KEEPING COMMUNITIES CONNECTED

New Challenges for California’s Rural Transportation

California Association for Coordinated Transportation

Representing small, rural & specialized transportation providers statewide
On Rural Transportation

Rural areas, including small rural communities, account for approximately 95% of the total land mass within the state of California. When typical Californians think of these rural areas they envision mostly unpopulated mountains, deserts or agricultural lands. In truth it’s actually quite the opposite. California’s rural areas are home to nearly 4 million people, many of whom play a vital role in supporting a healthy state economy and infrastructure. In fact, it’s becoming increasingly clear to policy-makers throughout the state that healthy and vibrant rural areas are critical to maintaining the health and well being of our urban areas like San Francisco, Sacramento, Los Angeles and San Diego.

One of the public services that plays an important role in maintaining the viability of our rural areas is Public Transportation. For years, rural public transportation providers have struggled to find the funds they need to provide services. Clearly there have been some successful programs over the years like Proposition 116, the Rural Transit System Grant Program of 2001/02 and the Agricultural Worker Transportation Program. Unfortunately though, most of these programs tend to revolve around “one-time” grants that focus on specific issues rather than providing a steady and robust stream of on-going funds.

Today, our rural areas are facing a set of challenges that we simply didn’t envision a decade ago. There’s a clear pattern of migration from urban to rural areas that’s happening throughout most of the state, from the Gold Hills, to the High Desert, to the vast Sacramento Valley, the Redwood Coast and everywhere in between. Many of those on the move are young families looking for more affordable lifestyles, but a large number are baby boomers looking for retirement homes.

As we look ahead just a few years we can begin to see that rural transportation providers, who already have difficulty meeting today’s challenges, are simply not equipped to handle the increasing demand for services that will accompany this growth in housing. Further complicating the issue is the fact that the transportation needs of a growing senior population can be quite different, and often more expensive to meet, than the needs of an urban population.

Our rural public transportation providers need our help and they need it now. The state’s rural public transportation systems have been under-funded for many years. A comparison of federal annual apportionment dollars received by rural areas and small urban areas indicates that rural areas receive less than one-third of the dollars per capita as small urban areas. This chronic under-funding means that rural transportation providers must frequently operate with low wage personnel, old equipment, inadequate facilities and minimal or no passenger amenities.

The paper you are about to read represents a “Call to Action” for rural transportation funding. I hope you’ll join me in moving things forward.

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1 California Transportation Plan 2025 (April 2006 update).
Introduction

When most people think of California they see a state with 36 million people that’s an economic powerhouse, a major agricultural producer or a world-renowned mecca for tourists. Yet many of the same people don’t realize that, from a geographic perspective, California is still predominantly a rural state. With nearly 4 million residents living outside of urbanized areas, the state’s rural area and population rank among the ten largest in the nation. California’s rural communities play a vital role in supporting key economic activities throughout the state, including agriculture and tourism.

However, living in these communities can pose some significant challenges. One of the main reasons is that goods and services that urban dwellers take for granted (for example, large grocery stores, pharmacies, hospitals and community colleges) are either non-existent or require long distance travel. Compounding matters is the fact that rural public transportation services are frequently in short supply. In fact it can be extremely difficult to get around in rural areas without regular access to an automobile.

Given these realities, rural public transportation has a vital role to play in keeping communities connected. This paper reflects two themes that exemplify the evolving role of public transportation providers in rural communities:

- Promoting Livability: The concept of “livability” has long been applied in urban areas in support of projects and services that promote healthy and thriving communities. Ensuring rural livability involves different challenges, and providing adequate transportation options is central to this effort.
- Preparing for the “Senior Tsunami”: Support for rural public transportation will continue to grow rapidly in importance as communities strive to meet the emerging mobility needs of an aging Baby Boom generation.

An ambitious and multi-faceted effort is needed at state and local levels of government to ensure that rural public transportation providers have the resources to keep California’s communities connected. This paper provides a list of recommendations and action items in the areas of Funding, Coordination, and Education, beginning on page 35. Detailed recommendations are provided in support of the following broad actions:

Funding

- Increase funding available to rural public transportation through existing federal, state, and locally-generated funding streams.
- Make funding available from new sources, such as Transportation Impact Fees for new development, or by designing future transportation bond measures and capital funding initiatives in a manner that recognizes rural infrastructure needs.
- Reduce competition between transit and “streets and roads” funding in rural areas.
- Promote coordination and ongoing evaluation of the use of the full range of transportation funding sources.

Partnering and Coordination

- Improve coordination of transit system development with planned residential and employment development.
- Implement planning and zoning approaches that support location of specialized housing and publicly-funded services and facilities within the core service areas of public transportation providers.
- Work actively to improve coordination of public transit and social service transportation by building on previous efforts, and through SAFETEA-LU coordination planning requirements and new funding sources.
- Integrate planning for the mobility of an aging population into community and agency projects and services, including improvement of the pedestrian environment.

Education

- Implement programs that inform those relocating to rural areas about available transportation resources and alternatives to driving.
- Improve or develop programs that educate residential developers about the importance of planning for pedestrian travel and access to public transportation.
Rural transportation: Always playing “catch-up”

For many years, rural public transportation providers have tried to argue the case that their areas receive an inadequate amount of funding given the lack of basic services and the sheer distances that separate communities in which they operate. In most cases decision-makers have tried to address the funding issue by tweaking existing formulas and providing short term capital grants.

One could argue that this approach was appropriate over the past few decades given the overall small population and low growth in the rural areas. But it won’t work in the future because California’s rural counties are entering a period of change that will dramatically alter their appearance. The aging of the existing rural population, combined with the development of Baby Boomer retirement communities and a growing sense that rural communities need to be made more livable, will change the face of most rural communities throughout the state during the next decade.

Rural transportation providers have an important role to play in maintaining and improving mobility in rural areas, yet the current approach to funding leaves transportation providers in the position of always playing “catch-up.” As the rural communities grow over the next decade, public transportation services will be unable to provide the level of service needed to promote and sustain viable communities unless a new approach to funding can be implemented.

According to recent data gathered from the U.S. Census and the Federal Transit Administration, it’s clear that in comparing rural areas with small urban cities, California’s rural areas receive less than one-third of the funds the small urban areas receive on a per capita basis, though rural transportation needs may be acute.² When the size of the service areas are factored in, these resources often cannot go as far in meeting mobility needs – leaving needs unserved.

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² Based on a comparison of FY 07 apportionments to small urbanized areas from the 5307 program, and rural areas from the 5311 program.
California’s Rural Transportation Is...

• A network of providers constituting an important element of our state’s transportation infrastructure, providing access to health care, education, and employment, as well as supporting connectivity within the transportation system as a whole.

• A key partner in planning for and meeting the challenges of California’s changing demographic landscape by addressing the mobility needs of California’s aging population.

• A central component of thriving rural communities and rural quality of life, reducing automobile dependence in growing areas, and providing independence and mobility for seniors, youth, persons with disabilities, and low-income individuals.
Almost 95% of California is classified as rural.
While California is a highly “urban” state in terms of the percentage of population living in urbanized areas, only 10 states actually have a larger rural population than California. The nearly 4 million Californians living outside of US Census-designated urbanized areas exceed the population of the entire state of Oregon.

As shown in Figure 1, 23 California counties have no urbanized areas (according to US Census measures for 2000) and therefore do not receive any operating or capital assistance for transit services from the Federal Transit Administration’s major funding program for bus transit—the 5307 Urbanized Area Formula Program.³

³ Urbanized areas are geographic entities defined by the U.S. Census Bureau, consisting of a central core and densely settled adjacent territory of 50,000 people or more. Federal funding supporting transit operations and capital projects is provided to urbanized areas through the 5307 Urbanized Area Formula Program. Areas with populations under 50,000 are eligible to receive funding from the much smaller 5311 Nonurbanized Area Formula Program.
Even “Urban” Counties Have Substantial Rural Populations

While the majority of California residents live in urbanized areas, one-half of California’s 58 counties have non-urban populations that exceed 50% of the total county population, according to 2000 figures. These include the 23 counties with no urbanized areas, as well as six partially urbanized counties such as Imperial, Butte, and San Luis Obispo (Figure 2).

Many predominantly “urban” counties have very large rural populations, as illustrated in Figure 3. Twenty-nine California counties have non-urban populations exceeding 50,000 residents, and 13 counties have non-urban populations of 100,000 or more. Four such counties—Los Angeles, Riverside, and San Diego, San Bernardino—each with non-urban populations of 14% or less in 2000, are collectively home to over 650,000 residents living outside of urbanized areas.
Figure 3: Population Outside of Urbanized Areas, 2000

Source: US Census 2000
Many of these transportation operators serve both rural and suburban or urban areas, and increasingly serve as the link between the two. In 2006 Caltrans programmed federal rural public transportation funds for over 100 projects throughout the state. In most cases these funds will be used to bolster scant funding supporting transit operations—in some cases for intercity services covering hundreds of miles—but they will also help fund replacement vehicles, much-needed passenger amenities such as bus shelters, communications infrastructure, and system planning.

A Network of Diverse Providers

The service provided by rural transit operators is supplemented by, and often coordinated with, a range of rural transportation services provided by the nonprofits, tribal entities, faith-based institutions, and human services agencies.

New Demands Call for More Than “Lifeline” Services

Unfortunately, much of the rural transportation provided throughout the state can only be considered “lifeline” service—a critical link that allows individuals to “get by,” but one that clearly does not meet the full range of mobility needs. In many areas, even this lifeline link is missing as private providers like Greyhound abandon services. Now, as growth pressures and new development intensify in some rural areas, and the population ages throughout the state, existing services—and funding levels—will continue to be insufficient for meeting a basic standard of mobility and connectivity.
New Demands

Aging Population Puts Pressure on Rural Areas and Transportation Providers

Many rural transportation operators are grappling with the impact of California’s aging population on demand for services. 2006 marks the year in which the first of the Baby Boomers turned 60; over the next 15 years, the number of older Americans will grow to nearly double the nationwide senior population in 2000.

By 2020, California’s senior population (residents 65 and older) is projected to grow by over 70% from 2000, with the 85 and over population growing by 55% over this period (Figure 4). With California’s senior population projected to increase by 2.6 million during this time, the resources and services necessary for supporting the health, vitality, and civic engagement of the older adult population will be strained as never before.

Today, an American celebrates a 60th birthday every 7 seconds. This “Birthday Boom” will continue for the next 17 years.

Source: California Department of Finance, Projections 2000-2050 (May 2004)
The “Senior Tsunami”

The “Graying” of Rural California

The impact of this historical demographic shift will be felt acutely in California’s rural areas—both in absolute and relative terms. Not only will the existing population of rural areas continue to age, but many rural and metropolitan fringe communities will become home to older adults relocating from urban areas. This process is underway, with many rural areas experiencing growth in senior populations that has already resulted in new demands on transportation systems.

In 2000, California’s predominantly nonurbanized counties already had large proportions of senior residents (see Figures 5 and 6). Though 11% of California’s residents were seniors in 2000, counties such as Lake and Inyo had senior populations approaching 20% of their total populations. By 2020, 14% of California’s residents will be 65 or over, and seniors will comprise more than 20% of the total population in 15 counties. Counties such as Siskiyou, Plumas, and Alpine will have nearly double the percentage of the seniors compared to the state as a whole.

Percentages only tell part of the story: the absolute number of seniors 65 and older will increase in every county in California between 2000 and 2020.
Figure 6: Projected Percentage of Population 65 and Older, 2020

14% Statewide

Much higher in many rural counties

Senior population spikes as the "Senior Tsunami" hits

Source: California Department of Finance, Projections 2000-2050 (May 2004)
One of California’s Most Important Transportation Challenges

This growing older adult population will place new demands on local transportation resources. Though older Californians as a group remain highly auto dependent, research has indicated that the average 75 year old man is likely to experience 6 years of non-driving, while the average 75 year old woman will experience 10 years of nondriving. When driving is no longer an option—or when it never was—transit and other transportation services are a means for maintaining the mobility necessary to remain healthy and connected.

Trends contributing to the “graying” of rural areas include the growing tendency for today’s seniors to age in place, and the attraction of some rural areas for retirees immigrating from metropolitan areas and developers of retirement communities. A recent analysis found that Americans over the age of 65 today are one-fourth as likely to move after they retire as the comparable cohort thirty years ago. The same analysis noted that the majority of active adult retirement communities are being built in the Sunbelt and often on suburban fringe where land is easier and less expensive to acquire.

Acute Challenges in Rural Areas

Rural transportation operators are at the forefront of local efforts to absorb the impacts of this demographic shift—both those impacts already felt, and the growing needs on the horizon. However, the existing resources are not equal to the growing need. Increasing services to support the booming senior population is one of California’s biggest transportation challenges.

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6 Ibid.
What Happens When We Give Up the Keys?

One in five Californians age 65 or older did not drive in 2001—constituting a non-driving senior population of 783,000 statewide.

Because older Californians are highly automobile-dependent, making over 90% of their trips in automobiles, they may face greater challenges than their peers across the nation when the time comes to “give up the keys.” Many will have made decisions about where to live based on their current ability to drive, rather than thinking about what might happen when they lose their keys.

Limited Options for Rural Non-Drivers

The question of how to maintain mobility after driving cessation is particularly acute for rural seniors living in areas where transit and paratransit is limited or unavailable, and pedestrian infrastructure is less developed. Many rural seniors, compared with their urban peers, will face a severely restricted set of options for maintaining their mobility.

A recent survey by the AARP found that among adults 50 and over, non-drivers were six times more likely as drivers to “frequently or occasionally” miss doing something they would like to do because of lack of transportation. The Surface Transportation Policy Project has found that older non-drivers make 5% fewer trips to the doctor than drivers, half as many shopping trips, and 65% fewer trips for social, family, and religious purposes.

Of California’s older non-drivers, 46% reported that they stayed home on a given day due to lack of transportation options.

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9 Ibid.
Growth in the Center – feeling the pressure in the Central Valley

Figure 7: Projected Population Growth, 2000-2020

Population Growth and Migration

Formerly Rural Areas Booming

In addition to absorbing the impacts of the aging population, many rural transportation providers are struggling to keep pace with rapid growth in areas that are now feeling the impacts of development on the metropolitan fringe, or that have become attractive retirement destinations. According to the Public Policy Institute of California, the high cost of housing—particularly in coastal areas of California—is a key factor fueling migration to areas further inland. The result is a population boom in the Central Valley and high rates of growth in many rural areas.

As shown in the map at left, the overall growth (in relative terms) in California’s population between 2000 and 2020 is projected to have a major impact on communities in the Central Valley and desert counties. For example, Placer County’s population is projected to increase by over 200,000 residents, constituting an increase of 83% over the county’s 2000 population. San Joaquin County is projected to add 412,664 residents, while the population of Riverside County is expected to grow by 1.1 million—population increases of 74% and 72%, respectively, between 2000 and 2020. Merced, Yolo, and Sacramento counties are also expected to experience population growth exceeding 50% during this period.
Growth Stretches Local Transportation Resources

Growth in these areas has the potential to severely stretch local transportation resources by rapidly expanding agencies’ potential service areas as well as the demands made on transportation systems. Absent efforts to align local land use planning with public transportation system development, much of this new housing development will be low-density in nature (and therefore less transit supportive), or located in areas that are currently unserved by public transportation.

Supporting Livability in Growing Areas

Even though the majority of residents in newly-developed areas will be able to drive their own cars, public transportation services will still have a central role to play in mitigating congestion. This will include providing alternative transportation modes, and supporting commuter trips to metro areas. Public transportation will also serve the nondriving population, which may include lower-income residents seeking a lower cost of living outside of metropolitan areas, as well as those seniors, people with disabilities, and youths who do not drive.

Fresno County serves as an excellent example of the trends discussed above. A fast-growing county that is attracting new development and migration from higher-cost urban areas, its transportation providers are feeling both the effects of growth and of increased demand for services for seniors. The case study that follows illustrates how these trends play out on the ground, creating new challenges for the Fresno County Rural Transit Agency in meeting mobility needs.
Fresno County Rural Transit Agency (FCRTA) provides local services to rural communities throughout Fresno County, as well as intercity service linking these communities to downtown Fresno. FCRTA’s 19 transit subsystems include 5 intercity services serving Fresno or Hanford (Kings County) and 14 local systems serving incorporated and unincorporated rural areas throughout the county, including the Sierra foothills. Due to the low density and rural nature of much of the agency’s service area, most local transit service is provided by dial-a-ride shuttles, while the intercity services are operated on fixed routes.
Jeff Webster has been the General Manager of Fresno County Rural Transit Agency for almost thirty years, and has seen the influx of retirees and other people moving from urban to rural areas. He says that many people move into low cost remote areas without first looking at their transportation options for the future, and choose a residential location that may be inappropriate for their access to necessary goods and services. Jeff gives the example of an elderly couple who moved from an unaffordable urban setting with excellent free paratransit services and bought a mobile home in the middle of a remote area without any regular transportation services, isolating them from the community. Alternative options were explored, but the costs proved too unreasonable for their frequent trip needs.

Experiences such as these have led him to increase information about outreach programs to educate people moving into the area about their available transportation options. Jeff also advocates the use of transit impact fees to ensure adequate funding for the implementation of appropriate transit solutions as development proceeds—a strategy that has not been commonly applied outside of urban areas.

In the past, Fresno County—which had a population under 500,000 in 1970, but near 800,000 in 2000—has exercised the option within the California Transportation Development Act (TDA) to meet “reasonable” transit needs and then designate the remaining funds for street and road projects. Despite continuous growth over the subsequent 36 years, Fresno County and over a dozen other counties continue to exercise the option to divert TDA funds for street and road expenditures. Jeff notes that increased transit funding can successfully address growing congestion problems, access to education and employment options, and air quality issues.

Fresno County voters, recognizing the importance of adequate transportation services, passed an extension of the county’s one-half cent sales tax program in November 2006. The program sets aside 24% of the generated revenues for transit over a twenty year period, funding a program that includes more frequent services, alternatively fueled vehicles, direct service for medical purposes, remote rural access services, vanpooling for commuters, farm labor vanpools, subsidized fares for seniors, a senior taxi subsidy program, and a school bus replacement program.

“The population in our rural areas will double over the next fifty years. We have to be ready.”

Jeff Webster
General Manager
Keeping Communities Connected

On a daily basis, rural transportation services make a tangible contribution to the livability of rural areas—providing mobility and independence for non-drivers, supporting access to health services, connecting residents with employment, education, and shopping, and linking riders to regional and national transportation providers. Rural transportation providers are involved in every aspect of community life, from the day-to-day routine, to emergency response operations.

Rural transportation providers throughout California continue to meet long-standing community needs and challenges with innovative approaches and services designed to improve livability, but new challenges and needs continually stretch or exceed available resources. Today, key challenges to maintaining rural livability in the face of demographic trends and other realities include:

- **Keeping rural seniors connected** — providing for an aging population and preparing for the “senior tsunami”.
- **Maintaining links between communities** — mitigating the effects of disinvestment by other transportation providers, and meeting needs for service expansion as communities develop.
- **Supporting the livelihood of individuals and economic health of regions** — meeting needs for employment transportation and other services that support local and regional economies as well as individual livelihoods.
In coming years, a growing proportion of the population will have specialized mobility needs, bringing new demands for transportation services. These services will be an essential element of the infrastructure of livability and successful aging, providing a means to ensure that older adults can access health care and other services, and continue to participate in our communities regardless of the ability to drive.

Maintaining mobility after giving up the keys is a particular concern for older adults in rural areas. In general, urban communities have a broader range of transportation resources available to seniors, such as more extensive pedestrian infrastructure and a denser network of transit and paratransit services. Since residents of rural areas often have a narrower range and lower number of health care and other facilities nearby, travel distances can be significantly greater, with a lack of appropriate infrastructure serving as an additional barrier to walking and bicycling.

In addition, the cost of transportation may be prohibitive for the large proportion of rural elderly with low and fixed incomes. The non-metro elderly tend to have lower incomes, fewer sources of retirement income, and fewer transportation resources than their urban counterparts. By age 75, 36% of elderly individuals living alone in non-metro areas are poor, and over half of those 85 or older are poor or near-poor.10

10Helen Kerschner (2004), Rural Transportation and Aging: Problems and Solutions (Beverly Foundation)
As a consequence of these factors, older adults living in rural areas make fewer trips than their urban and suburban counterparts, and are more likely to stay home on a given day due to lack of transportation options.\footnote{AARP (2005), Bailey (2004).}

Compounding the issue is the sense that “age 65 is the new age 50.” Seniors are living longer and are more physically active than they were just twenty years ago. Seniors want to be mobile, and this includes walking. Walking is a part of every transit trip, yet transit is often not an option in rural areas due to the lack of sidewalks and curbs. A comprehensive pedestrian environment plays a critical role in the success of a transit service.

California’s rural transportation providers are struggling to provide services that will both support overall community livability and address the specific, growing mobility issues of our aging population. The case study that follows illustrates how one transit agency has responded to the growing need for transportation to medical care in an aging community by creating partnerships and innovative services that keep residents connected.

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“Both urban and rural communities are at a crossroads in helping older adults get where they need to go. Essentially, they have three choices: 1) to modify or adapt existing options, 2) to create new options, or 3) to do nothing.”

Helen Kerschner (2004), \textit{Rural Transportation and Aging: Problems and Solutions} (Beverly Foundation)
Case Study

Lake Transit Authority

Partnerships Provide a Lifeline

Lake Transit Authority (LTA) serves the Clear Lake area of Lake County. A popular vacation spot during the 1930s through the 50s, the area has become home to many retirees fleeing the high cost of living in the San Francisco Bay Area. In 2000, 19.5% of Lake County’s 58,000 residents were 65 years of age or older (compared with 10.6% in California as a whole) and 25% of residents had a disability. In 2003, the median household income for the County was $31,000, with 14.8% of residents below the poverty line.

In the context of lower incomes, higher rates of disability, and large numbers of seniors, Lake County residents are highly dependent on transit for all aspects of daily life. Many residents are either unable to drive or are unable to afford a car. Buses are used for the full range of trips, including commuting to work and school; riders on Lake County buses include high school students and construction workers with toolboxes. As the population ages and new health issues emerge, medical transportation is becoming increasingly critical need. Lake Transit service design has been heavily influenced by the need to provide service to medical clinics, hospitals, dialysis centers, and other health care facilities.

Lake Transit serves each of the local hospitals, and has pursued partnerships in order to provide bus routes to several out-of-county medical facilities.

Lake Transit’s intercity bus route to Napa County was created through a partnership with St. Helena Hospital in Deer Park. An intercity bus route to Ukiah was originally sponsored in part by the Robinson Rancheria tribe of Yukt Indians as a means to provide access to a Consolidated Tribal Health Clinic. Lake Transit has also implemented service models that keep residents mobile when traditional transit won’t fit the bill. Door-to-door Dial-a-Ride and Flex Stop services allow LTA to keep many of these residents connected.
Dixie Porter is a resident of Lake County and a citizen advocate for transportation. The County’s senior population includes approximately 1000 veterans, including Dixie. When Dixie became aware that there was no transportation from Lake County to the closest veteran’s hospital -- 38 miles away in Ukiah -- she contacted Lake Transit’s General Manager. A partnership was formed, and Dixie was able to assist in creating and promoting service which recently began taking riders from Clear Lake to the door of the Veterans Clinic in Ukiah. The Ukiah Veterans Clinic now routinely refers Lake County veterans to the new bus service.

As a member of Lake Transit’s Social Services Transportation Advisory Committee (SSTAC), Dixie has also advocated for Saturday service, which was initiated by Lake Transit in 2006. Dixie is also a Dial-a-Ride customer, taking the service three or four times a week for various activities and errands in the community.

When she first came to Lake County in 1994, there was no bus service at all. According to Dixie, Lake Transit has made a big difference to local residents, including seniors and developmentally disabled individuals. It is inexpensive, and provides a way to get out and see the beautiful natural area and interact with others, regardless of ability to drive or lack of car ownership.

“Most anyone who doesn’t drive is relying on Lake Transit. The riders are totally dependent on the drivers, and they are terrific. You couldn’t get on and off without them and the lifts. And they are up against a schedule. I’m impressed with their attitude.”

– Mark Daniels

Mark Daniels lives on a gravel road outside of Middletown in Lake County. Mark is an amputee, and requires physical therapy in Clearlake two to three times a week to maintain use of his prosthetic device. Mark’s location and the difficulty of turning a 30 foot bus on his road inhibit regular transit service, but Lake Transit was able to work with Mark to provide a connection that would allow him to travel to physical therapy. By “flexing” the smaller vehicle serving a route through the mountains surrounding Middletown, Lake Transit found a way to link Mark with service to Clearlake. The trip is long and involves a transfer, but provides a vital connection—without this service, Mark would have no other option for his trip to physical therapy. Mark is grateful for the service, and while Lake Transit’s General Manager notes that this service does not provide the convenience one might expect in an urban area, he is pleased that they could provide a service that allows Mark to maintain his lifestyle and health.
Rural Transportation Services

A Key Component of California’s Transportation Infrastructure

Rural transportation services are a key component of California’s transportation infrastructure, allowing residents to overcome distance-based barriers to accessing work, education, health care, and regional or national air, rail and bus services. The linkages provided by rural transportation keep communities livable by filling in the gaps in our transportation network and making the connections that support individuals’ health and livelihoods and communities’ economic vitality.

Links to Health Care

Providing access to health care services is a primary focus of many rural transportation providers. Residents in rural areas often have a limited range of medical facilities and services available locally. Those in need of specialized medical care that is most often available at urban facilities, such as dialysis, may have no way of accessing these services. For such residents, the connection provided by rural transportation is literally life-saving.

Links for Commuters

In areas at the metropolitan fringe, urban-rural services help overcome the effects of the high cost of living in many California metro areas by providing a commuter link for residents who cannot afford (or do not choose) to live in more job-rich cities. These connections also allow rural residents to access the wider variety of goods, services and job opportunities typically available to residents in urban areas.
Rural Transportation Fills Gaps in Intercity Services

In recent years, Greyhound Lines continued a service restructuring process that has eliminated an estimated 1,000 bus stops in 45 states, constituting the most significant cut of rural stops since the 1982 bus industry deregulation. In California, service to 83 locations was lost. In some of these areas, Greyhound was the only service available for trips between cities.

The Greyhound cuts have placed new pressure on rural transportation providers to fill the resulting gaps. Throughout California, rural transportation providers have come forward to mitigate the isolating impacts of these service cuts for rural residents—in some cases working across multiple county lines to coordinate services and maintain connections. These services help to maintain a network that moves residents both within their local areas and connects them to regional transportation hubs where riders may transfer to other services.

More Funding is Needed to Keep Communities Connected

Many of these services, from Modoc County to San Diego County, are supported by federal 5311(f) funds for rural intercity bus services. While the program has allowed rural transportation providers to meet some of the most critical intercity transportation needs, these funds can only go so far: just $2.7 million was available in 2006 to support services statewide. Though the amount of funds available from this program is set to increase under SAFETEA-LU, many needs will continue to go unmet, because overall funding still falls short of satisfying the demand for services.

## Case Study

### Modoc Transportation Agency

**Linking Communities and Providing Access to Care**

Modoc Transportation Agency (MTA) operates the Sage Stage, which provides intercity transportation linking frontier rural communities in northeastern California with distant regional centers and services. Sage Stage serves an area covering over 18,000 square miles of rugged lava plateaus, towering mountains and fertile valleys with sparse population. The geography, extreme weather and extensive travel distances help isolate the region and residents, making it one of the most remote places in the state. To help get people where they need to go, Sage Stage transports passengers up to 200 miles from Alturas: (1) to Klamath Falls, Oregon; (2) to Redding, California and (3) through Susanville to Reno, Nevada. To facilitate passenger convenience and operating efficiency, Sage Stage intercity routes allow a 3½ hour layover in the terminus city, allowing passengers to conduct business, recreate, purchase specialized goods, transfer between carriers or receive specialized health care during a same day roundtrip.

Nearly one-quarter of Modoc County residents are 60 years and older. In fact, Modoc seniors are the fastest growing age group, whether lifetime residents or migrants during their active retirement years, attracted by its natural beauty, recreational opportunities and lower cost of living. These seniors continue to “age in place” and present escalating needs for health care, transportation and other services in places with few facilities and providers. Of those 65 years and older, about 48% have some kind of disability.

### Sage Stage Overview

- **3 intercity fixed routes** connecting to airports, Greyhound, Amtrak and medical facilities in Redding, CA; Reno, NV and Klamath Falls, OR
- **3 intracounty fixed routes** connecting towns and outlying communities with Alturas, county seat
- **“Flex” stops on all fixed routes** deviating up to 1-mile along travel route and 5-miles during layovers in terminus cities
- **Dial-A-Ride** with door-to-door assistance for elderly and disabled, and curb-to-curb service for general public within 10-miles of Alturas

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<tr>
<th>Modoc County Population, 2000 US Census</th>
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<td>Ridership, FY 05/06</td>
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<td>Revenue Hours Operated, FY 05/06</td>
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<td>Vehicle Miles Operated, FY 05/06</td>
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Intercity transportation needs continue to grow steadily throughout rural California. However, corporate decisions halted Greyhound service to many rural and remote communities, shifting resources to larger markets and more frequent service along major corridors. Thus, MTA Sage Stage and other rural operators have stepped up necessarily to fill gaps connecting travelers from remote or outlying communities to the national network.

In addition to intercity trips, Sage Stage carries public passengers and social service clients locally on Dial-A-Ride within 10 miles of Alturas and via fixed routes linking Modoc towns with the county seat. Sage Stage provides regular conveyance and critical lifeline transportation across a huge service area in northeastern California.
Ty O’Connor
Sage Stage Intercity Rider

Ty O’Connor lives with her daughter, Shan de Wey, on a horse ranch outside of Termo, Lassen County, California adjacent U.S. Highway 395 about “60 miles from the nearest gas station.” Ty is 92 years old and spent much of her life as a pilot. During WWII, she ferried airplanes and trained pilots, later becoming a commercial pilot for a civilian contractor. Consequently, Ty does not have military benefits; she relies wholly on Social Security (SS) and Medicaid during retirement. Several years ago, Ty’s health deteriorated dramatically. An immediate solution was for Ty to relocate to receive urgent care and continuous dialysis. As her condition improved, Ty was able to return to her ranch and travel for dialysis treatments as needed.

Ty rides Sage Stage to go to Reno for 3-hour dialysis treatments at the Sierra Rose clinic from two to three times every week. The 280-mile trip takes about five hours driving for which Ty pays a discounted $30 roundtrip fare. Because California regulations do not support non-emergency medical transportation through Medicare, Ty spends up to $400 per month for transportation to dialysis from her very limited SS income. Shan feels that more funding should be available to support services like the Sage Stage, and to subsidize travel for elderly and disabled persons receiving out-patient health care and treatment. She points out the obvious monetary savings to taxpayers, and moral decency in promoting health and well-being of vulnerable rural residents.

“Modoc Sage Stage drivers,” Shan says, “are great people; they all deserve medals.” They assist Ty in boarding and alighting, take her into the center for treatment, carry her snacks and purse, and even phone Shan when they near the ranch so she can meet the bus and her mother after treatment. This level of care and personal attention to individual passenger needs are typical of Modoc Sage Stage and of many rural transit providers.

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14 The actual cost to provide this trip is considerably higher. According to the California Transportation Development Act (TDA), rural operators’ farebox recovery ratio must meet 10 percent minimum, meaning that locally derived TDA funding may subsidize up to 90 percent of operating costs.
Supporting the Livelihood of Individuals & Economic Health of Regions

The benefits of rural transportation to the livelihood of individuals are easy to see. Riders use rural transportation to access education and training, jobs, and social services that are essential to the economic well-being of individuals and families. But numerous benefits can also accrue to the economies of communities and regions. A study of the economic impacts of rural transportation found that rural services support individuals and economies by:

- Providing access to employment, and education and training, reducing dependency on government assistance and supporting long-term chances of employment.
- Linking areas with labor shortages to communities with labor surpluses, to the benefit of both areas.
- Providing access to medical care and social services that support better health and quality of life.
- Supporting independent living for those who would need to pursue other, more expensive, housing options without access to transportation.
- Connecting individuals with local shopping and services, supporting local retailers and service providers.
- Contributing to the success of rural resort communities by reducing congestion, increasing safety, and providing access to a bigger labor market for employers seeking workers for tourism-related services.

Some common characteristics of rural transportation systems that are most successful in generating economic impacts include the following:

- **Frequent service**—Service is available to riders at a level sufficient to support daily activities, such as a commute to work or school, or access to regular medical care.

- **Target persons in need of service**—Service is designed to meet the needs of residents who rely on the service to meet economic or educational goals, or to support maintenance of health.

- **Respond to specific needs of riders**—Enhanced flexibility is incorporated into the system in order to make the service work for riders in terms of daily schedules, physical limitations, income, or other factors.

The Agricultural Industries Transportation Service (AITS) is one example of a rural transportation service that has been developed to meet a specific set of problems and challenges to rural livability—and that has been successful in adopting characteristics that maximize economic benefits to individuals, business, and regions.

An innovative vanpool service for farm workers, AITS was developed specifically with farm workers in mind, taking into account the unique needs of workers in agricultural industries, and providing a safe, reliable form of daily transportation to work throughout the year. In addition to benefiting farm workers by providing them with a transportation service that is flexible enough to respond to changing work conditions, the service has provided a means of addressing labor shortages in the industries that drive economic vitality in the Central Valley, to the benefit of businesses and the regional economy.
Approximately 25% of all Central Valley jobs are agriculture-related. Even though these workers keep California at the top of the nation’s agricultural economies, they face dangerous situations on their way to work every day due to limited availability of safe transportation to the farms they work on.

The annual income for farm workers is around $11,525, making it difficult for them to afford transportation to work. Many are not eligible for a driver’s license and many cannot afford to own cars to get them to and from work. Many ride with others, and almost a third of agricultural workers in the state ride with a “Raitero.”16 Raiteros have often been accused of overcharging customers, packing vans tightly and unsafely, and driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Since 1994, 63 people have died while riding aboard farm labor transportation vehicles. These vehicles are not only unsafe for workers aboard, but make the rural roads of California unsafe as well.

To address unsafe transportation to work and worker fatalities, Kings County Area Public Transit Agency, through its Agricultural Industries Transportation Services pilot program, has been providing vanpools for farm workers in Kings, Tulare, and Fresno counties since 2002. The passenger van system has been very successful, providing safe transportation for hundreds of farm workers in the Central Valley. There have been no at-fault injuries or fatal accidents since the service was started. This service can be used as a model to be replicated in other agricultural areas around the state.

Juan, Agricultural Worker — “The AITS program has been a big help”
Ron Hughes is the Executive Director of Kings County Area Public Transit Agency and oversaw implementation of the Agricultural Industries Transportation Services (AITS) pilot program in Kings, Tulare and Fresno counties. AITS offers flexible vanpool services to agricultural workers year round to accommodate new changes in agricultural labor needs. With labor shortages happening all over California, workers are turning from part-time or seasonal workers to full time farm workers, changing jobs from crop to crop throughout the year. Giving farm workers access to jobs and education plays an important role in supporting the rural economy in California, and Ron encourages transportation operators in rural places to provide similar vanpool services. Interest in developing like projects in Napa, Santa Clara, Santa Barbara and Imperial counties is a step in the right direction. However, better clarification on the limitations of local transportation funds to provide these services is needed. In order to use local transportation funds, the county in which the service will originate must consider the proposed agricultural worker transit as a service eligible for TDA funding.
Opportunities & Recommendations

Rural transit systems throughout California are facing significant challenges over the next ten years, ranging from the “graying” of the existing population, to rapid migration and population growth, to rising energy prices that have a greater impact on rural than to urban areas due to miles traveled, distances between key locations, higher fuel distribution costs, and the lack of certain fueling options such as natural gas. Rural transportation providers and their passengers will be directly and indirectly impacted by each and every one of these changes. Unfortunately, many of California’s transportation systems continually find themselves in a position in which they are unable to adequately address the growing demand for their services for a number of reasons, the most critical of which is simply a lack of sufficient funding.

There have been attempts during recent years to address funding issues by improving coordination and efficiency, offering special one-time grants and increasing funds for certain capital projects. All of these efforts have been welcome, but the magnitude of the transportation challenges facing rural areas makes it imperative that local, state and federal governments work together to improve both the overall and the per capita funding of rural transit to levels that more adequately address identified needs. Today, the per capita federal public transit funding in rural areas is less than one-third the level of urban areas, yet the rural population must

“If we want people to be engaged in their communities then we have to make sure they have the mobility they need.”

– Denise Rushing, Lake County Board of Supervisors
often travel greater distances to work and to access needed services. Funding for public transportation should be equalized across all communities, all socio-economic levels, and all modes.

This section provides a broad list of recommendations and action items designed to raise awareness about rural transportation issues and help provide decision-makers with the information they need to ensure transportation equity in the 21st Century throughout rural California.

The recommendations are divided into three sections: Funding, Coordination, and Education. Recommendations listed under the Funding category are actions that can have a direct impact on the availability of funds for rural transportation systems and services. The recommendations listed under Coordination and Education are more “indirect” actions which are intended to raise awareness and political will and to help secure funds, or make more effective use of available funding, over the longer term.
Funding

- Increase Transportation Development Funds and other locally-generated funds such as local sales tax.
- Protect and increase State Transit Assistance (STA) and “spillover” funds that can be used for the operation of urban and rural transit systems.
- Implement measures to use energy/carbon taxes or tax credits to reduce driving and apply the proceeds of these taxes or credits equitably to rural and urban areas.
- Encourage use of TDA funds for transit purposes in “rural” counties by providing incentives for transit capital improvement initiatives to counties that use all available TDA funds for TDA administration and pedestrian, bicycle and transit purposes.
- Bolster existing, or develop, Transportation Impact Fees for new development.
- Identify new sources of “local match” funds statewide to support increased federal funding under SAFETEA-LU.
- Design future transportation bond measures and capital funding initiatives in a manner that recognizes rural infrastructure needs. Rural transportation needs should be addressed directly, and equitably with urban needs.
- Recognize that transit and “streets and roads” needs are complementary, and should not be forced to compete. Buses and vans need good, safe streets to operate on. Passengers need good, safe access to and from bus stops.
- Establish a Cabinet-level State task force to coordinate or consolidate various funding sources for transportation, including funds expended on transportation by schools, HHS and others. Require an annual report to the Legislature on progress achieved by participating agencies, and reasons other agencies are not succeeding as effectively.
- Modify Medi-Cal Transportation rules to bring this program in line with the best practices of other states, reduce cost of trips, and extend medical transportation benefits by using public transit services.
- Encourage continuing increases in federal transit funding for rural areas.
- Develop an ongoing program for Caltrans to develop and pursue statewide “bus and bus facilities” earmark requests aimed at rural and small urbanized areas under FTA Section 5309, as do other States.
Partnering and Coordination

These recommendations are targeted primarily at agencies and jurisdictions with influence over local planning and zoning actions, and at social service transportation providers.

◊ Re-visit previous coordination efforts under AB 120 and SB 826 – why has California not built upon its earlier initiatives and achievements?

◊ Improve the coordination of transportation system growth and capacity to keep pace with planned residential and employment development.

◊ Require planning and zoning actions to locate all future senior, independent living, HUD-sponsored, and other specialized housing within the core service areas of public transportation providers, or mandate all public agencies and recipients of public funds to consult with local public transit systems in their site selection process.

◊ Work actively with partner/peer agencies to take advantage of the SAFETEA-LU coordination planning requirements and new funding sources.

◊ At community and agency levels, require planning to integrate mobility for the aging population into projects and services. Planning and investment for mobility should include not only attention to transportation services, but also pedestrian infrastructure that can support both walking and access to transit.

◊ Develop close collaborations among clients and social service agencies responsible for planning and delivering the complex mix of transit and paratransit services offered in rural, suburban, and urban communities.

◊ Provide tax incentives for companies providing route guarantees and other transportation funding support.

◊ Require community colleges that provide parking to establish transportation fees that pay for transit as well as parking.

◊ Consider economic development incentives based on limiting single-occupant vehicle commutes.

Education

These recommendations are targeted primarily at developers and individuals who are considering migrating to rural areas.

◊ Explore opportunities to work in conjunction with organizations such as AARP, CSAA, and others to help inform the public about transit resources and alternatives to driving in rural areas.

◊ Improve or develop new programs that help residential developers understand the importance of planning for pedestrian travel and access to public transportation services both now and in the future.
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