
Chapter 1. Introduction

INTRODUCTION

The eleven-town Greater Derry Greater Salem region is the only urbanized area in the state of New Hampshire that currently lacks regular fixed route transit service. Close to 20 health and human service agencies operating in the region offer some level of demand response transit service. While these agencies have done a remarkable job in providing a basic level of service, most of these transportation programs are underfunded and understaffed add-ons to the agencies' primary missions, and are not coordinated with efforts of other agencies. The limited nature of transit in the region creates a barrier to accessing health care and fully participating in community life for many of the region's elderly, disabled, low-income, and otherwise transit dependent residents.

This plan to expand transit service in the region is the result of a year long planning process, but it also builds on a series of efforts to meet the need for public transportation extending back almost 25 years. It reflects the efforts of dozens of people and organizations in the region committed to expanding accessibility for the region's transit dependent residents.

The document analyzes the need for public transportation in the region, the current level of demand response transit service available, and options for structuring and funding service improvement. Based on this analysis, it sets out an action plan for improving transit service in the region through a combination of coordination and expansion of existing demand response transportation services, and development of standard fixed route public transportation service. Implementing the plan's recommendations will be a multi-year process. It will also be dependent in large part on securing adequate federal, state, local, and private funding to support transit service on an ongoing basis. It will also depend on the willingness of existing transportation providers to come together and share resources in order to provide a higher level of service to people in need in their communities.

Achieving the needed level of cooperation and securing ongoing funding for transit are both significant challenges, but they are far from insurmountable. Through the study process provider agencies have become more familiar, and consequently more comfortable, with the concept of coordination and its implications for their organizations, their clients, and the region. In terms of funding, the plan identifies and analyzes a range of sources that can be tapped to implement the plan's recommendations.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

The lack of public transportation in the region has been identified as a major barrier to accessing health care in the region in a series of studies since 1978. Most recently, a 1997 needs assessment by the United Way identified lack of transportation as one of the most pressing human service needs in the region. This United Way study spurred the creation of the Greater Derry Greater Salem Regional Transportation Council (RTC) in 1998. The RTC is a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation established with a mission to assess, plan, seek funding for and develop a strategy or program which will most effectively and efficiently meet the transportation needs of the elderly, disabled and transit dependent residents within the combined communities of the

Greater Derry and Greater Salem region. These communities include Atkinson, Chester, Danville, Deny, Hampstead, Londonderry, Pelham, Plaistow, Salem, Sandown and Windham.

In the spring of 1999 the Council hired a full-time Project Coordinator, and went through the process of recruiting and training a Board of Directors, obtaining nonprofit status, and raising funds to cover operating costs for a lift-equipped van. This van, along with a second van funded by Community Health Service of Greater Derry, is operated by Special Transit Service, Inc., of Manchester. Since 2000 the vans have provided over 12,000 rides to residents in the 11-town region for medical, social, recreational, and other trip purposes.

PLANNING PROCESS

In the fall of 2001 the RTC, together with the Rockingham Planning Commission, the Southern NH Planning Commission, and the Nashua Regional Planning Commission, secured a State Planning and Research (SPR) grant from the NH Department of Transportation to: 1) Identify and document the need for transit within the combined communities of the Greater Derry and Greater Salem region, and 2) To develop a strategy to most effectively and efficiently meet the transportation needs of the transit dependent residents in the region.

The project has been implemented by a team of staff from the three regional planning agencies, and staff and board members from the Regional Transportation Council. The project team also received extensive technical assistance from Barbara Singleton, Director for Community Technical Assistance with the Community Transportation Association of America.

The planning process was launched on September 20, 2001 with a kickoff meeting attended by representatives of more than 20 agencies involved with transportation and human services in the Derry-Salem area, and the 11 towns in the region. Out of this group, a Project Advisory Committee (PAC), was formed with representatives from human service/ transportation provider agencies, local government, the NH Department of Transportation, the NH Department of Health and Human Services, and transit users.

The PAC met eight times between November 2001 and December 2002 to provide input to the study process: developing goals and objectives for transit service improvement in the region, reviewing draft chapters, and providing guidance at key points through the project.

Project team members also held three rounds of individual meetings with provider agencies. These included an initial round of interviews in October-November 2001 to develop profiles of agency missions and transportation programs; a second round of interviews in May-June 2002 to gather input on service coordination options; and a final round of meetings in November-December 2002 including staff from Special Transit Service, Ltd., (the recommended broker agency) to discuss specifics of how individual agencies can participate in a coordinated system.

Figure 1.1 Project Study Area/Regional Transportation Council Service Area

Greater Derry / Greater Salem Regional
Transportation Council Communities and
Regional Planning Commissions

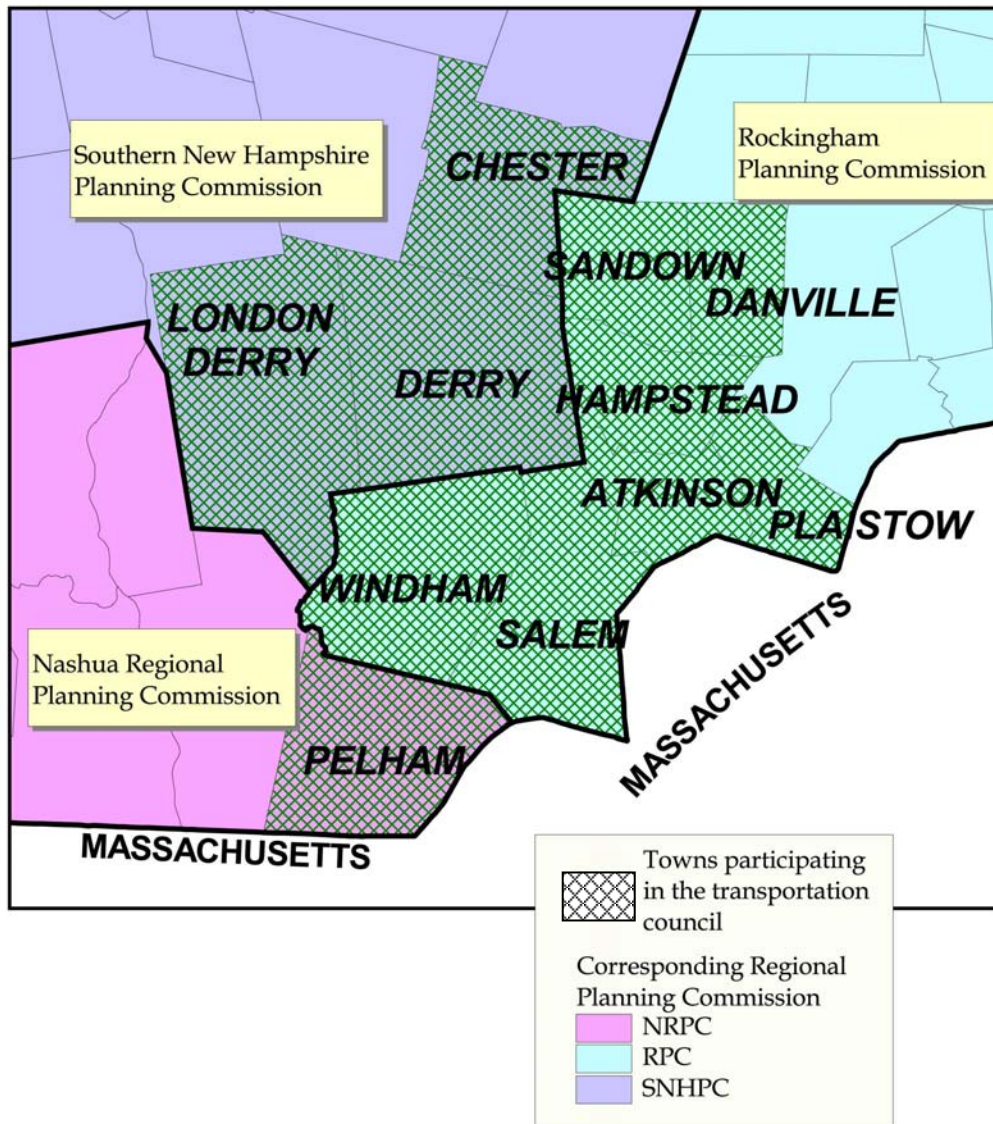


Figure 1.1 shows the eleven town study area, which corresponds to the service area for the Greater Derry Greater Salem Regional Transportation Council. It also shows the boundaries of the three regional planning commissions involved in the development of the study.

GOALS & OBJECTIVES FOR REGIONAL TRANSIT SERVICE

To guide this study and the recommendations stemming from it, the Project Advisory Committee adopted the following goal statement:

"Develop a coordinated, easily accessible transportation system that provides quality services to the transit dependent residents of the Greater Derry Greater Salem region."

The Project Advisory Committee also defined the following objectives to be met in pursuit of this goal. The recommendations and implementation plan included in Chapters 6 and 7 are structured to address each of these.

Objective 1. Increase the efficiency of transit service provided in the region

Close to twenty agencies currently provide transit service in the region. However, as with most non-coordinated systems, agencies are largely unaware of other agencies' routes, schedules, and eligibility criteria. While some agencies must deny trips for lack of capacity, other agencies' vans sit idle. In addition, inefficiencies exist when multiple agencies each must devote staff time to trip scheduling and dispatching – especially when these roles are filled by other highly trained program staff such as nurses, therapists, and case workers. To address this problem the project Advisory Committee prioritizes establishing a central trip coordination point, and coordinating schedules to increase the number of riders transported per vehicle run.

Objective 2. Expand service availability for the transit dependent population

Transportation available in the region currently is limited geographically, by time of day and day of the week, by populations served, and by capacity to meet even the current need. The Project Advisory Committee supports expansion of transit in the region to provide weekend and evening service; provide improved service to the elderly and disabled as well as basic access for groups not currently served, such as low-income workers and youth; and address barriers to interstate health care access.

Objective 3. Improve ease of access to the system

Improving ease of access to the region's transit system includes establishing a central coordination point with one number to call to limit confusion on the part of users. It must also include expanded marketing of demand response service in the region to ensure residents are aware of the resources available.

Objective 4. Establish common standards for service delivery

Establishing common standards for service delivery is central to any transit coordination effort. Using transit can be a daunting thing for riders who are unfamiliar with a transit system. Ensuring a high quality of service for customers, increases users' sense of comfort and safety, and the likelihood that they will use the system to meet their needs and actively participate in community life. Common standards for driver qualifications and training, vehicle maintenance, and emergency response also manage risk and help limit the liability of provider agencies.

Objective 5. Establish fixed route transit service in the region within 5 years

Extensive fixed route service is usually not practical in an area with population densities as low, and development as dispersed, as much of the Greater Derry-Salem region. However, this sort of service may well be effective in the population centers of Derry and Salem, and to provide connections to employment, retail, and service centers outside of the study area such as Manchester and Methuen. Expanding transit access in the region to the general low income and youth populations will likely require some sort of fixed routes.

Objective 6. Secure funding to maintain and expand transit service in the region

The central challenge to expanding transit access in the region, and the state as a whole, is funding. Establishing and maintaining coordinated demand response transit service in the region as well as a fixed route system, will require a mix of local, federal, and private sector resources. Funding development will be an ongoing task for both the coordinating agency and other stakeholders involved in the system. Important aspects of this include supporting efforts to improve funding coordination between NHDOT and NHDHHS; seeking simplification of the Medicaid billing process; supporting NHTA efforts to increase funding for transit statewide; and encouraging creation of statewide commission to advocate for a dedicated source of state transit funding.

PLAN STRUCTURE

The proposed tasks to be addressed in the study include the following:

- A. Quantify need and potential demand for transit service in the Greater Derry-Salem region
- B. Inventory and document existing transportation services provided in the region
- C. Inventory and document major trip generators
- D. Map the collected data to identify service gaps and deficiencies
- E. Formulate a plan for transit service in the region including both demand response and fixed route systems.
- F. Identify and describe available transit funding sources

Tasks A, C, and D are addressed in Chapter 2, which maps and analyzes data on transit dependent populations in the region, including elderly, disabled, low income, youth, and the otherwise carless. Chapter 2 also inventories major destination for transit users, including large employers, publicly assisted housing, childcare, retail, healthcare, and community service centers. These sites are mapped at a regional level in Chapter 2, and at a detailed local level as part of the analysis of potential fixed route transit service in Chapter 5.

Existing public transportation service in the region is analyzed in Chapter 3, including profiles of individual provider agencies; and an analysis of the origins, destinations, and purposes of trips provided by these agencies.

Chapters 4 and 5 present options for coordinating and expanding demand response service in the region, and establishing fixed route service. Chapter 6 identifies a range of public and private funding sources available for transit nationally and regionally; and assesses the appropriateness of each given the characteristics of the region. Chapter 7 presents recommendations for expanding and improving both demand response and fixed route service in the region, while Chapter 8 sets out timelines and assigns responsibility for implementation of each of the recommendations.