



# CHAPTER I

## Introduction

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The City of Helena, on behalf of the Helena Area Transit Service (HATS), contracted with LSC Transportation Consultants Inc. to prepare a five-year Transportation Development Plan as an update to the existing plan that expires this year. The plan specifically focuses on the Helena area and the communities in Lewis and Clark and Jefferson Counties. This Final Report presents a summary of the existing conditions related to transit services, presents the Strategic Transit Vision, presents service alternatives, and includes a short-range, five-year transit service plan.

The study focuses on public transportation issues within the greater Helena area. The report focuses on transportation for the general public, elderly, disabled, and school children. General public transportation service in Helena is provided by HATS, under the direction of the Helena Public Works Department. For some city and county residents, this service is their only link to work, shopping, health care facilities, and other necessary services.

### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study was to analyze and recommend strategies for the Helena Area Transit Service which will affect the delivery of public transportation services over the next five years. The finished product of this study can stand as a “blueprint” for service delivery in the area. This document supports Federal Transit Administration (FTA) and Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) requirements for the submittal of Section 5311, operating and capital requests. This document also provides local decision-makers the information necessary to make informed decisions regarding public transit system sustainability and future growth.

## **REPORT CONTENTS**

Chapter II presents a review of the previous TDP documents as well as other pertinent planning documentation concerning the study area. Chapter III presents the existing community conditions and includes a transportation system overview. A summary of community demographics and economics is also provided. Chapter IV presents the transit needs assessment for the Helena area. A discussion of HATS and other transportation providers within the county are presented in Chapter V. Information includes a description of services, ridership, fleet characteristics, and finances.

Chapter VI presents a summary of an onboard survey conducted on HATS routes, while Chapter VII presents a summary of community input from an online and agency-distributed questionnaire. Chapter VIII presents the Strategic Plan which includes a transit vision for the community and goals and objectives to support that vision. Chapter IX reviews the current management and organization of the HATS.

Chapter X presents an overview of coordination strategies which were discussed through this planning process. Chapter XI discusses appropriate service alternatives which were analyzed during the courses of this plan, while Chapter XII presents capital needs for HATS. Chapter XIII includes a discussion of potential funding sources which may be investigated both now and into the future. Finally, Chapter XIV presents the five-year service plan which should guide the HATC and HATS staff in presenting service options to local decision-makers.

## **STUDY APPROACH**

As in many areas, the Helena area 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 by HATS and other “transit” providers detailed later in this document. A key element in the plan has been to evaluate the unmet needs of local residents. The current effort focuses on the feasibility 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 Helena Area Transportation Council (HATC), City of Helena, Lewis and Clark and Jefferson Counties, human service agencies, the local school district, and local residents.

A key component in current transit planning—as dictated by the current transportation bill, the Safe, Efficient, Flexible, Transportation Equity Act—A Legacy for Users, or SAFETEA-LU—makes coordination/consolidation of transit/transportation services in local areas a priority. Requirements for federal/state funding now require the inclusion of a coordination plan for grantees. The purpose of this approach is to eliminate duplicate service areas and types so that the most cost-efficient and effective transportation for a given market segment and area can be achieved. Therefore, an element of this plan is a discussion of possible coordination opportunities of providers. The final service plan attempts to estimate the future coordination potential, which can be used as a local match component of FTA funds, administered through MDT. While there are not tremendous opportunities, several opportunities exist such as coordination with the local Head Start program. The future of coordination and consolidation of services will require active participation in the HATC by local providers. If such providers wish not to coordinate, those providers will find FTA funding difficult to obtain. It behooves each provider to attempt strategies which may lead to more efficient uses of limited transportation funds.

## **Project Team**

An initial “Kick-off Meeting” was held in Helena on May 16, 2006 with the HATC and other local residents. The meeting was attended by representatives from local agencies/organizations which have a transportation need for clients, representatives from the Montana Department of Transportation, HATS staff, and other local agencies within the study area which 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 issues and concerns, as well as identified others who would be critical in completing the transit study for the area.

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A second HATC meeting was held on July 6, 2006, as well as a project update to a joint County-City Commissioners meeting that day. A public open house was also scheduled during that week as well to solicit public input into the planning process. The purpose of the meetings was to discuss Technical Memoranda and provide feedback and comments to the LSC team. A third HATC and open house was held the first week of August with a final presentation to the Joint Commissioners in October.

These groups 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 to provide input for the transit study.

### **Opportunities for Public Involvement**

Throughout the planning process, public involvement was key to the success of the transit plan for the community. At critical points during the process, public meetings were announced and held where citizen participation was openly welcome and appreciated.

The first public open house was scheduled for July 2006. The open houses offered members of 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 service in the greater Helena area. The public was given the opportunity to state which services and other alternatives they think are necessary to address the identified issues and meet the established goals.

Additionally, public input has been solicited in several ways. First, an online survey was provided to community residents on the LSC website. This survey gave the general public an opportunity to answer a short questionnaire and to provide general comments on transportation needs. A public service announcement was published in local newspapers and by the local civic television station. This questionnaire was also distributed by agencies and organizations to clients. These were returned to the LSC Team for data input and analysis. Furthermore, the LSC Team

was on-site in Helena to conduct onboard surveys and boarding and alighting counts. The onboard surveys were analyzed by LSC with results provided in subsequent sections of this report. Further open houses were held in conjunction with Alive@Five and additional presentations were made to the Joint Commissioners.

## **SUMMARY OF THE ISSUES**

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

- There is a real need for a wheelchair-accessible vans after the hours HATS and other agencies end operations.
- There is a need for extended hours until 7:00 p.m. and some service on Saturdays. Many people are not using service because it does not operate after normal business hours and becomes difficult to use for work.
- Currently, the system has a limited wheelchair capacity. HATS has had to turn down trips because of capacity issues.
- HATS has referred persons with disabilities from the checkpoint service to the paratransit service. At times, the checkpoint service has called a paratransit vehicle to accommodate a disabled rider due to time constraints on the checkpoint system.
- The current checkpoint system needs to be expand to cover more geographic area. Areas, such as north of Target, need to be served.
- A transit district, including Jefferson and Broadwater, should be examined to determine if this would be appropriate for the area.
- A regional transit coordinator should be examined to aid in coordination/consolidation of regional services.
- Service from outlying areas should be examined, including commuter routes and other areas throughout the valley.

Other issues which became evident during the initial data collection phase of the planning project include:

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- While a new transfer/operations/storage facility is underway, with preliminary planning completed, how will affect future operations be affected?
- Will the growth in the elderly population create more demand for transit? How much additional funding will be needed to meet the demand?
- What is the most effective method of involving the public throughout the study?
- What future revenue sources can be dedicated for transit services?