

Chapter 5

Focus Groups

Introduction

Three focus group sessions for the Emmet Countywide Transportation Coordination Study were conducted in July and August of 2004, by the Community Access Transportation Team of Emmet 20/20 (CATT). The purpose of the focus groups was to solicit information on the status of current assisted transportation systems, the transportation needs of residents of Emmet County, and options for improving assisted transportation services in the County.

Community leaders from government, business/industry and education, and human service sectors were invited to attend one of three focus group sessions held July 19, 2004, August 2, 2004, and August 9, 2004, respectively. Four community members attended the government focus group session, five attended the business and education session, and eight community members attended the human services session.

Common strategic and organizational enhancement data were generated at each public focus group meeting. Issues in various categories were discussed and then prioritized by a weighted voting procedure. Each focus group member was allowed to prioritize issues through the placement of a set of three votes per focus group category; though the importance of voted priorities was stressed, issues with 0 votes or 0 points were not disregarded since they were raised during focus group sessions.

The categories raised in each focus group session were: 1) *What's positive about current transportation systems?* 2) *What do you believe are the 2-3 most important characteristics of a viable rural public transportation program?* and 3) *What do you believe are the 2-3 most vital issues that must be addressed to improve the public transportation systems in Emmet County?* 4) *What do you believe is keeping our community from doing what needs to be done to improve its public transportation systems?* 5) *What public transportation system improvements would you support in order to better meet the public transportation needs for Emmet County residents?*

The highest priorities within each data category were ranked by each focus group, with the top three priority summaries of each focus group shown, as follows:

1. What's positive about current transportation systems?
 - Government
 - a. Employer-based transportation system.
 - b. Inter-county routes.
 - c. Growing fleets; more competition.
 - Human Services
 - a. Maintenance of service, even though difficult and expensive.
 - b. Personal ownership of vehicles.
 - c. Dependable transportation via Friendship Center.
 - Business/Industry/Education
 - a. Inter-county routes.
 - b. Dependable transportation via Friendship Center.
 - c. More competition.

2. What do you believe are the 2-3 most important characteristics of a viable rural public transportation program?
 - Government
 - a. Reliability.
 - b. Marketing; well-advertised.
 - c. Heavily subsidized; Responsiveness.
 - Human Services
 - a. Accessibility.
 - b. Financially viable; sustainable.
 - c. Marketing.
 - Business/Industry/Education
 - a. Consistency and reliability.
 - b. Extended schedule (nights and weekends).
 - c. Affordability.

3. What do you believe are the 2-3 most vital issues that must be addressed to improve the public transportation systems in Emmet County?
 - Government
 - a. Car-dependent mindset of residents.
 - b. Lack of education about future options.
 - c. Competition among destination routes.
 - Human Services
 - a. Unmet service needs by current non-profit systems.
 - b. Lack of funding.
 - c. Very limited or no services on nights/weekends.
 - Business/Industry/Education
 - a. Increasing remoteness of residents that need public transit the most.
 - b. Lack of reliable transportation for those seeking stable employment.
 - c. Correlation between student loss at NCMC and unresolved transportation issues.

4. What do you believe is keeping our community from doing what needs to be done to improve its public transportation systems?
 - Government
 - a. Car mentality of residents.
 - b. Cost of public transportation operations.
 - c. No history of local government funding of public transportation; no crisis.
 - Human Services
 - a. Lack of centralized community coordination of public transportation efforts.
 - b. Lack of funding.
 - c. Lack of political support at local government levels.

- Business/Industry/Education
 - a. Fear of increased taxes.
 - b. Lack of funding.
 - c. Not a priority for funding; not a priority within community “image.”
5. What public transportation system improvements would you support in order to better meet the public transportation needs for Emmet County residents?
- Government
 - a. Market and educate community about successful rural public transportation ventures.
 - b. Create a regional transportation authority.
 - c. Increase collaboration of current public transportation systems.
 - Human Services
 - a. Adopt a public transportation millage.
 - b. Create a regional transportation authority.
 - c. Create night/weekend operations.
 - Business/Industry/Education
 - a. Better public/private coordination.
 - b. Create a Dial-A-Ride system.
 - c. Create a water-taxi system.

Summary

Focus groups’ comments provided the committee with guidance to plan for future improvements to assisted transportation in Emmet County. The results show support for existing systems and a strong interest in expanding availability of public transportation in Emmet County. Positive components of existing delivery systems include the Friendship Center and inter-county transportation. Private providers such as employer based transportation and taxis are key elements to the current system. Important characteristics of a viable rural assisted transportation system include: reliable service, accessible (geographically and for disabled persons), and financially sustainable. An on-going advertising/marketing program is important to build ridership and better serve the community. There is an increasing need for public transportation; however, the lack of funding and the mindset of car dependent rural community residents are issues that need to be addressed. Several obstacles to improving public transportation are concerns over costs, funding, and lack of community coordination. Suggestions to improve public transportation in the County include: form a community transportation authority, create a “dial-a-ride system, and seek a county transportation millage.