



## Consolidated Rural Transit

System's Name: Paul Bunyan Transit

Service Area: Beltrami, Lake of the Woods, & Roseau Counties, MN

Website: <https://www.paulbunyantransit.com/>

*This case study of Paul Bunyan System as it has expanded from the Roseau County Transit system that 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](http://onlinepubs.trb.org/onlinepubs/tcrp/tcrp_rpt_101.pdf) page 246. Over the last 16 years, Roseau County Transit was part of MNDOT's consolidation of rural transit systems and now is part of the Paul Bunyan Transit multi-county system.*

### Background

Paul Bunyan Transit (PBT) is a regional transit agency was established as a 501(c)3 in 1999. It operates service across a large, three-county area comprised of Beltrami County and the city of Bemidji, Lake of the Woods County and the city of Baudette and Roseau County and the cities of Roseau and Warroad in north central Minnesota. Minnesota Department of Transportation has been leading a cooperation, coordination and consolidation of rural transit systems initiative across Minnesota. From 2014 to 2015, PBT with the incorporation of the service, including that in Roseau County and Lake of the Woods County, operated by Far North Transportation, increased ridership dramatically by 23%, from approximately 103,000 to approximately 127,000 passenger trips.

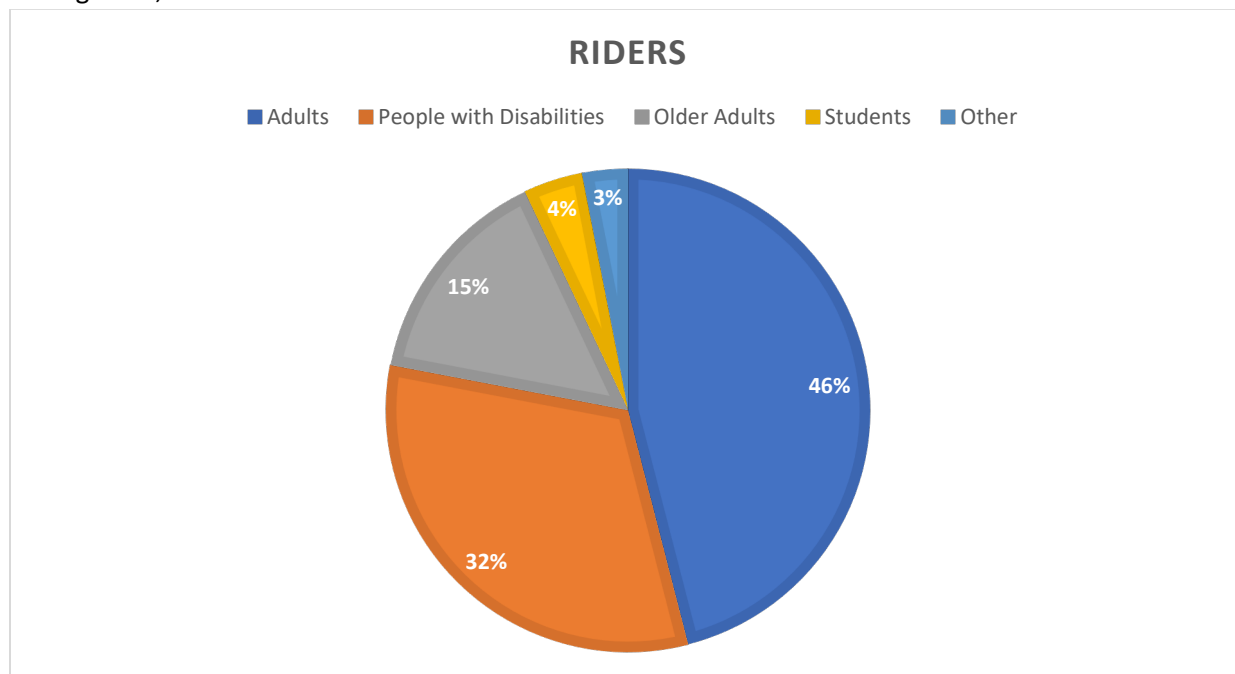
Dial-A-Ride buses operate as shared ride, demand-response service within a 10-mile radius of Bemidji City Hall. In the Roseau and Warroad communities, the service area is a 4-mile radius of the center of each town. In Baudette, service is provided to Lakes Road, the Clementson area and 6 miles south of Baudette. Service is also provided to Pitt, Graceton and Williams.

Due to the demand-response nature of the service, there is no requirement to operate separate paratransit service. Therefore, all members of the public, including individuals with disabilities and older adults, use the regular flexible routes as all operate with accessible vehicles.

Paul Bunyan Transit offers route deviation services under contract with many organizations and well as service to regional destinations two times a month between Baudette and Wakish and Bemidji, 100 miles one-way.

A Paul Bunyan Transit rider survey was conducted in 2016, as part of the Greater Minnesota Transit Investment Plan. Of the riders surveyed, shopping and work were the most common trip purposes. Survey respondents indicated that 71% use the bus two or more days per week, 42% are between 25 and 44 years old, and 63% are female.

During 2019, the breakdown of riders is as follows:



|                                   |  |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| <b>Service Area Population</b>    | Beltrami – 47,188<br>Lake of the Woods – 3,740<br>Roseau – 15,165  |
| <b>Service Area Size (sq. mi)</b> | Beltrami – 3,056<br>Roseau – 1,678<br>Lake of the Woods – 1,775  |
| <b>Data Year</b>                  | 2019   |
| <b>Annual Passengers</b>          | 124,540 3.9 passenger trips/hour   |
| <b>Annual Operating Expenses</b>  | \$1.656 million  |
| <b>Operating Cost/Trip</b>        | \$13.30  |
| <b>Annual miles of service</b>    | 343,984  |
| <b>Operating hours</b>            | 24,462   |
| <b>Fleet</b>                      | 21 vehicles, 15 in-service, 6 back-up vehicles   |
| <b>Major Funding Sources</b>      | Approximately three-quarters of trips (77%) were public passenger trips which operate with Federal 5311, state funds, farebox revenue, and local match. The other one-quarter of trips (23%) are supported through contracts. Local match funding comes from fares and contracted services. Cities and counties provide the 20% matching funds for capital expenses like new |

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|--------------------------------|--|
|                                | <p>buses. For rural populations under 2,500 and for services to older adults and people with disabilities, MNDOT required a 5% local match for 2019. Approximately three-quarters of trips (77%) are general public passenger trips. The other one-quarter of trips (23%) are contract trips. Local match funding comes from fares and contracted services. Cities and counties provide the 20% matching funds for capital expenses like new buses. For rural populations and for services to older adults and people with disabilities, MNDOT required a 5% local match for 2019, local match required by MNDOT can vary from year to year.</p> |
| <p><b>Partner Agencies</b></p> | <p>Beltrami County Human Services, Hubbard County Heartland Express, Bemidji Cab, Occupational Training Center, Boys and Girls Club of Bemidji, Developmental Achievement Center, senior housing, job training and workforce development organization, day training and habilitation program for adults with developmental disabilities.</p>   |

Coordination

Minnesota DOT developed the Greater MN Transit Investment Plan in 2017 which set a legislative target of meeting 90% of the statewide rural transit demand by 2025. Part of this plan included addressing gaps between current services and needs, and opportunities to improve efficiencies in delivery including consolidation of rural systems.

For contracted services, Paul Bunyan Transit works with partners, including Neilson Living Center (senior housing), City of Bemidji youth programs, and the Bemidji Developmental Achievement Center, and Focus in Roseau which are both programs for people with disabilities.

PBT works with two Regional Development Commissions who are designated as the Regional Transportation Coordinating Councils (RTCC) within their services area. The RTCCs are part of the Minnesota Council on Transportation Access, MNCOTA initiative to coordinate to fill gaps in transit service across the state.

The PBT Board of Directors includes members from the local community, Bemidji State University, Beltrami County Social Services, and the local disability and local business communities. In addition to the Board of Directors, there is a separate Joint Powers Agreement (JPA) (transit authority) between the City of Bemidji and Beltrami County to provide funding and guidance for the operations of Paul Bunyan Transit within Bemidji and Beltrami County. This JPA board acts as an advisory board to Paul Bunyan and meets twice a year. The JPA guided the early development of Paul Bunyan Transit from 1999 until 2002, when Paul Bunyan became a separate fiscal agent from the City of Bemidji and Beltrami County.

PBT also coordinates with Hubbard County Heartland Express, another rural public transit system to provide dispatching services.

### Challenges

Prior to consolidating services, the different systems had their own operating processes, procedures and communication. These needed to be consistent across all of the operations. Once this was done, it improved overall compliance with Federal and state regulations.

Staffing the transit agency is challenging. Competition for employees with other large local employers make finding drivers difficult.

### Keys to Success

The support of the state Department of Transportation has been a key to the success of the Paul Bunyan Transit system. A 5-year transit development plan was completed by MNDOT in 2019, for each rural transit system which would not have been conducted otherwise due to lack of resources.

The intent of MNDOT in conducting these studies was identified in the final report:

*Five-year plans will help systems better deliver service and work toward overall goals such as:*

- *Improve coordination of services to meet transportation needs;*
- *Increase ridership/usage across the network;*
- *Ensure fiscal responsibility as a transit funding agency;*
- *Anticipate and plan for future funding levels to achieve service expansion; and,*
- *Articulate and communicate a vision for the transit system and the benefits it provides to the community.*

*Plans are intended to help systems work with local government officials, local planning agencies, transit system board members, and other organizations to prepare for these changes. Transit agencies recognize the importance of involving local officials in planning activities to continue building local support for improving transit systems, including long-term commitment of local funds to leverage state and federal dollars.*

LSC Transportation Consultants, Inc. & RLS and Associates. (2019). *Paul Bunyan Transit Five-Year Transit System Plan*. (Report No. 184454). Report prepared for Minnesota Department of Transportation.

The consolidation of the rural transit systems achieved additional economy of scale that allowed the smallest systems access to additional dedicated staff with expertise in specific tasks such as compliance and drug and alcohol testing.

Overall, the value of transit is recognized by local officials in the service area. The local match for buses comes from municipalities in the PBT service area who continue to support transit.

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