 3,100 square miles in area and borders the Mississippi River and the State of Minnesota to the west. The study area is located in a very rural farm area of western Wisconsin having only one major city, Eau Claire, with an approximate population of 65,000



(including the City of Altoona), located in Eau Claire County. The rural character of the study area makes providing transportation services to residents very difficult. Overall population density for the study area is approximately 50 persons per square mile. This density is heavily influenced by the City of Eau Claire, as most of the surrounding communities are relatively small in comparison.

Buffalo County

Buffalo County is located in the western portion of the study area and is separated from Minnesota by the Mississippi River. The county had a 2000 total population of approximately 13,804 persons. When settlers arrived to what is now Buffalo County, they found rolling prairie land which was easily prepared for crop production. Prior to the late 1800s, wheat was the most predominant crop, until increasing erosion problems led to the introduction of dairy farming. Today, milk production continues to be the most important economic base in the county. Buffalo County is the 65th largest dairy county in the nation.

Eau Claire County

Eau Claire County gained recognition in the mid-1800s as one of the country's prime lumbering areas. The areas in, and around, Eau Claire County began lumbering operations after the signing of a treaty in 1837 between the Chippewa Indian Tribe and the United States. Since that time, the area has become the economic center of western Wisconsin. The area has evolved to support some of the most sophisticated and technologically advanced manufacturing within the United States.

Eau Claire County had a 2000 total population of 93,142 persons. Of this total population, the City of Eau Claire—the county seat—comprised approximately 66 percent (61,516 persons). Other smaller communities within Eau Claire County include: Altoona, Washington, Seymour, Pleasant Valley, Union, Brunswick, Augusta, Bridge Creek, and Fall Creek.

Jackson County

Jackson County is located on the eastern portion of the study area. The eastern half of the county is nearly all forest and was the bed of the large central Wisconsin Lake formed 10,000 years ago when the last glaciers melted away. The eastern half of the county contains the Jackson County Forest as well as the Black River State Forest, both very popular recreation areas.

The western half of the county is part of the non-glaciated region of Wisconsin. This area is mostly rolling hills and is home to many dairy farms, an important

agricultural industry. The land that is too steep for farming is primarily oak forest. The east half and west half of Jackson County are divided by the scenic and wild Black River. The county seat of Black River Falls is located adjacent to the Black River.

Jackson County had a 2000 total population of 19,100 persons, most of whom reside in Black River Falls. Other incorporated communities within the county include: Alma Center, Hixton, Melrose, Merrilan, and Taylor, with the majority having a population of less than 1,000 persons.

Trempealeau County

The first white settlement in the area to be known as Trempealeau County was established in 1685 when Nicholas Perrot built a trading post, which was eventually abandoned in 1732. Trempealeau County was formed in 1854 from Crawford and La Crosse Counties and is named for Trempealeau Mountain, French for the mountain that stands in water.

The 2000 population for Trempealeau County was 27,010 persons. The City of Arcadia is the largest populated place within the county, with approximately 2,300 persons. Of the eleven incorporated communities, eight have populations over 1,000.



GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The WDEOC does not currently have established goals for providing public transportation within the study area. General goals and objectives derived from both WDEOC staff and the Advisory Committee. The objectives were used to evaluate the existing service and any potential changes.

Preliminary Transit Goals and Objectives

- 1. Provide efficient transit services within Buffalo, Eau Claire, Jackson, and Trempealeau Counties, as well as to and from surrounding counties.**
 - a. Provide transit service for the general public.*
 - b. Provide service when it is needed during the day.*
 - c. Provide regional transit service.*
- 2. To provide persons in need of transportation access to child care facilities, employment, and other social service agencies.**
 - a. Provide transportation for access to employment.*
 - b. Create additional employment through the use of transit service.*
- 3. To coordinate between various organizations, agencies, and governmental entities the most effective transit system within the rural Western Dairyland area.**
 - a. Coordinate the use of existing resources*
- 4. Locate additional funding sources for the provision of transit service within the area.**
 - a. Fund general public transit service using existing funds of numerous agencies.*
 - b. Locate new and innovative funding mechanisms.*

These goals and objectives were reviewed by the Advisory Committee and became the basis for evaluating service options.

EXISTING SERVICES

There are several specialized transportation services operating within the study area. However, the area is characterized by a lack of public transportation. Inter-city services are provided by Greyhound, and there are private providers which will provide taxi or charter service. Eau Claire Transit provides public transportation service within the City of Eau Claire, but no similar service exists in any of the rural areas. Access to places of employment, shopping centers, and other services is very limited.

TRANSIT NEEDS ASSESSMENT

The assessment of transit needs in the four counties was an important aspect of this project. It was necessary to identify the potential users of public transpor-

tation and the level of demand which exists. Several different approaches were used to estimate the needs of the different markets.

The transit needs of low-income groups, seniors, and persons with disabilities were estimated using the Transit Cooperative Research Program (TCRP) Project A-3: Rural Transit Demand Estimation Techniques. The potential demand for public transportation was estimated to be about 300 trips per day. The demand for specialized transportation related to specific programs is much higher at 1,600 trips per day. These estimates are based on a high level of service and should not be construed to indicate the actual ridership which might occur on any particular service. The actual ridership is a function of the level of service which is provided and includes such factors as frequency of service, schedules, fares, travel time, and the specific route.

RECOMMENDED SERVICE PLAN

The recommended service plan is a combination of vanpools and scheduled service on flexible routes. The vanpools will be set up to meet the needs of employees commuting to jobs within the study area and in adjacent counties. Destinations outside the study area may include La Crosse and Winona. The plan calls for seven routes to be phased in over time. Initially, the routes would be set up to serve Trempealeau, Eau Claire, and Jackson Counties. Senior services would continue to meet the specialized needs of the elderly.

The plan calls for establishing a transit agency through an intergovernmental agreement among the four counties and the communities with the counties. Service may then be provided through a contract with a transportation provider and administered by the transit agency. There are two viable providers in the region which could provide the service—Eau Claire Transit and Abby Vans. The agency would also have the option of providing the service itself. However, the recommendation is to contract with an existing provider which has the expertise and support facilities to operate the service.

FINANCIAL PLAN

A financial plan was developed for the proposed services. The projected expenses and revenues are shown for the first five years of the service. The existing senior transportation services are incorporated into the financial plan. Continuation of the funding for these services is assumed to be available for operation of the proposed service. Additional revenue has been identified from the local communities, private employers, and the federal government. These sources of revenue will provide sufficient funding for the proposed service.

IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

A detailed implementation plan was provided as part of the Technical Assistance project. Specific implementation steps are described with designated responsibilities. The implementation steps include formation of a Task Force to seek support from the local governments and to obtain approval of funding.

