

Kansas DOT Briefing Paper

Regional Transit Approach

January 2010

Background:

As directed by T-LINK (the Governor-appointed task force established to set recommendations for a new State transportation funding program), the Kansas Department of Transportation was charged with creating a regional transit approach that would make rural transit service in Kansas more efficient and responsive to the diverse transit needs of Kansans. This regional transit approach is being piloted in three areas and is showing early successes.

Current Kansas Rural Transit System:

The Kansas Department of Transportation (KDOT) receives funding from the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) to administer transit programs in rural areas of Kansas. Currently, there are nearly 100 transit providers (the most of any state) that operate systems with KDOT rural funds. These systems are each unique in service area, fleet size and scope of services. Even with so many transit providers, there are 18 counties in Kansas that have no transit service and many counties in Kansas that are underserved. There are varied reasons for the lack of service: some counties lack service because of a lack of local funding support while other counties lack service because no provider has been identified for their area. Regardless, there are needs for transit service in every county in Kansas.

In an effort to organize the transit providers in Kansas, the Kansas Coordinated Transit District law was passed in 1992. This law required that all transit providers funded by KDOT must participate in a local Coordinated Transit District (CTD). These districts were designed to serve as the fiscal agent for all KDOT grantee transit providers in the region and are generally directed by one of the transit providers in the region. While these districts are helpful in coordinating the transit providers from an administrative standpoint, there is no requirement that the providers in the CTD coordinate operationally, in other words: the providers are each allowed to operate their systems autonomously without having to consider the operation of their peer providers.

Recommendations from the T-LINK Task Force:

As part of the T-LINK Local Consult process, committee members and KDOT staff heard from providers, advocates and transit users statewide regarding transit needs in Kansas. One of the most described needs was for more regional connections in rural areas. Currently, many transit providers serve within their political jurisdiction (City/County) but do not provide service outside of that jurisdiction. In many of the jurisdictions in rural Kansas, a transit-dependent individual cannot get all of their medical, social and human service needs met from within their home jurisdiction. In order for these individuals to continue to live in their chosen community, transit must be provided to connect them with services regionally. The T-LINK Task Force identified this as a need and described their concern regarding the philosophical inefficiency of having so many transit providers and yet areas of Kansas that are underserved. The T-LINK Task Force set forth the following recommendations in January of 2009:

- Create a regional transit approach to expand and improve delivery of rural transit service.
 - Start with one or more pilot projects in rural areas.
 - Eventually, the development of transit jurisdictions that would cover the entire state.
 - Jurisdictions would be defined by travel patterns.
 - One-call dispatching would be required and would assist with scheduling efficiencies.
 - Each jurisdiction would have a lead agency that would serve as the dispatcher for the region.

Process: Regional Transit Approach

After receiving the recommendations from the T-LINK Task Force, KDOT staff partnered with The Kansas Collaborative (a partnership of the State of Kansas, the Kansas Association of Counties and the League of Kansas Municipalities) to create Breakthrough Teams in pilot locations tasked with developing a regional transit approach for their multi-county areas. The Breakthrough Teams have broad participation, including transit providers, employers, city/county leadership, medical providers, aging and disability advocates and other transit-interested parties from throughout the region. The Breakthrough Teams work with a charter that has the following task/goals:

- Determine the market-based region
- Create a coordination model for the group's region-specific transit approach and strategies for meeting customer needs throughout their region
- Determine logistics of governance, local funding, staffing, vehicle maintenance and policies for riders

In order to achieve these goals, the Breakthrough Teams have been provided with ample data about current service, future needs and industry opportunities. Specifically, KDOT staff (in a partnership with the KU Transportation Center) has provided the following to the teams:

- Travel logs for current transit providers
- Work travel data: Journey to Work 2000 census, employee location for major employers
- Data on current services including: vehicle inventory, staffing (paid vs. volunteers), service schedule and location parameters.
- Case studies from peer states

KDOT staff expects each of the Breakthrough Teams to meet on a monthly basis for eight to ten months, with the final product being the implementation strategy for their regional transit approach.

Transit Breakthrough Teams: Update

Since inception of the project in May of 2009, three Breakthrough Teams have been established. The first team to be established, the NorthCentral Breakthrough Team, was launched in May of 2009 and includes participation from the following counties: Jewell, Republic, Mitchell, Cloud, Lincoln, Ottawa, Ellsworth, Saline, Dickinson and McPherson. This team has had five meetings and has begun to develop an operation framework. The next steps include determining governance and funding models. The group has identified late Spring of 2010 as their deadline for starting implementation of the approach, with full roll-out by the end of 2010.

The second group to be established, the Flint Hills Breakthrough Team, was launched in August 2009 and includes participants from the following counties: Dickinson, Clay, Riley, Geary, Morris, Wabaunsee and Pottawatomie and also includes Fort Riley. This group has had three meetings and has moved swiftly towards discussions related to governance and connections between a regional transit operation and the creation of a regional planning organization that has identified the same seven counties as potential partners. The Breakthrough Team is planning to have a governance and coordination structure identified by early spring and will then begin determine the operational framework.

Local transit providers have bought into this approach and understand its importance. As Anne Smith, Riley County Area Transportation Agency Director, commented *“Regional Transit strategies are the future of Efficient, Affordable, and Responsive Mobility for Kansas citizens. In the Riley, Pottawatomie, and Geary County region we are experiencing unprecedented growth. We are also experiencing an unprecedented demand for public transit throughout the tri-county region. Eliminating those barriers that impede access to transit will promote a stronger more diverse regional economy and an improved quality of life for the citizens of the Flint hills region. One of the barriers to improved access to transit service is funding; the proposal of the T-Link Taskforce to recommend a substantial increase in funding for transit is coming at a*

vital time for our region. Regional coordination is a perfect fit for the Flint hills and we wholeheartedly support the work of the T-Link Taskforce to transform rural transit in Kansas.”

The third group to be established, the SouthWest Breakthrough Team, launched in September 2009, with participation from the general public transportation providers of CTD 15 (19 county-area in southwest Kansas). Because over half of the 19 county area of CTD 15 is without transit service, KDOT staff and the Kansas Collaborative chose to work solely with the transit provider network to determine operational strategies that might provide efficiencies for regional trips. This group will first work towards regional dispatching and ride sharing for regular trips to Wichita and other regional destinations. The goal of this group is to show counties without service the opportunities that exist if they choose to join a regional dispatching collaborative. This group will begin the initial phases of regional dispatching in late spring 2010.

Bonnie Burgardt, Transportation Director of Finney County Transit and Breakthrough Team member described the benefits of this process, *“Of the nineteen counties in CTD 15 only 7 have 5311 providers, with many of them wearing many “hats” such as Senior Center Director, Nutrition Site Supervisor, city and county government, developmental disability organization and health department. The providers we work with have actually voiced their anticipation in turning some of their duties over to someone else to enable them to focus on some of their other tasks. The Breakthrough Team approach of regional coordination will allow each area to tailor their plans to their specific needs.”*

Transit Community Update:

KDOT staff has kept the entire transit community updated throughout the process. There are many providers that see the benefits of a regional transit approach and are ready to establish a Breakthrough Team. Specifically, there is interest from Lyon County (potentially serving the adjacent counties), Reno County (potentially serving McPherson, Harvey, Rice and other adjacent counties) and DSNWK – Hays (serving Northwest Kansas).

Most of the general public transportation providers in Kansas see the benefit to a regional transit approach. As with any new change, there are providers that are struggling to see the value of this change. In the past, KDOT has allowed transit providers to have a larger amount of local control compared with peer states (Iowa, Missouri and Illinois for example) which has made it challenging for providers to maintain compliance with federal regulations and sustain service levels that meet the needs of their clientele. The goal is that the improvement in service and enhancement of travel options for clients will help those transit providers with concerns to buy-in to this change.

Fern Odum, Nemaha County Transit Director, best summed up the goal of this process, *“Several counties in Kansas do not have general public transportation. We, along with another adjoining county, provide very limited service to residents of one of those counties. Funding a regionalized transportation program will expand the opportunity for surrounding areas to serve those underserved counties and provide a much needed service that has been, until now, underfunded and largely ignored. Additionally, a regional approach to transportation dispatching will open up additional possibilities for coordination within areas and make it easier for transit agencies to link together allowing us to offer more transportation options to our riders.”*