

## MCOTA December 2021 Newsletter

*This email newsletter is an effort by the [Minnesota Council on Transportation Access \(MCOTA\)](#) to provide periodic updates about its initiatives to the public and to interested stakeholders. Please let us know what you think by contacting Tom Gottfried at [tom.gottfried@state.mn.us](mailto:tom.gottfried@state.mn.us).*

### **New state legislation reduces some barriers to volunteer driving**

Volunteer drivers and volunteer driver programs throughout Minnesota benefited from the advocacy of MCOTA, the [Volunteer Driver Coalition](#), and many state and local supporters when the Minnesota State Legislature passed new legislation in 2021 to help encourage the growth of the state's volunteer driver pool.

State Sen. Jeff Howe and Sherry Munyon, president of Capital Access Inc., encouraged supporters of volunteer drivers and the 80,000 Minnesotans they serve each year to advocate for two bills that were introduced in early in the year.

The efforts of Howe and advocates of the legislation helped lead to the passing of a bill that clearly defined a volunteer driver in law as “not-for-hire,” and another bill that created a state income tax subtraction for volunteer drivers to reduce their tax liability in Minnesota.

The estimated \$30,000 cost of the state income tax subtraction is well recouped by the impact of volunteer drivers, says Dawn Simonson, executive director of the Metropolitan Area Agency on Aging.

“We can serve many thousands of adults and get them to health care and keep them in their homes for about \$30,000 a year,” she says. By contrast, assisted living for an individual costs about \$48,000 a year, and nursing home care averages \$90,000 a year.

“Volunteer driver programs are not only essential to people and their well-being,” Simonson adds, “they are an essential part of our public policy and the way that we work as a state to curb the cost of our growing budget devoted to long-term care services.”



Sen. Jeff Howe

### **Minnesota's Volunteer Drivers**

**2,000** volunteer drivers

**77,474** people served

**168,389** one-way trips

**9,588,033** miles driven

**508,468** hours

**contributed**

Source: 2018 Volunteer Driver Coalition Survey

While the new legislation helps, more policy work remains to change mileage reimbursement rates from 14 cents per mile closer to a rate that reflects the actual cost of owning and driving a personal vehicle for charitable purposes. In addition, legislation is needed to protect volunteer drivers from increased insurance rates and to cap the liability of non-profit organizations that offer volunteer driver services at \$1.5 million.

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### **GIS mapping provides clearer picture of gaps in transportation access**

When transportation providers serve a region, does that mean everyone can access rides? The answer may well be no.

For example, an RTCC may serve an entire county, but transportation services may only be provided within three miles of the county's largest city to maximize the number of trips. In other cases, trips may be available to communities, though not always on all days.

But data is playing a role in helping MCOTA and its partners better coordinate access to transportation throughout the state.

MnDOT GIS capabilities and MCOTA partnerships offer a winning combination when it comes to producing new data-based mapping that will show the gaps in transportation access, one important step in ultimately improving that access to Minnesotans who lack it.



“Transportation providers anecdotally may know of Minnesotans who can’t find the rides they need but understanding the whole picture of transportation access is much more complex,” says MCOTA executive director Tom Gottfried.

RTCCs and transportation providers know routes but managing all that data and information centrally and putting it into context presents a much larger task.

Enter MnDOT GIS. A system that manages, analyzes, and maps all types of data, GIS connects data to a map, integrating location data — Minnesota communities, with descriptive data — where transportation providers go.

“There is a lot of data in Minnesota,” Gottfried says. “GIS offers a database system that has the ability to take that data and identify where our problems are.”

Ultimately the project will result in a graphic representation of current transportation route lines, visually showing the gaps and helping quantify current capacity limits in a way not possible before. As the first project of its kind for Minnesota and one of the first in the nation, it represents a cutting-edge way to better understand the problems of transportation access in Minnesota.

“That understanding also makes it possible to figure out more workable and efficient solutions to meet those needs,” Gottfried says.

Currently, the GIS project has integrated more than 60 percent of the data — mostly data on public services. Collaboration with RTCC coordinators will help in collecting additional data, particularly from non-public providers. By next year, or possibly sooner, MnDOT hopes to produce the first comprehensive map of what is available now.

“Not only will this project help us in the short term, but its future impact is also highly important,” says Shelly Pflaum, program coordinator at the United Community Action Partnership in Marshall, Minnesota. “The more we understand about the reach of current routes throughout the state, the easier it will be to identify the path forward to efficiently and cost effectively reach all in need.”

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### **Scott County TCAP: Introducing ‘Hop Scott!’ from SmartLink**

The SmartLink Mobility Management team recognized the need for additional transportation options in Scott County’s more rural communities for older adults and the disabled and developed a new transit service option — Hop Scott! — as a result.

A Live Well at Home grant through MDH funded community vans to transport seniors and/or disabled community members, helping them remain in their homes longer.



“Often, transportation is a barrier for older adults or those with disabilities who can no longer drive, aren’t comfortable driving, or who don’t have the ability to drive themselves,” says Dakota County mobility management supervisor Alan Herrmann. “Accessing medical appointments, essential groceries and goods, social gatherings, and other appointments is needed for these individuals to stay active and engaged. Using volunteer drivers in these accessible minivans also makes the service more affordable and sustainable.”

In anticipation of launching the program, the team began to recruit volunteer drivers using print ads, radio ads, and social media to create awareness of the

program and call for volunteers. “The response to our appeal for ‘hometown heroes’ was enthusiastic with many inquiries and 11 individuals signing on to become volunteer drivers,” Herrmann says. “With the addition of Hop Scott and the concept of using volunteer drivers based in these smaller towns in Scott County, we hope to add to a meaningful quality of life that results in building and maintaining independence for many individuals where transportation had previously been a challenge.”

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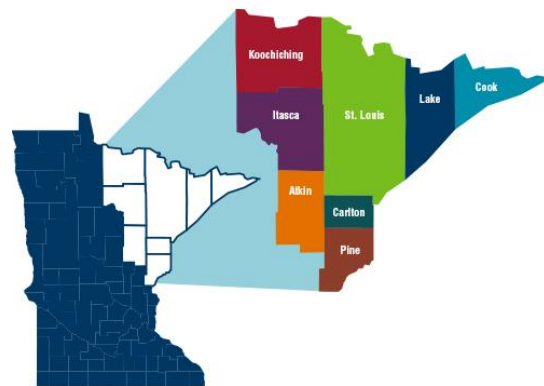
### **East Central RTCC: Improving access through information**

Before Minnesotans can access transportation, they need access to information about transportation options.

To make that task easier, the East Central Regional Transportation Coordinating Council, which covers the counties of Pine, Isanti, Chisago, Kanabec and Mille Lac, is taking a number of steps.

The ECRTCC worked with a local marketing professional to develop a visual identity that helps community members quickly recognize the council. “The look is informative, direct, unique, fun, simple and catchy,” says Karen Onan of the ECRTCC. “Whoever we correspond with, whether emails, letters or reports, wherever we are seen as ECRTCC in public, whether county fairs, expos or conferences, we use our marketing tools.”

The ECRTCC also launched a new web portal — [EastCentralTransit.com](http://EastCentralTransit.com) — that ECRTCC staff can easily update. “It’s a simple name, which makes finding information about our region’s traveling opportunities intuitive,” Onan says.



Other efforts to reach out to the region’s population include broadcasting on a popular regional radio station, promoting volunteer driver programs and sharing the web portal for ease in finding transportation information.

In addition, the radio station offers the ECRTCC 15-minute interviews every other Friday at 8:45 AM with a local radio celebrity. “During the interviews, we share relevant information about the ECRTCC and the statewide RTCCs,” she

says, “and to add more interest, we include guests who provide insight from their perspective on transportation.”

Interviews featured the region’s three public transit managers or directors (Arrowhead Transit, Timber Trails Transit and Tri-CAP Transit), the community liaison for Jefferson Lines, the transit manager for Groome Airport Transportation, the region’s RTCC chair who also is the executive director of PHASE/Industries (DT & H provider), the region’s veteran service providers, Jill Brown of the Northern Lights Express (NLX) Advisory Board, and Tom Gottfried, MCOTA executive director.

“We are so excited about the future of transportation in Minnesota,” Onan says. “Our goal in marketing is to infect others with our enthusiasm!”



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### **Connected and automated vehicle testing begins**

MnDOT’s Connected and Automated Vehicles (CAV-X) team and its partners are gathering data and user-experience information during a year-long project in downtown Rochester, Minnesota, to help prepare for the safe and expanded use of this technology. Med City Mover shuttles are part of the first automated vehicle pilot project to travel Minnesota streets. A similar project in involving the City of White Bear Lake, in partnership with the University of Minnesota and nonprofit Newtrax, also is in development. A key objective of these projects is to improve the transportation system for people who cannot drive.



Med City Mover AV shuttle, Rochester, Minnesota

Read more in recent news reports:

- [MnDOT reminds motorists to be alert when driving near Med City Mover in Rochester](#)  
Minnesota Department of Transportation News, October 26, 2021
- [Self-driving car, you're about to meet Minnesota winter](#)  
*Northfield News*, October 19, 2021
- [Minnesota testing driverless shuttles on public roads](#)  
*AASHTO Journal*, October 8, 2021
- [Driverless shuttle to get tested on Rochester route](#)  
*Star Tribune*, July 26, 2021

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### Minnesota's Road to Volunteer Drivers Virtual Forum Series recordings

Minnesota's Road to Volunteer Drivers Virtual Forum Series examined key policy issues, offered volunteer driver recruitment tips and guidance on starting a volunteer driver program, and provided training sessions on key topics for volunteer drivers. The series was sponsored by MnDOT and MCOTA in partnership with the Minnesota Volunteer Driver Coalition.



A total of 14 sessions drew an average of 110 participants, who represented every Minnesota county, tribal nations in Minnesota and Montana, and other parts of the United States. The series recordings are available for on-demand viewing and include captions and ASL interpretation.

#### Policy and Legislation

- [Current State and a Look into the Future of Volunteer Drivers \(Nov. 2020\)](#)
- [Policy Issues and Real-Life Stories \(Dec. 2020\)](#)

#### Nuts and Bolts of Volunteer Driver Programs

- [Volunteer Driver Recruitment and Promotion \(Jan. 2021\)](#)
- [How to Start a Volunteer Driver Program \(Feb. 2021\)](#)

#### Person-centered, Cultural Diversity, and Equity Training

- [Person-centered Practices and Disability Etiquette for Volunteer Drivers \(March 2021\)](#)
- [Cultural Diversity and Equity Training \(March 2021\)](#)
- [Trauma-Informed Care Training \(April 2021\)](#)
- [Providing Community Education About People Who Are Deaf and Hard of Hearing \(April 2021\)](#)

### **Best Practices Training for Volunteer Drivers**

- [Module 1 – Safety & Security \(May 2021\)](#)
  - [Module 2 – Emergency Preparedness \(May 2021\)](#)
  - [Module 3 – Passenger Assistance & Safety \(May 2021\)](#)
  - [Module 4 – Dealing with Difficult Customers and Self Care \(June 2021\)](#)
  - [Module 5 – Ethics and Boundaries \(June 2021\)](#)
  - [Module 6 – Best Practices & Summary \(June 2021\)](#)
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### **Upcoming MCOTA meetings**

MCOTA usually meets bimonthly on a Wednesday from 1:00 to 3:00 p.m. In accordance with recommendations from the State of Minnesota to help slow the spread of COVID-19, upcoming meetings will be remote only. The meetings are open, and members of the public are welcome to attend. Each meeting includes time for public comments. See the [MCOTA website](#) for more details.

- November 17, 2021, 1:00 to 3:00 p.m.
  - January 26, 2022, 1:00 to 3:00 p.m.
  - March 23, 2022, 1:00 to 3:00 p.m.
  - May 25, 2022, 1:00 to 3:00 p.m.
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### **About MCOTA**

The Minnesota Council on Transportation Access was established by the Minnesota Legislature in 2010 to “study, evaluate, oversee, and make recommendations to improve the coordination, availability, accessibility, efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and safety of transportation services provided to the transit public.”

[www.CoordinateMNTransit.org](http://www.CoordinateMNTransit.org)