

CHISAGO - ISANTI COUNTY



Heartland Express

East Central Minnesota Human Service Transportation Coordination Plan



Your ride.



Prepared in 2017 by the East Central Regional Development Commission, 100 Park Street South, Mora, MN 55051
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For more information related to the 2017 Human Services Transportation Coordination Plan contact the East Central Regional Development Commission at 320-679-4065x23, 100 Park Street South, Mora, MN 55051.

Executive Summary

The East Central Regional Development Commission provided the project management for the development of the 2017 Regional Transit Coordination Plan for East Central Minnesota, a comprehensive planning process led by a steering committee made up of leadership from services for individuals with disabilities, older adults, persons with limited incomes, public transit providers, and private transportation entities. The Minnesota Department of Transportation Office of Transit provided technical assistance, oversight and funding to complete the plan. The strategies and projects identified in this plan came about through collaboration to address the major needs and concerns of transit in the next five years across the region.

The East Central Regional Development Commission, serving the Region 7E east central counties of Chisago, Isanti, Kanabec, Mille Lacs, and Pine as a regional development and planning organization, including the development of this plan.

Some public and private transportation options currently exist for persons in Region 7E which include agency, for-hire transportation providers, shuttle services, specialized transportation services, taxi service, public transit, and volunteer based services.

An updated inventory developed as part of the plan helps to document, evaluate and disseminate information regarding the existing services within the region. Developing a common inventory system, easily used by providers, the public, and agencies remains a coordination strategy for the region.

Interest from regional stakeholders guided the development of coordination strategies, including new service development to mimic more urban choices such as Uber to begin to fill gaps in service needs for future human services transportation. Additionally, existing transit providers remain committed to working together to bring new capital and service delivery improvements to the region. East Central Minnesota remains a region with two subset regions: the southern counties (Chisago, Isanti, and Southern Mille Lacs) behave more suburban, and exhibit growth to support this. The northern half (Pine, Kanabec, and Northern Mille Lacs) remain rural, with slower growth and lower incomes.

The demands on the existing transit providers to work together to address changes in services will continue to include strategies such as sharing resources, coordinating routes and dispatch services to meet needs. A goal of joining forces and continuing the dialogue related to the pressures facing public and private transit and human service providers in reaching a sustained goal of identifying ways to improve the accessibility and convenience in service delivery in the most cost-efficient way.

Introduction

Enhancing transportation access by facilitating the most appropriate and cost-effective manner with available resources. Coordination between human services and public transit, while focusing on persons with disabilities, older adults, and those with low incomes, improves transportation for all. Communities maximize their resources more fully through coordinating efforts and using resources from a variety of sources.

As an update to the 2011 Local Human Service Transit Coordination Plan, this document (East Central Minnesota Human Services Transportation Coordination Plan) will assist in the determination of ways to assess needs and gaps in services among all transit providers coordinate transit services in Region 7E through technical analysis that evaluates existing transportation services within the region. The plan records the level of participation in the planning effort, including preferred strategies and projects to improve transportation coordination in Region 7E.

The federally-required Local Human Services Transit Coordination Plan, as identified in the Fixing America's Surface Transportation Act (FAST Act) states that projects eligible for funding under the Transportation for Elderly Persons and Persons with Disabilities—known as the 5310 program must promote strategies identified in a Local Human Service Transit Coordination Plan. This planning process fulfills federal requirements by engaging transportation providers, social services agencies, veterans and members of the public in identifying strategies for a more fully-integrated regional transportation coordination.

With federal requirements met, the planning process encourages a multi-faceted stakeholder group to join together to specify project that offer an opportunity to advance transportation services in Region 7E. All along the way, stakeholders generated project ideas, being always cognizant of the expectation of collaboration. The resulting project list came from a broad range of regional stakeholders, offering a five-year roadmap for future coordination efforts in Region 7E.

Plan Goals

The goals for this plan are to: 1) Increase the level of understanding of public transit and human service transportation coordination among stakeholders, elected officials and the governmental partners within the region; 2) Identify where there is potential for better coordination with the assistance of federal, state, and local funding, particularly where cooperation or consolidation could address existing unmet transit needs; 3) Establish strategies and identify projects for associated funding sources that support coordination within the delivery of human services transportation; 4) Update and prioritize needs and strategies within the region; and 5) Incorporate veterans as a special stakeholder focus with human services needs across the region.

Plan Process

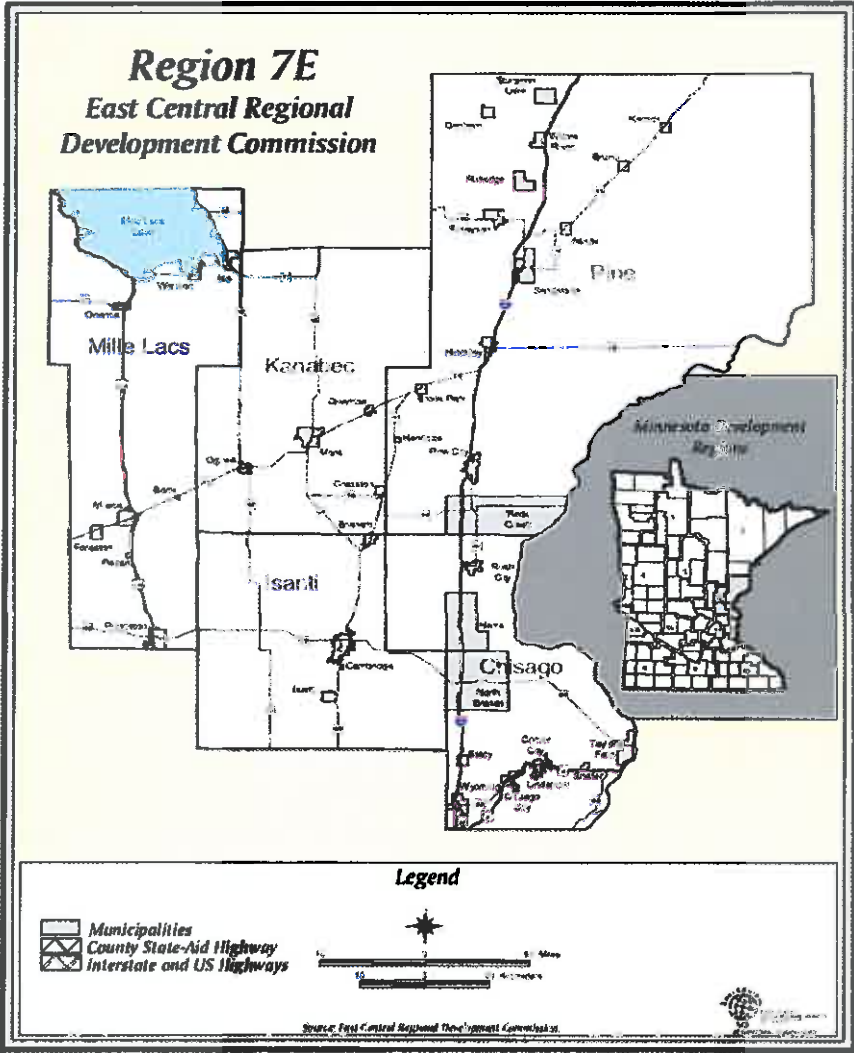
The plan goals established by a steering committee representative of stakeholders across Region 7E. Members of the steering committee included: 1) Helen Pieper, Timber Trails Public Transit; 2) Kathryn Burski, Kanabec County Public Health; 3) Charles Hurd, Kanabec County Family Services; 4) Lowell Sedlacek, Kanabec County Veteran's Services; 5) Beth Vanderplats, Mille Lacs County Human Services; 6) Mike Moilenan, Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe; 7) Dean Loidolt, Central Minnesota Council on Aging; 8) Voni Smolke, Arrowhead Public Transit; 9) Michelle Meis, Chisago-Isanti County Heartland Express; 10) Diane Seefeld, Mille Lacs Health System; 11) Tim Smutzer, PHASE rehabilitative services; 12) Ami Helmbrecht, Chisago County Human Services; 13) Deb Johnson, Industries, Inc.; 14) Marie Lourey, Family Pathways; 15) Peggy Brackenbury, Pine County Family Services; 16) Rod Peterson, Mille Lacs DAC; 17) Beth Crook, Mille Lacs County Public Health. In addition to these individuals, Susan Siemers, MnDOT; Robert Bollenbeck, ECRDC; and Penny Simonsen, ECRDC round out the steering committee. The steering committee reviewed the 2006 and 2011 Local Human Service Transit Coordination Plans, along with utilizing needs assessments, surveys, local compared to statewide data, rider surveys, and focus groups to determine past work, remaining gaps, and transportation successes. These processes resulted in a synthesis of strategies ready for adoption to align with future use of funding.

Three meetings of the steering committee were held at various locations within Region 7E (January 26, 2017 at Pine County offices in Pine City, March 2, 2017 at Timber Trails offices in Mora, and June 22, 2017 at Cambridge City offices in Cambridge). A public workshop held on May 18, 2017 at Wahkon City offices in Wahkon rounded out the meeting portion of the planning process. The solicitation of plan feedback via email throughout the process gathered further insight from interested individuals not able to participate in person.

Study Area

The compact, all-rural East Central region of Minnesota fits within the geographic area directly north of the Twin Cities, south of Duluth, east of St. Cloud, and west of Wisconsin's west-central border. The counties of Chisago, Isanti, Kanabec, Mille Lacs, and Pine identify as Region 7E. The map (figure 1) below shows the region, as well as where the region exists in relationship to other regional development commission within Minnesota. Region 7E resides within the boundaries of three Minnesota Department of Transportation districts (1, 3, and Metro).

Figure 1. Region 7E Map



Existing Conditions

Regional Background. The five county-region includes 39 statutory cities and 88 townships. Known as a region filled with small cities, the list of state aid cities, those with populations more than 5,000 include just four communities, North Branch (with more than 10,000 population), Cambridge, Isanti, and Wyoming. Princeton almost makes the list with 4,700 population.

Demographics. Region 7E, located in east central Minnesota includes a population of 163,416, a 20% increase from the 136,244 recorded in 2000. All five counties saw an increase in population from 2000-2015. Chisago County's population grew 32% by adding over 13,000 people, followed by Isanti County with 23%, Mille Lacs County 16%, Pine County 10%, and Kanabec County with 6% growth. Compared with a statewide growth rate of 12%, Region 7E counties continue to grow at a much larger than average rate in all age sectors. It currently is the second fastest growing of the 13 economic development regions in the state, and now the seventh largest in total population. The southern-most reaches of Mille Lacs County, and the entirety of both Isanti and Chisago Counties remain more densely populated than Pine, Kanabec, and northern Mille Lacs counties. Almost 60% of the region's population resides in Chisago and Isanti counties. Region 7E's population continues to register slightly older than the state's with 15% of the population over the age of 65, compared to the 13.6% statewide average. At 29%, Region 7E also touts a much higher percentage of people in the 45-64 year old age group, including the back end of the Baby Boomers (born between 1946-64) who create a significant population shift over time. The largest portion of 7E's population remains the 25-64 year olds, typically considered the "prime working years". Region 7E's under 25 population, still smaller than the statewide average at 31% (33% statewide). Younger resident growth rates rise slower than the over 45 growth rates historically in Region 7E. Population projections through 2035 estimate that Region 7E's over 65 population will increase by 90% by adding almost 27,000 people to that age group. Regional older adult service gap analysis consistently rank transportation as a top priority for development and cite it as an area needing more available services, offering challenges in providing services to rural older adults located fairly proportionally across all five counties.

Cultural and Racial Diversity. In 2014 almost 95% of 7E's total population of 163,310 identify as white, compared to 85% statewide. The region's American Indian population remains larger than the state average at 2,835. Other race/ethnic origin groups saw increases in totals, and when combined total 9,326. Overall, in Region 7E, Limited English Populations remain very low.

Zero-Vehicle Households. As a car-centric, rural area, the cities of Mora, Pine City, Princeton, Cambridge, North Branch report the highest rate of zero-vehicle households (between 9.5 and 21.3 households) in Region 7E report the majority of households with zero vehicles. However, beyond the confines of those cities boundaries, the zero-vehicle households within Region 7E appear throughout the region fairly homogenously in the 1.6 to 4.6 range, with increases in the population centers mentioned above, Milaca, and in the Chisago Lakes area including the communities of Center City, Lindstrom, and Chisago City—the Highway 8 corridor have higher rates of zero-vehicle households.

Transit Dependency Index for Region 7E. The following map (figure 2) shows the level of dependency on transit in Region 7E. Factors used to place certain areas at various levels include population, jobs, zero-vehicle households, income, disability, limited English proficiency, and age (older adults and youth). Most of Pine County exhibits more indicators for transit dependency than other areas, followed by northern Mille Lacs County, and the areas including Mora, Milaca, and Cambridge. Chisago County collectively scores lowest on transit dependency indicators. Local stakeholders challenged some of the findings of the indicators in areas of the south-eastern most region of Chisago County (specifically Taylors Falls and the Chisago Lakes area) and most of the northern reaches of the Mille Lacs and Kanabec County where small numbers of residents create difficulties in gauging transit dependency (or many other conditions).

Travel Patterns. Travel patterns depicted in figure 3 reinforce the reality that Region 7E's location between the metropolitan areas of St. Cloud, Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Duluth shows established connections between urban hubs beyond the region's boundary, and commerce centers from within. Most travel occurs via non-transit systems.

Figure 2.

Transit Dependency Index - RDC 7E

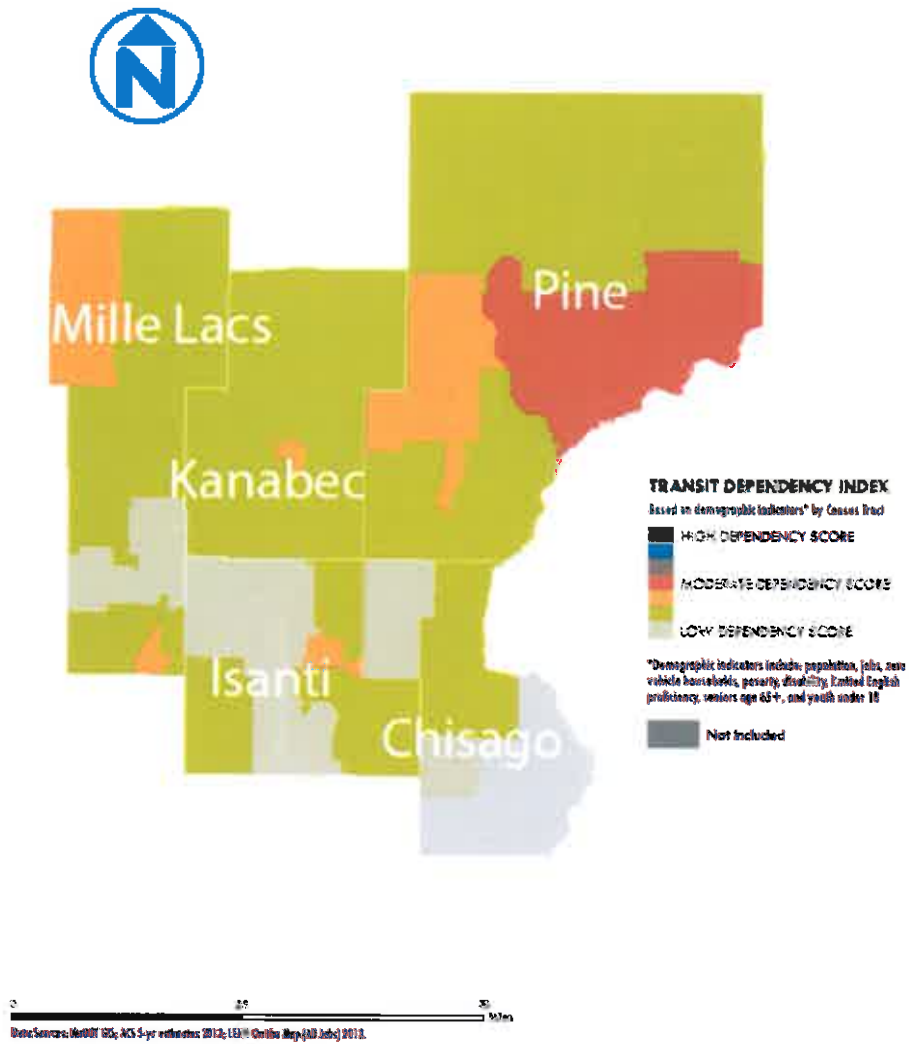
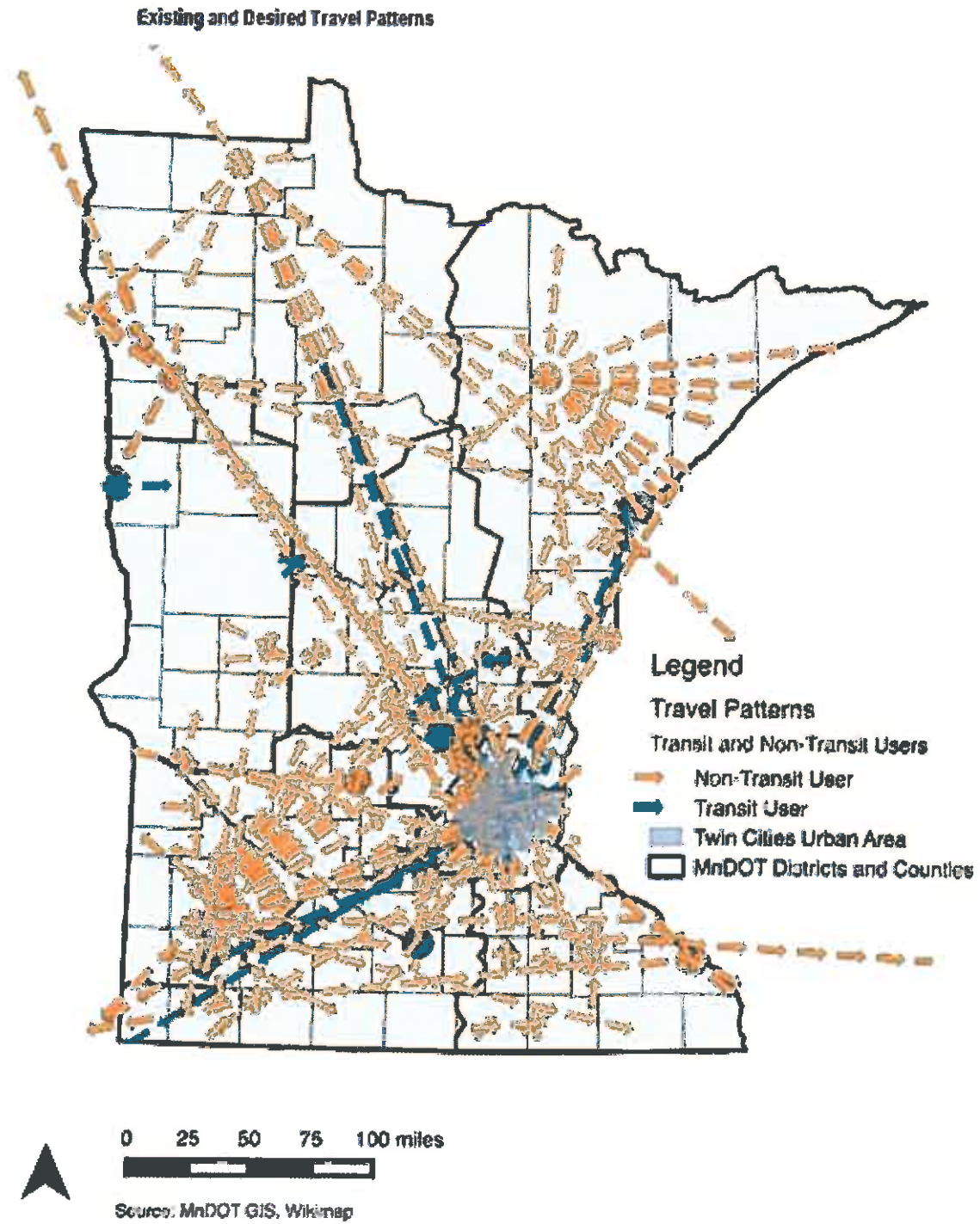


Figure 3.



Transportation Resources

Travel in Region 7E relies mainly on roadways in almost all cases. The region consists of east-west highways MN 95, MN 70, MN 48, MN 27, MN 23, and MN 18. North-south routes of I-35, US 169, MN 65, MN 47, MN 107. No passenger rail systems currently operate with any regular frequency outside of special excursion-type travel. Small airports handle recreational and commercial needs in six communities within the region, amounting to a negligible transit option.

Of the transit providers within Region 7E, they serve the region via a number of types of transportation entities that include: 1) Public Rural Systems; 2) Older Adult and Persons with Disabilities, 5310 and other; 3) Private, Non-Profit; and 4) Private, For-Profit.

Three groups of transit-dependent people exist in Region 7E: 1) Older Adults and those with disabilities who no longer own and operate a vehicle; 2) workforce riders of all ages; and 3) riders of all ages wishing to travel to the three metro areas located outside of the region: St. Cloud, Duluth, and the Twin Cities to access airports, entertainment, or work.

Taxi Services and Shuttles. Two taxi companies, AttaBoy and Cambridge Cab offer services from the small markets of Sandstone and Cambridge, respectively. Their reach stretches into all five counties of Region 7E in an uneven pattern. They also travel beyond the five counties of Chisago, Isanti, Kanabec, Mille Lacs, and Pine Counties. Services such as Uber and Lyft do not operate presently within Region 7E. Skyline Shuttle offers daily service at points located along I-35 in Pine and Chisago Counties to Duluth and Twin Cities locations such as the State Capitol and the MSP airport. In addition to Skyline Shuttle, Jefferson Lines operates in limited locations within Region 7E. Both providers offer a limited opportunity for inter-regional transit. The Grand Casino Shuttles offer entertainment and lodging based transportation between their two locations in Hinckley and Mille Lacs.

Public Transit Systems. Three public transit providers offer service within Region 7E. Arrowhead Public Transit serves Pine County; Timber Trails Public Transit serves Kanabec and Mille Lacs Counties; and Chisago-Isanti Heartland Express serves Chisago and Isanti Counties. Arrowhead Public Transit operates as a non-profit agency while Timber Trails and Heartland Express operate through county entities. The current public transit systems provide critical services to persons with low incomes, those with disabilities, and older adults. Coordination between the public transit providers with each other, and among the limited number of private providers does exist on a minimal level. All public transit providers utilize ADA compliant vehicles within their fleets.

Inter-regional Transit. Jefferson Lines and Skyline Shuttle provide services as private entities, offering important links between the counties in Region 7E and the metropolitan areas of Duluth, the Twin Cities, and St. Cloud; and points beyond. High speed rail service offered through a proposed NLX line operating in Region 7E from Minneapolis/St. Paul and Duluth remains under discussion and planning at the time of the publication of this document.

2011 Plan Outcomes & 2017 Update

The prioritized strategies and projects for improving transportation as of the 2011 planning effort included a 2012 Addendum that narrowed the work to two strategies: 1) Regional Volunteer Driver Network which provides a unified network lowering response times, increasing coordination productivity and reducing amount of cash resources dedicated to informal transit providers; and 2) Regional Transportation Manager/Organization, that encourages the development of a structure that acts as a navigator, initiator and catalyst for transit services offered from within the region and interfaces with services coming into the region from beyond its borders; producing efficiencies, increasing the types of services available at lower costs.

Benefits of the two priorities offer the region increased availability of informal transit options to equalize the benefits to all population segments by providing more transit in a flexible manner through a regionalized volunteer driver program. Progress made with that strategy include the several meetings convened with volunteer driver programs as a key topic and working with stakeholder groups connected to volunteer driver programs in Northern Mille Lacs County, as identified as an initial area for development. What work remains includes using the identified program strategies to address goals and develop funding strategies to support a new network. To this point, the East Central Regional Development Commission, public transit providers, the school districts, and major employers remain key stakeholders in this effort.

The second priority, a regional transportation organization progress includes initial work with public transit providers beginning some consolidation efforts continuing the system development approach rather than personnel development approach to service delivery. Public transit providers begin some consolidation efforts continuing the system development approach rather than personnel development approach to service delivery. Work that remains includes an inventory region's transit providers potential capacity; establishment of where skill sets exist, and where development of resources (type and amount) exist, and where best dispatched. Solicit outside facilitation for system development and role definition.

Coordination Efforts. In the past ten years, the development of public transit within Kanabec and Pine Counties by two separate entities brought about coordination developments in Kanabec and Mille Lacs County when public transit services in Mille Lacs County expanded to Kanabec County, resulting in more access to public transit within the region. At the same time, Pine County entered into an agreement with Arrowhead Public Transit to provide a variety of transit services in Pine County. These two new systems, along with Chisago-Isanti County Heartland Express work cooperatively with each other within the region, albeit somewhat independently of each other. Any assessment of the current level of coordination must include the reminder that public transit is new to the region as a whole in two out of the five counties, and within Mille Lacs County the provider morphed from a non-profit organization within the county, to their neighbor, Kanabec County. A great deal of change occurred, and services were developed. Within the last ten years residents of Region 7E have responded to the new services—becoming familiar with them, accessing the services, with ridership numbers collectively reflecting the new services ramp-up and in some cases most recently reaching plateaus in ridership common amongst more established systems. Any adjustments or wholesale changes to the new systems could impact their long-term viability simply due to their limited time in the “marketplace”.

A proposed pilot volunteer driver project in Northern Mille Lacs and Kanabec Counties referenced in the 2011 plan sat relatively dormant until 2016 when Catholic Charities, the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe, and the Initiative Foundation instigated a larger discussion, resulting in a work group of local stakeholders interested in developing a volunteer driver program. Over the past 18 months, the group remains committed to finding a local solution, making connections with the East Central Regional Development Commission and the public transit providers in the region for assistance in developing a new service using a model underway in other areas. The initial plans appear to offer opportunities for further coordination as a cornerstone.

Three MnDOT districts divide Region 7E (Pine County in District 1; Isanti, Kanabec, and Mille Lacs Counties in District 3; and Chisago County in the Metro District) offering a unique challenge to arrive at fully integrated coordination efforts. Working across three MnDOT districts which do not neatly line up with the county’s alignment of public transit partnerships, nor the Region 7E boundaries creates three jurisdictional boundaries rather than one or two as is common in all other areas of the state.

Public Participation. A steering committee formed in early 2017 to guide the development of the 2017 Regional Transit Coordination Plan for Region 7E. Expectations of the steering committee included: 1) evaluating strategies and assessing outcomes of projects identified in the 2011 Local Human Service Transit Coordination Plan; 2)

developing project ideas and identifying priority strategies; and 3) prioritizing project ideas identified at a public workshop for inclusion in the final plan.

Membership of the steering committee include representatives from a wide variety of stakeholders including county human service agencies, Area Agency on Aging representation, transit providers, habilitative service providers, transit consumers, and Minnesota Department of Transportation Office of Transit staff. The Region 7E Transit Plan Steering Committee included specifically: 1) Dean Loidolt, Central Minnesota Council on Aging/Area Agency on Aging for Region 7E; 2) Helen Pieper, Timber Trails; 3) Craig Rempp, Chisago Isanti Heartland Express; 4) Voni Smolke, Arrowhead Public Transit; 5) Ami Helmbrecht, Chisago County; 6) Michelle Meis, Isanti County; 7) Kathy Burski, Kanabec County; 8) Charles Hurd, Kanabec County; 9) Char Kohlgraf, Mille Lacs County; 10) Peggy Brackenbury, Pine County; 11) Tim Schmutzer, PHASE; 12) Denise Johnson, Industries, Inc.; 13) Rod Peltoma, DAC; 14) Maria Lourey-Bowen, Consumer; 15) Harold "Pete" Peterson, Consumer; and 16) Sue Seimers, MnDOT.

Rider Surveys. As part of the 2017 Greater Minnesota Transit Investment Plan, rider surveys conducted during that process and for the Region 7E 2017 Regional Transit Coordination Plan offered riders two opportunities to share information related to their experience as riders within Region 7E. In total, 167 riders responded as Chisago-Isanti Heartland Express and 50 as Timber Trails riders in this statewide survey effort. Pine County riders were part of the 618 Arrowhead Transit survey respondents.

Responses of the rider surveys solicited by the county human services departments yielded responses directly related to the use of transit services to provide medical trips, on an average of one time per week. These "established" riders are satisfied with the service, and considered it to be reliable. Respondents were primarily female, white, and between the ages of 18-65+.

Focus Groups. During the planning process four focus groups delved into many facets of public transit. Locations across the region gained a good cross-sectional balanced collection of responses. PHASE (Pine Habilitation and Supported Employment, Inc.) Sandstone location hosted the first focus groups. In addition to the Sandstone focus group, Mora's Elderwood senior community, Taylor's Falls community center, and Mille Lacs Health System offered a varied number of comments from a combined total of 40 people. Those attending included: 1) students; 2) clients; 3) retired persons; 4) workforce riders; 5) those utilizing the transit because of medical, leisure, or grocery shopping activities.

Grouping comments from the focus group, helped form a framework for future discussions throughout the planning process. Broad categories include: 1) coordination efforts; 2) development or expansion of services; 3) training needs; and 4) infrastructure.

Public Workshop. A public workshop held in Wahkon on May 18 conducted to help stakeholders identify strengths and weaknesses of the region's transit coordination. Participants then identified strategies and prioritized them for the region's future transit coordination. New project ideas emerged from the day's work, and concluded with the last meeting of the steering committee held on June 22, 2017 in Cambridge.

Input from all public workshop stakeholders (15) was reported out at the final steering committee meeting held on June 22, 2017 in Cambridge. Steering committee members synthesized the strengths and weaknesses of transit coordination within Region 7E, and identified potential projects recognized as either difficult to do/minor impact, difficult to do/major impact, easy to do minor impact, or easy to do/major impact. The four broad categories which emerged over the course of the focus groups created the framework for the progress made through the steering committee meetings and the public workshop. This work is reflected in the Coordination Strategies and Projects portion of this document that follows.

2017 Coordination Strategies & Projects

1. **Coordination Efforts:** 1) Buses are either too full or empty; 2) grocery shopping overloads the buses; 3) school age children overload the buses; 4) level of in-migration of older riders will continue to tax the current system; 5) current system of differing rates for different passengers complicates the delivery of the service; 6) lack of continuity between providers and volunteer drivers programs add confusion.
2. **Development or Expansion of Services:** 1) development of a rural Uber-type service should be developed; 2) county-line barriers/concerns; 3) heavy risk management has killed appetite for development or change; 4) low awareness of services; 5) large percentage of need remains "unique" transit needs (example: getting a woman to a woman's shelter) while due to Region 7E's rural areas, the total number of residents is small)
3. **Training Needs:** 1) dispatch systems seem to be challenged; 2) on-going bus driver training relative to passenger interaction; 3) communicating the process of riding the bus remains a challenge.
4. **Infrastructure:** 1) Bike racks on all buses; 2) Vans-vs-buses. Vans appear to be more flexible with smaller investment and lower lifetime costs

Category 1: Coordination Efforts

Project 1: Coordinate Purchases. Description: Save money on any expense when joint purchasing will offer that savings. Level of Priority/Difficulty: Medium priority, high degree of difficulty due to constraints from individual county IT department requirements.

Project 2: Shared/Loaner Vehicle Program. Description: Identify one or more vehicles within recognized systems that can be utilized in the event of break down/maintenance emergency or for scheduled intermittent use.

Project 3: Region-wide Ticket Purchase System. Description: Modeled from the “Heartland Tickets” service utilized in Chisago and Isanti Counties, expand the uniform ticket purchase system across the current three public transit providers, with possible inclusion of other service providers.

Category 2: Development or Expansion of Services

Project 1: Ride Sharing Program. Description: Residents from one town/neighborhood offer their vehicles and driving to community members/neighbors for shopping or other trips within their town or other nearby communities.

Project 2: Service Expansion in Chisago and Mille Lacs Counties. Description: Request as a waiver, for expansion of public transit funding for services in Chisago County’s community of Taylors Falls and Mille Lacs County’s northern-most communities of Vineland, Onamia, Wahkon, and Isle—around Lake Mille Lacs. These specific areas face unique challenges in delivery of services that do not translate well to existing ridership levels.

Category 3: Training Needs

Project 1: Centralizing Dispatch. Description: Organize the dispatching tasks for transit providers (formal and informal) as a first step in developing a coordinated service delivery model.

Project 2: Transportation Accessibility. Description: Personnel training related to meeting the varied needs of the public served through consistent customer service and increased capabilities in assisting riders of all abilities using rider-centric approaches.

Project 3: Centralized Training. Description: Development of a regional coordination entity to facilitate training efforts such as shared marketing, fund-development, service/business development, customer service, ridership outreach, general community outreach, and all aspects of formal and informal transit provider staff training.

Category 4: Infrastructure

Project 1: Existing Vehicle Maintenance. Description: Setting the maintenance and improvement of existing fleets as the top priority region-wide, and doing so in a coordinated effort across service providers by making modest upgrades, developing funding plans to address lag in State funding to begin to fill the gaps between the region’s transit need, and balancing that with the economic reality of State and local funding.

Project 2: Start a Transit Consortium. Description: Through a concerted regional effort, start something that includes ride coordination, training centralization, and administrative development with the expectation of increased ridership, broader coverage of services, and increased efficiencies of time and talents.

Project 3: State Solutions. Description: Identifying factors that are best left to the State of Minnesota to solve, saving valuable local resources for projects within our control.

Example of an issue: insurance.

2017 Strengths & Weaknesses

The steering committee compiled a list of strengths and weaknesses of existing transit coordination efforts. Combined with the plan's technical findings, these form the basis for identifying strategies to address enhanced transportation coordination within Region 7E.

Strengths:

- Strong political support in relation to the limited funds available
- Serves a good cross-section of ages
- Works with local human services agencies cooperatively
- Providers seek funds for other projects
- Public transit is available in all five counties; good quality infrastructure in place
- Population in 7E continues to grow faster than most Minnesota regions
- History of collaboration amongst providers; there is a desire to work together

Weaknesses:

- Limitations of existing providers across multiple disciplines (funding for additional routes and hours of operation, mobility management, coordination of operations, and overall promotion)
- Limited funding for "young" transit systems creates a long-term disadvantage
- Rural expanses across most of the region makes optimal usage difficult
- Underutilization of available assets
- "Young" transit systems challenged by training, coordination, and marketing their services
- Few organizations exist within the region to support other transit delivery models
- Legal or bureaucratic limitations (school bus transit, non-emergency medical transportation, veteran's transportation)
- Increase the provider-employer involvement to meet more employment related transit needs

In summary, the region remains committed to providing public transit, having strong support from its elected officials and regional stakeholders. Despite its limitation of rural expanse, low incomes, and limited funding, the three existing public transit providers offer a solid basic transit service to the five counties in Region 7E. Relationships between the three providers are collegial, and offer a foundation for opportunities for future coordination and cooperation.

Assessment & Conclusion

The Minnesota Legislature established a target to meet 90% of the public transit need in Greater Minnesota by 2025. The Minnesota Department of Transportation supports transit in Greater Minnesota by administering the funding for all regions. In 2015, it supported over 12 million rides, meeting 88% of the 2015 transit need of over 13 million rides. As the need for public transportation grows in Greater Minnesota, so does the challenge to provide the rides.

Providers identified some key challenges to coordination: 1) current levels of funding from all sources (and the consistency of the resources) makes expansion and coordination difficult; 2) the ongoing challenges of developing and managing an effective efficient volunteer driver program; and finally, 3) specific concerns directly related to non-emergency medical transportation across all providers and riders remains a significant challenge. In Region 7E, existing providers by all accounts have a cordial relationship with one another; with that climate of good will continues to see difficulties created by a system bogged down by regulations. Providers want to cooperate in a cumbersome system, one that continues to grow more unwieldy from several directions.

In conclusion, while many characteristics span the width and depth of public transit services (age, income, ability, and gender), in rural areas such as East Central Minnesota rural riders dependency on public transit become magnified when held against the light shining extremely limited transit options, either formal, informal, public, or private.

In terms of attitudes and opinions, riders in East Central Minnesota desire longer service hours, consistent reliable services, and the ability to go beyond the boundaries of East Central Minnesota. East Central Minnesotans remain flexible individuals as a lot, with a willingness to accept modest services delivered in unique ways. As a commitment to riders and stakeholders who shared their opinions, experiences, and time to this plan the expectation continues: remaining focused on delivering the most transit services in the most cost effective manner while maintaining the needs of riders as the guide to future decision making.