



Key Person Interviews

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to present an analysis of the key person interviews conducted during the week of October 15, 2007. Key person interviews are part of the public input plan being used in this study. The LSC Planning Team—with support and input from the Three Rivers Planning and Development District (TRPDD)—developed a list of individuals that represent private and governmental agencies that may be interested in investigating increased transit service in the region.

LSC staff interviewed 16 individuals (12 in individual settings and four in a group setting). The individuals interviewed are key decision makers in the community and represent private business, local government, and civic and business organizations. The interviews were conducted in person or by telephone by the LSC Senior Transit Planner. Each person was asked the same questions and given the opportunity to provide additional insight or information. A list of those interviewed can be found in Appendix L. Below is a summary of their comments.

Question 1: In your opinion, what are the major issues facing the Northeast Mississippi Region?

Many answers to this question revolved around local issues related to the communities in which those being interviewed live. In Oxford, the major issues were congestion and lack of public parking, along with caring for the elderly. Other issues of concern were keeping up-to-date with technological advances and developing transportation alternatives for Oxford residents and University of Mississippi students. In communities surrounding Tupelo, several people listed the poor economy as a major issue along with the lack of rural transportation alternatives and the lack of (or problems getting to) health care services. Some other issues were no senior center in Booneville and the lack of affordable retail space in down-

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town Tupelo, lack of affordable housing, and potential illegal immigration issues. Listed below are each individual's answer to this question.

- There is a great need for more senior centers in the region, especially in Booneville where the senior population is growing. There also needs to be more public transportation service for the elderly and disabled for medical trips. The Northeast Mississippi Community Action Agency provides these trips for four counties in the region and is at capacity.
- Major issue facing northeast Mississippi is the high cost of health insurance and the high percentage of people that are obese.
- Transportation is the major issue facing the region—both the lack of public transportation and the need to improve the existing roadway network. The region should make a major effort in developing a bikeway and pedestrian network.
- The region is experiencing an economic downturn. The furniture industry—which has been the main industry in the region—is experiencing a major recession and many factories are closing or relocating to China. At the same time, the population of the region is growing rapidly, which is placing a strain on regional infrastructures.
- For this part of the region (the area in and around Tupelo), the major issue is unemployment. A large segment of the population is employed by furniture factories. Recently the largest furniture factory in the area relocated to China, and several smaller factories closed down. It is possible two more factories will be closing by the end of the year.
- Unemployment is the major issue due to the loss of many jobs in the furniture industry which has been the main industry in the region for many years. The lack of affordable housing is an issue the region needs to address.
- Downtown congestion and parking. The City of Oxford is not pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly. Many areas in Oxford do not have sidewalks, and there are virtually no bikeways. It is extremely difficult for people without access to an automobile to travel in Oxford and the surrounding region.
- The region is very rural which leads to people having to travel long distances to get to work, go shopping, and travel to medical facilities.
- The large growth in the Hispanic population in the region, concern about affordable housing for this expanding population, and concern about illegal immigrants.
- A major issue in the region is trying to keep current with new technologies in communications.

- In the Oxford area, a major issue is providing necessary assistance and services, which includes transportation, to seniors. Another major issue facing the community is the high cost of healthcare service and health insurance. The City has taken steps to help with these issues by opening a free clinic for the working poor.

Question 2: What are the major transportation issues facing the region?

The overwhelming response to this question was the need for transit service in the region, especially transit services for the elderly and disabled. There were also some responses regarding the need for more pedestrian and bicycling facilities. One respondent mentioned the need to widen State Highway 15 from two to four lanes. Listed below are individual responses to this question.

- Additional senior centers in the region, especially in Booneville. More public transportation services for the elderly and disabled for medical trips.
- The difficulty in traveling any distance in the area, especially if you do not have a car.
- Transportation is the biggest issue facing the region both in the lack of accessible public transportation and the need to improve the existing roadway network.
- A regional transit system that provides access to employment and healthcare facilities. This service should operate on weekends and provide after-hour trips so that people can attend public meetings and go to shopping and entertainment venues.
- The major issue in this area is making State Highway 15 a four-lane divided highway along with the development of a public transportation system. Improving State Highway 15 will provide the citizens of this area with better access to Pontotoc and Tupelo and should encourage commercial and residential growth in the area. A transit system will enhance the attractiveness of the area to the growth mentioned above and also promote the area as a good place for folks to retire. Even without this possible growth, there is a desperate need for public transportation in the area since the population is aging and some are not able to drive anymore. With no taxi service, it is becoming increasingly more difficult for seniors to get around.
- Access to public transportation. Tupelo recently lost their local transit provider which makes it very difficult for those dependent on public transportation to get to work, the doctor's office, and other everyday travels that people who can afford a car take for granted. Also, although there is a taxi service in Tupelo, it is very expensive.
- No intercity bus service. Greyhound service ended in the area two years ago. Transit service is needed on Jackson Avenue to serve the University of Missis-

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Mississippi and downtown Oxford. The Mississippi Department of Transportation (MDOT) continually struggles financially and provides virtually no funding for local transit projects.

- Alternative forms of transportation to the private automobile, lack of sidewalks and bikeways in many parts of the community, and speeding vehicles on Main Street.
- High gasoline costs are making it difficult for limited-income families to make necessary trips.
- The lack of taxi service in Pontotoc (city and county), along with no public transit service, makes it very difficult for people who do not own or cannot operate a car. Many people in Pontotoc must go to Tupelo for employment and healthcare, and if you don't have a car, you have to rely on family and friends. Many seniors feel that they are a burden to their children by having to ask for rides, and many seniors do not have family in the area.
- The need for a public transit system in the region. Right now, if you don't have a car it is virtually impossible to get around.
- Need for senior transportation as stated above and local transit especially for University of Mississippi (UM) students, staff, and faculty.

Question 3: What are the needs of the region for local and regional transit service?

Again the majority of answers stressed the need to have transit service available and affordable to meet the needs of the elderly and disabled. There were also responses stating the need for regional transit service for non-emergency medical trips. Three respondents stated the need for a transit system in Tupelo, and two respondents stated the need for public transit in Oxford. Listed below are individual responses to this question.

- The needs are especially great for more medical trips for the elderly and disabled and for coordination of the existing transit services in the region.
- Affordable transportation for individuals that are dependent on public transportation.
- Service to and within the City of Tupelo. People in the rural areas around Tupelo depend on Tupelo for employment, healthcare, and services.
- A regional transit system that provides access to employment and healthcare facilities. This service should operate on weekends and provide after-hour trips so that people can attend public meetings as well as go to shopping and entertainment venues.

- Service from New Houlka to Pontotoc, Houston, and Tupelo. Although there is a grocery and retail business, New Houlka does not have a pharmacy. New Houlka does have a Veterans Administration medical center that will see patients in the community that are not veterans. Many people still go to Pontotoc and Houston for medical services, and the major hospital for the region is in Tupelo.
- The region truly needs a public transportation system for those in need so that they have a way to travel to the places we talked about in the last question.
- Service to the Northern Mississippi Regional Center (which employs 900 people); regional service into Oxford since many people who work in Oxford do not live in Oxford due to high housing costs. Oxford is the regional health center with 80 percent of hospital patients not living in Oxford. The Disability Commission believes the planning study area should be expanded to include Yalobusha and Panola Counties since a large percentage of their residents commute to Oxford to work.
- Fixed-route service for Tupelo and transit service to and from Tupelo to the surrounding communities which rely on Tupelo for retail, employment, and health care services.
- Regional service is most needed for medical trips.
- A rural public transportation system that is convenient and affordable. By convenient, the service has to be easy to use and large enough so that people can almost always get a ride. Some counties in the region have elderly and disabled bus service, but it is always at capacity and people have a hard time reserving trips. By affordable, the fare should be low enough for seniors on a fixed income and low-income folks can pay the fare.
- Need to have public transit service since there is no service right now except for the elderly and disabled.
- Need to expand elderly and disabled demand-response service into the county. This will probably happen when the new transit system opens.

Question 4: What benefits do you think improved transit service would bring to the region?

Those interviewed responded that the transit service would improve access to jobs, goods, and services for people that are dependent on transit. This improved access would help generate a stronger economy and encourage residents to stay in the region. Several others stated that improved transit service would help to decrease congestion and improve the availability of downtown parking. Listed below are individual responses to this question.

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- A better economic outlook for the region and a better quality of life for people dependent on public transportation.
- Improved health care access that will enable people to seek healthcare earlier instead of waiting until they are so ill that they have to go to the emergency room and the very high costs incurred with emergency service.
- It should bring economic benefits to the area since it is a cost-effective means for people to move around the community, help people dependent on public transportation obtain gainful employment, and attract new business to the community.
- Access to employment opportunities and health care facilities. It will also improve the economy since people who could not have jobs due to lack of public transportation can now be able to work.
- It can positively stimulate local economy and provide a reliable transportation alternative to the private automobile.
- Increased ease of travel for everyone. Allow those who do not own or cannot operate an automobile to be able to get to work and other trips. It may also be good for the school district. Some children who live close to school have to walk to school. On bad weather days, these children may be able to take the city bus to school. Students who go to Itawamba Community College could use the bus as well.
- Higher employment opportunities, better health care for transit-dependent people since they will have transportation to doctor appointments and won't wait until they are so sick they have to go to the emergency room; will be an incentive to better assist in the recruitment of new businesses to the area. It should improve congestion, air pollution, and generally improve the quality of life in the community.
- Better access to goods and services for people dependent on public transportation and less dependence on the automobile.
- It allows people who are dependent on public transportation to stay in the region, allows seniors to stay in their rural homes longer, and helps folks be able to get to this facility easier.
- Convenient, accessible, and affordable transit service for citizens in need of transportation to get to work, go shopping, and get to doctor appointments. If by using the bus people are able to get jobs, then counties will get more taxes, businesses will get more sales, and the economy will be much better.
- For Oxford and the University it would help to relieve congestion and parking problems.
- Improve parking and congestion in downtown and on the UM campus. More freedom of mobility for people dependent on public transportation. Will help

UM students get around without having to use their cars and will hopefully stop students from drinking and driving.

Question 5: What areas of the region should be given priority for local transit service?

Most of those interviewed felt that priority should be given to developing local service in Oxford and Tupelo and having regional routes traveling into these communities. There was one response for local and regional service to Corinth. Listed below are individual responses to this question.

- Transit service to Tupelo and Corinth. Corinth is in the process of building a regional cardiac treatment center.
- Tupelo since it is the regional hub for health services and commercial activities.
- The City of Tupelo, especially service to the medical center and rural service that goes to employment centers outside of Tupelo.
- There should be a local transit service in Tupelo and service to the industrial centers in and around Tupelo. Must provide service to the North Mississippi Medical Center that provides heart surgery, a cancer treatment center, and a Kidney Dialysis center.
- Rural service to Tupelo, Houston, and Pontotoc should be given priority as should rural service into towns and cities throughout the region.
- Service to employment, educational, and health care facilities should be given first priority.
- Local and regional service to Oxford with intercity service between Oxford and Tupelo. In approximately two years, Toyota will be opening a large manufacturing plant 12 miles north of Tupelo and service should be provided to the plant or perhaps work with Toyota to develop carpools and vanpools. Oxford recently received an FTA Section 5311 grant to begin operating a transit service that will serve the city, Lafayette County, and the University of Mississippi. The grant totals \$761,000 with a local match of \$423,000 coming from Oxford, Lafayette County, and the University for a total operating and capital fund of \$1,184,000.
- Service to the Northeast Mississippi Medical Center and service along the Main Street and Gloster corridors.
- The City of Tupelo should be given priority to develop a local transit service and regional transit service to Tupelo.

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- Rural areas like Pontotoc County. In towns, people may be able to walk or ride a bicycle or take a taxi to places. In the country, there usually are not taxi companies and most things are too spaced out to walk or ride a bike.
- Local service in Oxford with regional service into Oxford. This concept should also work well in Tupelo.
- Areas with good size populations of elderly folks and maybe service to factories and employment centers in the region.

Question 6: What should be the hours of service? Should weekend service be provided?

Most responses tended to look at about a 12-hour service day during the week with limited weekend service. Start time ranged between 5:00 and 9:00 a.m. with an ending time between 5:00 and 9:00 p.m. One respondent believed that transit should operate from 5:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m., while another believed the service should operate from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Listed below are individual responses to this question.

- Service should be provided on weekdays from 5:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. with weekend service operating from 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.
- If the service is to cover primarily medical trips, it should operate from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. If the budget allows, there should be weekend service.
- 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. at the minimum with longer hours if funding is available. There should be weekend service from at least 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.
- 6:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. with limited weekend service.
- Perhaps 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. on weekdays. No great need for weekend service since family members should be able to transport their relatives that do not have a car.
- I believe the service should operate from 5:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. on weekdays. This should allow people to get to work and shopping. Most restaurants and retail centers close at 9:00 p.m. so this time will allow those workers to go to work and return home on the bus. Not too sure how long the weekend service should operate, but there should be at least limited weekend service.
- The service should operate from 5:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. on city routes. Service to UM should operate 5:00 a.m. to midnight on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. There should be weekend service on all routes.

- Service on the Main Street corridor should be from 7:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The Gloster corridor should operate later, perhaps until 10:00 p.m. There should be weekend service, but not at the level of weekday service.
- 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. on weekdays with limited service on weekends.
- 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. on weekdays and no weekend service to start. This will allow for senior travel and, if this goes well, you can gradually extend the hours to cover more employment opportunities.
- The service should run from 6:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. Monday through Friday with later service on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday until the bars close. This way, mostly UM students could take the buses to bars and parties and not have to drive under the influence.
- The hours and days that have been identified in the regional transit plan for Oxford, Lafayette County, and UM. A lot of study was put into developing service hours and days in the study.

Question 7: What do you think would make transit service succeed?

The majority of responses expressed the need for the service to be affordable and effective. It was also expressed that the service needs to be well advertised and marketed so that people will be aware of the service. Listed below are individual responses to this question.

- Promotions and a good marketing plan and advertising campaign so that as many people as possible are made aware of the new transit system.
- A series of easy-to-get-to transit stations in the rural areas. People could then go to the stations and catch buses to where they need to travel. You must also make sure to obtain community buy-in of the transit service and station locations.
- Needs to be economical so that people can use it, and it should be well marketed so that people know about it.
- A professional marketing plan, outreach to the disabled community with service that is economic and effective.
- A well thought out and practical coordination plan with a professional agency that can operate the coordinated service. By professional you need people who have been successful in coordination in the agency.
- Marketing the new service and having a good public relations campaign that will get the word out about the service. The service has to be economic and convenient to use.

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- Since most of the region is very rural, perhaps park-and-ride lots should be constructed at various locations with fixed-route service operating from these lots twice a week.
- Service that is accessible to the elderly and disabled that is consistent and affordable to everyone.
- Service that is affordable and effective. New technologies should be used to make the service efficient and effective.
- Governmental cooperation. Local, state, and federal government must work together to make this service successful. The role of government, in my opinion, is to provide the necessary service and guidance for its citizens to be able to work and be productive in a positive way.
- Rising gasoline prices. This will make people consider using public transit as long as they will be able to save a significant amount of money. People love the convenience and privacy of their automobile and will not give that up unless they can really save money.
- You need community buy-in and a solid marketing campaign. The more the community knows about the new transit system the more likely they are to use it.

Question 8: What do you think is the greatest barrier to new public transit in the region?

The overwhelming, but not total, response to this question stated that the major barrier would be funding to operate the service. Several responded that many people have a negative perception of public transit. One individual stated that there should be no barriers. Listed below are individual responses to this question.

- The negative perception associated with bus service.
- Funding to operate the service and make sure it is affordable to low-income individuals.
- Nothing that can't be overcome if people truly work together to make this needed service happen.
- Money to operate the service.
- Public funds to operate the service and buy the buses and facilities. It may be relatively easy to get federal and state funds to start the service, but eventually you will need more local money to continue operations and that money is scarce.

- Negative perception of public transportation. A lot of people think that bus service is just for the poor. Other folks are just addicted to their cars.
- Funding will be the primary barrier along with a general negative perception of transit. The population density may be too low for transit.
- Money, pure and simple.
- Funding. Local governments have limited resources and have problems taking care of basic public needs.
- A barrier may be public apathy about making things better for those in need.
- Convenience of use is the greatest barrier. Why wait out in the elements for a bus to come, then have it stop at every corner until it comes to my corner when you can hop into a car and go directly where you want to go?
- Funding to assure the service can run into the future. It is fairly easy to get funding to start a new service, but finding funding to continue the service is difficult when the start-up money dwindles away.

Question 9: Who do you think should operate the service?

The majority response to this question was that a private company should operate the service. There were also several responses that a transportation authority be developed to either operate the service or oversee the private company operating the transit service. Listed below are individual responses to this question.

- Perhaps a Regional Transportation Authority with all communities represented on the Board. The day-to-day operation needs to be handled by a professional transit person or company.
- A professional coordination agency.
- Don't think a government entity should operate it. Perhaps a private company that specializes in transit.
- It should be operated on a daily basis by a private company which specializes in transit management with a Transit Authority set up to oversee the private company.
- Some type of transportation authority that is representative of the communities served and not part of one municipal government.
- Perhaps a successful Section 5311 transit service in the region.
- The service should be operated by people knowledgeable in local matters.

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- A private entity should operate the service. Private companies have more experience in efficient labor management, effective marketing and advertising campaigns, and generally are more flexible in service activities than government.
- The private sector should operate the service with governmental oversight. It is my understanding that there are private companies that specialize in operating transit. The governmental oversight should come from a regional transit authority.

Question 10: How should it be funded?

The respondents believe that the service should be funded by local, state, and federal government. One individual stated that if the service was not self-sustaining, it should not be started. Listed below are individual responses to this question.

- A tax set up in each county that is solely for funding transportation projects. This tax should be administered by the transit authority.
- It should be funded by the government because this a social issue that can't be looked at in terms of profit so the government needs to subsidize the service. It could be looked at as an infrastructure issue like sidewalks and roads; and the government funds those.
- Begin with federal funds and grants, then gradually support the service with local funding.
- Perhaps have a tax that would be only for transit.
- Federal funds and grants with some possible help from MDOT. The eventual burden of operating transit will fall on the local governments of the region.
- Three Rivers should fund it. They should be able to obtain some federal and perhaps state funding. Local governments would be hard pressed to come up with any money to fund transit.
- FTA Section 5311 funds with each local government entity putting up match money.
- Through a partnership of federal, state, and local agencies along with user fares.
- Federal, state, and local taxes should be used to operate the service along with the revenue collected from the passengers.
- Federal funding with help from local governments.

- The service should be self-supported. If it can't be self-supportive, I'm not sure that it should operate.
- It should be funded with local, state, and federal subsidies and somehow try to make sure this funding can be depended on into the future of the service if the service is successful.

Question 11: Do you think that the region would support increased funding to improve public transportation services?

Most of those interviewed felt that this would be difficult to do. However, it may be possible if somehow the community buys into the plan developed. Listed below are individual responses to this question.

- If there is a good plan of action for the regional transit service, people will vote for a tax to support the service.
- Yes, and taxes should be increased to make sure the new transit system has enough money to provide great service. Having said this, you need to have a solid operational plan with a budget to use to get community buy-in for the new service.
- Maybe, but it could be difficult to gather the support necessary.
- Yes, if you provide a good service plan.
- Probably not, mainly because of the poor economy we are experiencing in the region. When the economy starts to improve, there may be a chance.
- Very doubtful. They would want new roads before they would want transit.
- People will not be receptive to increasing taxes to fund the new transit service. Local governments should re-allocate existing financial resources to provide for the service like Oxford and Lafayette County have done.
- Probably not, too many people are married to their cars.
- It's a possibility, but you will need to show local governments that the service is needed and will benefit the community.
- They will if they are presented with a solid plan of action that spells out the benefits to the community if this service is started.
- No. Again, if this service cannot pay for itself, and you have mentioned the vast majority do not, it should not become another governmental burden.
- It would be difficult but possible. There must be a good plan, a solid marketing campaign that will reach as many folks in the region as possible, and obtain community buy-in to the project.

Question 12: Are there specific issues which should be addressed in our transit study?

There were a few issues expressed. Listed below are individual responses to this question.

- There needs to be a unified fare structure and transfer policy addressed in the plan.
- First and foremost, the plan must address the needs of the elderly in our region. Please make sure you reach out to the senior community and find out exactly what they need.
- Make sure all stops in the rural areas and most stops in the city have shelters with schedules and route maps.
- Please make sure the study addresses access to urban centers from the rural areas in the region.
- If you are going to do this, you really need a heavy-duty marketing plan. You first need a really good service, then you have to sell it well so that folks will know about it and hopefully use it.
- Make sure that all vehicles are accessible. Have a single fare structure and transfer policy for the entire regional service that is easy to understand. Regional service must be coordinated with local transit service so that people do not experience long waits for transfers.
- Look at light rail service for Lee County. Rail right-of-way and tracks exist that runs through every community in Lee County. Most of the industrial employment centers are along the track as well. You would need to work with the railroad company, but this is a great concept that would yield great positive economic impacts to Lee County.
- The study needs to have a marketing and public relations plan.
- Yes, study the transit systems that do support themselves and make sure this service can do the same.
- You need to include the transit plan for the Oxford area and probably discuss methods of regional service coordinating with the Oxford area service.

Question 13: Do you have any comments you wish to add on the topic of public transportation?

Listed below are individual responses to this question.

- The medical center has developed a carpool service to assist its employees in setting up a carpool. This program was developed to help our employees cope with the high cost of gasoline.
- You may want to contact a representative in Corinth to help you on this project.
- It is important to expand the service area so that all counties that use Oxford and Tupelo as commercial and health care hubs are included in the regional transit service.
- Downtown Tupelo should be pedestrian only with satellite parking developed and bus service which would bring people from the parking lots to downtown. There should also be a downtown circulator that could take people to local attractions.
- A good public transportation system can allow seniors to stay longer in their own homes which helps them to live happier and longer lives.

SUMMARY

The information received from the key person interviews, along with other public involvement processes, plays an important role in the development of the Northeast Mississippi Transit Study. These interviews and other public involvement presented throughout the study will also assist the TRPDD in obtaining transit funding from the federal government which provides substantial amounts of money across the country for local transit operations and capital procurement. The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) is the fiduciary of this funding, and one stipulation for obtaining FTA funds is that the community has direct influence in how the regional and local transit service is to operate. The TRPDD has shown that it is involved in public transit matters in the region and that the agency values input from its citizens.

Overall, there is excellent knowledge of public transit and a keen interest in having a regional transit service configured so that rural residents have access to the major towns and cities in the region, especially Oxford and Tupelo. One individual, when asked question #12, requested that the Planning Team analyze the

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potential of light rail or intercity service using the existing tracks of the Kansas City Southern Railroad. Their premise for this service is that all the towns in Lee County are along this rail line as well as several industrial centers. This same individual would like to see downtown Tupelo become a pedestrian mall with satellite parking lots developed. Shuttle bus service would be provided to each parking lot, and a shuttle route would be developed to transport people to shopping and tourist attractions along the Main Street corridor. In practicality, these two forms of public transportation may not be able to be implemented due to cost. However, it illustrates the forward-thinking attitudes of the people in the region.