

Issues and Plans for Public Transit in Washington and Benton Counties

By Karen Rollet-Crocker

In April, the League of Women Voters of Washington County will present a panel on the need for public transit, especially for those with disabilities. We hope that League members will study this issue this spring in preparation for our panel.

Transit Development Plan

This past fall, the League has had a representative on the Advisory Committee for a Transit Development Plan, Karen Rollet-Crocker. This planning process was funded by the State of Arkansas, and was developed by Connetics, Inc.

Funding Issues

Our public transit systems are at a major crossroads. Both Ozark Regional Transit (ORT) and Razorback Transit, will face a federal/state funding reduction when the population of NWA goes over 200,000, which has happened in the recent census. Basically our bus systems have two categories of funding, “operating costs” and “capital funds”. Capital funds, i.e. bus purchases and maintenance, will still be paid by federal and state funds, but operating costs, i.e. staff and drivers, that has previously been paid with outside funds, will not be paid by this source.. The shift will happen in the next year or so. Currently, local funding for ORT is at 30% local match, decided upon by each City Council. The tight economy has led some Councils to threaten withdrawing funding. The new Transit Development Plan suggests that the ORT system fill the primary needs of a growing population. To keep our bus system and expand it in the future a new source of funding is required, the ORT Advisory Board has suggested a ¼ cent sales tax.

Community Support

It is hoped that the new Transit Development Plan will give our communities direction and help convince the public to support the maintenance and improvement of the transit system. If the system is more extensive, then the service will be higher for ADA riders.

Americans for Disability Act

The Americans for Disability Act has major requirements for any public transit system that uses federal funds. These requirements are not well known to most of us, but it is clear that if the system expands, so will the services offered to those with disabilities.

Article Contents

This article includes selected sections from the Northwest Arkansas Transit Development Plan, Final Report, December 2010. The Executive Summary from the Transit Development Plan is below. Three levels of planning are suggested: near term, short range, and long range. The planning process was impressive: it included staff and public input, bus rider surveys, and current bus service. Future planning is based on

'latent demand' such as low income areas, population growth areas, and businesses with major numbers of employees. Other sections are Potential Transit Service Needs and Service Plan Recommendations.

For the complete plan with maps please go to <http://www.ozark.org>

Addition of ADA information

The plan did not address disabilities, due to the fact that the Americans for Disability Act has major requirements for any public transit system that uses federal funds. These requirements are not well known to most of us, but it is clear that if the system expands, so will the services offered to those with disabilities. Thus, at the end of the article I have added a series of notes on specific requirements for America with Disabilities Act. These are from a informational meeting hosted by ORT and Razorback Transit with several riders that required disability access, representatives who handled disability ridership, and me as a representative of the League. .

Selected Sections from the Northwest Arkansas Transit Development Plan Final Report December 2010

Executive Summary

The Northwest Arkansas Regional Planning Commission (NWARPC), in conjunction with the Arkansas State Highway and Transportation Department (AHTD), Ozark Regional Transit (ORT) and Razorback Transit, has undertaken the development of this Transit Development Plan (TDP) to chart a "blue print" for expanding transit services in the Northwest Arkansas region. This report presents a summary of the work completed for this TDP. The objective was to identify near-term (1-2 years), short-range (3-5 years) and long-range (6-10 years) service recommendations that result in expanded opportunities for Northwest Arkansas residents to utilize transit, boosting ridership in a manner that improves service productivities.

Eight (8) Technical Memorandums have been prepared during the course of this project. Four (4) meetings were also conducted with a Project Advisory Committee during the course of this study. The Northwest Arkansas region has experienced tremendous growth in recent years. The existing population of Bentonville and Washington Counties is estimated to be about 450,000. By 2035, the population of these two counties is projected to be 677,000. Institutions and industries that have been fueling this rapid growth include:

- Educational institutions, such as the University of Arkansas and the Northwest Arkansas Community College;
- Healthcare institutions, such as the Mercy Health System, the Northwest Health System and the Washington Regional Medical Center; and

□ Major corporations that are headquartered in Northwest Arkansas, such as Wal-Mart, Tyson Foods and J.B. Hunt.

The rapid population growth in the region has been accompanied with increased traffic congestion. As land use densities continue to increase in the region, there is growing recognition that alternative travel modes must be developed and expanded. This recognition has been documented in recent survey efforts:

- The NWARPC is presently updating its Long-Range Transportation Plan. During the public outreach portion of this project, participants were asked to identify how transportation funds should be allocated through a “coin toss”. Participants were given 10 coins and asked to distribute those coins to various transportation program options. Over 1,200 coins were collected. Improved bus transit received the largest number – 330 coins (27%).
- An on-line survey was also conducted by the NWARPC in support of its Long-Range Transportation Plan. Respondents of this survey also identified a strong desire to see increased public transportation services in the Northwest Arkansas region over other transportation strategy options.
- The University of Arkansas Community and Family Institute completed a Northwest Arkansas Community Survey in 2010. Respondents identified the existing lack of public transportation as a source of discontent and felt that transportation was one of the biggest challenges facing the region.

Existing transit services in the Northwest Arkansas region are presently provided by Razorback Transit and Ozark Regional Transit (ORT). Razorback Transit provides fixed-route and paratransit services that are targeted primarily towards University of Arkansas students, staff and faculty. Service is provided off campus to surrounding areas in Fayetteville, but with a focus on serving transportation service needs for the University of Arkansas. Razorback Transit provides high levels of transit service during the school year and is well utilized, but operates at significantly reduced service levels when school is not in session. Daily ridership during the 2010 Fall Semester was averaging close to 11,000 passenger trips.

ORT is the regional transit service provider, with routes operating in both Benton and Washington Counties. Despite its limited funding support, ORT does a noteworthy job in providing extensive geographic coverage with those funds. However, this geographic coverage is achieved through circuitous routes, often with infrequent service levels and a limited span of service. All service operated by ORT is with body-on-chassis (i.e., small) buses. Daily ridership in Fall 2010 was averaging just over 1,000 passenger trips. The existing transit system is inadequate to meet both the current and growing transportation needs of the Northwest Arkansas region. An expanded transit system is necessary if the region desires to make transit a viable transportation alternative to the single occupant vehicle. Recommendations presented in this TDP identify how transit services can be expanded to meet this objective. As previously noted, the following three service plan periods were defined for the ten-year TDP:

- The **Near-Term Plan** reflects Years 1-2 of the 10-year TDP time period. No additional funds have been assumed for transit during this time period. Thus, near-term recommendations focus on cost neutral service adjustments that will increase efficiencies.
- The **Short-Range Plan** reflects Years 3-5 of the TDP. The TDP assumes additional funds are available for transit during this time period. Recommendations reflect the transition of the existing limited transit network to a more robust regional network.
- The **Long-Range Plan** reflects Years 6-10 of the TDP. Recommendations reflect the continued growth of transit services, with expanded geographic coverage, longer spans of service on routes and the introduction of weekend service.

Prior transit studies in the Northwest Arkansas region have proposed consideration of a regional rail line. Development in the Northwest Arkansas is very linear along the I-540 corridor. Thus, a regional rail line may be a viable transit mode worthy of consideration sometime in the future. However, any rail system requires a strong background bus network. That network does not exist in Northwest Arkansas today. Thus, recommendations in this TDP are focused solely on bus service improvements.

A major benefit of the TDP service plans is increased accessibility to transit. The discussion below presents existing population and employment that is within ¼ mile of proposed transit services in each TDP service plan. Transit accessibility in the Near-Term Plan reflects minimal change from existing accessibility. However, accessibility increases significantly with the proposed Short-Range and Long-Range service plans. Expansion of service will result in the need for \$22.7 million to cover annual operating and maintenance expenditures for the two transit systems upon full implementation of the TDP. New equipment and facilities will also be needed, such as expanded bus fleets (including large buses), passenger transit centers, a new maintenance facility, and improved passenger amenities at bus stops. Almost \$63 million has been identified for vehicle and facility improvements. It will be important to include funding for pedestrian access improvements at bus stops (e.g., sidewalks, crosswalks and pedestrian signals). The proposed expansion of bus service in this TDP includes service on major roadways. Routes serving those major roadways should be operated with large buses (i.e., 30-40' buses). Safety (pedestrian and vehicular) must be considered with the placement of bus stops on those major roadways, and bus pullout lanes should be pursued where appropriate.

The financial analysis that was completed for this TDP identifies projected costs (operations and maintenance, and capital) and potential revenue sources over the TDP's 10-year period. The expansion of transit services will require a significant commitment of local funding. Recent studies indicate that a ¼ cent sales tax in Washington and Benton Counties can raise \$15 million per year. This amount would be sufficient to fund the transit service and facility improvements identified in this TDP, should local government leaders decide to pursue a ¼ sales tax ballot initiative. It should be noted that both ORT and Razorback Transit may soon be losing federal operating assistance formula funds because of the region's recent population increases

(regions over 200,000 in population cannot use certain Federal Transit Administration funds to cover operations costs). Thus, revenues from a sales tax initiative could be used to cover this anticipated loss in federal funds and the expansion of transit services as proposed in this TDP. Should the Northwest Arkansas region move forward with the expansion of transit services, consideration should be given to governance and service provision options. As previously noted, presently Razorback Transit's service is focused on the University of Arkansas and ORT is the regional transit service provider. This TDP assumes no change in this service provision structure. However, other options could be explored in conjunction with a sales tax initiative. For example, Razorback Transit could be the designated transit service provider within Fayetteville, with ORT being the designated service provider for all other local and regional route service. Another potential scenario could be the provision of all transit services within the region by one operator. Alternative scenarios such as these do have implications in areas such as fare structure, staffing and facility needs.

Finally, it is important to note that the expansion of transit services in the Northwest Arkansas region should be part of a comprehensive strategy that offers viable choices to the single vehicle occupant. This strategy should include other initiatives such as carpool and vanpool programs, and other transportation demand management (TDM) strategies.

Potential Transit Service Needs

The demographic data and growth elements presented in *Technical Memorandum 6 – Latent Demand Analysis* were compared to the existing transit network to determine areas where new transit services or expanded transit services may be warranted. Potential service expansion needs were identified as follows:

Washington County

- **New Growth Areas** – Population forecasts reflect significant growth in areas west of I-540, directly west of Springdale (Tontitown), the east side of Springdale, West Fayetteville and Farmington. New local route services may be warranted in these areas.
- **Low Income Areas** – The demographic analysis identified moderate concentrations of low income/zero auto households southwest of Fayetteville.
- **University of Arkansas** – The University of Arkansas has a student population of close to 20,000 undergraduates and graduates. Student transit service needs are presently accommodated by Razorback Transit, although there may be potential to increase usage through route alignment and service frequency modifications. Faculty and staff come from longer distances, with many coming from the Springdale area. Expanded transit service to the University of Arkansas from other areas of the region is likely warranted.
- **Commuter Services** – Besides the University of Arkansas, there are other major employers in Washington County including Tyson Foods in south Springdale.

Washington Regional Medical Center and the Northwest Medical Center in Springdale are two major medical facilities with large employment bases. There is also a significant amount of retail employment around the Northwest Arkansas Mall area. Travel to these areas comes from all over the two-county area, and may warrant regional/commuter transit services.

Benton County

- ***New Growth Areas*** – Population forecasts reflect significant growth in areas west of Bentonville and west/southwest of Rogers. New local route services may be warranted in these areas.
- ***Low Income Areas*** – The demographic analysis identified some concentrations of low income/zero auto households east of Rogers where expanded/new local transit services may be warranted.
- ***Elderly Services*** – The community of Bella Vista has a fairly high concentration of elderly citizens, along with the central area of Rogers and Siloam Springs. Services oriented towards the elderly should be considered for these areas.
- ***Siloam Springs*** – This community is located in the far west portion of Benton County. There are concentrations of population and employment in this community, but there is no existing transit service. Local route service with connections to Bentonville/Rogers should be considered.
- ***Commuter Services*** – Benton County is home to major employers, such as Wal-Mart. Analysis presented in this Technical Memorandum has identified concentrations of employees that live along the I-540 corridor. Regional commuter services to these major employment centers warrants consideration.

Service Plan Recommendations

The service plan recommendations are the culmination of data collected over the past several months, measuring existing service performance, customer demand and projected growth in the region. The recommended service changes for both ORT and Razorback Transit are presented over three distinct time horizons – near-term (1-2 years), short-range (3-5 years) and long-range (6-10 years and beyond).

Ozark Regional Transit

Specifically for ORT, the Near-Term Plan recommends immediate route changes designed to improve service efficiency and delivery, apply resources where they are most needed, and optimize the route network based upon current and projected conditions within the service area. This plan is intended to be cost-neutral with no growth in service hours. On the other hand, the Short-Range plan assumes significant growth with the passage of a dedicated funding source. Areas that are currently served and that have proven productive are streamlined and in many cases, provided with higher quality, bidirectional service. A limited amount of evening service as well as new service area is also introduced. The Long-Range Service Plan is even more aggressive

in its expansion and assumes the addition of weekend service plus new service models that include flex-zone and rural connector routes.

The new route structure introduced in the Short-Range and Long-Range Service Plans also comes with a new nomenclature. For clarity within this TDP, short-range and long-range routes will be identified with a prefix that indicates the type and/or primary location of their service. However, as service is implemented, the prefix system can be applied or a more traditional numeric system can be adopted.

R Regional Crosstown Service

B Benton County (Bentonville, Lowell, Rogers, etc.) Local Service

S Springdale Local Service

F Fayetteville Local Service

FZ Community-Based Flex Zone Service

RC Commuter-Based Rural Connector Service

Razorback Transit

At Razorback Transit, the near-term plan assumes a modest amount of growth to accommodate existing overloads and peak crowding conditions. Where practical, routes have been streamlined to provide more direct travel to areas where service is in highest demand. An effort to promote consistency between daytime and evening service structure has also been applied. The short- and Long-Range Service Plans for Razorback Transit are identical and assume a limited amount of growth above that which is presented in the near-term plan. This conservative approach is based on the assumption that Razorback Transit maintains its mission to focus on University of Arkansas campus circulation and student-oriented housing in the immediate vicinity of the college. As such, Ozark Regional Transit is relied upon more heavily to reach potential student housing that is located further off-campus. With this reliance also comes the recommendation and assumption that a reciprocal use agreement can be reached between the two transit providers. Such an agreement would lighten the paratransit burden that Razorback Transit assumes in areas that compete directly with Ozark Regional Transit, particularly for riders who are not associated with the university. The following subsections in the report will present multiple sets of service plans for each of the three planning horizons (near-term, short-range and long-range). Maps and route level-descriptions for ORT's proposed services in Benton County (Bentonville, Lowell, Rogers, etc.), Springdale and Fayetteville as well as Razorback Transit's proposed services will be outlined within each set of service plans. In the Short-Range Service Plan, regional routes and facilities will be added. Flex zone and rural connector services will be identified in the Long-Range Service Plan.

Additional of ADA Information: Specific Requirements for America with Disabilities Act

By Karen Rollet-Crocker

- a. Paratransit is “complementary” service. It is required in a public transit system as a complement to fixed route service regular transit with the same level of service.
- b. Two needs: (1) must be within $\frac{3}{4}$ mile of the fixed route service. (2) Disability limits person from taking a fixed route bus (can’t get to the bus or board bus climb in). ORT requires the passenger or caretaker to fill out a eligibility form.
- c. For Paratransit required fare is 2x fixed price. $\$1.25 \times 2 = 2.50$. Actual paratransit cost of a ride is much higher. Estimate is that cost of lifetime paratransit can be as much as \$1 million. This is a social justice issue.
- d. Due to stimulus federal funds, ORT was able to run popular paratransit on Saturday. This may go away after this year.
- e. ORT will pick up a person with reservations the next day. This is called “next day service”.in one day. Some riders have a ‘subscription’ which is a regularly scheduled ride, usually for work or school. Subscription service cannot be more than 50% of total paratransit service.
- f. If people have a disability or are elderly but can take a fixed route bus they pay one-half the regular fare. If fixed routes expand they will help those people, by offering more destinations, more frequent service (regularly scheduled service) at a lower price. This is legal in the ADA regulations, and that’s why they mandate the reduced fares for persons with disabilities in the law.
- g. Suggestion: Because this system is somewhat complicated, volunteers could be trained to help people negotiate the paratransit service.
- h. Different than Dial-a-ride.