

# Meeting Minutes

## Regional Transit Stakeholders Meeting June 20, 2013

### Attendees:

Kristina Barragen (COCOA), Anna Bergren (Full Access), Russ DeBoodt (EDCO, Prineville), Kim Dickie (City of Redmond, Airport), Ken Fahlgren (Crook County), Gary Farnsworth (ODOT Region 4), Karen Friend (COIC/CET), Angie Gilley (Crook County Veterans Services), Elaine Henderson (RPTAC), Seth Johnson (Opportunity Foundation), Jim Kinney (Mt. Bachelor), Jim Kirkbride (St. Charles), Donna Nordstrom (RPA), Ron Parsons (DHS), Robin Popp (Goodwill Industries), Gordon Price (COCC), Dave Rathbun (Mt. Bachelor), Molly Baker Ray (CAG, La Pine), Matt Shinderman (OSU-Cascades), Andrew Spreadborough (COIC, Interim Director), Cary Stanfill (Mt. Bachelor), Jon Stark (EDCO/REDI), Karen Swirsky (Department of Land Conservation and Development), Alan Unger (Deschutes County – COIC Board), Jim Wilson (Jefferson County - COIC Board)

### Staff:

Scott Aycock and Tami Geiger (Central Oregon Intergovernmental Council)

### Introduction

Alan Unger opened the meeting and explained COIC's role as the regional provider of transit service. He explained that Cascades East Transit (CET) service was cobbled together from a variety of funding sources that formerly provided client-specific service (for seniors, disabled, etc). While planning service for the rural communities, COIC had the opportunity to take over Bend Area Transit operations and agreed to a five year contract. Bend spends less contracting to COIC as they did to run their own system. He explained funding became tighter in 2012 and that CET was forced to do service cuts outside of Bend. The purpose of this meeting was to discuss the potential for a permanent funding plan for a transit district that would provide service to the tri-counties.

Karen Friend added that CET provides the best value for the community as possible. She added that they were managing 51 funding sources and it was not a sustainable system to manage. However, transit service has become an expected service in Central Oregon and they want to continue to provide service. The ability to maintain service and expand in the future would be dependent on the willingness to pay into a dedicated funding source. The next step they planned to take was a survey determining willingness to vote for a funded transit district.

### CET Service Overview

Scott Aycock explained that CET primarily serves transit dependent populations (senior, disabled, low-income, etc) because current funding isn't sufficient to pay for buses to run more convenient schedules to serve choice riders.

CET service has four main components:

- Fixed route in Bend and complementary paratransit
- Local public dial-a-ride in rural communities (daily service in Redmond, Prineville, La Pine, Madras, Tuesdays only in Sisters)
- Community Connector shuttles – provide service between Central Oregon communities

- Special services – Mt. Bachelor service in the winter and Ride the River in the summer

### **System Performance:**

Karen Friend explained that CET currently serves about 20 riders per hour and is middle to high productivity when compared with other similar systems.

Scott continued that the short-term service plan for Redmond is to switch from Dial-A-Ride service to fixed-route. Currently, Redmond is providing the same number of rides as Bend was when they switched to fixed-route, but with only half the population.

He continued with an overview of the general system performance. He demonstrated that there was strong growth in ridership from 2008-2011 with drop off's in 2012 due to service cuts from budget constraints. He added that the dips in ridership were in response to limited supply of service, not demand for service.

As far as productivity, he explained that it was difficult for dial-a-ride to serve more than 8 riders/hour because riders are not accumulated along a route. He explained most transit literature recommends switching from DAR to fixed route when productivity has reached 6-8 riders per hour. Considering this measure, Prineville, Madras and Redmond should switch to some form of fixed route service.

Scott reviewed CET's operating budget and how labor is contracted in Bend and run in-house for the rural system. Karen Swirsky asked how maintenance was managed. Karen explained that the City of Redmond provides maintenance on the rural fleet and a private company is contracted for the Bend fleet.

### **CET Budget: Funding**

Scott explained that local funding for service is provided by all of the cities in the region, except for La Pine (a community group contributes local funding in La Pine). He explained that the biggest decline in funding has been local, not federal funds. Also, that COIC/CET is accessing every state and local federal grant that they are eligible for. Since grant funding has been maximized, additional local funding will be necessary to maintain current service and for any service additions.

Scott demonstrated the increase in inter-community travel demand as assumed for 2030. Gary Farnsworth suggested looking at the total number of people traveling between communities rather than the number of vehicles in order to present the best case for transit. Scott explained that the change in vehicle traffic demonstrated the corridors and communities that could present the highest need for transit service.

### **Priority Service Improvements**

Scott provided an overview of the priority service improvements for each community based on the proposed service plans:

- Bend – Add routes, increase frequency of service on popular routes, later evening service, serve OSU-Cascades in the future. Overall goal: added convenience and flexibility.
- Redmond – Introduce local fixed-route service, dependent on Redmond Transit Master Plan planning process.

- Madras – Proposed flex route service, a combination of fixed route and dial-a-ride services. Karen explained that the bus runs on a route with scheduled stops, but has extra time to ‘flex’ for people who make a reservation for curb-to-curb service.
- Prineville – Proposed flex route service similar to Madras.

Additional funding could also provide for: WiFi, card-swipe system, and improved facilities.

Scott noted that they need a dedicated local funding base to continue to provide the baseline of service for transit dependent populations. He added that they are eager to develop new partnerships in the community (tourism, healthcare and education) to make the service more attractive to choice riders. However, group pass programs and increased fares cannot make up for the fact that there isn’t a dedicated local funding source.

### **Stakeholder Feedback**

Scott requested that the stakeholders provide feedback about the proposed service plans and CET service in general. Jon Stark asked about the budget and the cost of in-house drivers enrolled in PERS. Karen Friend responded that in-house employees cost less than contracted employees, and that the PERS cost percentage appears more significant than it is because the drivers are low wage-earners (\$12/hour).

The stakeholders asked about the hurdles to passing a district in the past. Karen explained that the last attempt was 2008, when Bend was dealing with negativity from the faulty blue buses and had much lower ridership than CET has now. Also, Scott explained that residents of Deschutes River Woods (DRW) voted strongly against it. He added that the service plans should help demonstrate to the voters what they would get for their money. Also, the next survey will help determine what people are willing to pay for.

Seth Johnson added that he would be interested in talking to CET about group passes for the Opportunity Foundation. He suggested CET investigate a direct billing process through Medicaid called Express. He added that CET could become a direct vendor to the Medicare system in the state, and they would be eager to work with them. Karen added that this different mechanism for direct billing is a great way for them to get additional infusion of resources for their clients.

Robin Popp asked about service for the DRW. Karen answered that service inside DRW is difficult because of low density and bad road conditions in the winter. She added that the La Pine-Bend community connector stops next to the Riverwoods Store. Robin explained that they have clients who drive illegally because they are unable to access transit service. Karen explained that the stop is not very popular, but they need to advertise and figure out the appropriate fare. Karen Swirsky added that the most difficult part of enticing riders in communities like DRW is that by the time they get to the stop, they are usually already halfway to their destination.

Scott continued to discuss the potential for a ballot measure to pass to support transit. He explained that a random phone survey completed in May 2012 indicated that a ballot measure would pass in Redmond and would be close in Bend. The group was reminded that Redmond is still in compression which has implications for passing a new property tax. Jon Stark asked about the way to rationalize passing a tax to the voters. Scott replied that CET is the largest transit provider, serving the most communities in Oregon, without a transit district.

Kristina Barragen suggested that CET do a better job of informing agency partners of service changes before they happen. Karen responded that they did outreach to riders to warn them about service cuts, but unfortunately overlooked agency notification. Scott added that they realized transit was truly used as a resource for a variety of agencies clients after the service cuts.

Gary Farnsworth asked how to make transit into a believable economics discussion. He emphasized the need to express the positive impacts on business recruitment, tourism, quality of life, safety and security, into a clear and concise message. Scott explained that most riders rely on transit to access work or training (school, etc) and availability of transit is one factor that industries consider when looking into relocation, particularly if they are a lower wage type of industry. He added that data shows property values increase for people whose homes are located next to transit. Gary suggested using the survey to determine the messages that resonate with people.

One concern was that transit currently serves such a small population, it may be unlikely that the average voter has a connection with the service. Scott explained that it is a chicken and egg type of problem. The only way to expand service is with funding, but without expanded service people may not have an interest in funding it. Also, Central Oregon doesn't have many of the issues that make transit popular in other areas, like traffic. Karen Swirsky added; however, that Bend will need transit to serve a four year college campus (OSU-Cascades).

Karen Friend added the system is currently designed to serve the transit dependent but if the community wants transit to serve everyone, then that comes with a much higher price tag. Scott explained that the number one tested statement in the May 2012 survey was "transit is important for those that don't have other options." Additional reasons, like economic development, the environment, and congestion also received positive responses but they weren't as high. The group agreed that many people, even if they aren't regular riders, have accessed transit (i.e. the Mt. Bachelor shuttle or having a parent who used dial-a-ride).

Gary Farnsworth added that the Bend Parks and Recreation bond was successful because they demonstrated what the community would get for their money. Scott added that the current agreement with the City of Bend expires in 2015 and they are motivated to get transit funding out of their general fund. They are very interested in the marketing strategy. Gordon Price asked about the funding alternatives that Bend is presenting. Scott explained that they have primarily talked about a transit district or a property tax.

Jim Kirkbride added that St Charles has parking constraints. He suggested that the City may give industries an allowance for a certain number and frequency of bus stops in lieu of meeting the required number of parking spots. Karen Swirsky responded that other communities have used those types of incentives. Jim added that St. Charles could pay for patient's fares if it would mean they made their appointments. He and Karen Friend will connect about St. Charles becoming a sales outlet for bus passes.

Matt Shinderman asked how a student pass program works at OSU in Corvallis. Scott explained that the student ID is a bus pass. He added that Bend will not have enough parking to serve a university and will likely need a robust transit service. Gary added that the University of Washington chose to invest in transit and passes for their students in lieu of building more infrastructure. Russ DeBoodt added that

OSU Corvallis had taken out parking lots and expected students to ride transit.

The group brainstormed about ways to prove transit's value to voters. They agreed that collaboration with the City could be helpful, and they could direct a campaign toward sizeable employers that could have (or may already have) parking issues. Gary suggested starting to build up a group of people and organizations who are willing to make a fair share contribution. Karen Swirsky asked about the timeline for a ballot measure and Scott explained it would most likely be November 2014.

Donna Nordstrom suggested marketing to show what CET already provides, like service to Redmond Proficiency Academy (a choice school). She suggested showing people going to the mountain, downtown and shopping and really focusing on the choice rider since the dependent rider is going to use the service no matter what. She added that advertising should make it cool, trendy and fun to ride transit. Scott added that another opportunity was the general high philanthropy and volunteerism in Central Oregon and transit helps people be self-reliant.

Alan Unger asked whether there was another possible measure besides a property tax. Jim Kinney asked about the order of magnitude for a tax to provide the desired level of service. Scott explained that previously the creation of a new district was proposed at \$.39/\$1,000 as a permanent tax rate, however, the specific territory covered is unknown. Robin Popp asked about funding for the rural routes. Scott explained that the district may be geared towards the area where it is most likely to pass (Bend and Redmond), although it could also be a tri-county district. Alan shared that \$.06/\$1,000 in Deschutes County would generate about \$1 million in revenue, and less than that in Jefferson and Crook Counties. Scott shared that unfortunately they are not allowed to have a variable rate within the district, even though different levels of service are provided to different communities.

Jon Stark suggested conducting a business survey. He explained that employers desired service in 2004-2007 and while employer demand isn't as high today it is beginning to reveal itself. The next 6 months may be a good time to get a pulse from employers. Jim Kirkbride added that employers who have locations in multiple cities should be at the top of that list. He added that healthcare is going to be centralizing resources to keep costs down (i.e. Redmond will be the healthcare hub to Prineville and Madras) and a strong bus system will be important for access. Karen Friend added that the community connector shuttles were started in part due to the interest from employers who needed their employees to be able to get to work. Robin added that informed employees who see employer interest in the service will vote alongside their employers.

Molly Baker Ray suggested a campaign highlighting the Central Oregon lifestyle and how residents don't want Bend to be full of parking lots, and also can access transit to save money on their commutes. Russ DeBoodt added that Prineville and Crook County are founded on a very independent culture and CET can benefit by demonstrating how transit makes it easy for people who previously couldn't get around independently. However, he added that it would take some time to chip away at the perception in smaller communities.

Gordon Price asked about reinstating the community connector from Warm Springs to Madras, especially now that Madras has a new COCC campus. Karen Friend explained that COIC and Warm Springs continue to talk and are in the planning process. She hopes to resume the relationship.

Scott requested that the meeting attendees keep in touch and promised they would be kept up to date on transit funding happenings.

Meeting adjourned.