

Chapter 1

Introduction and Background

The overall goal of this project was to develop a transportation coordination plan for the County of Emmet. The expected outcome was to develop a blueprint for improving transportation services within the Emmet County. The planning process was led by a local action team. Public input was solicited from surveys and meetings. The Northeast Michigan Council of Governments (NEMCOG) provided technical assistance, develop draft sections and, with committee and community input, compile the plan. Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) provided technical assistance and project oversight. The planning effort was funded by MDOT's State Planning and Research Grant Program.

A locally initiated community effort called Emmet 20/20 has been working to improve the quality of life in the County. The mission of Emmet 20/20 is: *"to provide a forum for the community to define it's vision of it's future and for working collaboratively to mobilize community resources toward turning those healthy visions into realities."* Beginning in the fall of 2000, Emmet 20/20 volunteers from all over Emmet County began a process to help create a proactive 20-year healthy vision for our area. (Community Dialogue Groups met from March to September of 2001 across the County.) The group hosted a two-day Countywide visioning conference on September 21 & 22, 2001. Emmet 20/20 created five Healthy Community Change Action Teams that were charged with advancing the visions of a healthy future for our communities.

One of those teams called the Community Access Transportation Team - (CATT) has created the following vision: *"Public transportation that effectively meets the needs of our community."* Early into the action team process, the group identified the need to complete a detailed study and develop a countywide coordination plan. Given the complexity and scope of such a project, the group sought assistance from MDOT and NEMCOG.

Study Area

This Transportation Coordination Study covers all of Emmet County, including all of the following local units of Government: the Cities of Harbor Springs and Petoskey; the Villages of Alanson, Mackinaw City, and Pellston; as well as the Townships of Bear Creek, Bliss, Carp Lake, Center, Cross Village, Friendship, Littlefield, Little Traverse, Maple River, McKinley, Pleasantview, Readmond, Resort, Springvale, Wawatam, and West Traverse. Figure 1.1 depicts the study area covered by this report.

Profile of a Changing Community

Population growth figures show that portions of Northern Michigan region are growing at a rapid rate. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, between 1990 and 2000, Emmet County was ranked the tenth fastest growing county in the State. The County grew by 25.5 percent, adding 6,397 people to the year round population. Given the increasing number of seasonal homes, the summer population is much higher than the 31,437 recorded in the 2000 Census.

Low-income families, persons with disabilities and elderly persons tend to have the highest need for public transportation. These groups are often referred to as transit dependent. Like other counties in northern Michigan, the number of retirees in Emmet County is increasing. The 1990 U.S. Census found 3,531 persons (14.1 percent of the County's population) were 65 years and older. In 2000, some 4,495 persons (14.3 percent of the County's population) were 65 years and older. Again, given the seasonal nature of the area, the elderly population increases during the summer months. In 1990, some 552 households in Emmet County had no vehicle available. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, the number increased over the next decade to 737 households with no vehicles available. All of the trends illustrate an increasing need for assisted transportation.

Public transportation tends to be used more by four primary groups: persons with low income, persons living in households with no or limited access to automobiles, seniors, and persons with certain disabilities. Several demographic characteristics from the U.S. Census are reflective of the above groups and include persons 65 years and older, persons living in group homes, persons with disabilities 21-64 years old, percent of persons with disabilities 21-64 years of age that are employed, per capita income, poverty level, households with no vehicle, and households with one vehicle. In order to gain a perspective of transportation needs within the County and possible geographic concentrations of those needs, above information was compiled by minor civil divisions and compared to the county average. This comparison within the County identifies areas with the greatest relative need for transportation assistance. Communities with the highest propensity for transit are Petoskey, Harbor Springs, Bear Creek Township, Littlefield Township, Little Traverse Township, and Resort Township.

Summary of the Current Assisted Transportation System

Information on ridership was obtained from transportation service providers within Emmet County. Service providers included public providers, agency client based services, private non-profit organizations, and private for-profit providers. The estimated annual ridership is based on best available data and only from organizations that responded to the inventory of existing services survey. Since the inventory does not account for transportation provided by friends and family, along with information not available from all transportation providers, it is surmised this is an underestimate of annual trips made by transportation population in Emmet County. Using this data the total estimated annual ridership on existing systems is 87,097.

In addition, Mackinaw City, Pellston and Petoskey public schools provided information on student transport. Of these three schools, the estimated annual student ridership for three of the five public school systems is 355,860.

Survey of Community Needs and Interest

The survey instrument developed for this study was based on successful transportation needs surveys used in several studies around the State. A sample of residents, geographically distributed throughout Emmet County, was compiled from the Emmet County voter registration database. Emmet County assisted by developing the mailing list and printing mailing labels.

- A total of 1,750 names were selected for the direct mailing.

- Printing of the survey booklets and envelopes was donated by the Northern Michigan Hospital Foundation. The Charlevoix-Emmet RSVP assisted with organizing the mailing.
- In addition, 160 booklets were dispersed to 20 agencies; each receiving eight booklets. Personnel at the agencies distributed the surveys to clients and in certain instances assisted their clients in completing the survey.
- A total of 694 booklets were returned with a 36 percent return rate.

To no surprise the survey showed automobiles are the main mode of transportation; however, between 12 and 15 percent of the households had someone that used another means of transportation. Other modes included: a neighbor, friend or family member drives, car pool, transit bus, bicycle, taxi, and walking. The responses show a high reliance on walking and neighbor or family member drives.

The transportation needs component of the survey clearly indicates a higher than expected need for assisted transportation. For example, over a one year period, eleven percent of the households had a member miss or delay a needed trip due to a lack of transportation. Furthermore, 146 or 21 percent of the households have someone that doesn't drive or limits the amount of their driving. Clearly, 'Don't drive in poor weather', and 'Don't drive at night' and 'Elderly' or 'Disability' were the most prevalent reasons. Most importantly, the community survey clearly shows a marked interest in having a public transportation system, such as a "dial-a-ride" bus. Some 22 percent of the households would likely ride public transit if it were available. In conclusion, the community survey has shown there is a need and interest to support a public transportation system such as a "dial-a-ride" in Emmet County.

Coordination Options

A mixed bag of transportation options is available to County residents, which include agency, specialized service transit, inter-county transit, and taxis. The Community Access to Transportation Team (CATT) developed a transportation options brochure and distributed it around the community. However, it is recognized even with the wide variety of options, there is still considerable unmet need within the community. Clearly the limiting factors to achieving higher levels of services, such as expanded service hours, more buses, and more frequent service to out-of-town areas are operational and financial constraints.

There is currently a high level of coordination between transportation agencies in the County. Friendship Center coordinates with adjacent county systems and with the Straits Regional Ride. For example, if a person is transported into Petoskey by the Straits Regional, attempts are made to transport the person around town during midday. During discussions, it was apparent some agencies could better utilize existing services, since there is available seating capacity. However, a transportation system such as the Friendship Center Transit would continue to prioritize scheduling to seniors and persons with disabilities.

There does appear to be opportunities to increase ridership of the Straits Regional Ride. Marketing the service within the County, under the current operational constraints would likely increase ridership. If permission was granted by funding sources to operate the Emmet Route bus within the County during mid-day, a higher level of transportation service would be realized.

Scenario for an Enhanced Countywide Public Transportation Program

- Expand public transportation in Emmet County by creating a countywide Dial-a-Ride system through funding from the Michigan Department of Transportation and local support.
- Building upon the efforts of Emmet 20/20's Community Access Transportation Team (CATT), form a work group, with representatives from local government, organizations, agencies and citizens, to spearhead implement the plan through the Emmet Transit Initiative.
- Place a countywide public transportation millage on the ballot. This will allow voters in the county to decide whether or not to support an enhanced countywide public transportation system.
- If millage is successful, form a Public Transportation Authority to operate a countywide public transit system. (Formation under the PA 196 of 1986)
- Apply to MDOT for operations and capital funding to expand existing systems and purchase additional buses and equipment.
- Fold the Friendship Centers' specialized services bus system and where appropriate consolidate other agency based transportation systems into the countywide transit system.
- Enter into an arrangement with the Friendship Center to use their new bus garage.

Transportation Coordination Steering Committee

Emmet 20/20 created five Healthy Community Change Action Teams that were charged with advancing the visions of a healthy future for our communities. One of those teams called the Community Access Transportation Team - (CATT) had been working towards improving public transportation to meet the needs of the community. The Community Access Transportation Team (CATT) had representatives from local government, agencies, education, and businesses, as well as citizens at large. The project expanded the membership to include agencies that represent the transit dependent population. The steering committee met a number of times during the planning process to review draft sections and provide guidance on "next steps."