

Thinking about Transportation A New Regional Alliance Connects the Dots

Louise Hardiman, May 2010

Maybe transportation is a non-brainer for you; you just get in your car and go. But maybe you've watched your parents or grandparents be forced to stop driving and then struggle with isolation and the ability to buy milk. Or, maybe you have a neighbor or relative who is unable to stay employed because they have no reliable way to get to a job every day.

Although often taken for granted, transportation is the lifeblood of our economy and way of life. It impacts everything we do. Yes, there is public transportation, but it doesn't exist or go everywhere. And it's not available in the evenings or on many holidays. It is an option for some people and some trips; but clearly, there is not enough of it to offer the level of mobility that exists with the car. At least while gas remains under \$3.00 per gallon, driving is a source of freedom, as any teenager with their first car--and as any senior who's given up their keys--can tell you. For about one third of our population (those too young to drive, physically unable to drive or unable to financially keep a car on the road), transportation is a barrier to everything. That's something to keep in mind before the cost of driving goes up again.

Our federal government tries to help through 62 different programs with transportation funding. There is funding for veterans to get to VA hospitals, for elders to get to meal sites, and for people on Medicaid. There's federal and state funding for public transit agencies. The States, local communities and private foundations also give money to support various transportation needs. Navigating through the maze of programs and funding to solve an individual need is tough.

There is no one place to call that handles all things transportation—not yet. All of this fragmented funding also results in scenarios where two vehicles travel to the same part of town to pick up passengers going to the same medical center because the funding source for one trip does not allow other types of passengers on a trip they've financed.

Transportation coordination is a response to a fragmented transportation network. It is trying to use resources efficiently and make a better system as a whole. Last fall, ten members of the community attended the first ever Massachusetts Transportation Coordination Institute, led by the Community Transportation Association of America and sponsored by a grant initiative called Work Without Limits with funding from the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services. The team from this region named itself the Southeastern Massachusetts Transportation Alliance and put together a work plan to 1) identify transportation needs in the region; and 2) identify all transportation resources available in the region that will ultimately go into a one-stop information center.

The Transportation Alliance held five focus groups in the region to discuss transportation needs, barriers and possible solutions. The top need cited is for evening transportation services, which would serve employment and education for all age groups, after school programs for youth, and evening community events for families. Other top needs include long-distance medical transportation and getting between communities across the region. A common theme of the focus groups was the lack of information about how to access transportation services and what options exist.

Some solutions include: 1)find a way to share unused vehicles among agencies during evenings; 2)better coordination for long-distance medical trips; 3)improve the physical environment for walking, biking and transit; 4)encourage ride sharing; and, 5)work on removing policy barriers to coordination.

A report of the focus group findings will be completed in the next month and released to decision-makers, media and the general public. The needs identified will be a part of SRPEDD's updated Plan for Coordinated Human Services Transportation, which is a requirement in order to (ironically) receive funding from two of the federal transportation programs—the Jobs Access and Reverse Commute and New Freedom programs.

The Transportation Alliance was formed because the members saw the need to expand transportation services in the region, but realized that more public transportation funding is an unlikely solution. Instead, the Alliance wants to find ways to increase transportation coordination with the resources that already exist in the region in order to increase mobility for all. It's a no-brainer.

For more information, to be put on an email list, or to share your transportation stories and experiences, please contact Louise Hardiman at lhardiman@srpedd.org or call 508-824-1367.