

CET Funding Sub-Committee
NOTES
August 16, 2013
9a-11a, 716 SW Evergreen Redmond, OR 97756

Members:

Jason Carr (City of Prineville), Scott Cooper (NeighborImpact), Matt Shinderman (OSU-Cascades), Dave Rathbun (Mt.Bachelor), Jim Wilson (COIC Board), Wendy Holzman (City of Sisters), Eric King (City of Bend), Joni Bramlett (ODOT), Richard Ladeby (City of Madras), Ron Parsons (DHS), Jeff Monson (Commute Options)

Guests:

Hoyt Wilson (COIC)

On the Phone:

Alan Unger (Deschutes County)

Staff:

Andrew Spreadborough (COIC), Scott Aycock (COIC), Karen Friend (COIC/CET), Tami Geiger (COIC)

Action Items:

- Andrew Spreadborough will discuss private sector committee participation through Roger Lee and Jon Stark, EDCO.
- Dave Rathbun will invite private sector participation at the next Bend Chamber of Commerce event.
- COIC to email webpage link for committee materials and additional information.
- Andrew Spreadborough and Scott Aycock to add an Outreach and Messaging schedule to work in tandem with the funding development process. Incorporate a formal outreach component between meetings 6 and 7 to gather input on draft findings.
- Solicit participation on the Committee by representatives of senior citizens.
- Scott Aycock to email out draft public survey for Subcommittee review.
- COIC to gather cost of current service, breakdown of funding, and cost estimates for different levels of service for the next meeting.
- COIC to generate a list of funding levels for various transit agencies in Oregon, including property tax, payroll tax, and utility fee rates.
- COIC to gather population and contribution numbers for each City and County for the next meeting.

Welcome and Introductions

Jason Carr opened the meeting and explained that he and Alan Unger (COIC Board members) had volunteered as co-chairs to the Cascades East Transit (CET) funding sub-committee of the COIC board. He explained that the purpose of the sub-committee was to research and develop a recommendation for a more permanent and sustainable local funding mechanism for CET. He thanked everyone for coming and turned it over to Andrew Spreadborough.

Overview of Committee Purpose and Goals

a. Committee Membership

Andrew Spreadborough directed the committee's attention to "Attachment A: Roster of Invites." He explained that every committee member on the roster had agreed to participate and was hoping that they would have consistent member attendance at all the meetings to keep the committee progressing on schedule. He explained that COIC staff would post relevant information on the webpage, email out all important documents, and he was willing to meet with members one on one to get them up to speed if they have to miss a meeting. He requested the committee provide input on the current membership and suggest any additional persons they thought should be at the table. The group agreed that they would like greater participation from the private sector. Jason Carr suggested communicating through Roger Lee and Jon Stark at EDCO in order to get information out to the private sector. Dave Rathbun offered to bring it up at the next Bend Chamber of Commerce event. Andrew and Karen Friend agreed that private sector participation was extremely important, especially as one of the frequently used local funding solutions was a payroll tax (would require the support of the business community to implement), and that business support for any ballot measure would be critical.

b. Outreach and Communications Approach

Andrew explained that COIC would email important information out to an outreach list for community input. Also, COIC staff plan to present at COACT meetings, other city organizations, and any other groups the members recommended. He added that COIC expected their board members to help ensure there is communication with each City Council and County Commission. Jeff Monson suggested creating an outreach schedule to be sure that information goes out as the Committee makes progress, not after it has made decisions. Jason agreed and suggested that COIC get on the Council and Commission agendas as soon as possible. Scott Aycock suggested a formal outreach effort between meetings 6 and 7 in order to solicit input on the draft recommendations.

Action Item: COIC to email webpage link for committee materials and additional information.

Action Item: Andrew Spreadborough and Scott Aycock to add an Outreach and Messaging schedule to work in tandem with the funding development process. Incorporate a formal outreach component between meetings 6 and 7 to gather input on draft findings.

Andrew set the context and described the current status of public transit. He explained that transit is still relatively new to the region. CET, as a provider of integrated regional public transportation has only been in existence for a few years (since 2008-2009). The development of CET has been rapid, efficient and entrepreneurial. COIC has been aggressive in partnership and resource development resulting in a regional system that is efficient and cost effective. However, a large number of funding sources have been cobbled together to support the system and most local funding comes from City General Funds that have competing demands. The funding mix is volatile which has resulted in a disruptive and uncomfortable cycle of service cuts. As a result, the COIC board has requested that COIC work toward developing a mechanism to ensure the long-term sustainability of the service. The COIC Board is hoping that this committee will present the most viable and sustainable funding source moving into the future.

c. Meeting Schedule and COIC Desired Outcomes

Andrew directed the group's attention to "Attachment B: CET Funding Committee Process and Timeline." He explained that the COIC Board has requested recommendations on four primary questions: governance, funding geography, funding tool, and level of service (what level of service should be maintained/built over time?).

He explained that the meeting schedule outline is flexible; however, Jason suggested that any major changes to the schedule should be made now to maintain a meeting structure. Andrew added that the meeting schedule is set for the 1st and 3rd Friday but that they can rotate locations if desired.

d. Roundtable: Committee member input on desired outcomes

Andrew asked the members to share their initial thoughts and perspectives.

- Dave Rathbun opened the conversation by explaining that he had been involved with the development of the transit system in two other communities. One community was tourism driven (developed a sales tax) and one was similar to Central Oregon with a diverse rural to urban setting and a variety of fragmented values. He explained that transit is a quality of life and a moral issue since there are so many benefits to the community and environment. Regardless of the solution the committee determines, they will need to sell it to the community and develop a very strong PR campaign.
- Jeff Monson agreed with Dave and added that he had been on the committees for the previous three votes for public transportation levies that had failed. He stressed the importance of promotion, outreach and a strong PR campaign. He added that the process will need to be well planned and seamless, since the committee meetings end in November and that is exactly one year until something would go to vote.
- Scott Cooper added that senior citizens are important constituents of public transit and also vote. The committee needed representation from an organization representing seniors.
- Jim Wilson explained that service cuts have hurt low income and seniors that are transit dependent. He added that there is a responsibility to take care of our own and provide a necessary service.
- Eric King suggested that they needed a higher level of service to attract choice riders. He added that service is not robust enough right now for people to recognize the benefits. He also agreed that the committee can't lose sight of "selling" the idea.
- Wendy Holzman added that young people are not purchasing cars when they don't need them (ex. Portland). She thought it may be a tough sell in Sisters because there isn't broad community participation in transit. She added that it's important for the region to have a robust system.
- Richard Ladeby explained that Jefferson County and Madras have low ridership and a low level of service. He asked if there was a way for service to benefit the outlying communities more.
- Jason Carr added that Jefferson and Crook Counties were less likely to approve a new tax in general and would need to recognize its value to the community as a "public good" in order to consider voting for it.
- Joni Bramlett shared that she was happy COIC was working on the issue and that they will hopefully develop the match that they need to support the service. She added that transit is always subsidized and is never a private for-profit enterprise. The governor wants mobility for all Oregonians who need it.

Action Item: Solicit involvement in the Committee by representatives of senior citizens.

Review CET Background, Status and Vision (PPT Presentation)

a. Background

Andrew, Scott and Karen presented a PowerPoint presentation that reviewed current conditions, services, and funding for CET. Andrew highlighted that City of Bend has a funding commitment through 2015, at \$1 million per year, but there needs to be a plan in place for when the City's commitment ends. Jeff Monson asked why funding is presented as a "downward trend" when statewide and national funding sources have been on the rise. Karen explained that local funding that is used as match for the state and federal funding has diminished, particularly because of sequestration on social service agencies.

b. Service Overview

Andrew reviewed current ridership and clarified that the system, on average, has anywhere from 5 to 20 riders per hour per bus (from rural dial-a-ride to Bend fixed route). He explained that all local service outside of Bend is a dial-a-ride model except for one fixed-route in Redmond that connects the Redmond Library to the Airport/WorkSource/COCC area (Route 12). However, Route 12 is partially funded by the Partnership to End Poverty and COCC. Jason added that they

will be another disappearing funding source because his organization (PEP) is dissolving. The Community Connector shuttles move passengers between communities in the region and those runs are on a fixed-schedule.

Joni emphasized that CET also has an aging fleet that will need replacement. She explained that there are 200+ vehicles in ODOT Region 4 and 52% are eligible for replacement. ODOT does not have enough money to provide the capital for new buses. Scott Cooper asked if it was each community's responsibility to replace their own ODOT fleet. Joni responded no, but the funding just isn't available. Scott Aycock stated that a "capital replacement plan" needs to be a part of the local funding plan.

Andrew also reviewed the facilities that CET operates. Jeff Monson suggested scheduling tours of the facilities for the committee members and maybe working it in as a part of one of the meetings.

Karen explained the system performance, especially the downward trend in ridership in March 2012 (for the rural system) since the diminished funding forced service cuts. She verified that the CET fleet was 100% ADA accessible. Eric King added that the infrastructure in Bend including bus stops and paths are 100% ADA accessible as well. Karen pointed out that ridership on Community Connector shuttles shifted to the remaining available shuttles after the service cuts. Redmond-Bend was the only shuttle that did not experience cuts and it continues to show strong growth.

Karen reviewed current service funding. She explained that the system began with a \$300,000 grant and \$300,000 in match for the rural system. She explained that Bend and rural service have similar sized workforces, but staff for Bend is contracted and rural staff is in-house. She added that rural funding is dependent on rides and miles, and the state is currently working on a strategic process to determine the best way to allocate funds across rural systems. She added that their farebox recovery rate is 10% on average, but that it is one of CET's goals to raise it to 15 or 20%. Also that CET is currently the largest public transit system in the state without a dedicated local fund. Rogue Valley Transit District has a local fund but it has the lowest permanent tax rate and has required them to implement fare increases.

Scott explained the scope of recent planning processes for regional transit. The Bend Transit Plan was recently completed (the Bend MPO completed the Plan because they wrote the grant when the City still operated transit), as was the Regional Transit Master Plan. He explained that the Plans fit together, especially the planned service improvements and timing, because both Plans were coordinated and had the same consultants, Nelson/Nygaard. He continued that they conducted ample public outreach, and the Bend plan is truly unique for the region because it shows the development of transit corridors and discusses the nexus between land use and transit.

Generally the conclusion from public outreach was that transit was important for those that had other options and their top priorities were more convenience and flexibility. A random phone survey was completed (statistically significant in Bend, Redmond and for the region) and asked a vaguely worded question about willingness to pass a property tax for transit. It would have passed in Redmond but failed in Bend – both by a narrow margin. Scott shared that COIC is planning a follow up survey in the following weeks that will provide additional information in mid-September and October. Ron Parsons suggested that the group review the survey before it is complete; to be sure COIC asks the right questions regionally. Scott agreed to distribute the draft survey via email.

Action Item: Scott Aycock to email out draft public survey for Subcommittee review.

The group discussed the survey method (COIC hired a consultant) and the value of re-surveying Redmond before they have implemented fixed route (which is set to happen as soon as possible). Andrew stated that COIC is hesitant to start providing the new service while funding is so volatile. Scott agreed that the survey needed to be completed before any of the new plans were implemented.

The group briefly discussed the opportunity to implement a sales tax since it would force visitors to pay some of the cost. Scott Cooper stated that the last ten ballot measures in Oregon to implement a sales tax have failed. Ashland is the only city in Oregon with a sales tax (charged on prepared food and beverage).

Scott briefly reviewed the data that guided the future service plans for the region. Jeff Monson believed that the travel demand models were overestimating trips because people are making the choice to drive less and fewer young people are purchasing vehicles. According to the models, the most service needed to be added in Bend, Redmond, between Bend and Redmond, and between Prineville, Bend and Redmond. He added that COCC is the number one destination for bus riders in Bend and that staff expect OSU-CC to surpass that once it has grown. Short term improvements include: Redmond fixed route, flex route in Madras and Prineville, and switching the Community Connector shuttle from Sisters-Redmond to Sisters-Bend. Increased funding could also bring more technology including a cell phone application, Wi-Fi, swipe cards, and better stops and facilities for passengers.

c. Vision/Goals

Andrew presented CET's draft vision. He shared that they are unclear whether their vision was to serve the transit dependent exclusively or to move toward serving the choice rider. Regardless, he agreed that they needed a compelling story to convince voters of the value of transit.

Scott Cooper suggested that COIC clearly present the gap in funding at the next committee meeting, also how much funding is from local sources and how much is coming in from the outside. He would like to see how much the level of service that the region needs will cost since the cost estimate may determine the funding vehicle. Since it is unclear what level of service the region "needs" (it's a matter of opinion), Scott Aycock suggested using the anticipated costs for the midterm expansions in the service plans of the Regional Transit Master Plan.

Action Item: COIC to gather cost of current service, breakdown of funding, and cost estimates for different levels of service for the next meeting.

Dave Rathbun requested context of how like-sized and situated systems are funded and operate. Specifically, how much revenue would be generated if we implemented a similar model to Klamath Falls, Salem or Eugene. Karen stated that the federal and state funding is also volatile, and was unclear whether funding mechanism should be to fund CET in its entirety or just the gap funding that is currently needed to match the grants. Dave suggested that COIC elect the most sustainable option that also includes capital for purchasing buses. Scott added that outreach and marketing would also have a budget in a sustainable system.

Action Item: COIC to generate a list of funding levels for various transit agencies in Oregon, including property tax, payroll tax, and utility fee rates.

Jim Wilson asked about the potential for forming a transit district. Andrew explained that it is a governance option on the table, but that staff is not ready to make a recommendation on a funding mechanism. Scott A explained that they will discuss the different governance pros and cons at the next meeting. Joni added that they can create a transit district that does not have a tax rate; however, Karen responded that she's been warned by transit peers to ask for the funding they need and not "shoot low".

Committee Discussion

a. Brief Overview of Funding Mechanisms

Scott Aycock directed the committee's attention to Figure 1 on "Attachment C: Governance Options" which lays out the primary tools for local funding. He explained that governance and operations do not have to be intertwined. A property tax associated with a transit district has its own separate elected board, for example, but that entity could in turn contract

out operations at the regional scale. It would require legislative change for the Council of Governments (COIC) to have a property tax that paid for transit operations. Currently, as an ORS 190 entity they can establish a tax through vote for transportation facilities (but not for transit operations). Payroll tax is also a fairly common funding mechanism but would require legislative change to be used in Central Oregon. Corvallis used a utility fee (passed by City Council) that charges a variable rate based on the anticipated load an entity is expected to put on the system (household is one rate, business rates are based on size). As part of the campaign to develop the utility fee, the decision was made to make the system free (no fare). They also briefly reviewed the “prepared food and beverage tax” sales tax in Ashland. Scott A explained that they would also look for innovative new tools for local funding.

Jim W. asked if a transit district without funding would open CET to funding that they currently don’t have access to. Karen explained that a district has the authority to tax, but that would require a public vote, and that it would receive STF funding directly that the County’s currently distribute. There is not a big pool of funds that COIC has not been able to access as they are already the designated recipient of transportation funds for the region.

b. Brief Overview of Governance Options

c. ID information/data/research needed for future meetings

Andrew discussed the schedule outlined in “Attachment B: CET Funding Committee Process and Timeline” and added that COIC will add a Council/Commission outreach schedule. Scott reviewed the action items from the meeting, and requested additional input from the group. Scott Cooper stressed the importance of having a senior representative at the table.

Andrew explained that the next few meetings would be information gathering on rates and funding tools other areas have used and discussion about the best opportunity for Central Oregon. Jason thanked everyone for coming and for their participation.

Adjourn

Meeting adjourned at 11:00 am.

After the meeting, Wendy Holzman suggested that COIC present the contribution by each City and County in the region as compared to their population.

Action Item: COIC to gather population and contribution numbers for each City and County for the next meeting.