

Kent County Emergency Needs Task Force



Transportation Subcommittee

- **Purpose:** *Working to ensure that transportation is economically and easily available for all people to access basic needs, including medical care, employment, food, faith activities, social events, and social services.*

I. Introduction to Transportation Subcommittee

Kent County's movement towards a comprehensive public transportation system continued to make gains in 2004 and the ENTF Transportation Subcommittee continued its leadership role. Going into the year, the subcommittee laid out a proactive agenda in the areas of education and service delivery improvements and systems advocacy. The most notable accomplishments included:

- The subcommittee with the Kent County Task Force on Health Care for People of Color completed the Transportation Resource Guide detailing all available transportation resources, costs of rides and eligibility and published it in 2004 through the support of the Kent County Health Department. This is available through the Kent County website (www.accesskent.com) at the Health Department's publication page. A hard copy of the directory is also available from the Health Department by contacting 632-7249. To date, over 1,100 directories have been requested and distributed.
- The subcommittee continued its oversight of the planning process to create a single access transportation scheduling system. Many of the frontline providers, including *The Rapid*, Hope Network, Red Cross, Senior Neighbors, United Methodist House and ASCET, are engaged in this effort. A consultant was hired by *The Rapid* to complete the design of the single access system. Funding was provided by *The Rapid*, Hope Network and the Kent County Health Department-Task Force on Health Care for People of Color.
- Subcommittee members testified before the Transportation Subcommittees of both the Michigan House and Senate. This was focused on preventing cuts to the bus operating line item of the Transportation Appropriations bill.
- Subcommittee member *The Rapid* was awarded the Outstanding Public Transportation System Award by the American Public Transportation Association. *The Rapid* competed nationally against 80 other systems in its size category (more than 4 million but less than 30 million passenger trips per year) for this award.
- The subcommittee began an exciting collaboration with the ENTF food subcommittee. As a result of this, the Red Cross and the food pantries have engaged in an on-call system to provide rides to and from the food pantries based on necessity. In addition, the Transportation and Food Subcommittees are looking at an in depth review of transportation issues and transportation resources within the food pantry system.
- Finally, subcommittee members began working with Faith In Motion on the expansion of services throughout Kent County and into eastern Ottawa County. At the end of the year, this work evolved into the planning for a citizens' transit summit tentatively scheduled for October 2005.

While much was accomplished, much of our community's vision for transit remains undone. People who can't drive or can't afford to own and maintain a car – the two most vulnerable groups in our county – continue to struggle to access medical care, employment, food, and social services especially outside of *The Rapid* service area. At the same time, transportation providers continue to struggle to meet the needs of an increasing population in an increasingly sprawling area with the same or decreasing funds, increased costs, and less volunteer hours.

II. Trends in Needs & Demographics

As the Subcommittee continues its work, it has become more and more apparent how transportation is such a basic service that so many in the community take for granted. In 2001, it was discovered that 44% of pregnant women receiving Medicaid had a significant transportation barrier to get needed pre-natal services. This statistic helped launch the effort that eventually became the Subcommittee. This last year, it was reported by the ENTF Food Subcommittee that 49% of persons not able to access available food resources were unable to do so because of lack of transportation to or from a local pantry. With our current trends in land development sprawling into area townships, it looks as if the situation will get worse before it gets better.

Hidden in plain sight is the impact of sprawl on household transportation expenses and the difficulties this poses for families as they seek to meet their many commitments and needs whether employment, education, healthcare, medical or social destinations. In the study, Driven to Spend, the information on households in the Detroit, Ann Arbor and Flint areas is telling:

	Annual Household Spending	Percent of Total Transportation Expenditures
Vehicle Purchases	\$2,629	39.2%
Other Vehicle Expenses	\$2,915	43.4%
Gasoline and Motor Oil	\$1,055	15%
Public Transportation	\$ 111	1.7%

While one can readily see the expenses associated with the necessity of owning and maintaining a vehicle (or two or more), these statistics are even more dramatic when compared to other household expenses -- Households spend more on transportation than on any other category except shelter!

	Annual Household Spending	Percent of Total Household Expenditures
Transportation	\$6,710	18.8%
Shelter	\$6,809	19.1%
Food	\$5,057	14.2%
Utilities	\$2,505	7.0%
Other Household	\$2,476	6.9%
Insurance and Pensions	\$2,903	8.1%
Health Care	\$1,604	4.5%
Entertainment	\$2,295	6.4%
Apparel and Services	\$1,652	4.6%
Education	\$ 473	1.3%
Miscellaneous	\$2,816	7.9%

This is even more dramatic for low-income families and workers who can spend up to 36% of their household budget on transportation, mostly to gain access to job sites.

In 2004, the Area Agency on Aging of West Michigan, the Kent County Council on Aging and the Grand Rapids Community Foundation convened the Creating Community for a Lifetime process. In looking at US Census data and projections, one notes that:

- One in ten Kent County residents are 65 or over. Within 30 years that number will double to one in five.
- The number of older adults in Kent County living below poverty level increased in all age groups other than 75 plus (age 55-64 – 15%, age 65 – 74 -- 1%).

Reduced mobility puts these citizens at risk to poor outcomes in all areas of life.

The AdvantAge Survey of August 2004 (see www.community4alifetime.org for the full survey results) showed the impact in the area of transportation:

- 30 % of respondents had no access to public transportation
- 4% used public transportation.
- 6% thought transportation was a problem.
- 8% listed a lack of transportation as the reason they did not go out. This represents 1200 people. Seniors who need transportation assistance mostly depend on their family and friends for rides. Isolation and poverty are the issues that complicate the transportation issue.
- 12% had impairments ADL that prevented travel

- 15% said that the lack of transportation sometimes prevented them from getting to work or places they needed to go. That represents over 17,000 people.

In addition, the need for the Subcommittee's work in the area of coordination of both services and transportation systems planning remains paramount. A glimpse from the General Accounting Office into just the federal funding of transportation services can lead one to believe that a coordinated approach could result in increased effectiveness for users of transportation services and the agencies that provide these services.

- The federal government manages 62 separate programs that can fund transportation services for individuals who are transportation disadvantaged. These programs are administered through 8 federal departments – 23 programs in the Department of Health and Human Services, 15 in the Department of labor, 8 in the Department of Education, 6 in the Department of Transportation and the remainder in Departments of Veterans Affairs, housing and Urban Development, Agriculture, and Interior. The 62 programs are authorized by 25 separate pieces of legislation.
- The extent of spending for services for transportation-disadvantaged is not fully known. Only 32 of the 62 federal programs identified by the GAO track transportation in their accounting information systems.

Finally, more and more persons are seeing the connection between a strong economy and transit services. As an example, with sustained local job and transit system creation comes a matching increase in tax and sales revenue for local communities. A recent report by the American Public Transit Association (APTA) found that every dollar taxpayers invest in public transportation generates \$6 or more in economic returns. Business leaders now realize that metropolitan regions cannot operate effectively, or attract new business investment, without good public transit. Of the 50 largest metropolitan areas in the United States, 48 are building or expanding their transit systems, or have plans to do so. A recent survey by Jones Lang LaSalle in Property Futures found that 77% of New Economy companies rated access to mass transit an extremely important factor in selecting corporate locations.

III. Trends in Resources

Local resources for transportation remain a mixed bag. The tax increase passed by voters in *The Rapid* service area was first collected in the summer of 2004. Unfortunately, the modest tax increase was offset by continued flat funding from the state and significant increases in operating costs. However, a few service improvements were able to be planned and implemented in early 2005. For the cities, townships and villages outside of *The Rapid* service area, budgetary constraints remain due to diminishing revenue-sharing dollars from the State and the limitations of Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) resources. (CDBG funds underwrite a significant portion of the transit services outside of the six central cities.) CDBG funding was put into further jeopardy by the Bush Administration proposal to greatly reduce or eliminate much of this funding source in its FY 2006 budget. As alluded to above, State funding for public transportation continues to decrease as a percentage of a transit agency's operating funds. Local programs affected by state transportation dollars include *The Rapid* and Kent County Community Mental Health. In spite of this, *The Rapid* has been very successful in accessing federal transit funds with the help of local Congressman Vern Ehlers, as evidenced by the new Surface Transportation Center, Rapid Central Station, which was opened in June 2004. However, these resources are generally restricted to capital purchases except for special programs.

Thus, while *The Rapid* continues to grow the number of rides provided each year, the amount of money available for operating the system remained relatively steady while costs increased in 2004. *As a region*, then, we need to further develop our local support and advocate for increases in state operating or face cuts in the various systems.

Private transportation providers continue to find their resources stretched to the limit over the past year. The American Red Cross, for instance, finds a dwindling pool of volunteer drivers to meet increased demand for services. The rides available are quickly booked, leaving those who do not or cannot plan a week ahead of time without a ride. Existing resources will also be significantly impacted by the move of Metropolitan Hospital and other health providers further away from the major low-income population centers of Kent County. Rides will take longer and cost more, reducing the number of rides agencies will be able to provide.

The Hope Network-run North Kent Transit Service, as noted above, continues to operate within tight budget constraints. The participating townships, villages and cities use a mix of CDBG and general fund dollars to fund this system. CDBG resources have remained flat and general funds have been hit by a reduction in State revenue sharing grants, all the while costs continue to increase. Thus, the resources needed to operate an effective transportation system outside of *The Rapid's* current service area are not currently available.

In March 2005, *The Rapid* rolled out the County Connection service. This county-wide option is funded by a four-year federal Job Access Reverse Commute (JARC) grant designed primarily to provide work-related rides to eligible participants. Rides will need to be arranged by either Department of Human Services (DHS, formerly FIA) or WorkFirst case managers in order for riders to qualify for a reduced fare. If space is available, rides can be scheduled by the general public (those who are not clients of DHS or WorkFirst). Rides will be scheduled point to point, unless the trip enters into *The Rapid's* service area where it will then be transferred to either fixed-route or PASS service. The demand for and success of this four year, federal/state funded grant program may open the door to more permanent county-wide public transportation.

Overall this, area providers and funders are exploring ways to move towards increased efficiency on the part of transportation providers who are doing the same with flat funding and increased operating costs. Further increases in efficiency through a single access system may yield small increases in service. In addition to the continual move towards service efficiencies, we need to prioritize transportation in our region's thinking and planning in order to reach the service levels our community needs.

IV. Recommendations for 2005

A. Education

1. Continue to raise awareness of existing transportation services and eligibility criteria via the [Kent County Healthcare Transportation Resource Directory](#), published in 2004 by the subcommittee and the Health Department's Taskforce on Health Care for People of Color. This is available through the Kent County website (www.accesskent.com at the Health Department's publication section) and in hard copy from the Kent County Health Department- Task Force on Health Care for People of Color.
2. Continue to educate the community on the need for the development of a county-wide land use plan with an eye on transportation beyond the automobile that
 - integrates the Kent County Sprawl Task Force Report, the Orfield study, and census data showing areas of concentration of poverty in the county;
 - includes maps with the locations of dialysis centers, health care providers, public/subsidized housing, and employment centers, as well as the service areas and criteria of transportation providers;
 - is coordinated with the surrounding counties and townships, especially eastern Ottawa County.

3. Continue to educate municipalities and the public on the impact of transportation decisions – their costs and benefits – so they come to see the benefit of including public transit in their decisions.
4. Continue to oversee the efforts between providers to increase service efficiency and productivity and to lower costs through a single access scheduling system.
5. Continue to work with the ENTF Food Subcommittee on the in depth review of transportation issues and transportation resources within the food pantry system.

B. Advocacy

1. Continue to advocate for a cost-effective affordable county-wide public transit system that would serve all people and locations within the county.
2. Advocate for restoring state funding of public transportation at the constitutionally-allowable level (50% match for urban systems and 60% for rural).
3. Move toward a schedule-less urban bus system (buses running frequently enough, i.e., every 10-15 minutes, that one doesn't need a schedule to know when the next bus is coming; one can simply stand at the bus stop), making public transportation easier to use and much more accessible.
4. Maintain adequate transportation to the increasing number of seniors, especially those over 75, living in their own homes throughout the county – an option that is less expensive for all involved and provides higher quality of life.

Emergency Needs Task Force Transportation Subcommittee

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