



Coordination in a Rural County

System: ALTRAN County Transit

Service Area: Alger County in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula

ALTRAN County Transit Authority was highlighted in a case study in the 2004 TCRP report: Toolkit for Rural Community Coordinated Transportation Services.

http://onlinepubs.trb.org/onlinepubs/tcrp/tcrp_rpt_101.pdf page 250.

Many of the services continue which speaks to the sustained partnership building and relationships maintained by the current director.

This updated case study will highlight additional services and best practices for community support.



Background

Alger Transit Authority (ALTRAN) is a transit authority located in the City of Munising, Alger County, Michigan on the southern shore of Lake Superior and home to the world-famous Pictured Rocks National Park/Lakeshore.

ALTRAN strives to provide service for all of Alger County and provides a regional route three times a day to Marquette. Alger County is approximately 1,000 square miles, or roughly the size of the state of Connecticut.

ALTRAN provides demand response service, first come-first served, except for the Marquette routes that operate on a scheduled deviated fixed-route. Fares range from \$2 - \$25 for their backpacker service. In partnership with the National Parks Service, Altran provides rides for hikers accessing the trails for backpacking. Most fares are distance-based: \$2.00 - \$10.00.

The general transit services are open to all, including older adults and people with disabilities because the demand response buses are wheelchair accessible. Altran also provides services to older adults and people with disabilities through specific arrangements with the Commission on Aging and Get Away Drop-in Center.

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| Service Area Population | 9,097 |
| Service Area Size (sq. mi) | 5,048 |
| Data for Year | 2019 |
| Annual Passengers | 149,000/year with 30-40% rides for tourists |
| Annual Operating Expenses | \$828,000 |
| Operating Cost/Trip | all based on distance – passenger - \$8.37, mile \$2.27, hour \$44.82 |
| Annual miles of service | 303,665 |
| Cost per trip | \$8.37/trip, \$2.27/mile, \$44.82/hour |
| Fleet | 17 from mini-vans to heavy-duty buses with 14 of them having wheelchair lifts. |
| Major Funding Sources | ½ fed/state grants, ½ millage and fares, some local grants and contracts |

Coordination

In an extremely rural area, coordination is essential. ALTRAN has become a trusted partner to provide transportation to people, and to convey supplies if the bus is already running that way.

Through coordination with neighboring counties, there are interagency agreements that allow a ride originating in one county, to pass through another without making the rider disembark and board another bus.

ALTRAN provides trips to schools and daycares and also delivers materials for the school district.

In partnership with the Superior Health Foundation, ALTRAN created a new Ride to Wellness program. Although the hospital in Marquette discontinued its arrangement to pay for transportation when it changed ownership, the Ride to Wellness program has enabled rides to healthcare to continue.

ALTRAN has enjoyed a broad base of support including Kiwanis, Lions Club, and other grant funders to offset the cost of senior shopping trips. They also work with the casino, local restaurants, and other area employers to take 20-30 people each day to work.

The unique partnership with the National Park Service, paid for entirely by user fees, transports hikers to pre-determined destinations. This has allowed the parks to reduce traffic and avoid expanding parking lots. All trips are booked in advance. When these trips are scheduled, ALTRAN will also haul workers, books and other materials, if needed, in these remote destinations. With expanded advertising budget, ridership on this service has increased substantially in the last 2 years.

The "Drunk Bus" was established almost 20 years ago and runs in coordination with the employment transportation program. This program provides transportation for those workers who work late shifts. One driver was instrumental in combining the services of employment transportation with an on-call service for those who have been consuming alcohol. While the Federal Section 5311 funding is used for work transportation, other funding from the Sault Tribe, advertising revenue, and millage money subsidize the cost of providing night-time service to reduce drunk driving within Alger County.

All the executive directors of Michigan transit systems know each other and discuss ways to improve and coordinate service. Michigan Public Transit Association has a webpage dedicated to Executive Directors to ask questions and seek advice from others. They have informed Michigan DOT of needs including scheduling and dispatching software and additional funding for transportation of older adults to medical appointments. Transit agencies are hoping that dispatching software will be added to capital contracts/purchases in the very near future.

In a neighboring community, Grand Marais, a partnership with the newspaper and township secretary enables the bus schedule to be publicized in the community. This service only operates when there are riders, so bus service is not regular. This communication enables people to know when the bus will be coming.

Challenges

The politics of funding and providing service are a challenge. The complexity and unique challenges of rural transportation providers are not always understood by state and national officials. Funding and regulatory decisions made by the state are often the same for urban and rural areas despite the marked differences in system operations.

Keys to Success

The current director highlights the importance of knowing and interacting with people around town. Relationships, needed and desired services, and positive messaging have sustained and grown the system over the years.

Community engagement succeeded in bringing additional revenue to fill a budget gap. Speaking at events, conversations with townships staff and at city commission meetings were also part of these efforts. A positive campaign highlighted how the funds will be used to maintain and improve ALTRAN services. This campaign succeeded in getting voter approval of a millage to support the system.

Re-evaluating needs and reallocating resources also is a key to success. ALTRAN is in the process of downsizing the fleet to vans that hold 10-15 passengers, to closer match service needs. ALTRAN also provides additional services to garner revenue and promote good will. This includes delivery of materials and workers if the van is going to a destination anyway.

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