
**Greene County
Transportation Needs Assessment**

Executive Summary



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The Greene County Legislature, with FTA and NYSDOT funding assistance, commissioned this Transportation Needs Assessment to address concerns about public and human service agency client transportation services available to the residents of Greene County. The study was undertaken by consultants selected and overseen by the Greene County Department of Economic Development, Tourism and Planning. Understanding the close proximity of Columbia County to Greene County and the transportation needs of the residents of both the counties, the Greene County Legislature also commissioned this study in cooperation with Columbia County. The Rip Van Winkle Bridge is an important transportation asset and is used daily by the residents of both counties for work, shopping and medical services. Both counties simultaneously performed the development of individual Transportation Needs Assessments using the same consultant team. At numerous points throughout the study the respective Economic Development and Planning Departments met to discuss opportunities to coordinate service, and explore opportunities for consolidated services with the goal of reducing costs through efficiencies of scale.

The Greene County Transportation Needs Assessment was conducted in partnership with an Ad-Hoc Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC). Understanding what constituents need was a priority objective and the study included several public involvement initiatives to engage community and institutional leaders, as well as bus riders, agency clients, and other residents. Interviews were conducted with individuals, businesses, institutions and small groups of stakeholders representing agencies, interest groups and units of local government. Group and individual meetings of TAC members were held to focus on ways that public and human service agencies and Greene County Transit may better coordinate the services they provide.

Several human service agencies and governmental functions in Greene County currently offer some form of transportation assistance to their clients. Agency programs and services mostly target individuals and families with mobility issues related to developmental, mental and/or physical disabilities, aging, low income or lack of a personal automobile. Access to reliable and affordable personal transportation is a major issue for these groups, and in a predominantly rural County with limited public transit service, agencies have responded to client needs in various ways.

The transportation services currently provided within Greene County are operating in an uncoordinated fashion and demonstrate some serious functional and service gaps and unmet needs.

Various stakeholders articulated the need for the following services over the course of the study:

- Better information about existing transportation services, including Greene Transit, not-for-profit agency services, and affordable services offered by for-profit transportation providers.
- More accessible vehicles to transport people who are unable to use Greene Transit fixed route service and require a lift or ramp-equipped vehicle for personal travel, especially veterans and seniors.
- Service availability on weeknights and weekends, and for holidays and other special events and festivals.
- Access to major employers along the NYS Routes 9W, 385, 32, 23, 23A and 145 Corridors, as well as entry level retail and service employers spread out across the County, and also including tourist oriented businesses, such as, Hunter and Windham Mountains, Zoom Flume Waterpark, Thomas Cole House.
- Increased access to Columbia-Greene Community College and Columbia Memorial Hospital.
- Connections to regional employment destinations in Albany, Hudson and Kingston.

The study recommends that the County Legislature form a permanent Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC) to transition coordination efforts from the planning stage to implementation. This action should be taken as soon as possible to ensure continuity of study momentum and stakeholder participation. The mission of the TAC should include more direct oversight and coordination with the Greene Transit System, and development of administrative capacity within County government to carry forward the technical recommendations made in the study.

The study also recommends that the coordinated transportation plan should be utilized to reduce the unit cost of trips provided, decrease the number of vehicles directly operated by the County to provide transportation, and potentially purchase more 3rd party services from private transportation providers.

Further recommendations range from submittal of funding applications to NYSDOT for Section 5310, 5316 and 5317 program grants, to initiation of discussions with neighboring counties about regional connectivity of local public transportation services, to development of training and public information programs. Moving forward on these initiatives will require the implementation of a County-wide coordinated transportation system, requiring the support and participation of the County's several transportation providers, along with new staff capacity to administer the coordinated plan and work with the TAC.

The study identified and recommends important changes in both Greene Transit System and OFA routes and schedules to reduce duplication between the two systems. Over time it may be possible to achieve significant savings and generate additional State Transit Operating Assistance (STOA). This is envisioned through expanding the public transit system (Greene County Transit System) to provide commuter transportation services for the Greene County workforce and general public; utilizing an expanded Greene County Public Transit System to absorb ridership provided by Greene County Human Services providers; and examining the financial and administrative components necessary to operate a County-wide coordinated system.

Several recurring themes have been heard during the study process.

One is that a basic County-wide coordinated public transit system is critically needed for a growing segment of the population. The most pressing need identified in the Plan is to develop a coordinated system of transportation in Greene County. Coordination reduces costs and redundancies, and increases efficiencies in services and operations, and also provides the opportunity to provide additional services to the public. The several human services and public transit systems currently operating within Greene County are decentralized, meaning that each of the several transportation providers, both internal and external to Greene County, are independently operating their respective systems. There is little to no coordination of service with the County's public transportation system, Greene Transit.

A second theme is that the existing Greene Transit System does not provide a viable commuter service within the County, to downtown Albany, Hudson, or Kingston. In addition, the Catskill Shuttle, which serves an important niche, has service timing issues that need to be resolved. Moreover, the Greene Transit System does not cross the Rip Van Winkle Bridge for the public to gain access to the Columbia Memorial Hospital, and of critical importance, does not address the commuter needs of the sizeable student population, to access the Columbia Greene Community College. The transportation routes and services need to respond to the prevailing location of businesses in and around the industrial parks in the northern portion of the County, the prevailing location of commercial and retail facilities in and around the towns of the County, the major tourism destinations on the mountaintop, as well as major job centers in downtown Catskill.

Third, the Office of the Aging and the Greene Transit System both operate transportation systems primarily providing services to Greene County's senior population. Both systems are independently operated without coordination of routes. OFA does not charge a fee to ride the

senior buses and the County is not accessing state revenue which could be reimbursable for mileage and ridership. The County is subsidizing the OFA transportation system without maximizing the revenue that could be received from the STOA 5310 program. Significant cost efficiencies can be realized by getting the OFA system NYSDOT approved and coordinating ridership and routes.

Fourth, the largest transportation expense to Greene County comes from the mandated services provided by the Greene County Department of Social Services. In 2009, Greene County contracted with MTM, a transportation broker which provides 24/7 dispatching services for Medicaid clients. This contract outsourced dispatching and billing effectively eliminated county DSS personnel formerly performing this function. In the implementation of a coordinated transportation system, MTM would need to add the Greene Transit System to the list of eligible transportation providers, effectively providing additional state and Federal transportation operating revenue to the Greene Transit System. The Greene Transit System would need to revise its routes and schedules to accommodate the DSS clientele that need to be transported to recurring locations throughout Greene and surrounding counties that can be accommodated through a fixed route system.

During the preparation of this Plan, the Greene County Department of Social Services, in partnership with five additional counties, submitted a forward thinking request for proposals to the NYS Department of Health (NYSDOH) for a “transportation manager demonstration project”. The proposal was built upon the concept of forming a six county partnership to solicit one regional broker to handle Medicaid transportation services for the six counties thereby reducing costs to participating counties through efficiencies of scale. Greene County DSS was subsequently notified by the NYSDOH that the request to implement the Regional Managed Medicaid Transportation Services demonstration project was denied. In denying the demonstration project, NYSDOH notified Greene County DSS that the Commissioner of Health intends to directly move forward with procurement of a transportation manager for counties located in the Hudson Valley. Citing legislation granting authority to the Commissioner of Health, NYSDOH intends to solicit procurement that will be modeled on the proposed demonstration project submitted by the six counties, including the scope of services, quality assurance indicators, and contractor performance criteria and qualifications.

Subsequent discussions with the NYSDOT regarding the NYSDOH Hudson Valley transportation manager proposal has clarified that the NYSDOH solicitation is a pilot project to test the process of regionalizing administrative functions for Social Services. Under this model they plan to utilize a regional Medicaid coordinator who would handle eligibility requirements, assign trips to the appropriate transportation providers, secure an authorization for the provider so the

provider can bill Medicaid, and reimburse individuals for their personal vehicle or bus pass expenses. While the details and logistics are not yet available, the NYSDOH Medicaid coordinator would arrange for local transportation services through one or more authorized private, third party transportation providers to transport Medicaid clients in the local counties.

NYSDOH intends to have this state administered regional coordination plan running early next year. The startup date is undetermined and will be based upon the timeline established by the Department of Health once the proposal is released to the public. At this time the number of counties involved is eleven. The NYSDOT is currently in discussion with the NYSDOH regarding the impact of the NYSDOH proposal on local mobility management plans and cost sharing. This is still a process intent on spending tax payer dollars prudently and managing services efficiently.

In discussion with NYSDOT the NYSDOH Regional Medicaid Coordination Plan to Greene County will only be peripherally connected to the proposed Greene County Coordinated Mobility program (Columbia County also impacted), meaning it is undetermined at this time whether NYSDOH will participate in cost sharing arrangements pertaining to Greene or Columbia County DSS involvement as originally proposed in the local coordination plans. Whether the State Regional Medicaid Coordination Plan is implemented or the Greene DSS retains administration, it is important to the proposed Greene County Coordinated Mobility program, that the Greene County Transit System seek authorization from the designated Medicaid broker to be authorized as a transportation provider of Medicaid eligible ridership. This is an important source of revenue to the Greene Transit System and its ability to provide enhanced transportation services to meet the current and future needs of its target populations.

Also of timely importance to Greene County is the pending loss of revenue from the Community Solutions for Transportation (CST) program. The CST program is funded by the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance. The CST program is a partnership between Greene County DSS and Greene County Community Action where DSS contracts with Community Action to provide eligible recipients with commuter transportation services. Recipients are chosen based on their work-related need for transportation and other specific program guidelines. Greene County DSS indicates that CST funding has been extended through June 2011. The money allows for service to TANF eligible, or 200% with children, which accounts for half of Community Actions funding for this program. With CST funding unsure beyond June 2011, Community Action has indicated that it would not be able to continue providing transportation beyond that point.

The CST transportation program is very successful and enables many people to leave the welfare rolls and secure jobs that would otherwise have been unobtainable, as well as assists

people with maintaining or improving their current employment to remain independent of public assistance, or gain access to higher education to increase their earning potential.

Also of importance to the County is the vision for expanded economic vitality based on Greene County as a visitor destination which invites further consideration of mobility alternatives. This Plan offers a vision for public transportation in the County and its connections to the region, as well as more specific objectives, policies and design guidelines to help size and shape a transit system that is commensurate with local needs through a five year planning horizon.

Finally, local officials and taxpayers agree that a public transportation system must be affordable to local governments. Moreover, if the transit system is expanded, it must be sustainable over time within the combination of available federal, state, local subsidies and user fees.