Five-Year Transit System Plan for 2020-2025

Trailblazer Transit
Southwest Region

Prepared for:
Trailblazer Transit

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Acronyms

ACS	American Community Survey
ADA	Americans with Disabilities Act
ARRA	American Reinvestment and Recovery Act
FTA	Federal Transit Administration
FTE	Full-Time Equivalent
GMTIP	Greater Minnesota Transit Investment Plan
GTFS	General Transit Feed Specification
LEHD	Longitudinal Employer-Households Dataset
LEP	Limited English Proficiency
MnDOT	Minnesota Department of Transportation
MPO	Metropolitan Planning Organization
MPTA	Minnesota Public Transit Association
MVLST	Motor Vehicle Lease Sales Tax
MVST	Motor Vehicle Sales Tax
NTD	National Transit Database
RDO	Regional Development Organization
RTCC	Regional Transportation Coordinating Council
SMART-RIDE	Sibley McLeod Auxiliary Regional Transit
TCRP	Transit Cooperative Research Program
U.S.C.	United States Code
USDOT	United States Department of Transportation
WCAT	Wright County Area Transportation

Glossary

Access: The opportunity to reach a given destination within a certain timeframe or without significant physical, social, or economic barriers.

Accessible Vehicle: A public transportation vehicle that does not restrict access, is usable, and provides allocated space and/or priority seating for individuals who use mobility devices.

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA): The Americans with Disabilities Act, passed in July 1991, gave direction to local transit agencies to ensure full access to transportation for persons with disabilities.

Capital Cost: The cost of equipment and facilities required to support transportation systems, including vehicles, radios, shelters, software, etc.

Central Transfer Point: A central meeting place where routes or zonal demand-responsive buses intersect so that passengers may transfer. Routes are often timed to facilitate transferring and depart once passengers have had time to transfer. When all routes arrive and depart at the same time, the system is called a pulse system. The central transfer point simplifies transfers when there are many routes (particularly radial routes), several different modes, and/or paratransit zones. A downtown retail area is often an appropriate site for a central transfer point, as it is likely to be a popular destination, a place of traffic congestion and limited parking, and a place where riders are likely to feel safe waiting for the next bus. Strategic placement of the transfer point can attract riders to the system and may provide an opportunity for joint marketing promotions with local merchants.

Circulator: A bus that makes frequent trips around a small geographic area with numerous stops around the route. It is typically operated in a downtown area or area attracting tourists, where parking is limited, roads are congested, and trip generators are spread around the area. It may be operated all-day or only at times of peak demand, such as rush hour or lunchtime.

Commuter Bus Service: Transportation designed for daily, round-trip service, which accommodates a typical 8-hour, daytime work shift (e.g., an outbound trip arriving at an employment center by 8 a.m., with the return trip departing after 5 p.m.).

Coordination: Coordination means pooling the transportation resources and activities of several agencies. The owners of transportation assets talk to each other to find ways to mutually benefit their agencies and their customers. Coordination models can range in scope from sharing information, to sharing equipment and facilities, to integrated scheduling and dispatching of services, to the provision of services by only one transportation provider (with other former providers now purchasing services). Coordination may involve human service agencies working with each other or with public transit operations.

Dedicated Funding Source: A funding source that, by law, is available for use only to support a specific purpose and cannot be diverted to other uses (e.g., the federal gasoline tax can only be used for highway investments and, since 1983, for transit capital projects).

Demand-Responsive Service: Service to individuals that is activated based on passenger requests. Usually passengers call the scheduler or dispatcher and request rides for dates and times. A trip is scheduled for that passenger, which may be canceled by the passenger. Usually involves curb-to-curb or door-to-door service. Trips may be scheduled on an advanced reservation basis or in “real-time.” Usually smaller vehicles are used to provide demand responsive service. This type of service usually provides the highest level of service to the passenger but is the most expensive for the transit system to operate in terms of cost per trip. In rural areas with relatively high populations of elderly persons and persons with disabilities, demand-responsive service is sometimes the most appropriate type of service. Sub-options

within this service type are discussed in order of least structured to most structured, in terms of routing and scheduling.

- **Pure Demand-Responsive Service**: Drivers pick up and drop off passengers at any point in the service area, based on instructions from the dispatcher. In pure demand-responsive systems, the dispatcher combines immediate requests, reservations, and subscription service for the most efficient use of each driver's time.
- **Zonal Demand-Responsive Service**: The service area is divided into zones. Buses pick up and drop off passengers only within the assigned zone. When the drop off is in another zone, the dispatcher chooses a meeting point at the zone boundary for passenger transfer or a central transfer is used. This system ensures that a vehicle will always be within each zone when rides are requested.
- **Flexibly Routed and Scheduled Services**: Flexibly routed and scheduled services have some characteristics of both fixed route and demand-responsive services. In areas where demand for travel follows certain patterns routinely, but the demand for these patterns is not high enough to warrant a fixed route, service options such as checkpoint service, point deviation, route deviation, service routes, or subscription service might be the answer. These are all examples of flexible routing and schedules, and each may help the transit system make its demand-responsive services more efficient while still maintaining much of the flexibility of demand responsiveness.

Dial-A-Ride Service: A name that is commonly used for demand-responsive service. It is helpful in marketing the service to the community, as the meaning of "dial-a-ride" may be more self-explanatory than "demand-responsive" to someone unfamiliar with transportation terms.

Express Bus Service: Express bus service characteristics include direct service from a limited number of origins to a limited number of destinations with no intermediate stops. Typically, express bus service is fixed route/fixed schedule and is used for longer distance commuter trips. The term may also refer to a bus that makes a limited number of stops while a local bus makes many stops along the same route but as a result takes much longer.

Farebox Recovery Ratio: The percentage of operating costs covered by revenue from fares and contract revenue (total fare revenue and total contract revenue divided by the total operating cost).

Fares: Revenue from cash, tickets, and pass receipts given by passengers as payment for public transit rides.

Federal Transit Administration (FTA): An operating administration within the United States Department of Transportation that administers federal programs and provides financial assistance to public transit.

Feeder Service: Local transportation service that provides passengers with connections to a longer-distance transportation service. Like connector service, feeder service is service in which a transfer to or from another transit system, such as an intercity bus route, is the focal point or primary destination.

Fixed Route: Transportation service operated over a set route or network of routes on a regular time schedule.

Goal: A community's statement of values for what it wants to achieve.

Headway: The length of time between vehicles moving in the same direction on a route. Headways are called short if the time between vehicles is short and long if the time between them is long. When headways are short, the service is said to be operating at a high frequency; if headways are long, service is operating at a low frequency.

Intercity Bus Service: Regularly scheduled bus service for the public that operates with limited stops over fixed routes connecting two or more urban areas not near, that has the capacity for transporting baggage carried by passengers, and that makes meaningful connections with scheduled intercity bus service to more distant points, if such service is available. Intercity bus service may include local and regional feeder services, if those services are designed expressly to connect to the broader intercity bus network.

MAP-21: Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act, signed into law in July 2012. MAP-21 established surface transportation funding programs for federal fiscal years 2013 and 2014.

Measure: A basis for comparison, or a reference point against which other factors can be evaluated.

Motor Vehicle Sales Tax: A source of revenue for Minnesota public transit. The percentages of this revenue source designated for metropolitan area and Greater Minnesota transit are defined in Minn. Stat. 297B.09.

Operating Expenditures: The recurring costs of providing transit service (e.g., wages, salaries, fuel, oil, taxes, maintenance, insurance, marketing, etc.).

Operating Revenue: The total revenue earned by a transit agency through its transit operations. It includes passenger fares, advertising, and other revenues.

Paratransit Service: "Paratransit" means the transportation of passengers by motor vehicle or other means of conveyance by persons operating on a regular and continuing basis and the transportation or delivery of packages in conjunction with an operation having the transportation of passengers as its primary and predominant purpose and activity but excluding regular route transit. "Paratransit" includes transportation by car pool and commuter van, point deviation and route deviation services, shared-ride taxi service, dial-a-ride service, and other similar services.

Passenger Trip (Unlinked): Typically, one passenger trip is recorded any time a passenger boards a transportation vehicle or other conveyance used to provide transportation. “Unlinked” means that one trip is recorded each time a passenger boards a vehicle, no matter how many vehicles that passenger uses to travel from their origin to their destination.

Performance Indicator: An indicator is a metric that provides meaningful information about the condition or performance of the transportation system but is neither managed to nor used to evaluate the effectiveness of policies, strategies, or investments.

Performance Measure: A performance measure is a metric that measures progress toward a goal, outcome, or objective. This definition covers metrics used to make decisions or evaluate the effectiveness or adequacy of a policy, strategy, or investment.

Performance Target: A target is a specific performance level representing the achievement of a goal, outcome, or objective.

Point Deviation Service: A type of flexible route transit service in which fixed scheduled stops (points) are established but the vehicle may follow any route needed to pick up individuals along the way if the vehicle can make it to the fixed points on schedule. This type of service usually provides access to a broader geographic area than does fixed route service but is not as flexible in scheduling options as demand-responsive service. It is appropriate when riders change from day to day but the same few destinations are consistently in demand. Also sometimes called checkpoint service.

Public Transportation: Transportation service that is available to any person upon payment of the fare either directly, subsidized by public policy, or through some contractual arrangement, and that cannot be reserved for the private or exclusive use of one individual or group. “Public”

in this sense refers to the access to the service, not to the ownership of the system that provides the service.

Revenue Hours: The number of transit vehicle hours when passengers are being transported. Calculated by taking the total time when a vehicle is available to the public with the expectation of carrying passengers. Excludes deadhead hours, when buses are positioning but not carrying passengers, but includes recovery/layover time.

Ridership: The total of all unlinked passenger trips including transfers.

Ridesharing: A form of transportation, other than public transit, in which more than one person shares the use of a vehicle, such as a van or car, to make a trip. Variations include carpooling or vanpooling.

Route Deviation Service: Transit buses travel along a predetermined alignment or path with scheduled time points at each terminal point and in some instances at key intermediate locations. Route deviation service is different than conventional fixed route bus service in that the vehicle may leave the route upon requests of passengers to be picked up or returned to destinations near the route. Following an off-route deviation, the vehicle typically returns to the point at which it left the route. Passengers may call in advance for route deviation or may access the system at predetermined route stops. The limited geographic area within which the vehicle may travel off the route is known as the route deviation corridor.

Section 5304 (State Transportation and Planning Program): The section of the Federal Transit Act of 1991, as amended, that provides financial assistance to the states for purposes of planning, technical studies and assistance, demonstrations, management training, and cooperative research activities.

Section 5307 (Urbanized Area Formula Program): The section of the Federal Transit Act of 1991, as amended, that authorizes grants to public transit systems in urban areas with populations of more than 50,000 for both capital and operating projects. Based on population and density figures, these funds are distributed directly to the transit agency from the FTA.

Section 5310 (Enhanced Mobility for Seniors and Persons with Disability): The section of the Federal Transit Act of 1991, as amended, that provides grant funds for the purchase of accessible vehicles and related support equipment for private non-profit organizations to serve elderly and/or disabled people, public bodies that coordinate services for elderly and disabled, or any public body that certifies to the state that non-profits in the area are not readily available to carry out the services.

Section 5311 (Non-urbanized Area Formula Program): The section of the Federal Transit Act of 1991, as amended, that authorizes grants to public transit systems in non-urbanized areas (fewer than 50,000 population). The funds initially go to the governor of each state. In Minnesota, MnDOT administers these funds.

Service Area: The geographic area that coincides with a transit system's legal operating limits (e.g., city limits, county boundary, etc.).

Service Gaps: Service gaps can occur when certain geographic segments cannot be covered by transportation services. This term can also refer to instances where service delivery is not available to a certain group of riders, or at a specific time.

Service Span: The duration of time that service is made available or operated during the service day (e.g., 6 a.m. to 10 p.m.).

Standard: A recommendation that leads or directs a course of action to achieve a certain goal. A standard is the expected outcome for the measure that will allow a service to be evaluated. There are two sets of transit standards.

- **Service design and operating standards**: Guidelines for the design of new and improved services and the operation of the transit system.
- **Service performance standards**: The evaluation of the performance of the existing transit system and of alternative service improvements using performance measures.

Total Operating Cost: The total of all operating costs incurred during the transit system calendar year, excluding expenses associated with capital grants.

Transfer: Passengers arrive on one bus and leave on another (totally separate) bus to continue their trip. The boarding of the second vehicle is counted as an unlinked passenger trip.

Transit Dependent: A description for a population or person who does not have immediate access to a private vehicle, or because of age or health reasons cannot drive and must rely on others for transportation.

Transit Subsidy: The operating costs not covered by revenue from fares or contracts.

Transit: Transportation by bus, rail, or other conveyance, either publicly or privately owned, that provides general or special service on a regular and continuing basis. The term includes fixed route and paratransit services as well as ridesharing. Also known as mass transportation, mass transit, or public transit.

Trip Denial: A trip denial occurs when a trip is requested by a passenger, but the transportation provider cannot provide the service. Trip denial may happen because capacity is not available at the requested time. For ADA paratransit, a capacity denial is specifically defined as occurring if a trip cannot be accommodated within the negotiated pick-up window. Even if a trip is provided, if it is scheduled outside the +60/-60-minute window, it is considered a denial. If the passenger refused to accept a trip offered within the +60/-60-minute pick-up window, it is considered a refusal, not a capacity denial.

Volunteers: Volunteers are persons who offer services to others but do not accept monetary or material compensation for the services that they provide. In some volunteer programs, the volunteers are reimbursed for their out-of-pocket expenses; for example, volunteers who drive their own cars may receive reimbursement based on miles driven for the expenses that they are assumed to have incurred, such as gasoline, repair, and insurance expenses.

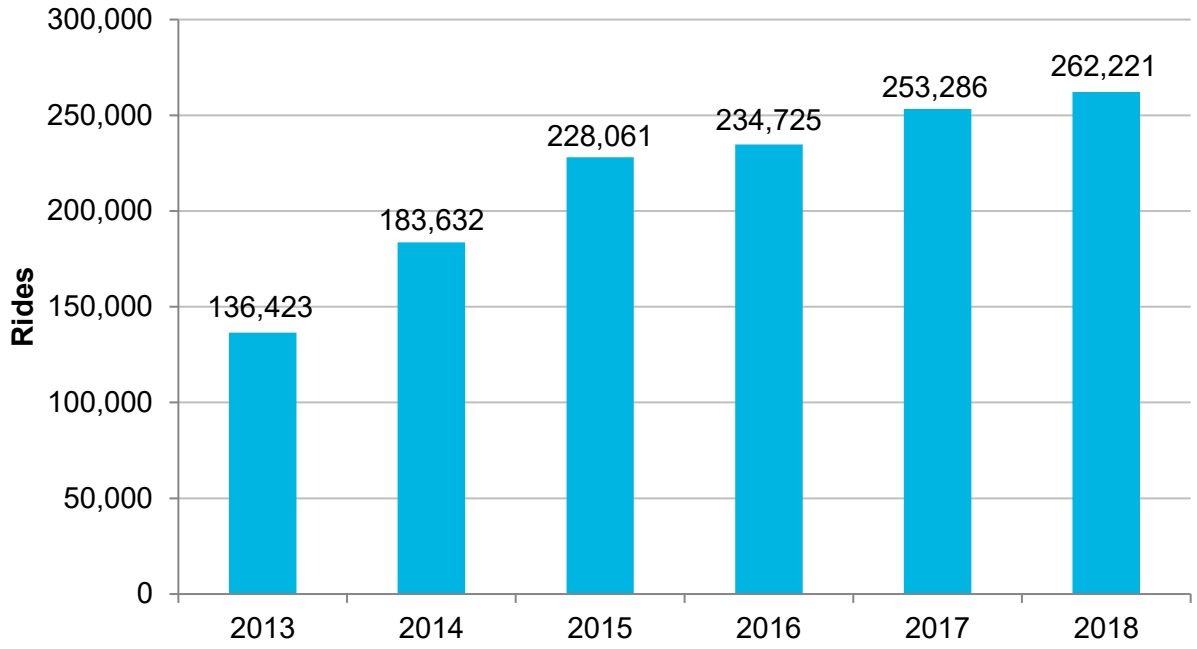
1. Executive Summary

Trailblazer Transit provides demand response service throughout Sibley, McLeod, and Wright Counties. Trailblazer Transit is operated by Trailblazer Joint Powers Board. As the governing body of Trailblazer Transit, the Trailblazer Board consists of six members that represent Sibley, McLeod, and Wright Counties.

Trailblazer Transit has grown considerably in recent years. This increase in passenger trips is likely due to the addition of Wright County into the service area in 2014.

The span of service for the entire Trailblazer Transit service area is 6:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. on weekdays; there is no weekend service. Systemwide ridership has grown by almost 120,000 rides since 2013, as shown on Figure 1.

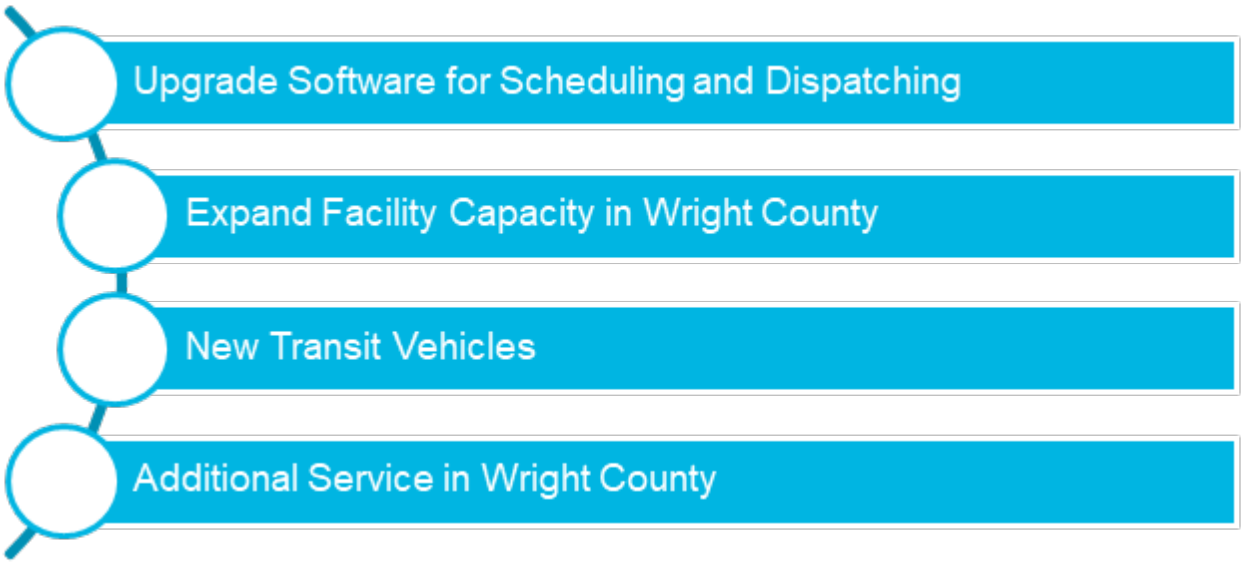
Figure 1. System-Wide Ridership (2013-2018)



Source: Trailblazer Transit 9/18/19 Correspondence

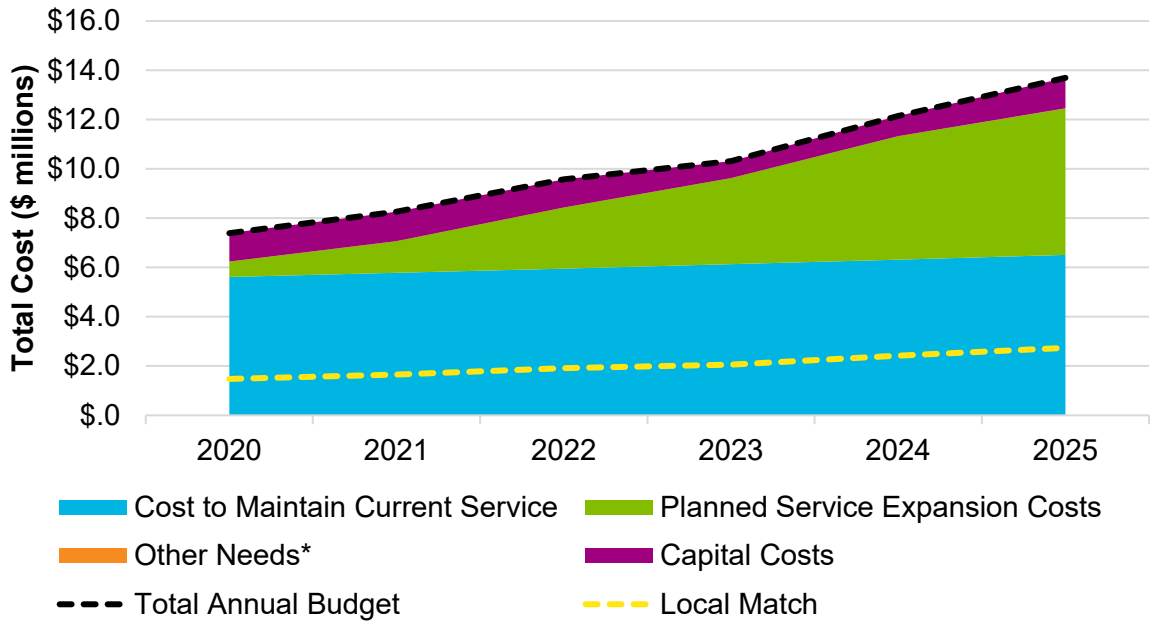
The project team for the five-year transit system plan met with staff from the agency, stakeholders, and Wright County Transit Advisory Committee members three times in the fall and winter of 2018-2019 to discuss the agency's operating structure and environment, challenges, and opportunities for improvement. As a result of the meetings and an online community survey, agency needs were identified and prioritized for the five-year period, without fiscal constraints. This "unconstrained" needs list was developed to identify investments of all kinds that could enhance the agency's operational efficiency. The survey results, study team, and Trailblazer Transit staff then prioritized needs to inform which strategic investments could be made to better meet the needs of the community. Figure 2 illustrates the needs designated as a high priority for Trailblazer Transit.

Figure 2. High-Priority Unconstrained Needs for Trailblazer Transit



The project team developed capital and operating plans to lay out the costs of investing in improvements like service expansion, facilities, and improved dispatch technology between 2020 and 2025 to address identified community needs. Figure 3 summarizes the costs of investing in these improvements, and the detailed plans are included as Appendix A.

Figure 3. 2020-2025 Plan, Local Revenue Requirements



A more detailed stakeholder summary can be found in Appendix B.

2. Why a Five-Year System Plan?

Transit systems in Greater Minnesota have been working in a rapidly changing environment with system mergers and increased demand for service along with new policies and funding situations. Despite significant growth in the amount of service available outside of the Twin Cities Metropolitan Area, transit in Greater Minnesota is not always recognized or understood by local officials and residents. To address the growing need for transit service in a way that is integrated and embraced by the community, a vision for the future of each transit system is critical. Without a plan, systems are put in the position of having to react in the moment to new circumstances and operate on a year to year basis without a longer-term vision to guide annual budgets and decision making.

Transit providers and MnDOT agree that individual five-year plans will help identify system-specific priorities based on themes from the Greater Minnesota Transit Investment Plan (GMTIP). Five-year plans will help systems better deliver service and work toward overall goals such as:

- Improving coordination of services to meet transportation needs;
- Increasing ridership/usage across the network;
- Ensuring fiscal responsibility as a transit funding agency;
- Anticipating and planning for future funding levels to achieve service expansion;
- Articulating and communicating 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.

The process for developing the five-year plans is guided by a consultant Project Manager, the Office of Transit and Active Transportation at MnDOT, and the Minnesota Public Transit Association (MPTA). A Project Advisory Committee consisting of Transit Directors, staff from MPOs (Metropolitan Planning Organizations) and RDOs (Regional Development Organizations), local government officials, service organization representatives, and staff from MPTA and MnDOT is providing input and identifying key issues to be addressed by the plans.

Larger transit systems routinely develop and update five-year plans as do local governments when it comes to planning for future development. The Greater Minnesota Transit System five-year plans will allow all transit service to be incorporated into the larger transportation vision for communities as they plan for new economic development and a future with an aging population.

Policies established through the Olmstead Plan and Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) require communities to accommodate the needs of people with disabilities. A statutory goal of meeting 90% of the need for transit service by 2025 in Greater Minnesota is also focusing more attention on exactly how to expand service around the state.

With a well-defined five-year plan, goals and ideas for improving transit service can be put into action with a clear blueprint for which routes to add or expand, specific hours of service to adjust, and how the funding can be identified to cover additional operating and capital expenses. The plans will also facilitate communication with the public and help raise awareness of how and where transit service is provided in the state, which will help encourage greater ridership.

The five-year plans are designed to be updated annually to meet changing needs and circumstances.

Transit service improves the livability and prosperity of communities across Greater Minnesota. The Five-Year Transit System Plan will bring all stakeholders together to develop a future vision that will guide the decisions that are made today.

3. Agency Overview

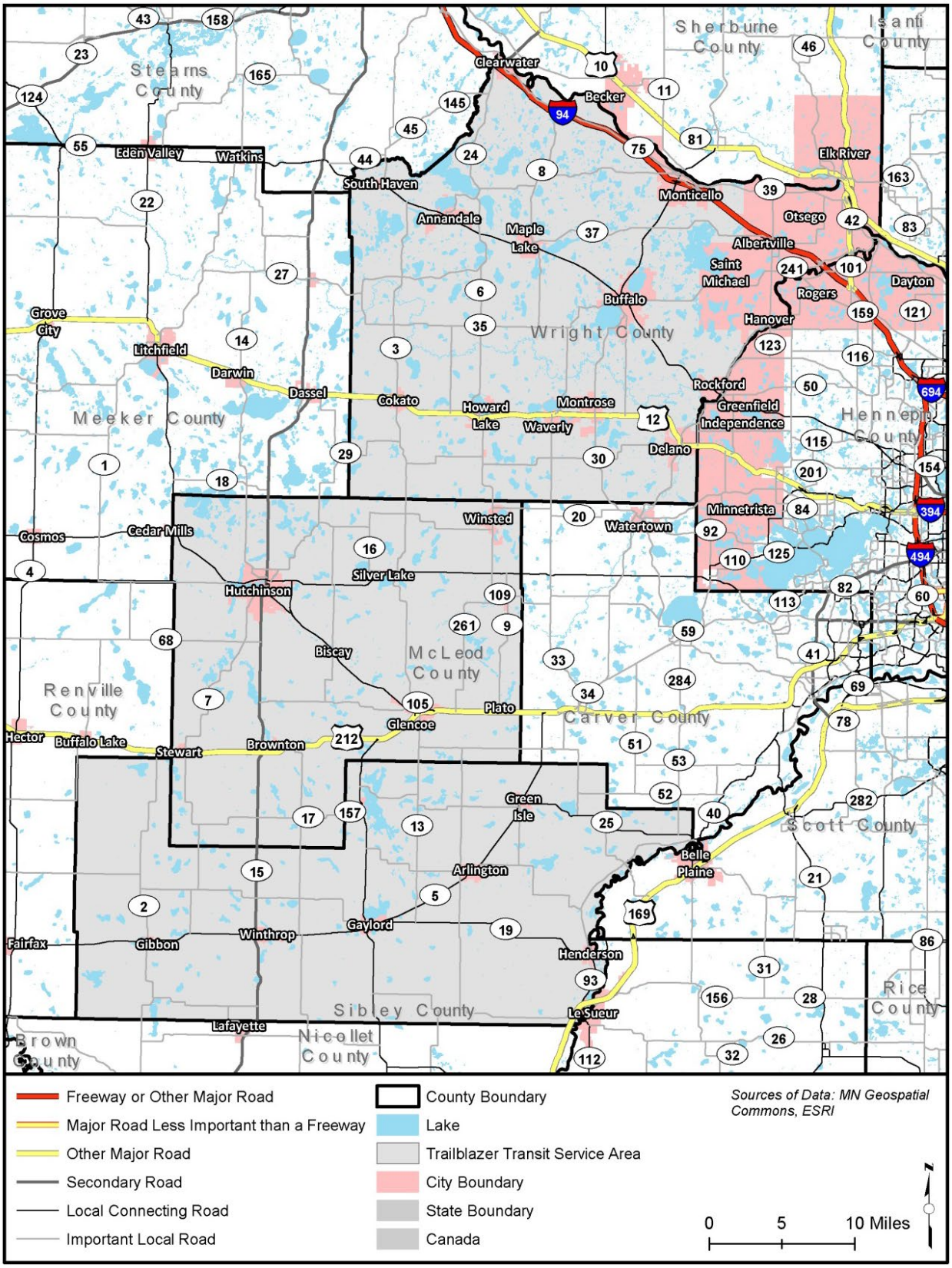
Trailblazer Transit operates demand response service throughout Sibley, McLeod, and Wright Counties. As shown on Figure 4, Sibley, McLeod, and Wright Counties are in the south-central area of Minnesota with the Mississippi River constituting the northern border of Wright County, and the Minnesota River constituting the eastern border of Sibley County. The counties are located on the western border of the seven-county metropolitan area, approximately 60 miles west of the Twin Cities.

3.1 Transit Agency Background

Trailblazer Transit was established in 1999 to serve Sibley and McLeod Counties, resulting from a merger of four existing transportation systems. These systems included (1) Trailblazer Community Transit in Sibley County, (2) the adult day care transportation program from Glencoe Regional Health Services, (3) City of Hutchinson Heartland Express (also known as Hutchmobile), and (4) the volunteer driver program from McLeod Social Service Center. Wright County Area Transportation (WCAT) Joint Powers Board formally joined Trailblazer Joint Powers Board to operate Trailblazer Transit in 2015, at the suggestion of MnDOT to avoid a service gap resulting from the dissolution of RiverRider, a public transit system that served Wright and Sherburne Counties. As of January 1, 2019, Wright County replaced WCAT as the partner representing Wright County on the Trailblazer Governing Board.

Source: Trailblazer Transit

Figure 4. Location Map



3.2 Governance

Trailblazer Transit is operated by Trailblazer Joint Powers Board. As the governing body of Trailblazer Transit, the Trailblazer Board consists of six members that represent Sibley County, McLeod County, and Wright County. Trailblazer Joint Powers Board is an independent government entity that receives federal, state, and local funding.

3.3 Mission

Trailblazer Transit's mission statement is to provide as many rides as safely and efficiently as possible. The provider's core values support this mission: safety, teamwork, attitude, and responsibility.

3.4 Decision-Making Process

The Trailblazer Board is responsible for the governance of the organization and makes final decisions about global service area and service levels. The Executive Director is responsible for the overall operation of the organization and has several administrative and supervisory positions to support that objective. The Director of Operations supervises a Dispatch Manager and two Driver Managers who provide the direct front line supervision for the organization. There are also human resource and administrative positions. The organization chart is shown in Figure 5.

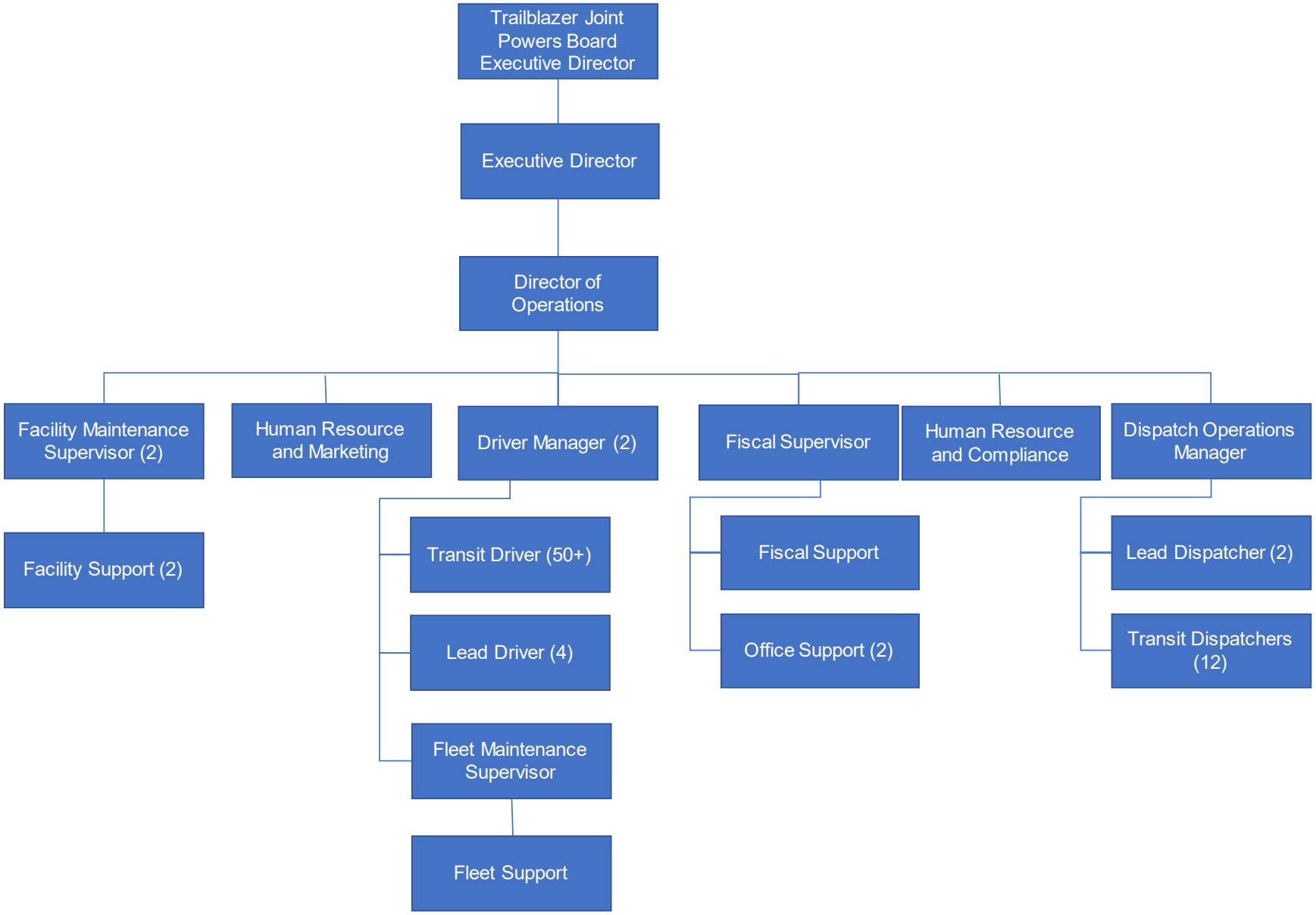
3.5 Service Area Overview

Trailblazer Transit serves all of Sibley, McLeod, and Wright Counties, and up to 1 mile beyond the Sibley and McLeod County borders, plus some neighboring communities. As shown on Figure 4, the service area contains over 40 communities, including Albertville, Annandale, Arlington, Belle Plaine, Big Lake, Biscay, Brownton, Buffalo, Cedar Mills, Clearwater, Cokato, Dassel, Delano, Elk River, Gaylord, Gibbon, Glencoe, Green Isle, Hamburg, Hanover, Howard Lake, Hutchinson, Lafayette, Le Sueur, Lester Prairie, Maple Lake, Mayer, Monticello, Montrose, New Auburn, Norwood Young America, Otsego, Plato, Rogers, Rockford, Silver Lake, South Haven, St. Michael, Stewart, Watertown, Waverly, Winsted, and Winthrop. A more detailed map of the service area is provided in Appendix C.

This section describes existing and projected socioeconomic characteristics of the area served by Trailblazer Transit. Understanding the demographics can help explain changes in transit demand and support recommendations for changes in future transit service. Specifically, people living below the poverty level, households without vehicles, seniors, and disabled individuals typically rely on transit; changes in these demographics can provide insight into transit demand trends. The U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) and Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD) program are the primary sources of demographic data used in this analysis and provide valuable indications of trends and projections.

As per the ACS 2016 estimates, and as shown in Table 1, the population of the Trailblazer Transit service area is 180,805. Out of the three counties in the service area, Wright County has the largest population with 129,922, followed by McLeod County with 35,926, and Sibley County with 14,957. Compared to Minnesota as a whole, the service area has a higher median household income and a lower percentage of people living under the poverty level. It is likely that this is largely driven by Wright County, which has a median household income about $12,500 higher than the statewide average, and half of the statewide average percentage of people living under the poverty level.

Figure 5. Organizational Chart



Source: Trailblazer Transit

Table 1. Current Demographic and Socioeconomic Profile

County/ Community	Population	Jobs	Median Household Income	% People Living Below the Poverty Level	Households without Vehicles	% Seniors	% Disabled
Service Area	180,805	56,343	$68,306	6.4%	3.8%	13.0%	9.0%
McLeod County	35,926	15,313	$57,738	8.1%	3.8%	17.6%	11.3%
Sibley County	14,957	3,983	$59,596	9.8%	4.0%	17.5%	10.8%
Wright County	129,922	37,047	$75,705	5.6%	3.8%	11.2%	8.2%
Minnesota	5,450,868	2,557,046	$63,217	10.8%	7.0%	14.3%	10.6%

Source: US Census Bureau ACS 2016, LEHD 2015 Jobs

Historically, the total population of the service area has significantly increased over time. In 1960, the population of Sibley, McLeod, and Wright Counties was 70,564, increasing to its current estimated level (i.e., a 156% increase over half of a century).[1] The population forecasts for the service area indicate continued population growth. According to the Minnesota State Demographic Center, the total service area population is expected to grow to 206,666 by 2050 (i.e., a 14% increase over 34 years).[2]

Except for Wright County, the proportion of seniors in the service area overall is higher than the proportion of seniors statewide, which will only grow as the Baby Boomer generation ages. According to the Minnesota State Demographic Center, the senior population of the service area will increase by 111% by 2050, meaning around 25% of the service area population will be over 65 years old.[3] The increase in seniors may result in an increase in demand for transit, senior housing, and healthcare needs across the service area.

As can be seen on Figure 6, the population of the service area is concentrated in and around several municipalities, namely St. Michael, Buffalo, Otsego, Hutchinson, and Monticello, as well as along the corridors defined by Interstate 94, U.S. Route 12, and State Highway 55.

Figure 7 illustrates that poverty is concentrated in areas in and around Winthrop, Buffalo, and Hutchinson, with additional (but less intense) concentrations in northwestern Sibley County.

Figure 8 illustrates that households with no vehicles available are concentrated in and around Hutchinson and Buffalo, with some relatively high concentrations in southern McLeod County and in Wright County along State Highway 55.

Figure 9 illustrates the economic health of the various portions of the service area, an index that is based on the average number of employers, the trend in number of employers, the adult labor participation rate, and the population change from 2010 to 2016. The only portions of the service area indicating a “Very Low” economic health are located in central Sibley County and north-central McLeod County.

Figure 10 shows the transit vulnerability of the residents of the service area, an index that is based on the percentage of the population with a disability, a certain level of median household income, percentage of workers without access to a vehicle, and percentage of limited English speaking households. The only portions of the service area indicating a “Very High” transit vulnerability index are located in and around Glencoe, and the central region and northwestern corner of Sibley County.

Figure 11 illustrates that most jobs in the service area are concentrated in areas in and around the municipalities of Hutchinson, Buffalo, Monticello, and the area between St. Michael and Albertville.

[1] U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census and Population Estimates, retrieved from Minnesota Compass demographic tool.
[2] Minnesota State Demographic Center: March 2017 Total Population Projections by County.
[3] Minnesota State Demographic Center: March 2017 Age and Sex Projections by County.

Figure 6. Population Density

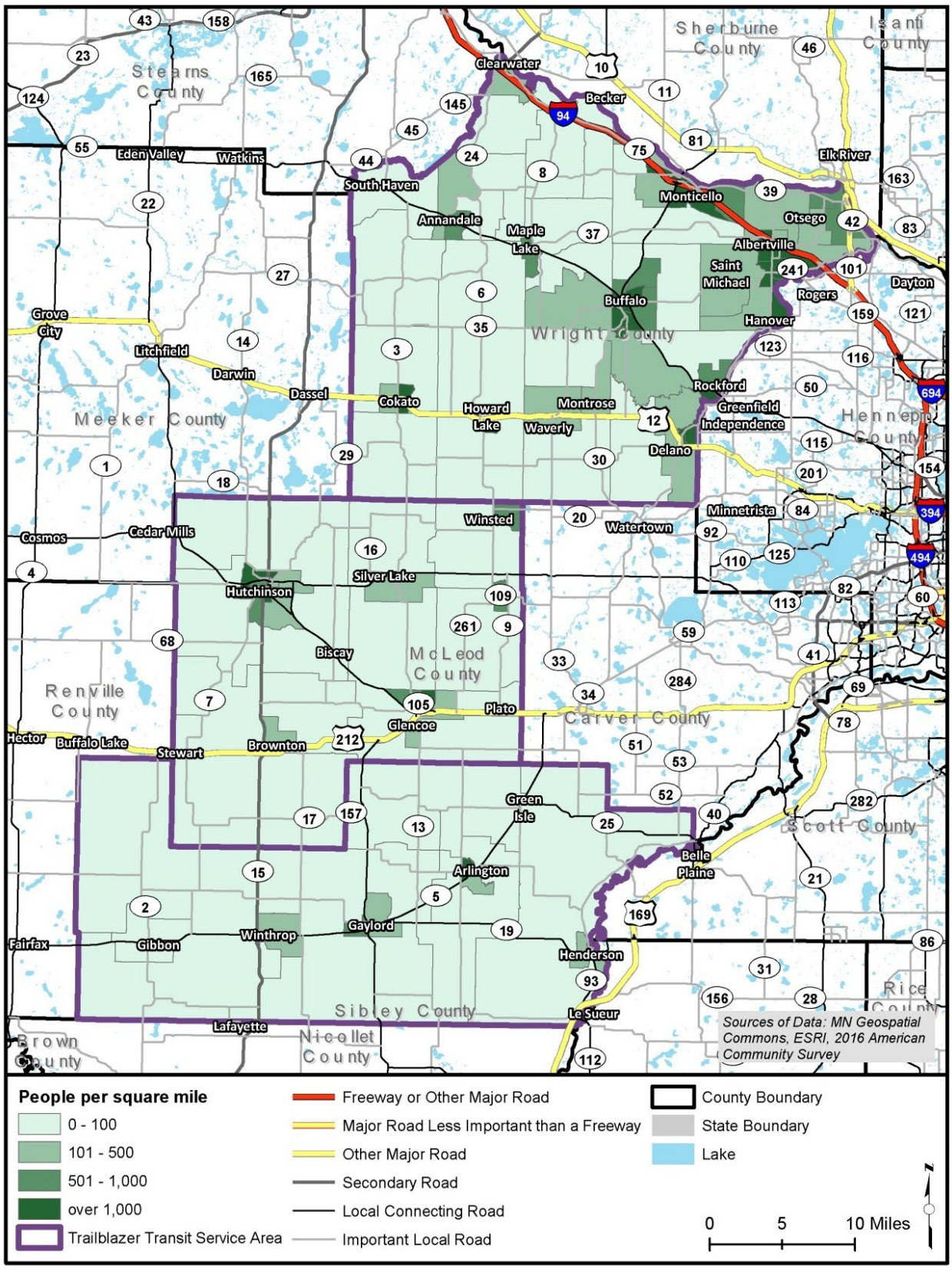


Figure 7. Persons Living Below the Poverty Level

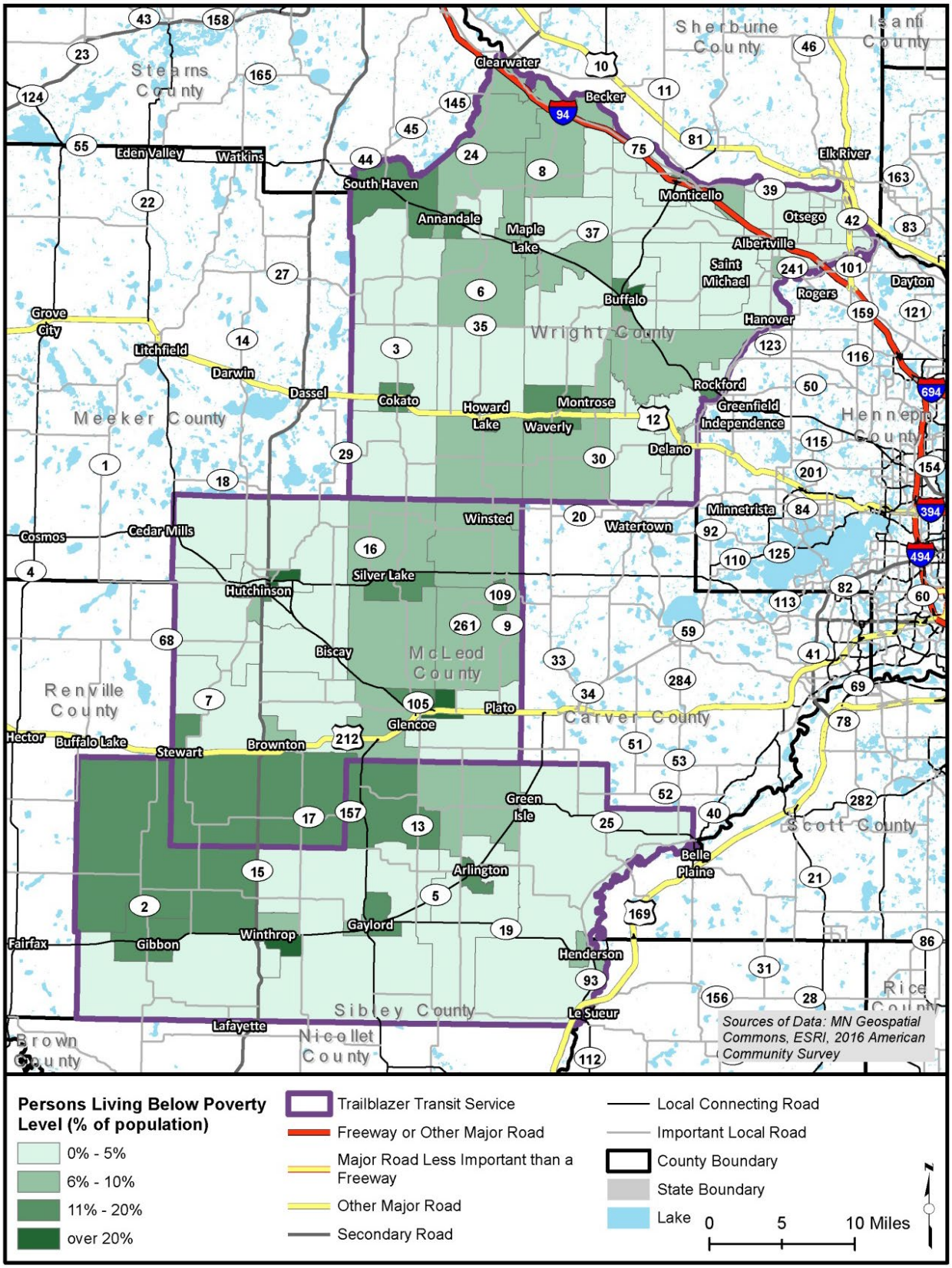


Figure 8. Zero-Vehicle Households

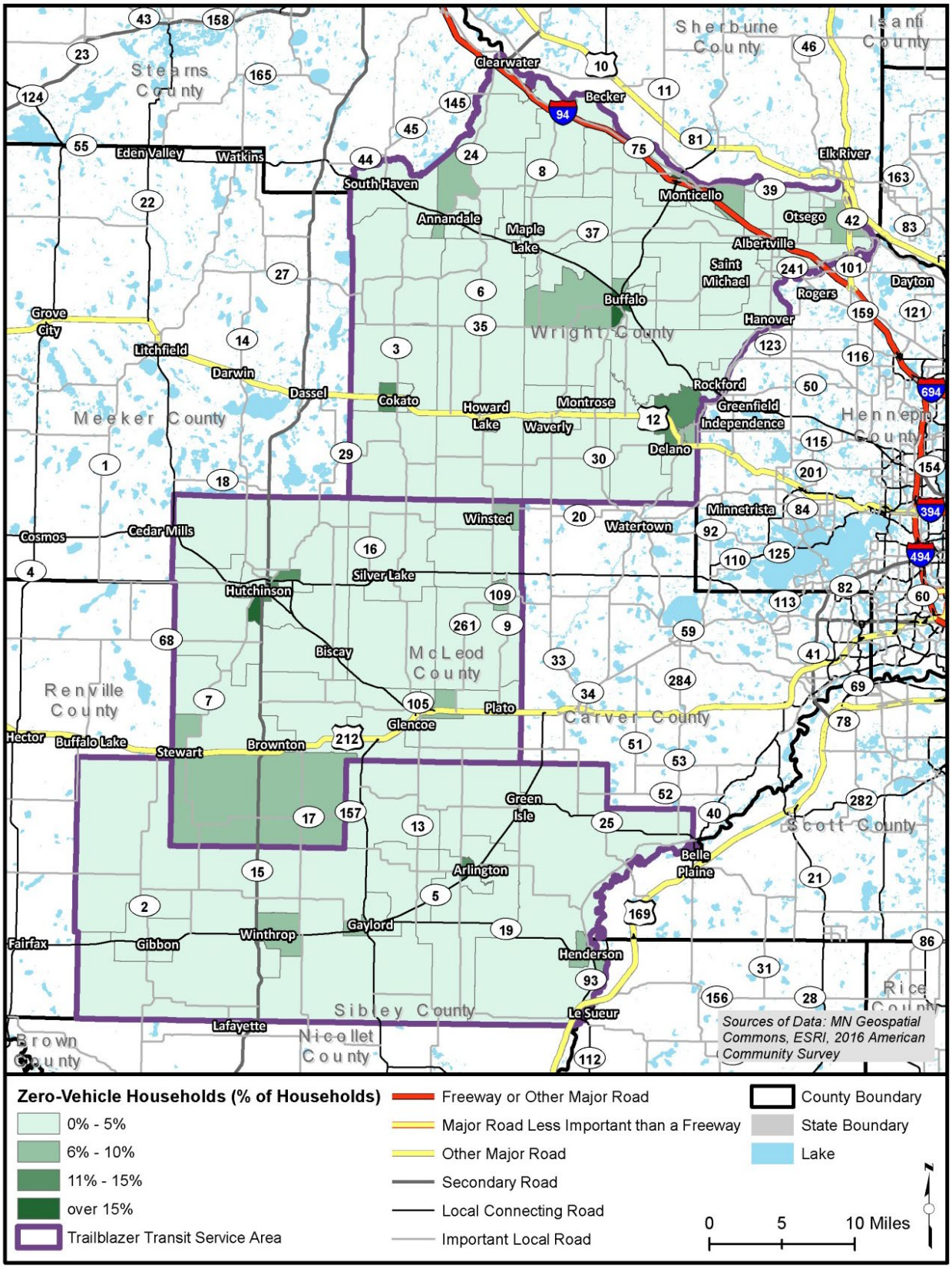


Figure 9. Economic Health Index

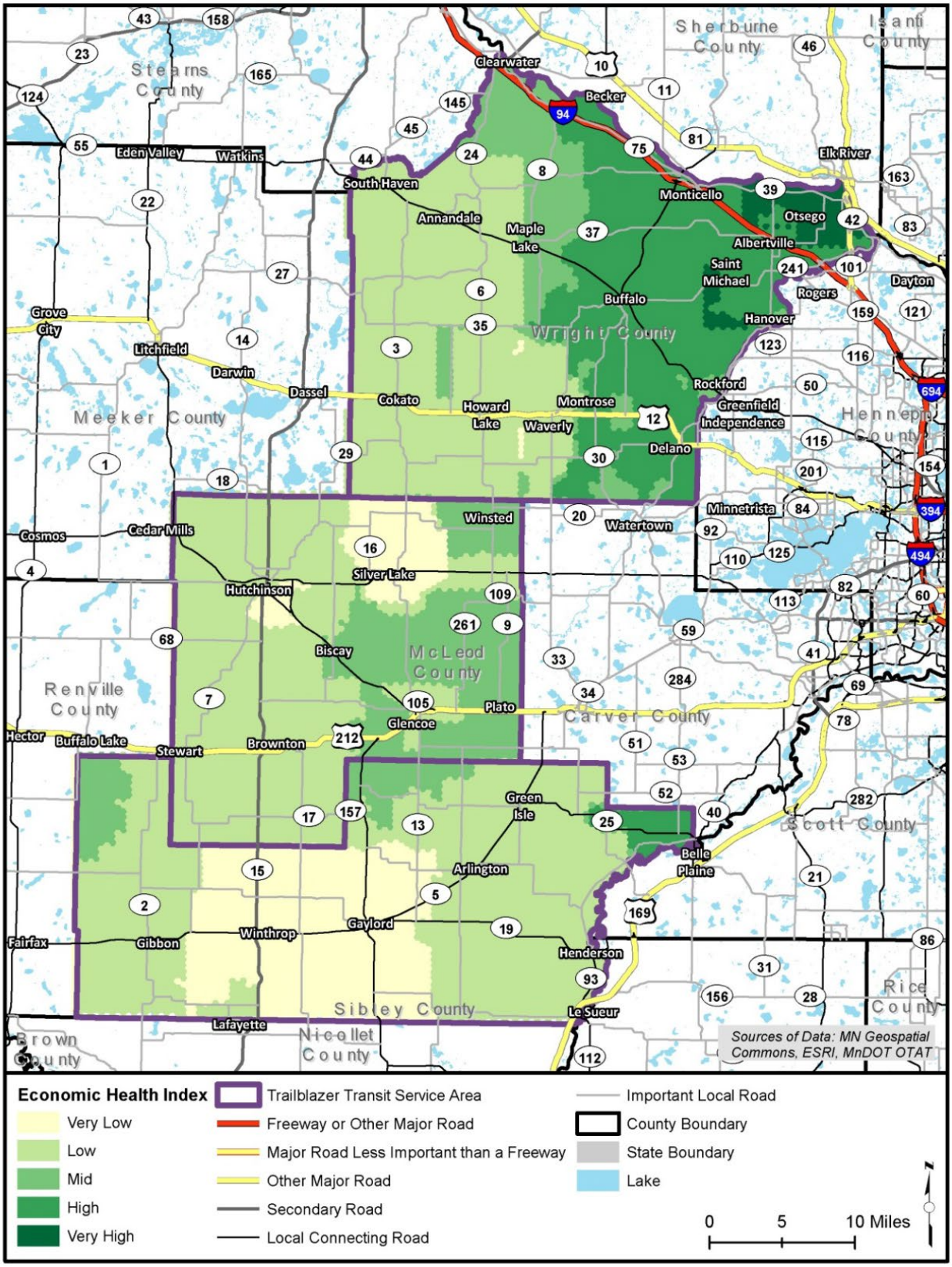


Figure 10. Transit Vulnerability Index

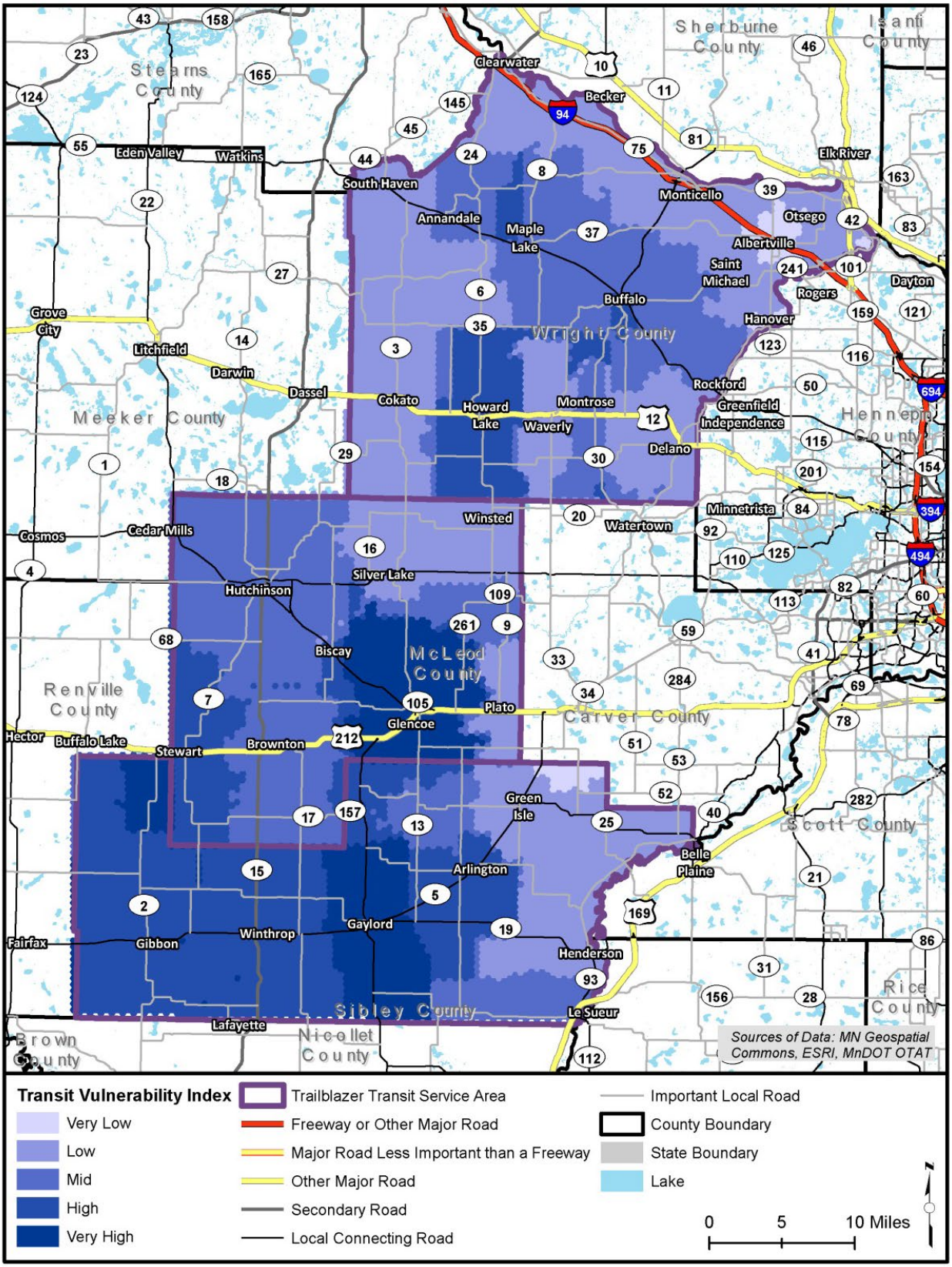


Figure 11. Job Density

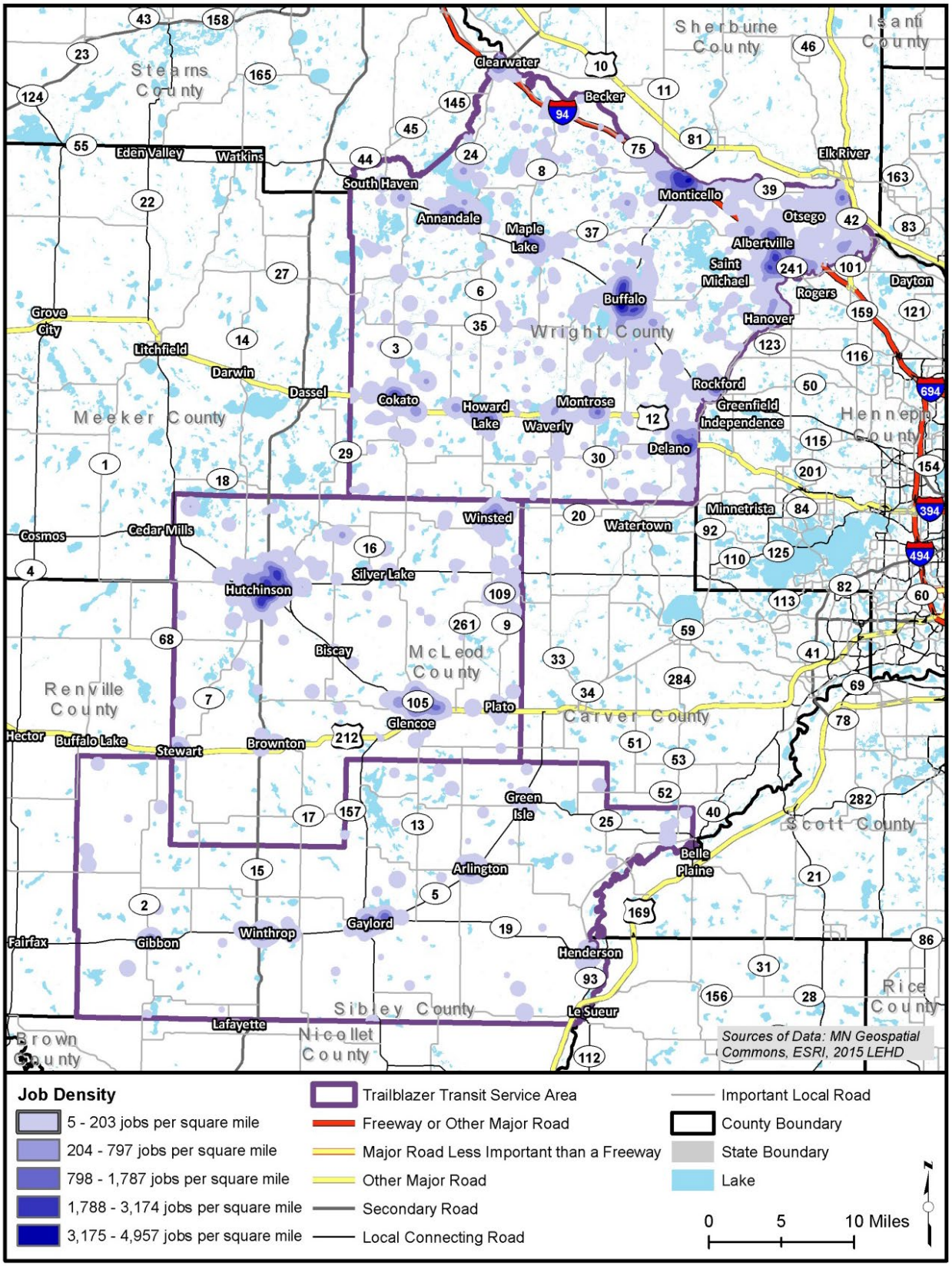


Figure 12 illustrates where residents of the service area travel for work, with the most significant patterns apparent from the service area to Hennepin County, followed by Wright and McLeod Counties. On a regional scale, travel patterns from the service area trend eastward toward Hennepin, Carver, and Ramsey Counties and northward toward Stearns County. Table 2 displays the work destinations by county for residents in each of the three counties in the service area.

Table 2. Trailblazer Transit Service Area Travel Patterns by County

From →To ↓	McLeod	Sibley	Wright
McLeod	8,639	659	523
Sibley	304	2,143	18
Wright	702	78	19,587
Hennepin	1,888	724	25,961
Carver	1,648	798	1,146
Ramsey	469	187	2,901
Renville	291	119	13
Scott	233	509	555
Stearns	280	75	2,521

Source: 2015 LEHD

Figure 13 shows the major trip generators spread throughout the service area, which include the Adult Training and Habilitation Center in Winsted, Sibley County Public Health and Human Services in Gaylord, McLeod Social Services Center in Glencoe, Functional Industries in Buffalo, and various nursing homes and schools throughout the service area. Generally, trip generators are concentrated in the larger cities, but there are trip generators spread throughout the entire service area.

3.6 Regional Connections and Other Transit Service Providers

On a regional scale, Trailblazer Transit coordinates with other regional transit providers and transportation services to provide connections to locations outside of the three-county service area. Trailblazer Transit coordinates with Brown County Heartland Express for service to and from New Ulm and the New Ulm Medical Center. Additionally, Tri-Cap Transit Connection serves the Trailblazer Transit service area, and Central Community Transit serves some Hutchinson area riders. Some coordination also occurs between Trailblazer Transit and Minnesota River Valley Transit for Le Sueur area riders.

The volunteer driver service for both Trailblazer Transit and for the SMART-RIDE program were discontinued in 2019 due to regional and national trends indicative of declines in the number of volunteers and issues associated with taxes and reporting income.

Figure 12. Primary Work Destinations for Employees Residing in the Trailblazer Transit Service Area

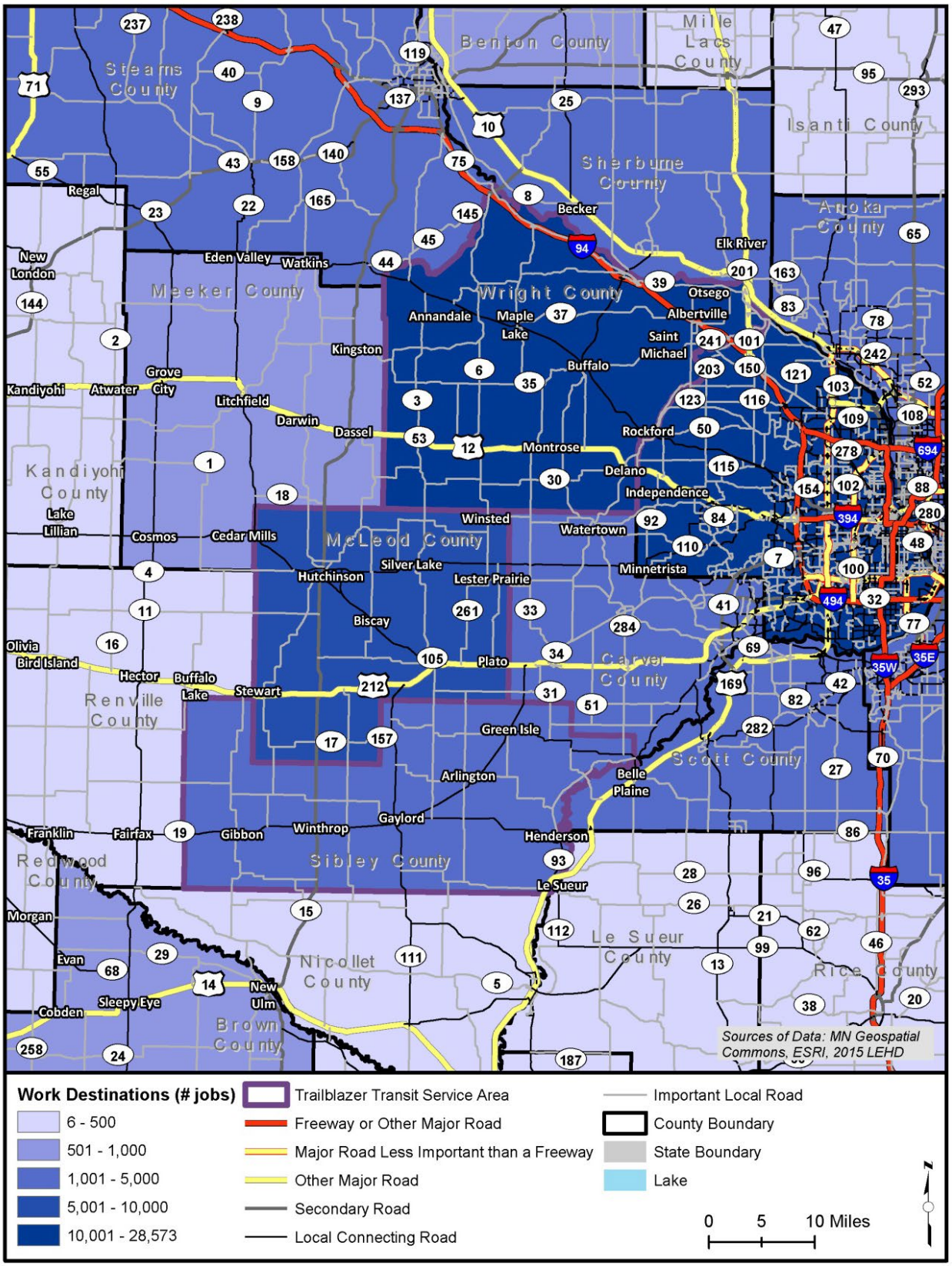
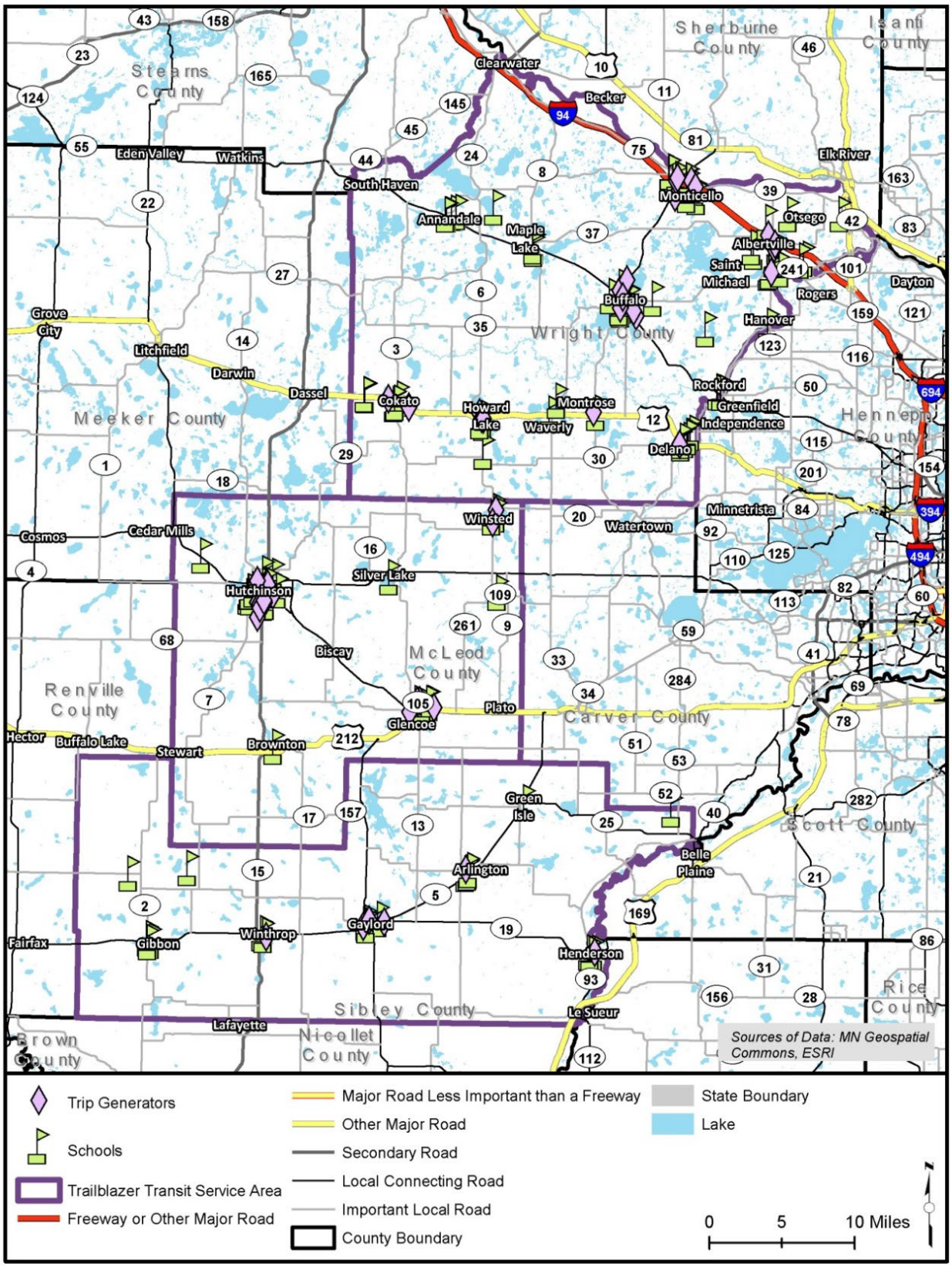


Figure 13. Major Trip Generators



4. Agency Transit Services

Trailblazer Transit operates demand response service throughout Sibley, McLeod, and Wright Counties (Figure 14).

The Trailblazer Joint Powers Board supplements Trailblazer Transit demand response service with a program called Sibley McLeod Auxiliary Regional Transit (SMART-RIDE), which is exclusively funded by user fees and local tax dollars.

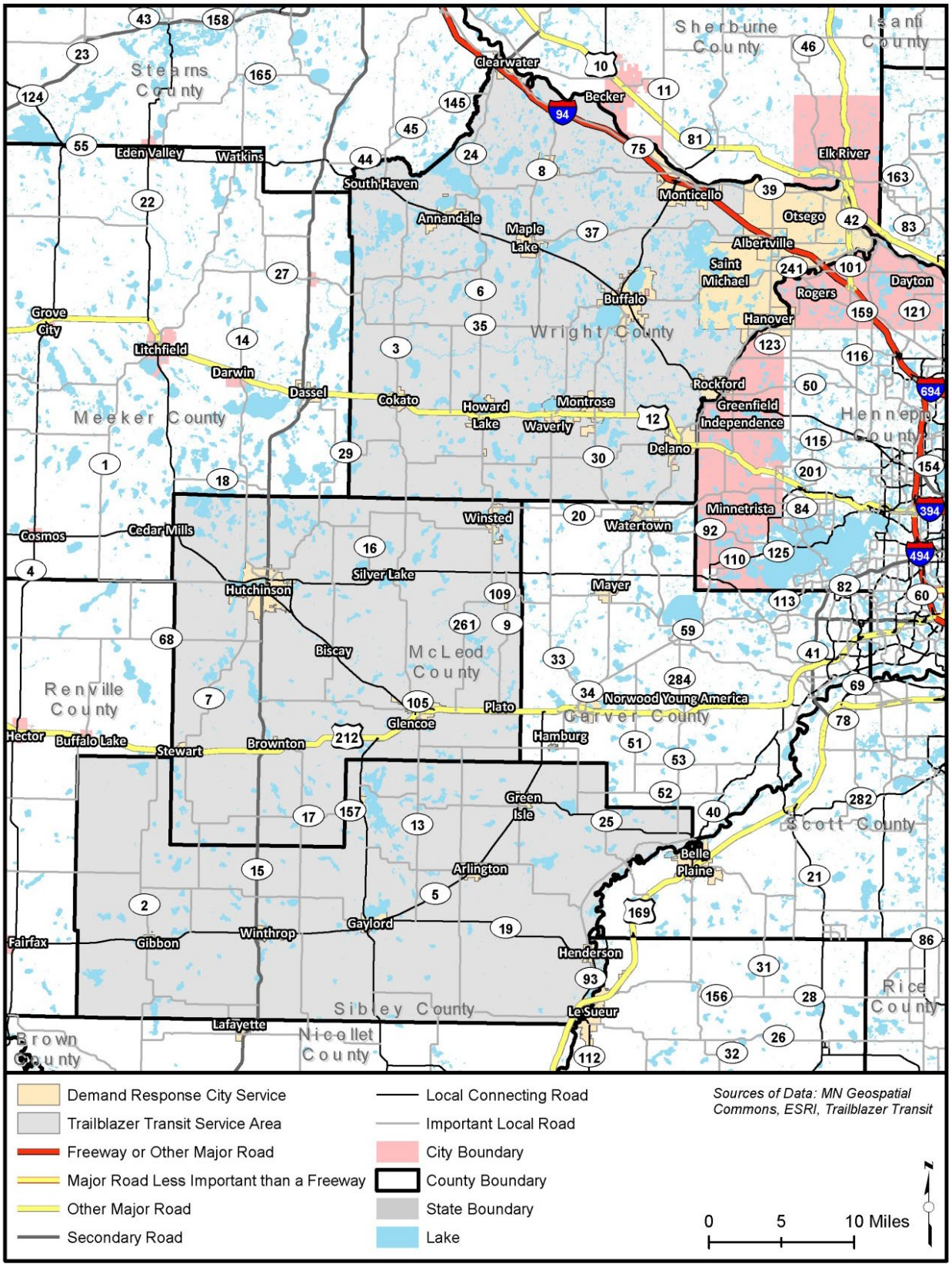
The span of service for the entire Trailblazer Transit service area is 6:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. on weekdays. The operating statistics for Trailblazer Transit's demand response service are shown in Table 3. The statistics indicate that service was operated out of either the Glencoe or Buffalo facility. The annual hours and miles of service are generally high, demonstrating that Trailblazer Transit's demand response service is heavily used.

Table 3. 2017 Operating Statistics

Service	2017 Annual Hours of Service	2017 Annual Miles of Service
Wright County (Buffalo)	31,469	684,000
Wright and McLeod (Buffalo)	3,335	72,000
McLeod County (Glencoe)	19,995	447,000
McLeod and Sibley (Glencoe)	12,323	278,000
McLeod and Wright (Glencoe)	4,972	104,000
Total Demand Response	72,094	1,585,000

Source: Trailblazer Transit

Figure 14. Trailblazer Transit Services



4.1 Ridership

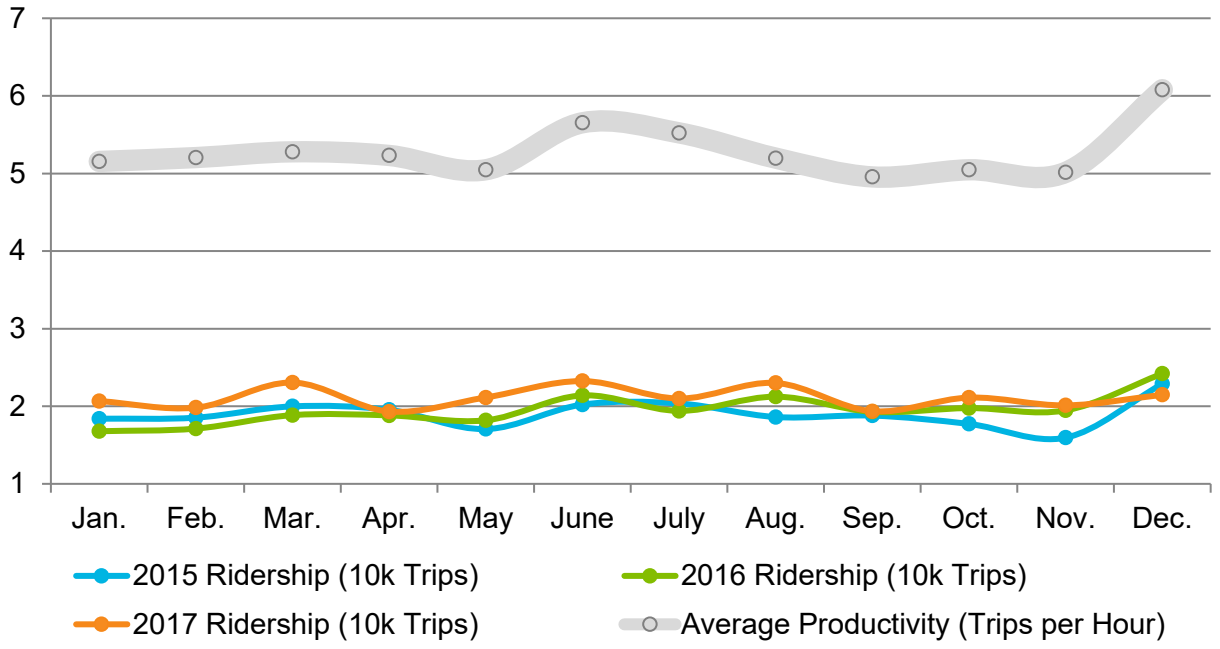
Trailblazer Transit tracks ridership daily, weekly and monthly in order to monitor trends. Overall, total passenger rides have increased by nearly 126,000 since 2013 (i.e., a 92% increase over 5 years), as shown in Table 4. This substantial increase in rides is due to the addition of Wright County into the service area as a result of the expansion into service in Wright County in 2014. By month, ridership does not seem to follow a prevailing seasonal pattern, as shown on Figure 15. In terms of the average trip productivity, measured as ridership per service hour, December and June have the strongest performances.

Table 4. Ridership by Service (2013-2018)

Service	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Passenger rides	136,423	183,450	228,061	234,725	253,286	262,798

Source: Trailblazer Transit

Figure 15. Ridership by Month (2015-2017)



Source: Trailblazer Transit, AECOM, 2018

Based on the total rides, demand response service is heavily used (Table 5). Trailblazer Transit's rides per hour value is higher than rides per mile value due to having significantly more annual service miles than annual service hours, resulting from operating across a large service area.

The value in Table 4 does not match the value presented in Table 5, likely due to the way the data were collected (i.e., by individual bus as opposed to trip type) and reported (i.e., on different forms).

Table 5. Ridership Performance (2013-2018)

Year	Total Rides	Rides/Month	Rides/Day	Rides/Hour
2013	136,423	11,369	525	5.89
2014	183,632	15,303	706	5.71
2015	228,061	19,005	877	5.64
2016	234,725	19,560	903	5.29
2017	253,286	21,107	974	4.99
2018	262,221	21,852	1,009	4.46

Source: Trailblazer Transit 9/28/19 Correspondence

4.2 Service Delivery

Trailblazer Transit is directly operated by the agency and it has service contracts with various entities. These customers receive some degree of dispatch “priority” on Trailblazer Transit’s services because of the volume of rides produced by these entities. For example, Trailblazer Transit has a service contract with Functional Industries in Buffalo, which is also served by Tri-Cap Transit Connection, another transit provider that serves Stearns, Morrison, Benton, and Sherburne Counties. Trailblazer Transit builds it schedules around the contract for Functional Industries and allows non-contract customers to ride the buses at the same time.

As previously mentioned, the volunteer driver service for both Trailblazer Transit and SMART-RIDE was discontinued in 2019.

4.3 Users

Trailblazer Transit serves passengers of all ages and abilities. Trailblazer Transit tracks passenger demographics through its NOVUS dispatch software. Table 6 displays the demographic breakdown of passengers served between 2014 and 2018. The specific ages and disability status of passengers in 2017 are illustrated on Figure 16. Trailblazer Transit defines disabled passengers as any individuals that use the elevator to board the bus. In terms of age, Trailblazer Transit defines elderly passengers as individuals that are 60 years old or older, adults as individuals between 18 and 59 years old, students as individuals between 6 and 17 years old, and children as individuals that are 5 years old or younger.

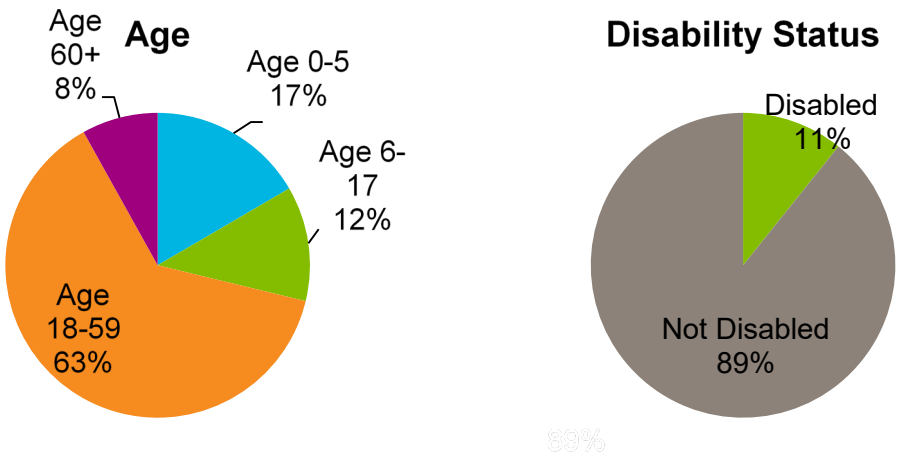
By age group, most passengers are adults, making up over 60% of all passenger trips, followed by children, students, and elderly passengers. The number of passengers in all age groups has generally increased over time primarily as a result of the addition of Wright County into the Trailblazer Transit service area in 2014.

Table 6. Passenger Demographics (2014-2018)

Year	Disabled	Elderly	Adult	Student	Children	Total Passenger Trips
2014	19,526	14,598	102,037	23,901	23,570	183,632
2015	22,962	18,289	129,014	26,604	31,192	228,061
2016	24,412	17,531	133,390	25,464	33,928	234,725
2017	27,610	18,388	143,621	27,721	37,760	256,338
2018 projections	26,970	17,193	150,636	24,138	36,381	255,318

Source: Trailblazer Transit

Figure 16. 2017 Trailblazer Transit Selected Demographic Characteristics

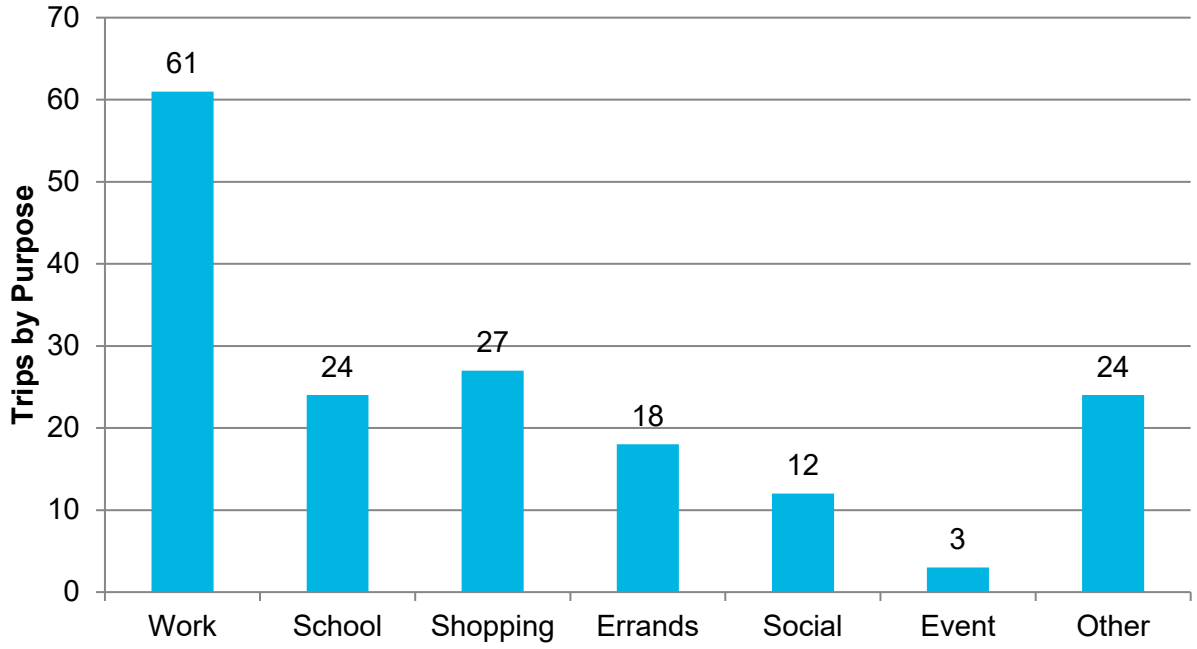


Source: Trailblazer Transit

Trailblazer Transit passengers use transit service for a variety of purposes, as shown on Figure 17. According to a 2016 on-board survey of 140 passengers, trip purposes ranged from working, shopping, and school to medical appointments, social (friends, family) gatherings, and day care.

While trip purposes vary, the most popular trips are for work, which was the destination for about 44% of the surveyed passengers. Shopping (20%) and school (17%) were the next most common trip purposes, and about 12% of the passengers surveyed were using transit for medical-related trips.

Figure 17. 2016 Trip Purposes



Source: Trailblazer Transit

5. Capital

Trailblazer Transit has a fleet of 38 MnDOT 400-series gasoline engine vehicles, including spares, and uses two facilities: one in Glencoe and another in Buffalo. Each facility can house up to 20 vehicles and houses administration and operations. All maintenance is performed by a third-party vendor. Trailblazer Transit has no bus stop assets such as formal bus stop signs, benches, and shelters. Trailblazer Transit's Capital Plan through 2025 includes the replacement of 36 vehicles and expanding by 18 vehicles, which does not include the 6 additional vehicles that have been added to accommodate new recommended improvements in the plan, for a total expansion of 24 vehicles. At least one vehicle is scheduled to be replaced each year and expansion will occur each year between 2020 and 2025 with at least three vehicles purchased each year (Table 7). All vehicle replacements and expansions are assumed to be MnDOT Class 400 medium-light duty gas vehicles.

Table 7. Vehicle Management Plan (2020-2025)

Capital Plan	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Replacement Vehicles	7	8	4	1	2	7
Vehicle Replacement Cost	$616,000	$728,000	$376,000	$97,000	$200,000	$721,000
Expansion Vehicles	4	3	4	3	4	0
Expansion Vehicles Cost	$352,000	$273,000	$376,000	$291,000	$400,000	$0
Total Capital Cost	**$968,000**	**$1,001,000**	**$752,000**	**$388,000**	**$600,000**	**$721,000**

Source: Trailblazer Transit, Capital Plan

5.1 Background

5.1.1 Vehicles

As of July 2018, the Trailblazer Transit-owned fleet consisted of 38 vehicles made up of 25-foot cutaways, primarily on Ford E-450 chassis. Thirty-two of the vehicles are used in revenue service and the remaining six are spares. This equates to a spare ratio of 18.75%, which is below the 20% maximum recommended in the service guidelines outlined in the GMTIP. The average age in the fleet is 3.44 years and the oldest vehicles are 10 years old. The average number of miles on a vehicle is 124,042 with older vehicles typically having higher mileage. All Trailblazer Transit vehicles are wheelchair accessible in accordance with requirements of the ADA and can carry two wheelchair passengers each. None of the vehicles are equipped with bicycle racks or have automatic vehicle location. All vehicles have cameras on-board.

Table 8. Vehicle Fleet

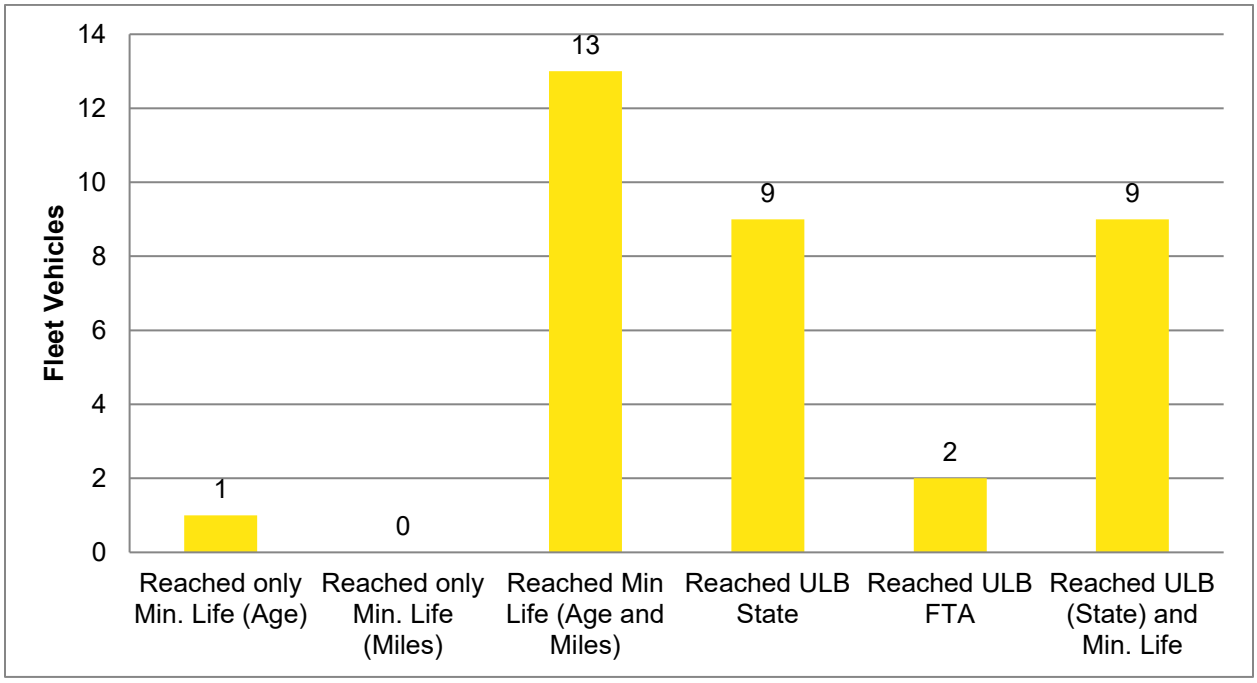
Vehicle Type	Count in Fleet	Year	Average Mileage	Fuel	Seats
Elkhart Coach Ford E-450 (400 Class)	1	2009	279,690	Biodiesel	18
Diamond Coach Ford E-450 (400 Class)	1	2009	226,905	Biodiesel	17
Elkhart Coach Ford E-450 (400 Class)	3	2012	236,404	Gas	18
Startrans GM 4500 (400 Class)	1	2012	190,600	Biodiesel	15
Elkhart Coach Ford E-450 (400 Class)	3	2013	189,909	Gas	18
Startrans GM 4500 (400 Class)	1	2013	161,684	Biodiesel	20
Champion Bus GM 4500 (400 Class)	1	2014	160,941	Biodiesel	19
Elkhart Coach Ford E-450 (400 Class)	3	2014	154,290	Gas	18
Elkhart Coach Ford E-450 (400 Class)	14	2015	112,905	Gas	18
Elkhart Coach Ford E-450 (400 Class)	4	2016	81,307	Gas	18
Elkhart Coach Ford E-450 (400 Class)	1	2017	41,019	Gas	18
Elkhart Coach Ford E-450 (400 Class)	5	2018	5,045	Gas	18

Source: Trailblazer Transit

The minimum life, outlined in the *Transit Asset Management Plan*, for this class of vehicle is five years or 150,000 miles with a useful life benchmark of 7 years for MnDOT and 10 for FTA. MnDOT has set the useful life benchmark in the *Transit Asset Management Plan* as 10 years for all cutaway buses with a performance target of no more than 10% exceeding this useful life benchmark.

As shown on Figure 18, Trailblazer Transit is meeting this benchmark, as only 5% are exceeding the 10-year useful life benchmark. Fourteen vehicles have reached their minimum life, of which thirteen have reached both the minimum miles and age, and one has reached just the age. Of these 14 vehicles, 9 of them have reached the MnDOT useful life benchmark and 2 have reached the FTA useful life benchmark.

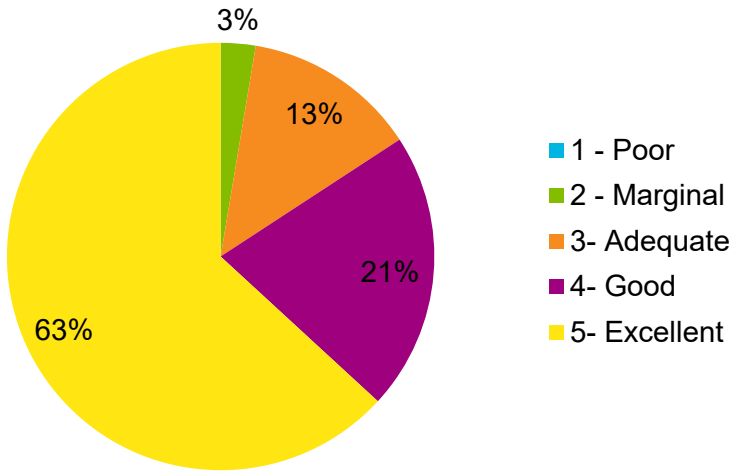
Figure 18. Vehicle Minimum Life and Useful Life Benchmark (2019)



Source: Trailblazer Transit

Vehicle conditions are rated using a five-point scale as defined by the *Transit Asset Management Plan* with 1 being the worst and 5 the best. Scoring is done using a combination of factors, including the lifetime maintenance costs as a percentage of total purchase price, vehicle mileage, months in service, and cost of maintenance needed in the next six months. The average rating for a Trailblazer Transit vehicle is 4.5; the overwhelming majority are rated "good" or "excellent" (Figure 19).

Figure 19. Vehicle Condition Rating



Source: Trailblazer Transit, MnDOT Transit Asset Management Plan

As the vehicles age, it is anticipated that the cost to maintain the vehicles will increase. Trailblazer Transit's spare ratio is currently close to the maximum recommendation. However, a lack of quality spare vehicles could put a strain on the system as vehicles age and Capital Plan-based expansion occurs.

5.1.2 Facilities

Trailblazer Transit has two facilities: one in Glencoe and another in Buffalo (Table 9). The Glencoe facility is owned by Trailblazer Transit, while the Buffalo facility is leased from the City.

The Glencoe facility was constructed in 2010 for $2.5 million, allowing Trailblazer Transit to consolidate operations from four facilities to one new facility. The facility was constructed using American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA) funding. The Glencoe facility houses 18 5311 vehicles and multiple SMART-RIDE vehicles. The facility is at maximum capacity.

In 2015, the City of Buffalo began construction on the new facility for Trailblazer Transit in Wright County. Construction was completed in 2016 on the $3.4 million facility that was paid for by the City of Buffalo. Trailblazer Transit rents the facility for $223,200 annually and has a 20-year lease on the property with the option to purchase for one dollar at the end of the lease. The Buffalo facility is a satellite facility with office space, a meeting room, transfer hub, and heated garage. The Buffalo facility is already at maximum capacity, storing 20 vehicles indoors. Any expansion of service that would increase the fleet size would have to be housed outside or somewhere else. Given the proposed plan to expand the fleet by at least three vehicles each year, the service expansion will require vehicles to be housed outside unless the Buffalo facility is expanded or a new facility is built.

Both facilities house operations, administration, and a dispatch center. Vehicle maintenance is not performed in-house but contracted through a third-party vendor.

Table 9. Facilities

Facility	Facility Location	Facility Size	Facility Age	Facility Amenities	Maintenance Capabilities
Glencoe Facility	207 West 11th Street Glencoe, MN 55336	20,000 square feet	9 (occupancy in May 2011)	20 vehicle storage capacity Administrative space Operations	N/A
Buffalo Facility	115 Commerce Circle Buffalo, MN 55313	20,650 square feet	3 (occupancy in April 2016)	20 vehicle storage capacity Administrative space Operations	N/A

5.1.3 Technology

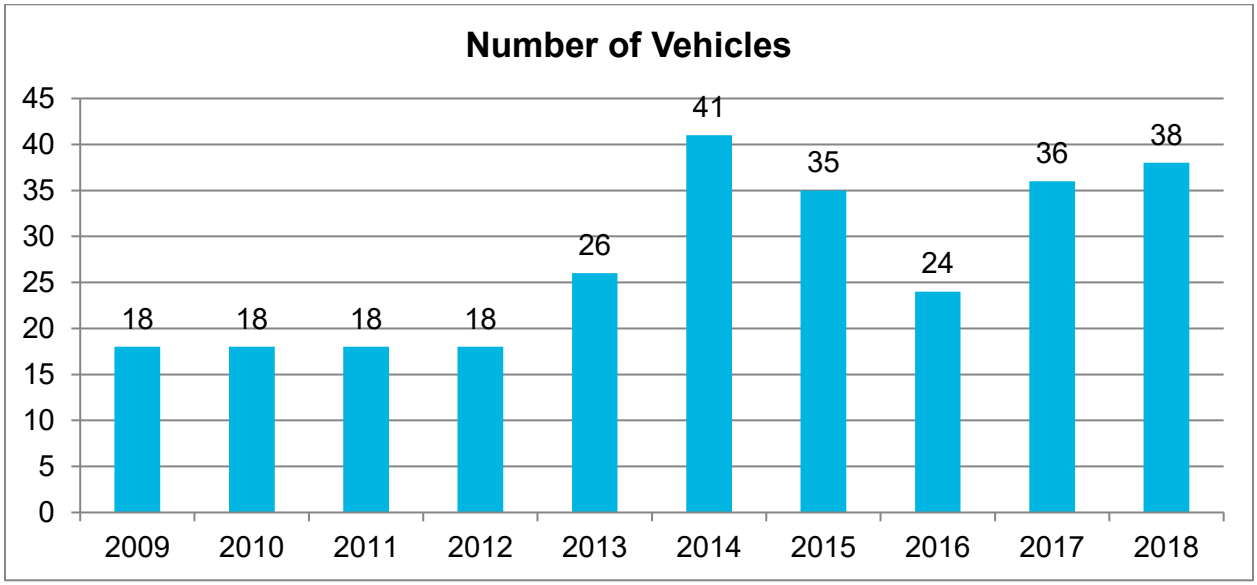
Trailblazer Transit first started using computer-aided dispatch software in 2009 and in the following year installed mobile data computers onboard the buses to coordinate with the dispatch software. Trailblazer Transit uses Novus from TripSpark to manage scheduling, dispatch, and accounting. In December 2018, Trailblazer Transit signed a contract with a new software system called "Reveal" to replace Novus due to the inability of the current software to accommodate the growing needs of the organization.

5.2 History

Between 2009 and 2012, the Trailblazer Transit fleet remained steady at 18 vehicles. The fleet size increased in 2013 and then again in 2014 when Wright County joined Trailblazer Transit. The fleet size has continued to increase to its current level of 38 vehicles.

The number of vehicles attributed to Trailblazer Transit is show in Figure 20. The number of vehicles shown reflects the vehicle data in MnDOT's recordkeeping system, which was significantly updated recently. Therefore, the vehicle data may be counterintuitive due to the previous design of MnDOT's recordkeeping system and may also be skewed due to inaccurate or incomplete data. Trailblazer Transit's records for fleet size (not included in this report) are not consistent with MnDOT's numbers primarily due to the way replacement and expansion buses were tracked. Trailblazer Transit has never seen a decrease in its operational fleet size. Furthermore, the 2015 numbers include eight buses from the dissolution of RiverRider, many of which Trailblazer Transit never used.

Figure 20. History of Fleet Expansion (2009-2018)



Source: 2010-2017 MnDOT annual transit plans, 2017 NTD data, Trailblazer Transit Capital Template

Agencies that receive federal financial assistance and own, operate, or manage capital assets used in the provision of public transportation are required under 49 U.S.C. 625 to create a transit asset management plan. This plan facilitates decision-making that balances needs and demands for rolling stock, facilities, and equipment. MnDOT Office of Transit and Active Transportation (OTAT) personnel make annual visits to each federal- or state-funded facility to inspect facility and fleet conditions and understand how assets have been maintained.

In 2017, MnDOT added a Transit Asset Management module to the BlackCat Grants Management System that facilitates streamlined communication between MnDOT and transportation providers regarding the maintenance and depreciation of assets. Additionally, MnDOT's updated 2018 *Transit Asset Management Plan* includes:

- Inventory of the number and type of capital assets
- Condition assessment of those inventoried assets for which a provider has direct capital responsibility

- Description of analytical processes or decision support tools that a provider uses to estimate capital investment needs over time and develop its investment prioritization
- Discussion of prioritization investment direction
- Plan implementation strategies and recommendations

Prior to 2020, fleet assets were prioritized based on life expectancy. For this FYTSP, the assets are identified for replacement based on the *Transit Asset Management Plan* submitted to FTA on October 1, 2018.

6. 2020-2025 Annual Needs

6.1 Needs Identification Process

Trailblazer Transit's annual needs were developed through a review of the agency's existing capital items and the use of those items as well as through a series of in-person visits with the Trailblazer Transit team to discuss the agency's operating structure and environment, agency challenges, and opportunities for improvement. The initial meeting provided a chance to gather information and begin to consider strategies and opportunities for the agency, as well as to use analyses and metrics to assess the agency's baseline conditions and performance. After the initial meeting, an online community survey was conducted to gather input on agency strategies and priorities and to collect information on community opinion or community habits that may help to inform transit service decisions. Detailed survey information, including results, can be found in Appendix D. The following meeting allowed the consultant team a chance to develop a comprehensive list of agency needs for the five-year study period with Trailblazer Transit administration and staff. A discussion was then held to prioritize these agency needs according to the perception of their relative importance for the agency; this exercise was not conducted with fiscal constraints in mind. The unconstrained list of needs is displayed in Table 10.

6.2 List of 2020–2025 Needs

The needs identified through the prioritization activity, in order of priority, are listed in Table 10. For new or extended service, operational costs were based on anticipated hours and an hourly rate provided by Trailblazer Transit. Vehicle unit costs are from MnDOT.

Table 10. Unconstrained Needs List

Need	Priority Level	Purchase Year	Description of Need	Rationale	Estimated Cost (2019 dollars)
Upgrade Software for Scheduling and Dispatching	High	2020	Reveal software	Higher quality and better consistency in scheduling and dispatching Provide real-time information to customers Improve on-time performance	$42,000 annually

Need	Priority Level	Purchase Year	Description of Need	Rationale	Estimated Cost (2019 dollars)
Increased Facility Capacity	High	2020	Facility Expansion	Expand Buffalo facility to accommodate service growth	$136,000 per year in lease payments
New Transit Vehicles	High	2020-2024	To be used for ongoing service expansions in Wright County	Increased capacity and expanded service area requires a larger fleet	$85,000 per vehicle
Additional Service in Wright County	High	2020-2024	Increase levels of service each year by adding three buses	Increase capacity and frequency to meet high demand	$201,975 annually per vehicle with 10.5-hour span
Regional Connections-Waconia City	Medium	2022	Service into Waconia City	High demand for service	$226,406 annually per vehicle with 11.75-hour span plus one new vehicle
Regional Connections-Highway 212	Medium	2022	Service to the Highway 212 Medical Center in Chaska	High demand for service	$226,406 annually per vehicle with 11.75-hour span plus one new vehicle
Regional Connections-Hennepin County	Medium	2023	Service to western Hennepin County	High demand for service	$226,406 annually per vehicle with 11.75-hour span plus one new vehicle
Extend Evening Service	Low	2024	Extend span of weekday evening service one hour	Meet demand after 5:30 p.m.	$19,235 annually per vehicle
Weekend Service	Low	2025	Introduce weekend service in most populous areas	Trailblazer Transit does not operate on weekends The weekend service provided by SmartRide is expensive	$38,324 annually per vehicle with a 10-hour span

Need	Priority Level	Purchase Year	Description of Need	Rationale	Estimated Cost (2019 dollars)
Feeder Commuter Services	Low	2025	Offer commuter services to Twin Cities and St. Cloud	Demand for urban connections during peak hours	$114,972 per vehicle with 6 service hours, plus new vehicles

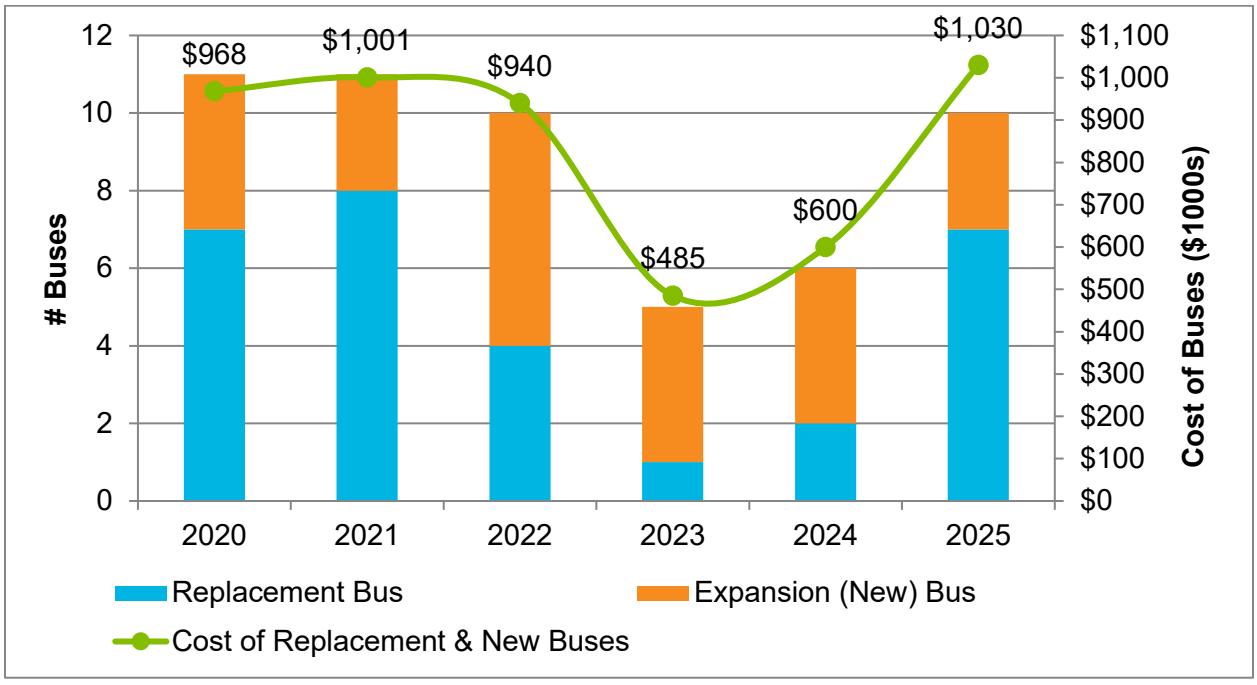
6.3 Historical and Projected Annual Summary

Trailblazer Transit's needs involve a broad expansion of capital and levels of service, with new technology, vehicles, destinations served, and span of service. Demand in Wright County and service gaps in evening hours, on weekends, and across the Sherburne County border will require a larger fleet and increased capacity at Trailblazer Transit's facilities. Meeting these anticipated needs will not involve major changes to the agency's overall service plan, but rather scaling up its current services.

6.3.1 Fleet

Trailblazer Transit uses two methodologies to estimate ridership and service levels. The Gold benchmark called "10/4" correlates to 10,000 annual rides per bus and to have one bus per 5,000 residents, while the Bronze benchmark called "9/5" carries 9,000 annual rides per bus and to have one bus per 4,000 residents. In order to meet the Gold and Bronze benchmarks, Wright County should have as many as 32 buses (today it has 17). These vehicles will be used to add capacity within the service area, particularly in Wright County. Additional buses will be necessary to extend services to regional destinations in other counties. Figure 21 shows Trailblazer Transit's plan to replace and add buses to the fleet from 2020 to 2025 based on the existing fleet plan and proposed service expansions.

Figure 21. Planned Replacement and Expansion Buses (2020-2025)



Source: Trailblazer Transit Correspondence 9/18/19; Trailblazer Fleet Replacement Plan

6.3.2 Facilities

The need for a larger fleet of vehicles also necessitates expanded facility capacity in a strategic location. Expanding the existing facility in Buffalo is logical given that most of the projected expansion for the agency is to occur in Wright County.

6.3.3 Technology

Trailblazer Transit currently uses Novus from TripSpark to operate its services, though a transition to a new software system called “Reveal” is planned for Fall 2019. The software will enable improved scheduling, on-time performance, and customer experience with a new dispatch system and real-time arrival information for riders.

6.3.4 Other

Transportation needs between Wright County and neighboring communities, including Elk River, Rodgers, and Big Lake, have increasingly pushed Trailblazer Transit to pursue coordination with other transit providers such as Tri-CAP Transit Connection based out of St. Cloud and Transit Link in Hennepin County. Historically inter-regional travel has not been coordinated between these agencies, but increasingly it has become a higher priority. In January of 2019, Trailblazer Transit started providing service into neighboring communities along the Wright County border.

7. System Performance

Performance measurement tracking establishes a consistent method of evaluating a route or service type, provides a regular opportunity to reflect on future needs and service improvements, and ensures compliance with the ADA, MnDOT’s Olmstead Plan, and any other local performance expectations. For state-funded transit services, MnDOT requires performance tracking of annual ridership, baseline span of service, on-time performance, and asset management. Additionally, each provider is required to track denials based on the ADA trip denial definitions and process in FTA Circular 4710.1 as well as service and performance indicators.

7.1 Historical Performance

This section evaluates the performance of the system. Five base data sets were collected from Trailblazer Transit’s records to create the performance metrics: ridership statistics, revenue hours, revenue miles, operating cost, and farebox revenue. System statistics are described in Table 11.

Table 11. System Diagnostic Information (2013-2018)

Year	Passenger Trips	Annual Revenue Miles	Annual Revenue Hours	Farebox Revenue	Operating Cost
2013	136,423	594,620.1	23,152.2	$312,136.33	$1,858,908.25
2014	183,632	835,489.4	32,168.9	$467,756.52	$2,528,551.17
2015	228,061	1,031,103.5	40,461.3	$662,553.99	$3,066,509.59
2016	234,725	1,117,371.5	44,337.6	$620,837.39	$3,719,196.61
2017	253,286	1,261,028.0	50,727.6	$754,628.14	$4,308,461.74

Year	Passenger Trips	Annual Revenue Miles	Annual Revenue Hours	Farebox Revenue	Operating Cost
2018	262,221	1,377,530.1	58,754.1	$782,149.79	$5,017,174.30

Trailblazer Transit 9/18/19 Correspondence

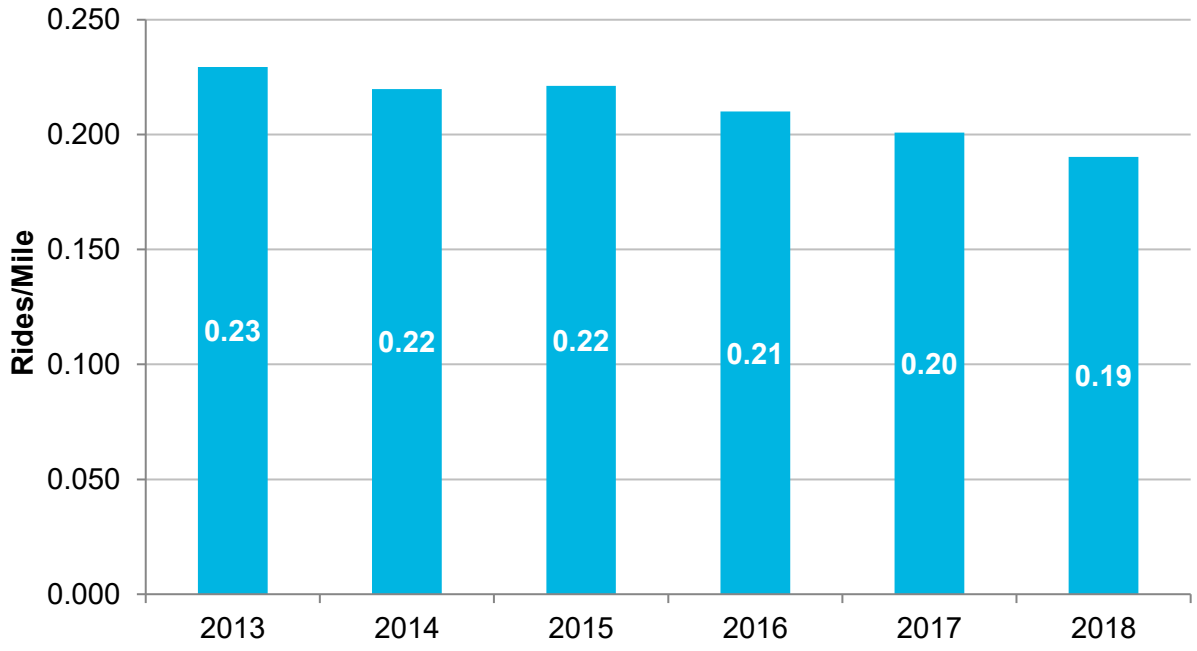
7.1.1 Service Effectiveness

Service effectiveness describes the amount of service utilized per unit of transit service provided. Service effectiveness is measured based on two indicators: passengers per mile and passengers per hour.

7.1.1.1 Passengers per Mile

Passengers per mile is a measure of efficiency and trip length. Large numbers indicate shorter trips. Smaller numbers indicate either longer trips, where passengers are traveling greater distances, or poorer performing routes. Trailblazer Transit averages 0.19 passengers per mile; this number has been declining since the addition of Wright County to the service area and the longer distances to be traveled when traversing a three-county area rather than a two-county area. According to the *2017 Rural Transit Fact Book* the national average for passengers per mile for rural transit demand response service providers is 0.15 and in Minnesota is 0.31. The system-wide average is greater than the national rural average but less than the state rural average (Figure 22). The current dispatching software is currently miscalculating trip times and distances, leading to some unreliable data, so performance should improve when the new software is implemented.

Figure 22. Passengers per Revenue Mile Statistics (2013-2018)

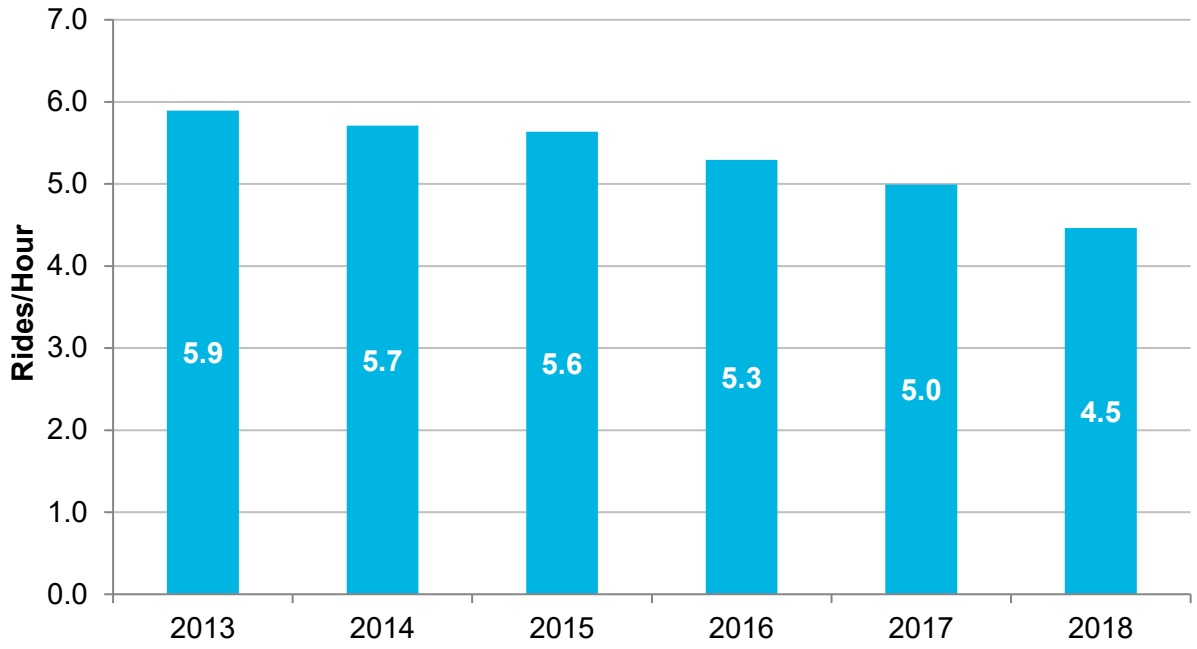


Source: Trailblazer Transit 9/18/19 Correspondence

7.1.1.2 Passengers per Hour

Passengers per hour measures ridership as a function of the amount of service provided and varies based on the geographic spread of the area and average operating speed. Higher numbers indicate a more efficient system. Trailblazer Transit averaged 4.5 passengers per hour in 2018; this has declined since 2013, again due to the addition of Wright County to the service area and the associated longer trip distances. Trailblazer Transit has set a goal of 5.0 passengers per hour and a minimum threshold that each bus schedule must maintain a minimum of 3.0 passengers per hour over any three-month period. The system-wide average is slightly less the state rural average of 4.57 and much higher than the national rural average of 2.6. The GMTIP outlines performance metrics for passengers per hour based on service type and area. The target for demand response service in rural areas, set by MnDOT, is 3.0 passengers per hour.

Figure 23. Passengers per Revenue Hour Statistics (2013-2018)



Source: Trailblazer Transit 9/18/19 Correspondence

7.1.2 Financial Efficiency

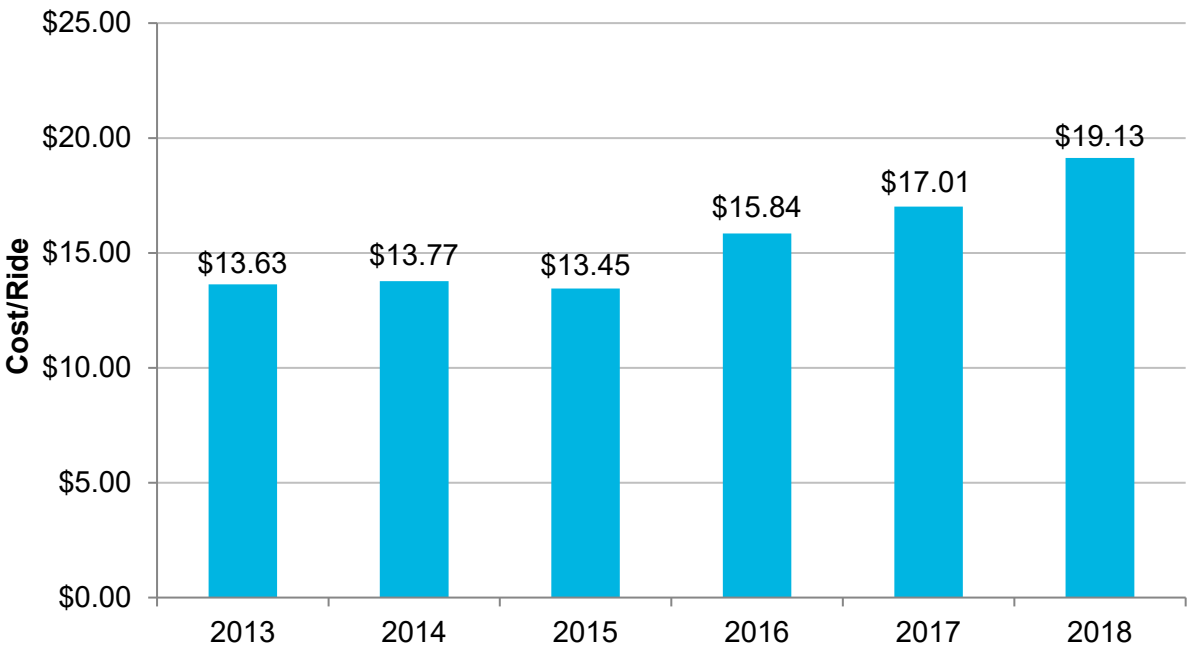
Cost effectiveness statistics measure the effectiveness of the system from a financial standpoint – how well the dollars put into the system are being used to produce trips. The cost effectiveness indicators are cost per passenger, cost per mile, cost per hour, farebox recovery, and subsidy per passenger.

7.1.2.1 Cost per Passenger

Cost per passenger is the overall cost to operate a bus schedule divided by the number of rides. Cost per passenger has been increasing from 2013 to 2018, reflective of the prevailing trends of increasing fuel and insurance costs as well as wages in close proximity to the Twin Cities metropolitan region. According to the *2017 Rural Transit Fact Book*, the national average for cost per passenger for rural transit demand response service providers is $14.68. The *2017 MnDOT Transit Report* lists the average cost per passenger in a rural area as $13.30. The new performance tracking guidelines by MnDOT recommend that the target for cost per passenger for Dial-A-Ride services should not exceed $15 per passenger. Trailblazer Transit has a higher

cost per passenger than the national average, state recommendations, and a higher cost than the state rural average (Figure 24).

Figure 24. Cost per Passenger Statistics (2013-2018)

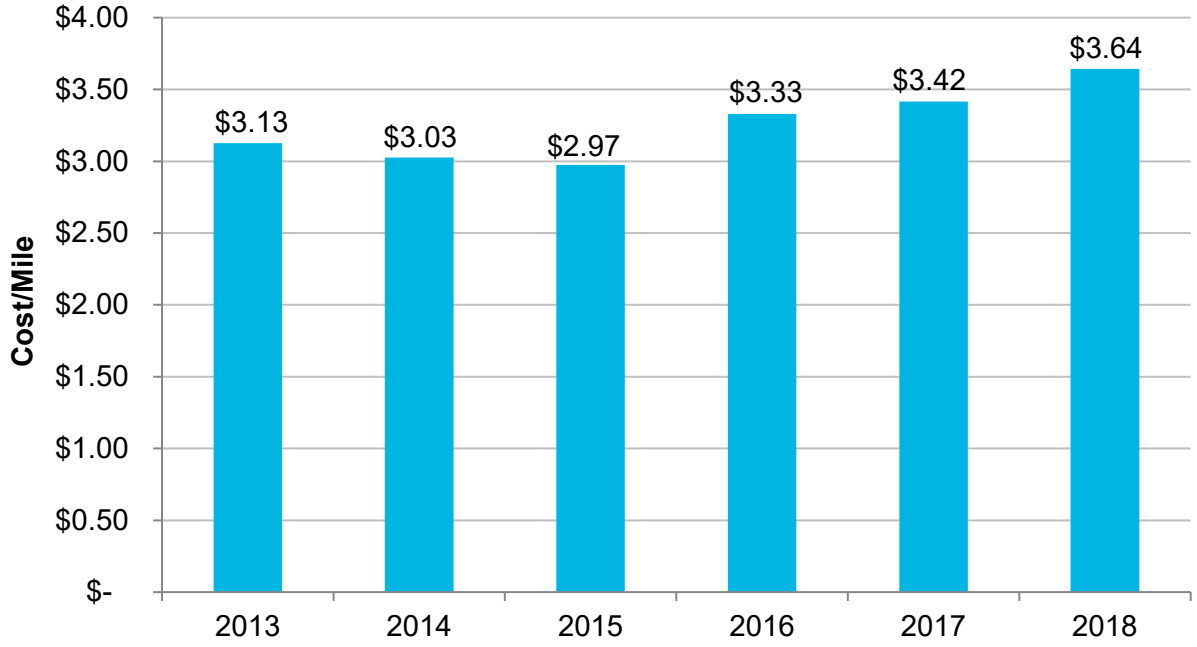


Source: Trailblazer Transit 9/18/19 Correspondence

7.1.2.2 Cost per Mile

Cost per mile measures the financial efficiency of providing service and varies based on the average operating speed. The smaller the number indicates more financially efficient routes and/or faster operating speeds. Trailblazer Transit has a cost per mile of $3.64, which has been increasing since 2015, again due to the addition of Wright County to the service area and the corresponding longer trip distances (Figure 25). According to the *2017 Rural Transit Fact Book* the national average for cost per mile for rural transit demand response service providers is $2.22.

Figure 25. Cost per Mile Statistics (2013-2018)

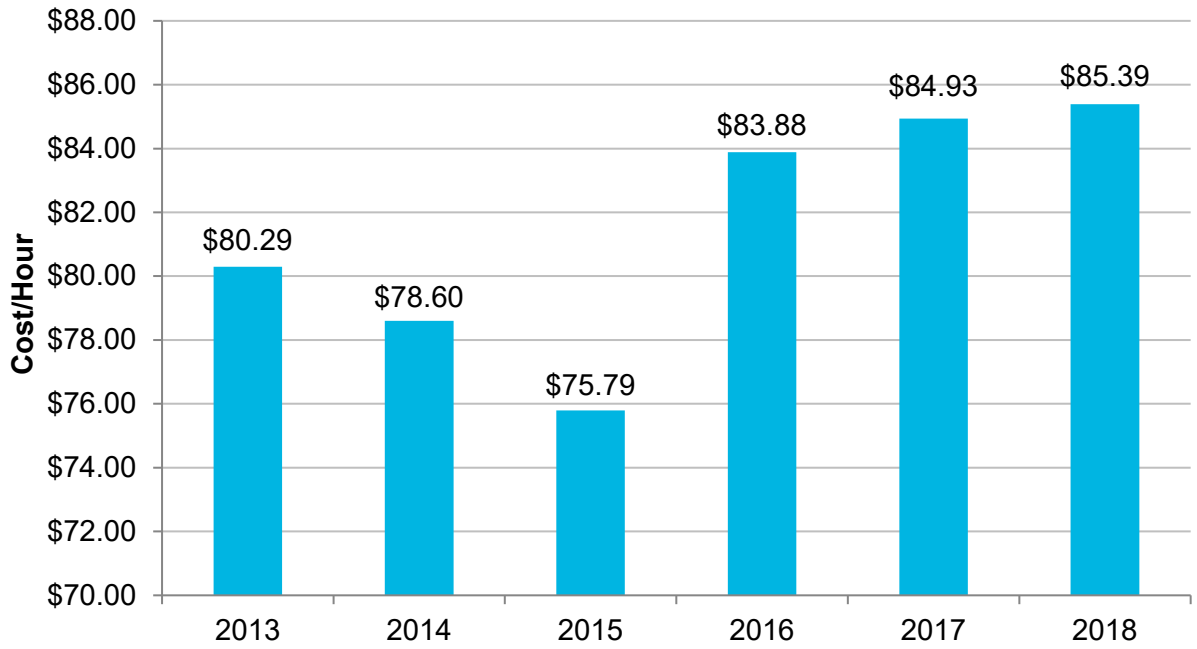


Source: Trailblazer Transit 9/18 Correspondence

7.1.2.3 Cost per Hour

Cost per hour measures the financial efficiency of operating service. A lower cost per hour indicates more financially efficient service. The Trailblazer Transit average cost per hour is $85.39 and has been increasing from 2013 to 2018, reflective of increased costs of doing business (Figure 26). According to the *2017 Rural Transit Fact Book*, the national average for cost per hour for rural transit demand response service providers is $38.83.

Figure 26. Cost per Hour Statistics (2013-2018)

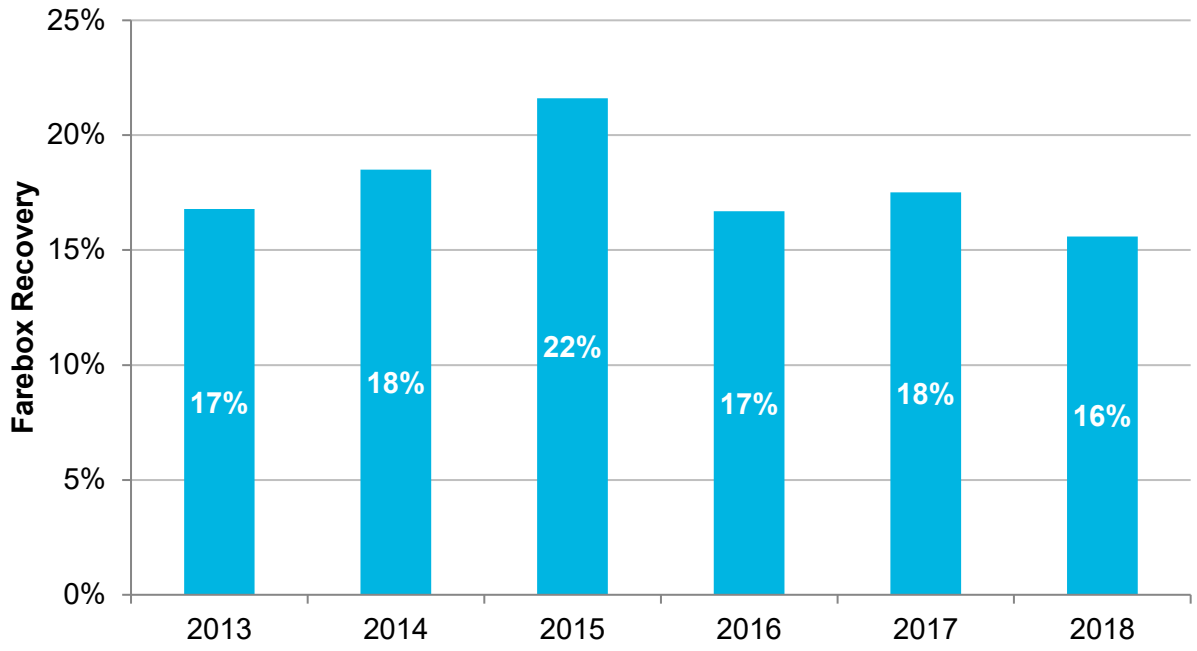


Source: Trailblazer Transit 9/18 Correspondence

7.1.2.4 Farebox Recovery

Farebox recovery measures the percentage of operating cost covered by fares. Farebox recovery is an outcome heavily influenced by the ridership productivity of a bus schedule against its total operating cost, as well as the fare policy of the system. It is calculated by dividing fare revenue by operating cost. Trailblazer Transit has an average farebox recovery of 16% (Figure 27). This value includes fare revenue collected from the farebox and contract revenue. The GMTIP includes local contributions (e.g., property taxes for local share) when calculating farebox recovery. According to the *2017 Rural Transit Fact Book* the national average for farebox recovery for rural transit demand response service providers is 7%. Trailblazer Transit is performing far better than the national rural average.

Figure 27. Farebox Recovery Statistics (2013-2018)

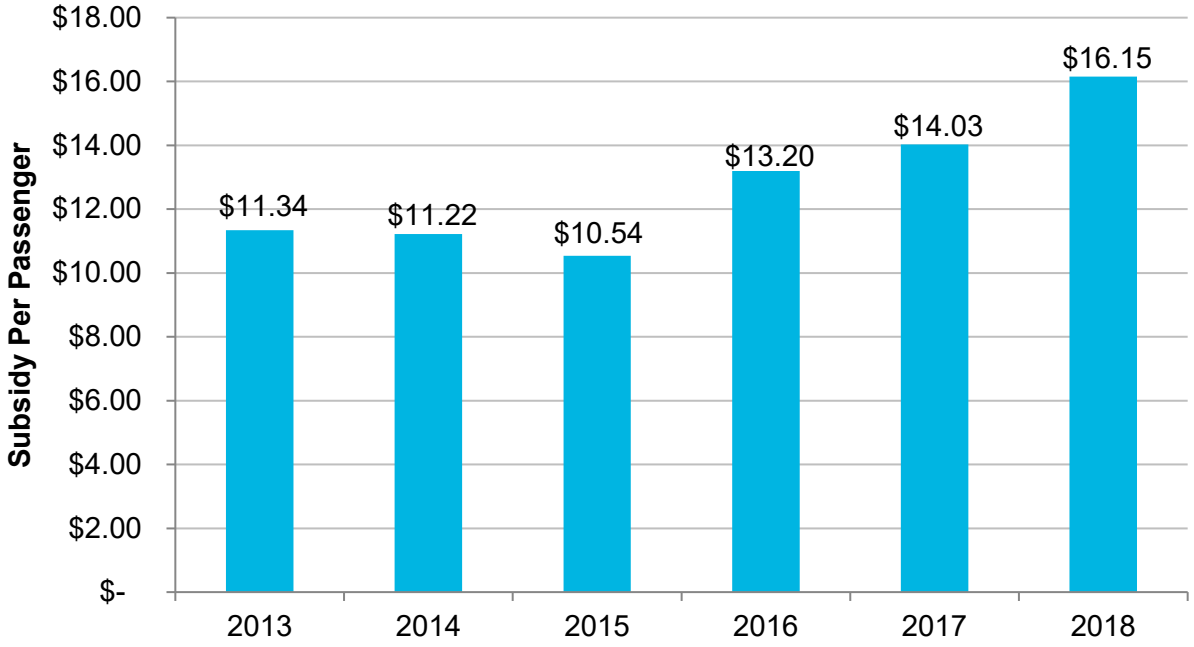


Source: Trailblazer Transit 9/18/19 Correspondence

7.1.2.5 Subsidy per Passenger

Subsidy per passenger measures how much it costs to operate a bus schedule on a “per passenger” basis. It is calculated by subtracting passenger revenue from operating cost and dividing by the total number of passengers. It is the portion of operating costs that need to be covered using public funding sources. Trailblazer Transit has an average subsidy per passenger of $16.15 (Figure 28). According to the *2017 Rural Transit Fact Book* the national average subsidy per passenger for rural transit demand response service providers is $12.98.

Figure 28. Subsidy per Passengers Statistics (2013-2018)



Source: Trailblazer Transit 9/18/19 Correspondence

7.1.3 Capacity

While the laws that apply to ADA complementary paratransit service for a fixed route system have different criteria than a stand-alone demand response system, systems should still strive to limit capacity constraints. Capacity constraints can be indicated through denied and missed trips, long telephone hold times, and on-time performance. High levels of cancellations and no-shows can indicate a strain on the system and lead to capacity issues.

The GMTIP service guidelines state that the on-time performance for a demand response system should be 90% arrivals within the pick-up window given. The pick-up window provided to the public on the Trailblazer Transit website is defined as plus or minus 10 minutes from the scheduled pick-up time that is negotiated. Trailblazer Transit tracks the number of late pickups; they do not track the number of early pick-ups because if a bus arrives early (prior to the start of the pick-up window) it will wait until the scheduled window time and does not require the individual to take the trip earlier just because the bus arrives earlier. In an average month Trailblazer Transit is late for 1,048 rides, with an on-time performance of 95.4%, well above the MnDOT target.

No-shows are defined as (1) customers not being present for the pick-up, (2) cancellations made less than one hour prior to the pick-up time, or (3) customers who are not ready to board when the bus arrives within the pick-up window. Trailblazer Transit tracks all three statistics. In an average month, Trailblazer Transit averages 114 customers who are not present, 114 late cancellations, and 154 customers who are not ready to board. In an average day, Trailblazer Transit averages 11.4 customers who are not present, 5.2 late cancellations, and 7.0 customers who are not ready to board. Collectively these three categories result in an average of 23.6 no-shows per day. No-shows also include trips where the bus was running 10 minutes or more late and the customer did not call to cancel the ride.

Missed trips are defined by FTA as trips that do not take place but were requested, confirmed and scheduled by the agency. This includes leaving before the beginning of the pick-up window, not waiting the required wait time, arriving after the pick-up window is over, and departing

without the rider or not arriving at all. Information on the number of missed trips was unavailable. However, Trailblazer Transit generally reports not having a problem with missed trips, at least to the extent where it needs to be tracked.

The number of trip denials in 2017 was 7,440; this equates to almost 30 per day. Trailblazer Transit does not track the reason for denial. Denials are not the same unit of measurement as ridership because the denial numbers do not reflect the multiple rides that could have been provided, such as standing orders. The GMTIP states that demand response transit systems must follow the FTA ADA trip denial definition. FTA defines a denial as a trip requested at least a day prior that the agency cannot provide or is outside of the 1-hour negotiation window. It also includes round-trip requests where the agency can only provide one leg of the trip. If one leg of a trip is taken then it equates to one denial and if the entire trip is not taken than it is two denials. The way denials should be tracked and reported needs to be further refined to accommodate multiple and recurring ride requests and then explained to all transit systems.

While it is anticipated that some level of cancellations will exist, high percentages of same-day cancellations can put strain on a system and lead to increased costs. Trailblazer Transit tracks cancellations in two categories. Late cancellations are those made less than an hour before the beginning of the pick-up window. Same-day cancellations are those made on the same day of the scheduled ride but more than an hour before the start of the pick-up window. In an average month, Trailblazer Transit experiences 2,672 cancellations, an average of 121 per day. Most cancellations (96%) are same day cancellations and only a small percentage are late cancellations. Trailblazer Transit's cancellation rate averages approximately 12% of total rides.

7.1.4 Service Quality and Safety

The GMTIP has guidelines and performance measures for service quality and safety measures in order to gauge the reliability of a system. These metrics include the number of complaints, road calls, and accidents. The number of complaints should be no more than 6 per 100,000 boardings. Trailblazer Transit had 16 substantiated complaints in 2018, which equates to 6.1 complaints per 100,000 boardings.

Breakdowns are a measure of the number of road calls divided by the number of revenue miles and monitor the effectiveness of routine maintenance, vehicle performance, and dependability. MnDOT has set a target of 1 road call per 14,000 revenue miles for each transit system. Trailblazer Transit had 32 road calls in 2018 for an average of 1 road call per 68,877 miles, much better than the target.

Monitoring accidents measures driver safety. MnDOT has set a standard of 1 recordable accident or less per 100,000 revenue miles. A reportable bus accident is defined by the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration as one in which there is any commercial motor vehicle with seating for nine or more involved in an accident that results in a fatality, an injury, or any of the vehicles involved in the crash must be towed away from the scene. Trailblazer Transit had no recordable accidents in 2018.

7.2 Projected Performance

Trailblazer Transit already collects the necessary data but has not historically used all the performance measures, mostly relative to service quality and safety. Moving forward, Trailblazer Transit will utilize the data it collects to track the performance metrics now required by MnDOT and the additional measures that it selects to measure progress toward local goals and priorities. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, MnDOT requires providers to track on-time performance, trip denials, and percentage of communities with a baseline span of service, and MnDOT has set the targets for these performance metrics. MnDOT also requires providers to track passengers per hour, cost per service hour, and cost per trip, but providers define the

targets for these performance metrics. Additionally, MnDOT requires providers to select three performance metrics of their choice, for which providers define the targets. A complete list of these performance metrics and their targets is provided in Table 12.

The definitions of the performance measures that Trailblazer Transit will track are as follows:

- **On-time performance**: the percentage of trips that arrive within a specified pick-up window.
- **Trip denials**: occurs when a trip is requested by a passenger, but the transportation provider cannot provide the service. Trip denial may happen because capacity is not available at the requested time. For ADA paratransit, a capacity denial is specifically defined as occurring if a trip cannot be accommodated within the negotiated pick-up window. Even if a trip is provided, if it is scheduled outside the +60/-60-minute window, it is considered a denial. If the passenger refused to accept a trip offered within the +60/-60-minute pick-up window, it is considered a refusal, not a capacity denial.
- **Percentage of communities with a baseline span of service**: the percentage of public transportation service areas meeting the baseline number of hours during the day when transit service is available in a particular area.
- **Passengers per hour**: unlinked passenger trips per revenue hour. This does not include volunteer trips.
- **Cost per service hour**: fully loaded operating cost per revenue hour. This does not include volunteer trips.
- **Cost per trip (rider):** fully loaded operating cost per unlinked passenger trip. This does not include volunteer trips.
- **Service area**: the percentage of population covered by a service area (demand response service) or the percentage of a service area within a given distance of a transit route (flex route).
- **Farebox recovery**: the percentage of operating costs covered by revenue from fares and contract revenue (total fare revenue and total contract revenue divided by the total operating cost).
- **Road calls:** any mechanical event (not related to an accident) that results in the loss of service or the vehicle being removed from revenue service and replaced with another vehicle.
- **Accidents**: anything that meets the National Transit Database reporting threshold for collision and a reportable event per the most recent Safety and Security Policy Manual or per the FTA Post-Accident Drug and Alcohol testing regulations testing was required. The 2018 Safety and Security Policy Manual defines a collision as one that includes a fatality, an injury which required immediate transport was needed from the scene for medical attention, property damage exceeding $25,000, involve transit revenue vehicles and the towing away of any vehicles (transit or non-transit) from the scene, or a suicide or attempted suicide that involved contact with a transit vehicle. The FTA Post-Accident Drug and Alcohol testing regulations require a test when the accident involves a fatality, any individual suffered a bodily injury and immediately received medical treatment away from the scene of the accident, any disabling damage to any vehicle involved in the accident requiring the vehicle to be towed away from the scene, or the vehicle was removed from operation.

Table 12. Trailblazer Transit Performance Metrics

Performance Measure	Current Baseline	Goal/Target	Frequency of Measurement
On-time performance	95.4%	> 90% on-time within published pick-up window (before published time point for deviated route, 45/45 minute window for demand response)	Monthly
Trip denials	7,440 annually (2.8%)	Transit systems must follow the ADA trip denial definitions and process	Monthly
Percentage of communities with a baseline span of service	0%	> 75% of population covered by demand response service area (20, 12, or 9 daily hours of service depending on population size)	Annually
Passengers per hour	4.5 passengers per hour system-wide	No less than 2 passengers per hour system-wide	Monthly
Cost per service hour	$85.39 system-wide	< $70 system-wide	Monthly
Cost per trip [a]	$19.13 system-wide	< $15 system-wide	Monthly
Service area Coverage	100%	> 75% of population be within system service area	Annually
Farebox recovery [b]	29% system-wide (includes contract and local)	> 20%	Monthly
Road calls	20	< 1 road call per 10,000 revenue miles (based on current mileage, 158 or fewer road calls annually)	Annually
Accidents	Not known – baseline must be established	< 1 recordable accident per 100,000 revenue miles (based on current mileage, 15 per year)	Annually

[a] In 2016, the national average cost per passenger trip was $43.79 for demand response service and $28.71 for demand response service operated by taxi. Trailblazer Transit is operating at a much more efficient cost per passenger trip of $15.94. For more information, see https://www.transit.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/docs/ntd/66011/2016-ntst.pdf. However, Trailblazer Transit still has higher than average costs per rider compared to peers in Minnesota.

[b] Nationally, in 2016, the average farebox recovery rate for demand response services was 7.3%, and for demand response operated by taxi, it was 14.8%. Trailblazer Transit's system-

wide farebox recovery exceeds both averages, so expecting current levels or a slight improvement is a reasonable expectation. For more information, see https://www.transit.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/docs/ntd/66011/2016-ntst.pdf.

8. Operations

Trailblazer Transit operates general public Dial-A-Ride service in Sibley, McLeod, and Wright Counties. There are currently 52 full-time and 16 part-time employees who perform all management, administration, and operational functions.

8.1 Background

Trailblazer Transit requests operational funding from MnDOT on an annual basis and will request operational funding on a semiannual basis starting in 2020. In 2018, Trailblazer Transit had an unaudited operating budget of approximately $5.4 million as shown in

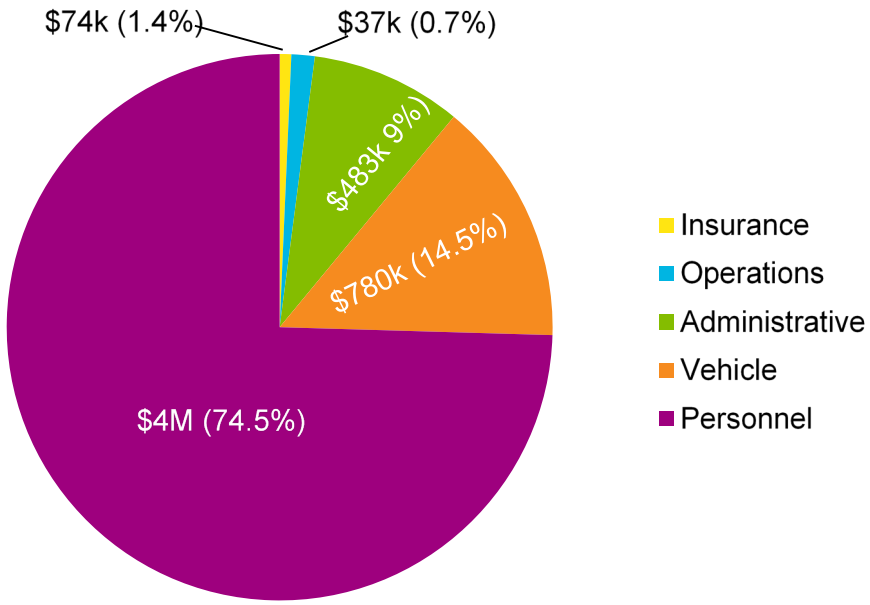
Table 13. These operating costs were projected to be offset by $825,000 in anticipated operating revenue and system revenues. As shown in Figure 29, personnel expenses account for about 75% of the Trailblazer Transit operating budget, which includes expenses such as salaries, wages, and fringe benefits. The second largest expense category is vehicle expenses, which is comprised of fuel, preventative and corrective maintenance, tires, and other vehicle-related costs. Administrative expenses are 9%. Insurance expenses, operations, and taxes and fees comprise the remainder of the Trailblazer Transit operating budget.

Table 13. 2018 Unaudited Operating Budget Request

Line Item	Requested Amount
Personnel	$4,024,000
Administrative	$483,000
Vehicle	$780,000
Operations	$74,500
Insurance	$37,000
Taxes and Fees	$500
Expenditures Sub-Total	**$5,399,000**
Farebox Revenues	$225,000
System Revenues	$600,000
Revenue Sub-Total	**$825,000**
Less Refund Amount	**($105,000)**
Total	$4,469,000

Source: Trailblazer Transit Operating Budget 2018 Breakdown

Figure 29. 2018 Unaudited Operating Cost Categories



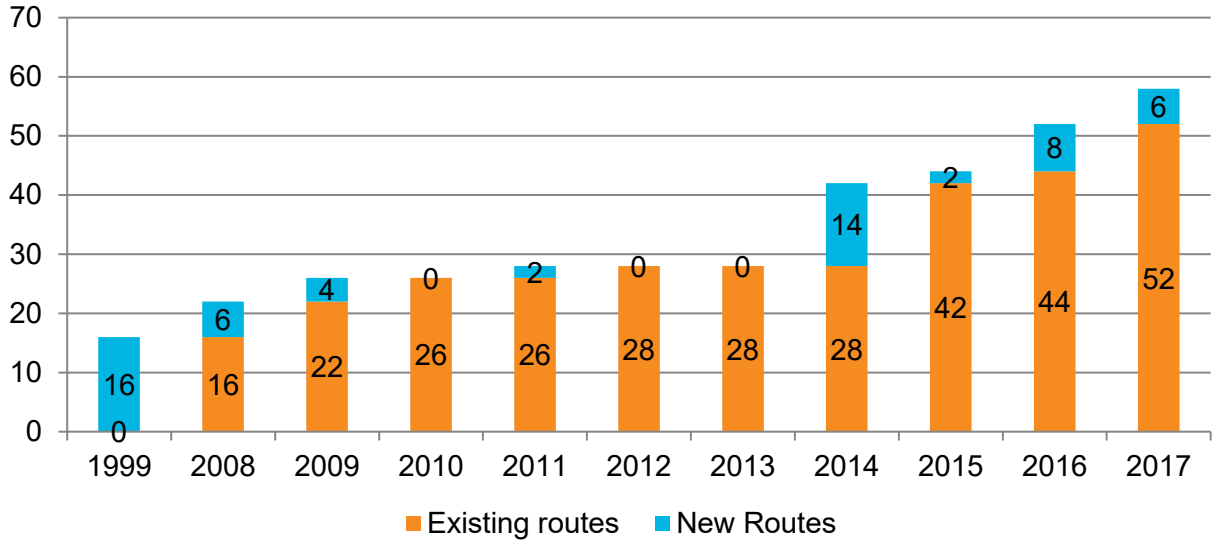
Source: Trailblazer Transit Operating Budget 2018

Note: The figure does not include taxes and fees, which totaled $500.

8.2 Historical and Projected Annual Summary

Trailblazer Transit began with 16 bus schedules in 1999 and now operates 58 schedules daily. Service has increased in 7 of the last 10 years with the addition of new schedules (Figure 30). As the Trailblazer Transit system has grown operating expenditures have increased, although the system has become more efficient. Documented and projected changes in system-wide service hours, miles, and operating costs are highlighted in Table 14. The annual revenue hours increased by 153% between 2013 and 2018 with the largest increase (39%) happening between 2013 and 2014 when Wright County joined the transit system.

Figure 30. Trailblazer Transit Historical Route Growth (1999-2017)



Source: Trailblazer Transit

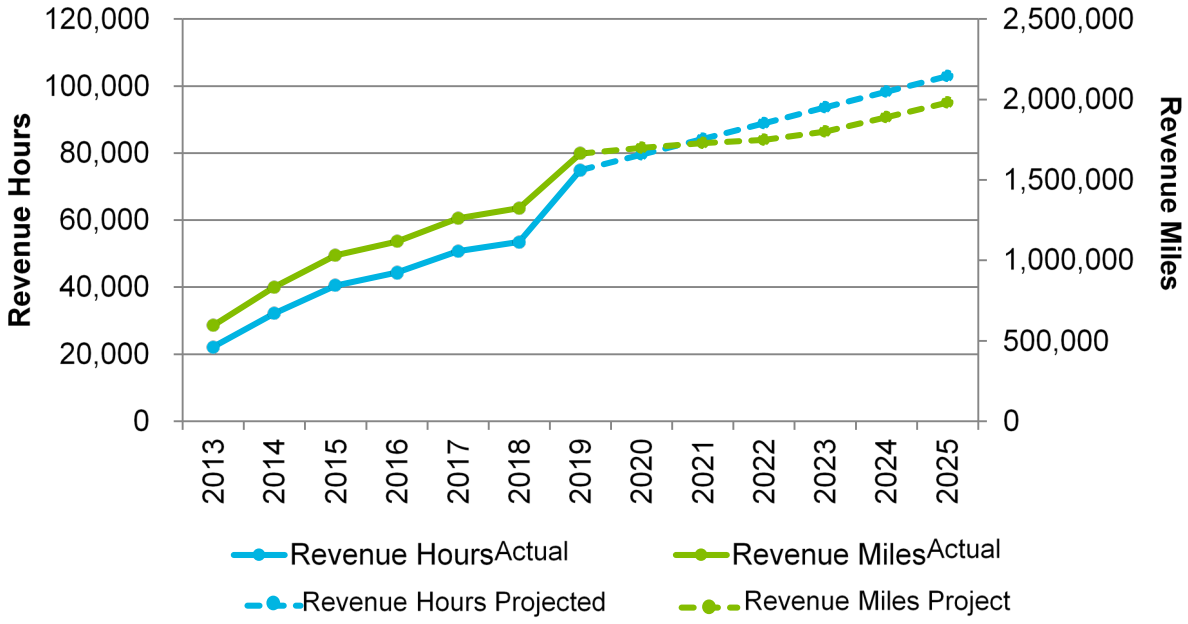
Table 14. System Cost Efficiency by Year (2013-2018)

Year	Revenue Hours	Percent Change Revenue Hours	Revenue Miles	Percent Change Revenue Miles	Operating Cost	Percent Change Operating Cost
2013	23,152		594,620		$1,858,908	
2014	32,169	38.95%	835,489	40.51%	$2,528,551	36.02%
2015	40,461	25.78%	1,031,104	23.41%	$3,066,509	21.28%
2016	44,355	9.62%	1,117,372	8.37%	$3,719,196	21.28%
2017	50,728	14.37%	1,261,028	12.86%	$4,308,461	15.84%
2018	58,754	15.82%	1,377,530	9.24%	$5,017,174	16.45%

Source: Trailblazer Transit Data Tables 9/18/2019

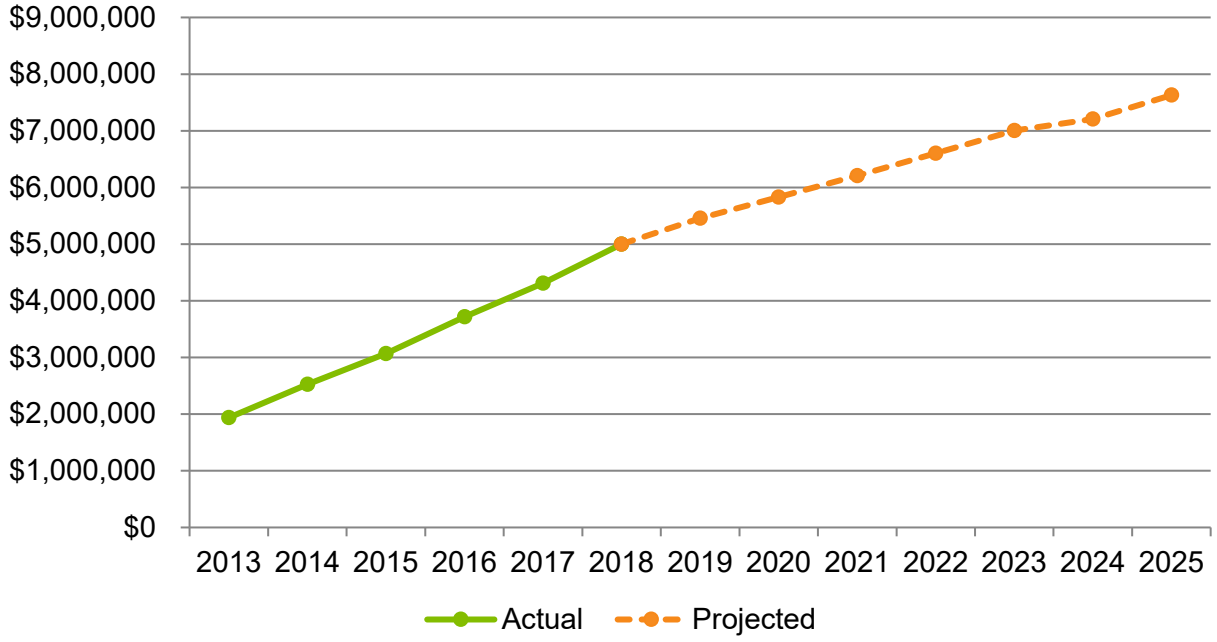
Currently, the system operates 1,377,530 miles and 58,754 hours annually and has a budget of $5,017,174. By 2025 Trailblazer Transit anticipates operating more than 100,000 revenue hours and almost two million revenue miles annually (Figure 31). The projections use a 5% growth rate for revenue hours and a 2% rate for revenue miles after 2019. Historical and projected operating costs are illustrated in Figure 32. Operating costs have grown by $3 million since 2013. Trailblazer Transit estimates that operating costs will increase on average 6% annually from 2019 through 2025.

Figure 31. Actual and Projected Hours and Miles by Year (2013-2025)



Source: Trailblazer Transit

Figure 32. Actual and Projected Operating Costs by Year (2013-2025)



Source: Trailblazer Transit

8.3 Staffing

Trailblazer Transit employs 52 full-time and 16 part-time personnel.[4] Drivers make up two-thirds of the workforce. Driving shifts last between four and seven hours. Trailblazer Transit operates 256 days a year, which equates to 268 revenue hours daily. Assuming that each shift contains seven revenue hours, allowing one hour for deadhead and pre-trip and post-trip inspection time, Trailblazer Transit needs 44 full time equivalent (FTE) drivers to maintain current service levels. This does not account for any extra spare drivers that might be needed when scheduled drivers take time off or are out on extended sick leave. Currently there are 40.5 FTE drivers and staff have indicated there is a driver shortage.

Table 15. Trailblazer Transit Staffing

Type of Staff	Management/ Supervising	Drivers	Dispatch/ Scheduling	Administrative/ Support	Maintenance	Total
Full Time	5	36	8	3	0	52
Part Time	2	9	3	2	0	16
Total	**7**	**45**	**11**	**5**	**0**	**68**

Source: Trailblazer Transit

8.4 2020-2025 Annual Operations Needs

The Transportation Research Board's Transit Cooperative Research Program (TCRP) Report 161 outlines methods for quantifying need and forecasting demand for rural passenger transportation.[5] Appendix E contains the detailed data and worksheets used to quantify the transit need and demand for this FYTSP. Transportation need, summarized in Table 16, is defined as the total number of households without a vehicle times the difference between the daily trip rate for rural households having one personal vehicle and rural households having no personal vehicle. Within the Trailblazer Transit service area, there is an annual need for 1,662,600 one-way trips. These are transportation needs that can be met through a variety of options, including taxi service, volunteer drivers, community partners, or transit providers such as Trailblazer Transit.

Table 16. Transit Need by Jurisdiction

Transit Need/Mobility Gap by Jurisdiction	Annual Number of One-Way Trips Needed
McLeod County	396,900
Sibley County	139,900
Wright County	1,125,800
Total Service Area	1,662,600

Source: 2017 ACS 5-Year Estimates, AECOM

[4] Some staff are full-time employees but have dual roles that make up full-time hours (i.e., driver and fleet supervisor/dispatcher and fleet support). These employees were marked as part time in two categories. These shifts are typically 4 hours/day in each position.
[5] Transportation Research Board, TCRP Report 161, *Methods for Forecasting Demand and Quantifying Need for Rural Passenger Transportation: Final Workbook*, http://www.trb.org/Publications/Blurbs/168758.aspx.

In 2010, the state legislature asked MnDOT to determine the level of funding required to meet at least 80% of public transit need in Greater Minnesota by 2015, and 90% of need by 2025. The legislature set the goal but did not provide additional funding or mandate that the need must be met. The transit providers participated in developing the strategies to increase ridership in Greater Minnesota. However, the GMTIP does not include detailed direction for the transit providers as transit service is based on local needs and resources.

This FYTSP for Trailblazer Transit complements the GMTIP by identifying the need and demand for public transit and priorities unique to the transit provider. Recommendations and investments listed in this plan were developed with input from the community, stakeholders, and transit provider staff and are opportunities to improve current transit service and expand service as appropriate.

TCRP 161 provides several methods for estimating categories of transit demand, provided in Table 17. General Purpose Rural Non-Program Demand is based entirely on demographic factors indicating decreased mobility, including population over age 60, population with a disability, and population without access to a vehicle. Demand for General Public Rural Passenger Transportation is calculated based on the unmet trip need and passenger miles of service in operation. Both estimates of demand are significantly below Trailblazer Transit's 2018 ridership of 262,221, indicating that current services in Sibley, McLeod, and Wright Counties are performing better than demographic factors and service levels would predict. Accordingly, ridership targets and revenue estimation for future service expansions should be based on demonstrated performance of the system rather than national indicators.

Table 17. Transit Demand by Service Area

Transit Demand Type	Annual Number of One-Way Trips In Demand
General Purpose Rural Non-Program Demand	94,300
General Public Rural Passenger Transportation	160,500
Total Demand	**254,800**

Source: 2017 ACS 5-Year Estimates, LEHD 2015, AECOM

In order to meet 90% of community transit needs by 2025, there are operational improvements and upgrades that will need to be funded and implemented, along with the associated capital investments to support improvement and expansion. Trailblazer Transit operations needs are described in this section.

It is widely acknowledged that transit service alleviates traffic congestion, reduces air pollution, generates economic development, and provides access to employment.[6] The benefits of transit service grow the longer the service is operational as a rider base grows and economic development impacts are realized. Being able to sustain the service for the long-term is paramount to realizing the benefits of transit in the region. Sustaining the service involves securing multi-year investments from funding partners and fostering a strong group of transit supporters in the region. Trailblazer Transit plans to implement a strong marketing program that cultivates a positive public image of the service. Sustaining the service is also dependent on the quality of the service, which should provide direct links between residents and their destinations, work or otherwise. The service must also be affordable, comfortable, and reliable. The

[6] Victoria Transport Policy Institute. *Transit Demand Management Encyclopedia*. 2011.

operational needs described in this section will help to bring these benefits to the residents of Sibley, McLeod, and Wright Counties.

8.4.1 Staffing Needs

The need for more operators was identified by Trailblazer Transit, but there is a nationwide, statewide, and local driver shortage due to record low rates of unemployment and commercial driving opportunities with higher compensation and better benefits packages. For the same reasons, Trailblazer Transit has had difficulty in finding qualified staff. With the current staffing load, it is difficult to find replacement drivers when others are out. Upgrading scheduling software should help in route performance by optimizing trip assignment to routes and improving on-time performance. It will also provide real-time information to customers, potentially reducing the volume of calls fielded by customer service representatives. This upgrade should result in higher quality and better consistency in scheduling and dispatching.

8.4.2 Operations Funding Needs

This plan includes several recommended service improvements, detailed below, that will require an annual increase in operating funds for Trailblazer Transit over the period of 2020 to 2025.

8.4.2.1 Service Change Recommendations

Proposed service expansions for Trailblazer Transit include more service in Wright County extended service span on the weekday evenings, weekend service, new regional connections, and feeder services for commuters.

Additional Service to Wright County

This FYTSP calls for an increased level of service in Wright County to meet high demand and decrease wait times for customers beginning in 2020. The addition of three weekday buses on a 10.5 hour span would result in an additional 8,221.5 service hours per year starting in 2020, with 41,107.5 hours annually in 2024. The additional total amount of operating funds needed to provide this service ranges from $624,000 in 2020 to $3,618,000 in 2025.

Regional Connections – City of Waconia

This FYTSP calls for a new regional connection between Wright County and the City of Waconia beginning in 2022. This weekday service would be provided with one vehicle and would result in an additional 3,072 service hours per year. The additional total amount of operating funds needed to provide this service ranges from $247,000 in 2022 to $270,000 in 2025.

Regional Connections – Highway 212

This FYTSP calls for a new regional connection between Wright County and Highway 212 (to serve the healthcare facility) beginning in 2022. This weekday service would be provided with one vehicle and would result in an additional 3,072 service hours per year. The additional total amount of operating funds needed to provide this service ranges from $247,000 in 2022 to $270,000 in 2025.

Regional Connections – Hennepin County

This FYTSP calls for a new regional connection between Wright County and Hennepin County beginning in 2023. This weekday service would be staffed with one vehicle and would result in an additional 3,072 service hours per year. The additional total amount of operating funds needed to provide this service ranges from $255,000 in 2023 to $270,000 in 2025.

Extension of Evening Service

This FYTSP calls for extended evening service across the entire Trailblazer Transit service area beginning in 2024. Increasing the evening service by one hour (from 5:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m.) for 32 vehicles (the estimated peak fleet needs) would result in 8,352 additional service hours per year. The additional total amount of operating funds needed to implement and continue the extended hours ranges from $714,000 in 2024 to $735,000 in 2025.

Weekend Service Extension

This FYTSP calls for new weekend service in the densest parts of Trailblazer Transit's service area (Hutchinson, Otsego, Buffalo, Albertville, St. Michael, and Monticello) beginning in 2025. This weekend service would be comprised of eight vehicles on a 10-hour span on either Saturday or Sunday and would result in an additional 4,160 service hours per year. The additional total amount of operating funds needed to provide this service would be approximately $366,000 in 2025.

Feeder Service for Commuters

This FYTSP calls for feeder service to other transportation providers offering commuter services to the Twin Cities and St. Cloud starting in 2025 in response to requests for longer-distance commuter service options. Service would be operated during peak periods on weekdays only and would require three vehicles that would result in an additional 4,680 service hours per year. Trailblazer Transit does not intend to provide the type of traditional commuter service typically operated by much larger urban transit systems and private, for-profit companies. Such an initiative would require a significant capital investment in an entirely new type of commuter bus that is much different than the classification of bus that Trailblazer Transit currently uses. Instead, Trailblazer Transit would need an additional three MnDOT Class 400 buses to start this feeder service to connect to the larger urban providers. The additional total amount of operating funds needed to provide this service would be approximately $412,000 in 2025.

9. Financial

As shown in Table 18, unaudited operating costs for Trailblazer Transit in 2018 were $5,017,174 with $782,150 in farebox revenue, which equates to an approximately 16% farebox recovery rate. Federal and state revenue sources provided 82% of the rural transit agency's annual operating expenses. The remaining 14% of the annual operating expenses come from local revenue sources, refunds, and contracts. In 2017, Trailblazer Transit's local share was about 29%, comprised of fare and contract revenue, refunds, and other local revenues.

Table 18. 2018 Audited Operating Financial Profile

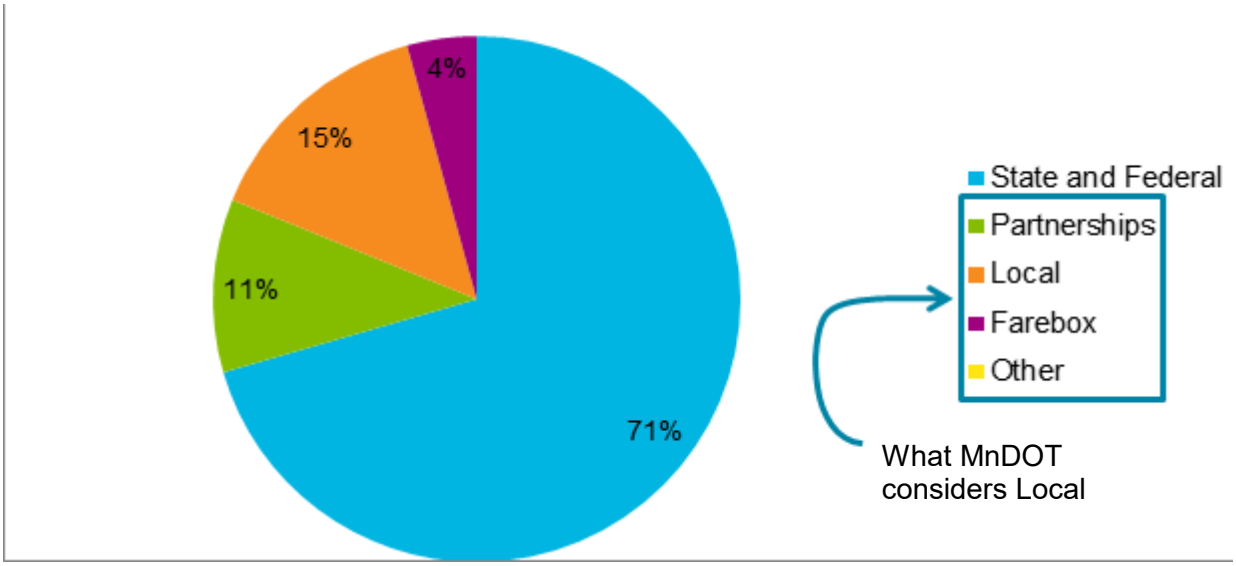
Expense/Revenue Category	Amount
Operating Costs	($5,017,174.30)
Federal Revenue Share	$1,694,009.80
State Revenue Share	$2,570,588.35
Local Revenue Share	$752,576.15
Fare Revenue	$233,140.46
Contract Revenue	$549,009.33

Expense/Revenue Category	Amount
Refunds Fuel tax refunds and other reimbursements considered contra expenses are already accounted for in the net operating costs. Trailblazer received no refunds that would be considered revenue.	$0
Other Local Revenue Interest income and sale of buses	$10,838.37
Reserve Account[a] This is total excess operating revenue and does not reflect any use toward local share for capital expenses.	($40,412.02)

Source of Data: Trailblazer Financial Template; 2018 Transit Grant Request Awards MnDOT

[a] A negative value associated with the reserve account represents a contribution rather than a withdrawal.

Figure 33. 2017 Operating Revenue by Source



Source: Trailblazer Operating Budget 2018

Trailblazer Transit offers a range of fares and passes (Table 19). One-way fares are based on the distance traveled. Travel within one city/town is $2 and between towns is $4 if the trip is less than 25 miles and $8 if it is greater than 25 miles. There are special promotions for children under 2 and first-time users of the bus service. One-way fares can be paid with cash, tokens, check, or invoice. Exact change is required if paying with cash; drivers do not make change. Tokens can be purchased onboard the vehicle and are valued at $2 each. With invoicing, individuals are billed monthly for fares based on actual usage. On average 91.8% of rides are invoiced or use passes, with the reminder 8.2% paying at the farebox. Of those that pay at the farebox, approximately 27% use tokens and the remaining 73% pay with cash. Trailblazer Transit offers four different types of monthly passes that allow a customer to ride an unlimited number of times for a specific purpose:

- **Dining Card**: allows passengers unlimited rides to and from establishments that provide food for purchase and consumption on-site

- **Combo Card**: an upgraded Dining Card that additionally allows passengers unlimited trips to and from shopping establishments
- **Summer Recreation Card**: monthly passes available in June, July, and August that allow passengers unlimited rides to and from any summer-related recreational activity or destination
- **Day Care Provider Card**: allows day care providers to transport children under 12 years old to and from any destination (except between the child's home and day care location)

In addition to fares, Trailblazer Transit also offers hourly rates to groups. The hourly rate is $65 charged at 15-hour increments with a minimum of one hour. Any number of individuals can ride to an unlimited number of destinations. This service is not charter and the general public may ride at the same time on a space-available basis.

Table 19. Fare Structure

One-way Fares	Fares
Rides less than 25 miles	$4.00
Rides 25 miles or more	$8.00
Intracity Discount (pickup and destination in the same city)	$2.00
Dining Card (Monthly Pass)	$16
Combo Card (Monthly Pass)	$24
Summer Recreation Card (Monthly Pass)	$16
Day Care Provider Card (Monthly Pass)	$60
Hourly Rate	$65

Source: Trailblazer Transit Website

9.1 Background

Transit providers serving Greater Minnesota receive funding from several sources at the federal, state, and local levels. Specifically, transit funding is comprised of:

- Federal Transit Funding, United States Department of Transportation (USDOT) (FTA);
- State General Fund appropriations;
- State Motor Vehicle Sales Tax (MVST);
- State Motor Vehicle Lease Sales Tax (MVLST); and
- Local Share: farebox recovery, local tax levies, local contracts for service.

Transit providers in Greater Minnesota generally receive federal funding through the 5311 Non-urbanized Area Formula Program, which provides capital and operating funding for small urban and rural areas, including intercity bus transportation. MnDOT is responsible for distributing federal funds to transit providers in Greater Minnesota.

MnDOT also distributes state funding from the General Fund and Transit Assistance Fund to Greater Minnesota transit providers. Transit services have received funding from the state's General Fund every year for decades. However, the majority of state funding for Greater Minnesota transit providers comes from the Transit Assistance Fund, which receives revenue through the MVST and MVLST.

Minnesota State law requires local participation in funding public transit services in Greater Minnesota. A statutory fixed-share funding formula sets a local share of operating costs by system classification as noted in Table 20. Local revenue sources that can provide the local match include farebox recovery, local property taxes, local sales taxes, contracted route revenues, advertising revenue, or program revenue.

Table 20. Local Share Requirements

Program (Recipient Classification)	Percentage of Required Local Match
Elderly and Disabled	15%
Rural (population <2,500)	15%
Small Urban (population >2,500 and <50,000)	20%
Urbanized (population > 50,000)	20%

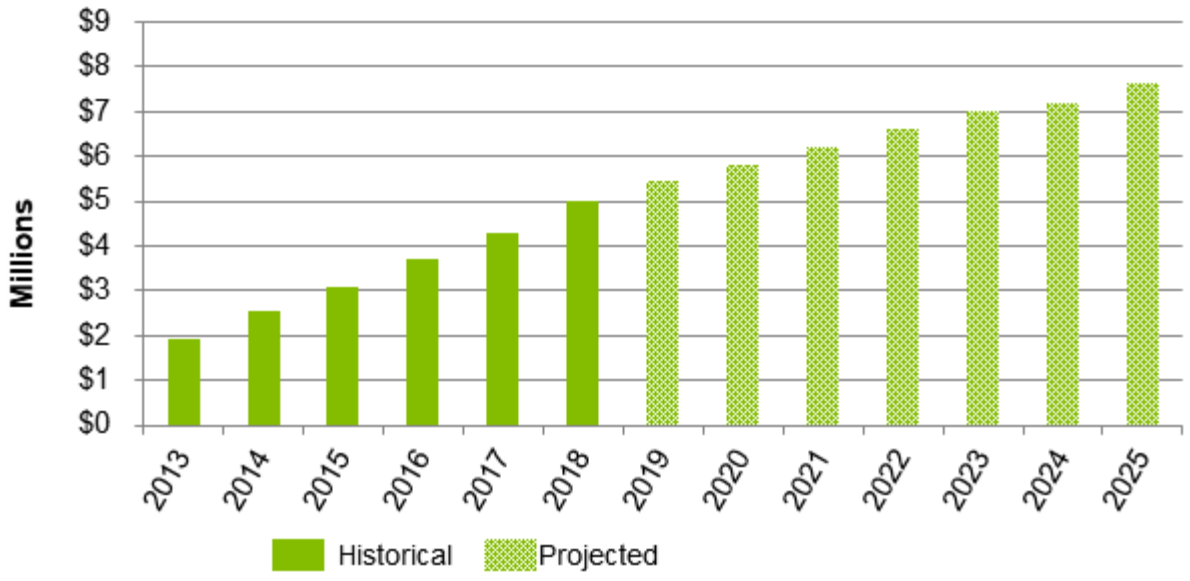
Source of Data: MnDOT Greater Transit Funding in Minnesota

State and federal funding for public transit should cover the remaining 80 or 85% of operating costs. Transit systems in Greater Minnesota often provide additional service that is not recognized in the funding formula, thus the actual percentage of local funding for transit service in Greater Minnesota is more than 20%.

9.2 History

The annual operating budget increased by 153% between 2013 and 2018, with the largest increase (39%) happening between 2013 and 2014 when Trailblazer Transit expanded into Wright County (Figure 34). By 2025, Trailblazer Transit anticipates having an operating budget of $7.6 million, which correlates to the anticipated growth in revenue miles and hours. Operating costs after 2018 are projected using an average growth rate of 6%, which accounts for a 3% increase annually for inflation.

Figure 34. Projected Operating Costs (2013-2025)

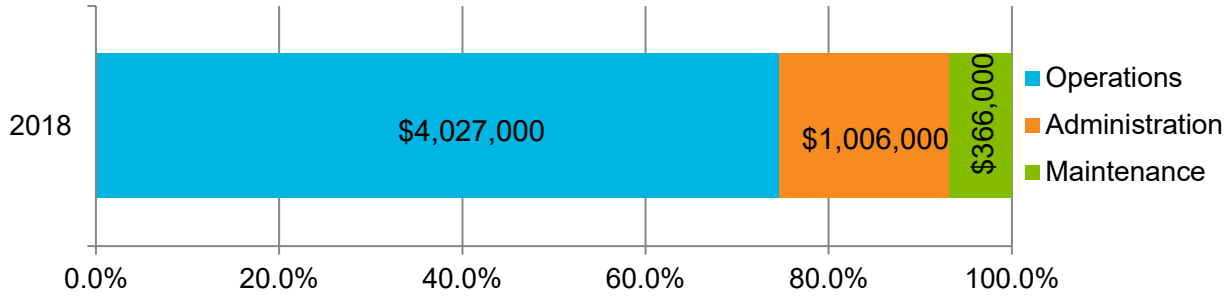


Source: Trailblazer Transit

9.2.1 Expenses

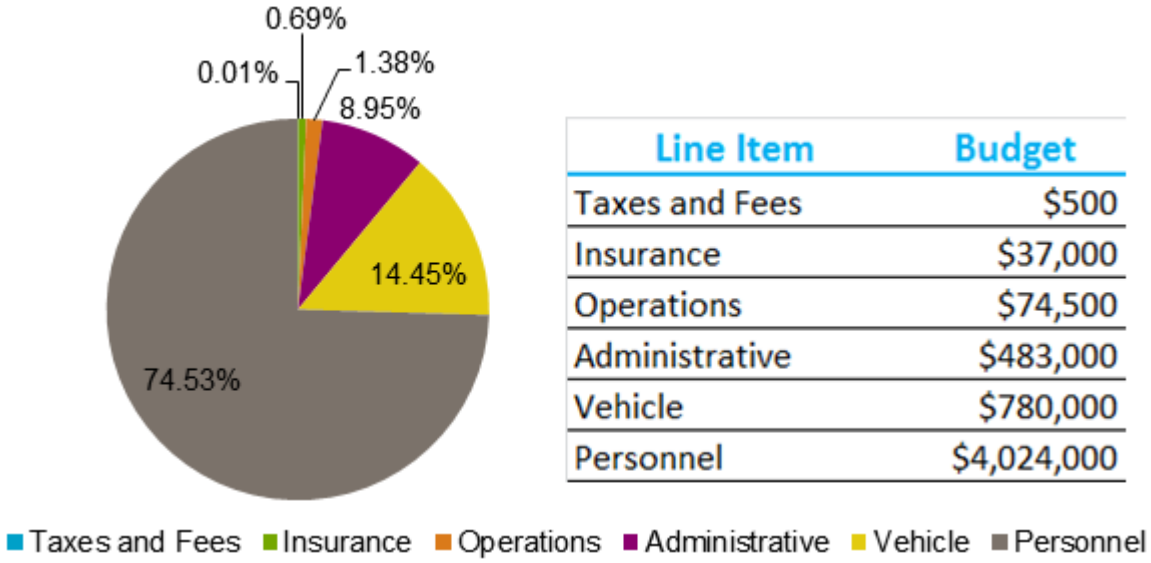
The 2018 operating budget request for Trailblazer Transit was $5.4 million. The budget is broken down into three categories; maintenance, administration and operations. The largest percentage (74.5%) of expenses are operating costs (Figure 35). Within each category there are several groups of line items, Figure 36 shows the overall budget for each group.

Figure 35. 2018 Operating Expenses/Budget Request



Source: Trailblazer Transit 2018 budget request

Figure 36. Line Item Budget Request



Line Item	Budget
Taxes and Fees	$500
Insurance	$37,000
Operations	$74,500
Administrative	$483,000
Vehicle	$780,000
Personnel	$4,024,000

Source: Trailblazer Transit

Operating expenses include driver and support staff wages and benefits, fuel, vehicle registrations and other operation charges as requested in the line item budget. Maintenance includes preventative and corrective maintenance for vehicles, vehicle maintenance and repair wages, tires and other parts, and property maintenance. Administrative expenses are insurance, office supplies, utilities, professional fees, marketing/advertising, leases, administrative and office support salaries and wages, and Drug and Alcohol testing.

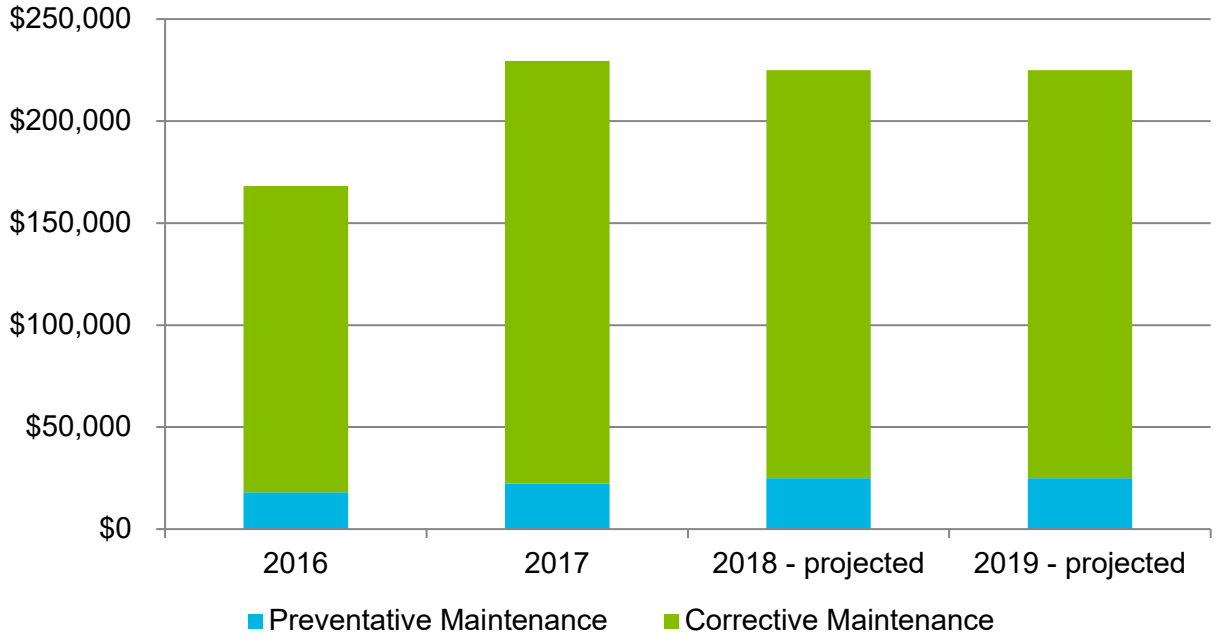
The cost of maintenance makes up 7% the Trailblazer Transit budget, of which nearly 100% is outsourced. Trailblazer Transit hires third-party vendors to complete the maintenance work and has no in-house maintenance staff. As shown in Table 21, annual maintenance costs for outsourced maintenance have increased by 36% from 2016 to 2017, primarily due to the increase in service in Wright County.

Table 21. Maintenance Costs (2016-2019)

	2016	2017	2018 - projected	2019 - projected
Annual Preventative Maintenance	$17,987	$22,306	$25,000	$25,000
Annual Cost of Corrective Maintenance	$150,207	$207,166	$200,000	$200,000
Total Annual Maintenance Costs	**$168,194**	**$229,472**	**$225,000**	**$225,000**

Source: Trailblazer Transit

Figure 37. Actual and Projected Maintenance Costs (2016-2019)



Source: Trailblazer Transit

9.2.2 Revenues

Funding sources for Trailblazer Transit operating expenses include state and federal programs, as well as local funding (Table 22).

State funding comes from the state general fund and the motor vehicle sales tax (MVST). Federal funding is from FTA Section 5311 funds administered by MnDOT. 85% of the operating budget is from state and federal sources.

Minnesota State Law defines local funding to include farebox collections, revenue from partnerships (i.e., service contracts), local property taxes, and local sales taxes. Per Minnesota state law, a minimum of 15% of the funding for rural programs must come from local revenue sources. Other sources of local revenue for Trailblazer Transit include interest income and proceeds from the sale of disposed buses.

Farebox revenue and revenue from service contracts are used to offset the local funding responsibilities for any operating expenses. The counties will fund any remaining deficit through local share according to the following percentages. Sibley County contributes 20%, McLeod County contributes 35%, and Wright County contributes 45% of any local share. Any surplus revenue is called excess operating revenue and is deposited into a protected reserve account that can only be spent on future 5311 expenses.

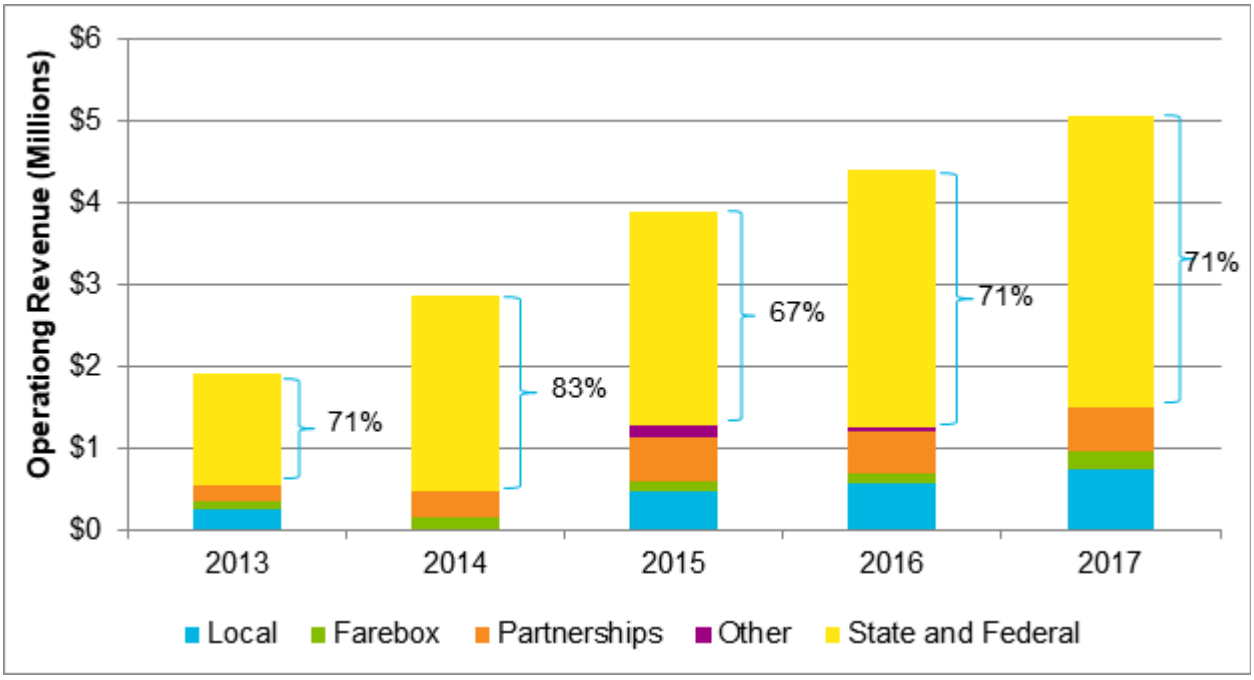
Table 22 shows historical funding for each source. The percentage by funding source remained relatively consistent even with an increasing budget each year. The one exception is 2014 when federal and state share made up 83% of the budget when Trailblazer Transit received additional MnDOT funding to expand into Wright County.

Table 22. Operating Expenditures (2013-2017)

Funding Source	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Federal & State	$1,349,546	$2,390,000	$2,606532	$3,145,000	$3,570,000
Local	$240,782	$11,691	$459,976	$574,196	$738,461
Farebox	$95,973	$146,059	$137,417	$125,583	$215,344
Partnerships/Contracts	$217,317	$321,697	$525,137	$495,254	$539,284
Other	$0	$0	$145,787	$65,885	$0
Operating Expenditures	**$1,903,618**	**$2,869,447**	**$3,874,849**	**$4,405,918**	**$5,063,089**

Source: Trailblazer Transit Financial Template

Figure 38. Operating Revenue Sources (2013-2017)



Source: Trailblazer Transit Financial Template

Trailblazer Transit has contracts (partnerships) with five organizations to provide transit service. Contract service is structured around the organizations, but the service is open to other members of the general public on a space-available basis. These service contracts account for a majority of local revenue. The oldest contracts are over 15 years old and the newest has been in existence for approximately four years. Table 23 provides an overview of each contract.

Table 23. Operating Contract Revenue

Organization Contracted With	Year Contract Began	Annual Contract Revenue Amount 2017 (estimated)
Adult Training and Habilitation Center	2003	$165,000
Minnesota New County School	2003	$45,000
Sibley County Public Health and Human Services	2010	$6,000
McLeod Social Service Center	2010	$30,000
Functional Industries	2014	$336,000

Source: Trailblazer Transit

9.2.3 Capital Expenses

The average cost per vehicle in Trailblazer Transit's existing fleet is $71,068. In 2019, the average cost to purchase a vehicle was $85,000. Funding sources vary by vehicle. Vehicles funded through The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) are 100% federally funded, those through the traditional capital funding program are 80% federally funded and 20% locally funded, and state funded vehicles are either fully funded by the state or have a 20% local match.

Table 24. Capital Expenditures (2012-2017)

Year	Asset Category	Total Expenditures	State and Federal Share	Local Share
2012	Buses	$216,000	$172,800	$43,200
2013	Buses	$203,945	$163,158	$40,790
2014	Buses	$980,952	$784,762	$196,190
2015	Buses	$290,745	$230,400	$60,345
2016	Buses	$74,000	$59,200	$14,800
2017	Buses	$157,611	$126,089	$31,522

Sources of Data: 2013-2018 MnDOT Annual Transit Report

Table 25. Vehicle Capital Funding Sources for Existing Fleet

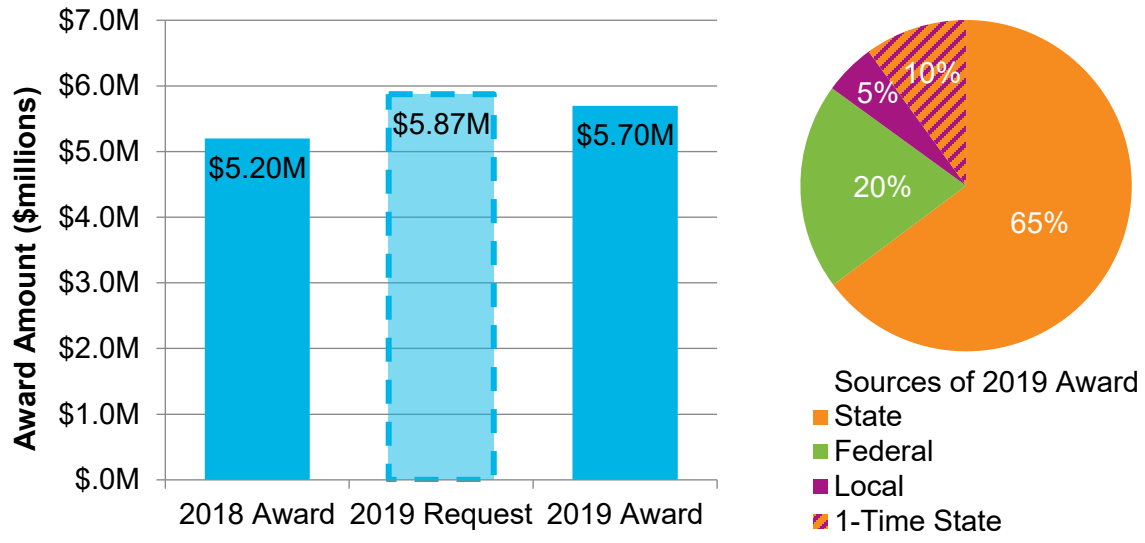
Funding Source	Count	Average Cost
ARRA (from RiverRider)	1	$65,364
Federal Funding	14	$69,252
State Funded	20	$71,465
100 Local Funded	3	$78,797

Source: MnDOT Transit Asset Management Plan

9.3 Budgeted Revenue

Like all rural public transit systems in Minnesota, Trailblazer Transit was designed to operate primarily with funding provided by MnDOT originating from FTA Section 5311 funds and supplemented with state and local funding. Figure 39 illustrates requested and granted funds from 2018 to 2019. The 2019 grant award is about $179,000 less than the amount requested by Trailblazer Transit. The 2019 grant award and represents a 10% increase from the 2018 award. Additionally, MnDOT approved a one-time across-the-board 10% reduction in the local funding requirements for Greater Minnesota transit providers in 2019. This means that the MnDOT operating contract will fund 95% of the eligible expenses and that Trailblazer Transit's local responsibility was reduced from 15% to 5% for 2019 only.

Figure 39. Grant Requests and Awards (2018-2019)

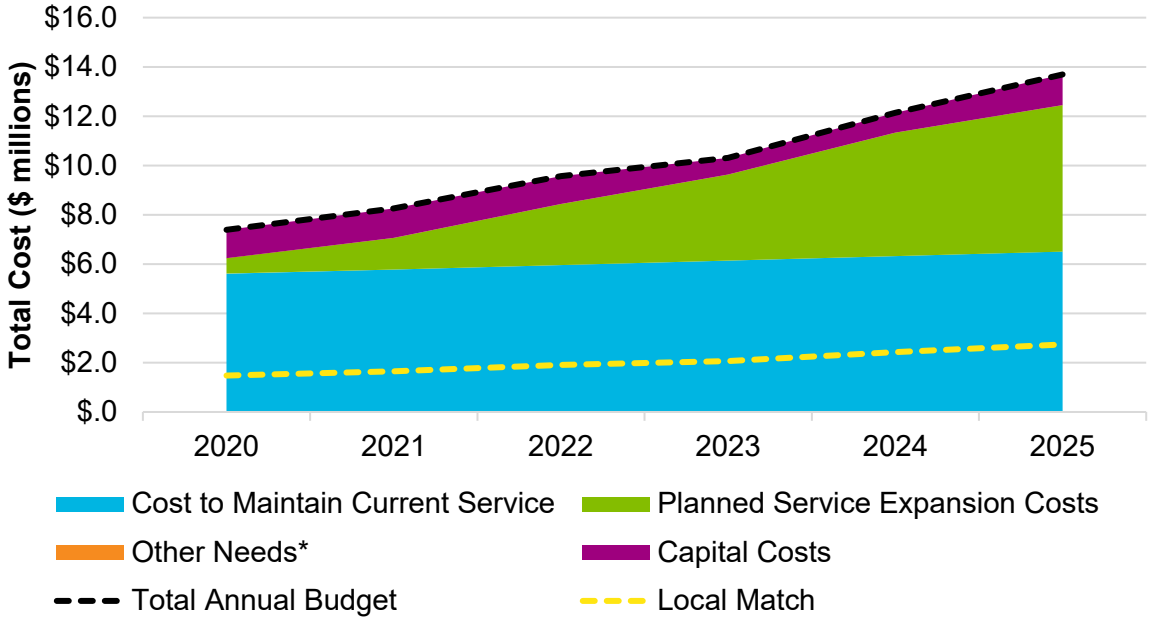


Source: MnDOT 2019 Transit Grant Requests and Awards Compared to 2018 Grant Awards

9.4 2019-2025 Needs vs. Projected Revenue

Capital and operating plans for 2020 through 2025 are included in Appendix A. The combined capital and operating expenses are summarized in Figure 40. As shown, costs to maintain current service, planned service expansion costs, and other needs are expected to increase each year. Increased Wright County demand response service will begin in 2020, new regional connections in 2022 and 2023, extended evening service in 2024, new feeder commuter service in 2025, and weekend service in 2025. The local funding responsibility (15%) would increase from approximately $1,478,000 in 2020 to $2,739,000 in 2025.

Figure 40. 2020-2025 Plan, Local Revenue Requirements



**Other needs are non-capital and non-service costs, which include the annually recurring costs for an additional marketing/recruiting position and purchasing "specialist" position.*

Source: Capital and Operating Templates for 2020-2025 (Appendix A)

10. Agency Strategic Direction

The five-year planning process for all the rural transit service providers (FTA Section 5311) in Greater Minnesota, the first of its kind, has identified and quantified the transit services being operated around the state, which vary greatly in size and scope, and identified potential areas for improvement, expansion, and regional coordination. The provision of transit service is subject to many federal and state guidelines, which may impact how improvements, expansion, and coordination are implemented. In addition to federal, state, and local requirements, this section describes both overarching areas of potential improvement and opportunities identified across the state, as well as those specific to Trailblazer Transit.

10.1 Requirements

The provision of transit service is subject to many local, state, and federal guidelines.

10.1.1 Federal Transit Administration (FTA)

FTA Section 5311 provides formula-based grants to support rural areas for transit capital, planning, and operating assistance.[7] Guidance on the grant, requirements, compliance and the application process is available online[8] and through MnDOT Office of Transit and Active Transportation.[9]

[7] https://www.transit.dot.gov/rural-formula-grants-5311
[8] https://www.transit.dot.gov/regulations-and-guidance/fta-circulars/formula-grants-rural-areas-program-guidance-and-application
[9] https://www.dot.state.mn.us/transit/

The FTA is a major funder of rural transit service in Greater Minnesota. MnDOT operates as the primary recipient of FTA Section 5311 funds. As such, all Greater Minnesota transit service providers (i.e., sub-recipients) receiving FTA Section 5311 funds through MnDOT, as the primary recipient, must comply with FTA regulations. FTA regulations pertain, but are not limited to, major topic areas including: training, safety, maintenance, service, procurement, and drug and alcohol testing. Any contracted service by transit agencies, including taxi services, must also comply with FTA requirements.

FTA also requires compliance with the American's with Disabilities Act (ADA), Olmstead Plan, and Title VI, described in more detail below.

10.1.2 Olmstead Plan

In 1999, the United States Supreme Court affirmed that 1) mental illness is a type of disability, 2) that individuals with disabilities, including those with mental illness, have a right to live in their communities as opposed to forcing institutionalization, and 3) individuals with disabilities are covered by the Americans Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) in *Olmstead vs. L.C and E.W.*[10] The State of Minnesota is one of the more progressive states in instituting a specific Olmstead Plan. Minnesota's Olmstead Plan was updated most recently in March 2018.[11]

For transit providers in Greater Minnesota, the Olmstead Plan requires that people with disabilities, including those with mental illness, are covered by the same requirements of the ADA (discussed in Section 10.1.4). This means that the level of transit service available to the general public (the span of service, frequency of service, and service area coverage) is also available to people with disabilities, including mental illness. This also means that social and human service agencies and public transit agencies should coordinate as much as possible to provide service to individuals with disabilities.

Trailblazer Transit is already coordinating with other providers and provides transportation outside of its primary service area to Lafayette, Le Sueur, Belle Plaine, Cedar Mills, Hamburg, Norwood Young America, Mayer, Watertown, Dassel, Big Lake, Elk River, Rogers, and other cities and rural areas. Trailblazer Transit coordinates with Brown County Heartland Express for service to and from the New Ulm Medical Center. Additionally, Tri-Cap Transit Connection serves the Trailblazer Transit service area, and Central Community Transit serves some Hutchinson area riders. Some coordination also occurs between Trailblazer Transit and Minnesota River Valley Transit for Le Sueur area riders.

10.1.3 Title VI

FTA requires all recipients and sub-recipients to comply with USDOT Title VI regulations, based on the Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Title VI requirements for transit services are generally related to supplying language access to persons with limited English proficiency (LEP).[12] In Greater Minnesota, MnDOT is the primary recipient of FTA funds, so all the Section 5311 transit service providers are sub-recipients. Thus, MnDOT has the primary responsibility for Title VI compliance. MnDOT may request information related to Title VI compliance, including language assistance plans or activities, public participation plans or activities including language access, etc., from the transit service providers as needed.

In Greater Minnesota, with primarily deviated fixed route and demand response service, Title VI responsibilities include identifying communities with LEP and providing materials and outreach in appropriate languages.

[10] https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/527/581/
[11] https://www.dhs.state.mn.us/olmstead/
[12] https://www.transit.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/docs/FTA_Title_VI_FINAL.pdf

10.1.4 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

The ADA is designed to prohibit discrimination based on disability. In terms of FTA and the provision of transit service, the ADA is structured to ensure equal opportunity and access for persons with disabilities.[13] ADA requirements apply to facilities, vehicles, equipment, bus stops, level of service, fares, and provision of service.

In Greater Minnesota, with most service provided via deviated fixed route or demand response, most service-related requirements (i.e. complementary paratransit service associated with fixed route service) are inherently met by the normal service design. Any contracted service by transit agencies, including taxi services, must also comply with FTA and ADA requirements.

MnDOT defines the types of vehicles that are available for service provision in Greater Minnesota. All of the vehicles on the procurement list and in inventory are ADA compliant. Any new facilities or bus stops must be constructed to be ADA compliant. All transit service providers must complete required training.

Service provision-related equivalencies include the following for demand response service:

- The response time, fares, geographic area of service, hours and days of service, trip purpose restrictions, and availability of information and reservations capability must be the same for all riders, including those with disabilities.
- With regard to capacity denials (denials within the existing service parameters in the above bullet), denials are allowed for demand response service, as long as the frequency of denials is the same as the frequency for riders without disabilities.
- Any priority or higher levels of service given to persons with disabilities is a local decision. However, such decisions cannot result in reverse discrimination for people without disabilities.
- Requirements for demand response service are different than those required for ADA complementary paratransit associated with fixed route service.

Service provision-related practices include the following for deviated fixed route service:

- Advertise route deviation policies, including distance and availability.
- Establish a reasonable service area in which deviations are permitted (e.g. ¾ mile).
- Establish reasonable limits on numbers of deviations per trip to ensure that the fixed route portion of the service is able to operate on-time.
- Apply reasonable surcharges for deviations (e.g. deviation surcharges no more than twice the base fare).

All Trailblazer Transit vehicles are ADA compliant. Trailblazer Transit does not provide fixed route service. The upgrade in scheduling and dispatch software will provide Trailblazer Transit with the data needed to demonstrate that individuals with disabilities are not disproportionally impacted with respect to trip denials.

10.1.5 Agency

MnDOT is responsible for making sure each provider (i.e., sub recipient) complies with FTA Section 5311 requirements. MnDOT also has additional requirements for the transit service providers, including:

[13] https://www.transit.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/docs/Final_FTA_ADA_Circular_C_4710.1.pdf.

- Service data for National Transit Database (NTD) reporting
  - Monthly and annually
  - By mode
- Grant management
- Fleet inventory
- Denials
- Capacity
- Unmet Need
- On-Time Performance (pickup window)
- Percent of communities with baseline span of service
- Performance metrics (required, but not tracked)
  - Passengers per hour
  - Cost per service hour
  - Cost per trip
  - Service area coverage
  - Farebox recovery
  - Road calls per 14,000 revenue miles
  - Accidents per 100,000 revenue miles

NOTE: MnDOT reports annual NTD statistics and created and maintains the *Transit Asset Management Plan* for all FTA Section 5311 transit service providers. Therefore, Trailblazer Transit does not need to develop its own Transit Asset Management Plan.

Trailblazer Transit also has the following internal guidelines, policies, and requirements in place:

- Each bus schedule must maintain a minimum of 3 passengers per hour over any three-month period.
- The target for riders/hour on a given bus schedule is 5 or higher, anything less than 3 is monitored per above.
- The target for monthly on-time performance of each bus schedule is 98% or higher, a schedule with an on-time performance of less than 96% is monitored.

10.2 Opportunities

In discussing opportunities with transit service providers throughout Greater Minnesota, several overarching opportunities were identified. They are discussed in Section 10.2.1. Opportunities specific to Trailblazer Transit are discussed in Section 10.2.2.

10.2.1 Southwest Region

Across the Southwest Region (Figure 41) and Greater Minnesota, several themes emerged related to the following opportunities:

- Regional coordination (public and private)
- Marketing

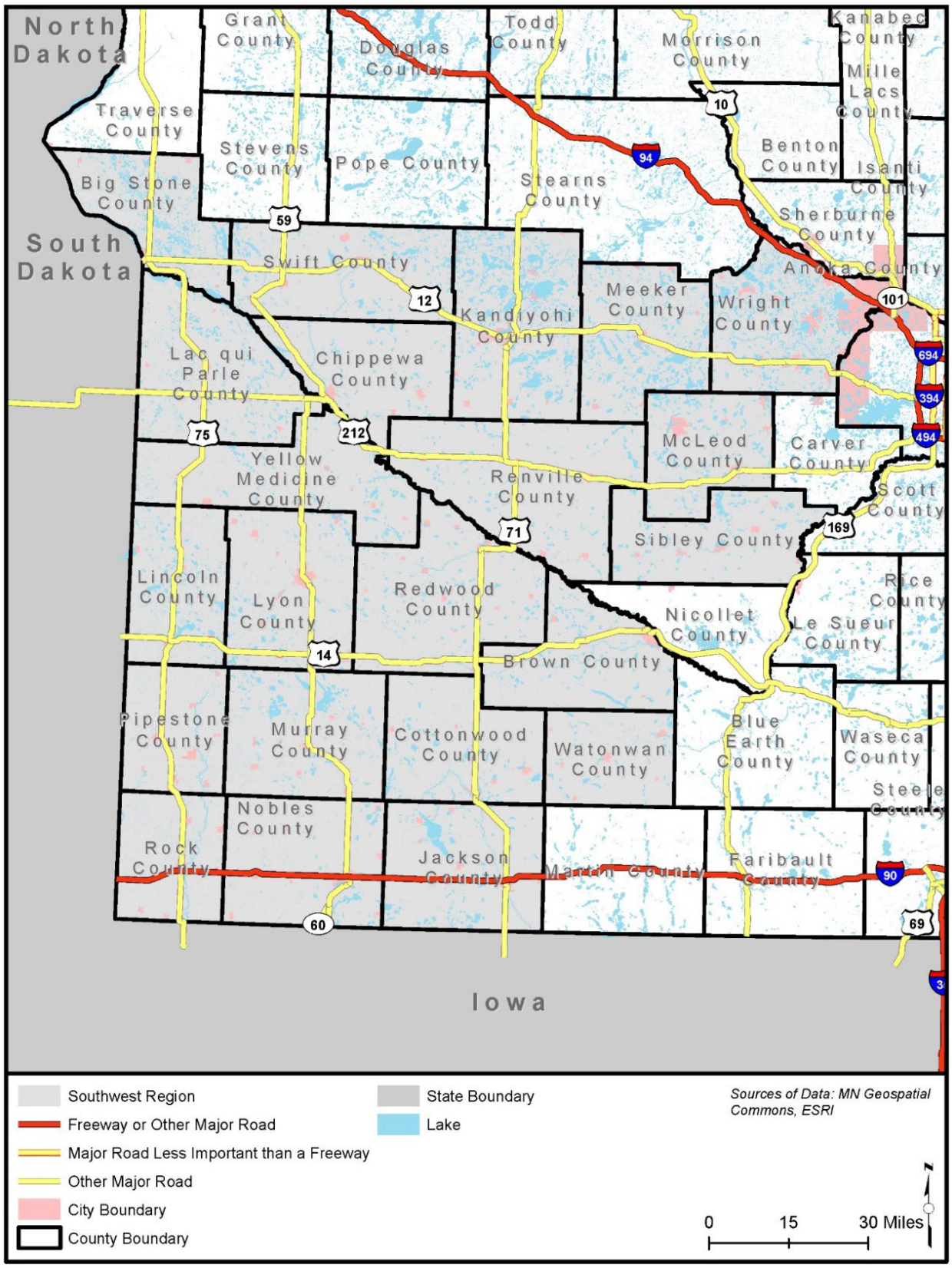
- Mobility management
- Data standardization and tracking
- Transit manager handbook
- Succession planning
- Technology
- Online trip planner/Apps/general transit feed specifications (GTFS)
- Bulk procurement

Regional connections for employment, medical appointments, socialization, and other trip purposes have been identified by many transit service providers as both a need and a challenge to operate or deliver. Many of the longer distance trips are not being completed by public transit but rather by volunteer drivers. Some providers do provide regional services into metropolitan areas or into neighboring counties. As the volunteer driver pools decrease over time, identifying a public transit solution to regional connectivity will be vital. One effort to fill regional transportation gaps is already underway. The Minnesota Department of Transportation and Department of Human Services, in collaboration with other state agencies, are working with local governments and organizations to create Regional Transportation Coordinating Councils as appropriate throughout Minnesota. Coordination between transportation providers and service agencies has been a goal and strategy to fill transportation gaps, provide more service with the same or fewer resources, streamline access to transportation and provide customers more options of where and when to travel. However, coordination comes at a cost. The goal is to find coordination solutions that provide more benefit in the aggregate than the individual cost to specific agencies or customers.

Getting the word out about the services that are available and also how to use the transit service are themes that emerged from every transit service provider in Greater Minnesota. Developing marketing plans and getting out into the community is very time-consuming. Many providers could use additional staff for marketing activities, either a full-time staff position, or a shared regional staff position. Another solution may be to hire individuals in a mobility management role or train schedulers to all serve a mobility management role. Mobility managers are well versed in all types of transportation services in a community and work with customers to identify the best program for that customer. Mobility managers also work with community organizations, human service agencies, major employers and others to get the word out about transit services and how to use them, including providing travel training for potential riders in some cases.

Data collection, organization, and reporting varies greatly from transit service provider to transit service provider. This inconsistency comes from different modes, different operating models, different types and level of technology, among other reasons. MnDOT has the opportunity through this five-year transit system planning process to identify and incorporate data standards, definitions, and tracking procedures. These could be documented in a Transit Manager’s Handbook, something that would be helpful to guide transit managers in planning, operating, and reporting transit services. Staff turnover and the need for succession were mentioned by several transit agencies, both from the perspective of new staff and older staff nearing retirement age. A Transit Managers Handbook would be helpful in both cases.

Figure 41. Southwest Region



Technology also varies greatly from provider to provider; sometimes because of the size of the organization, sometimes because of technical support, and sometimes because of limited staffing. New technology is becoming available and more affordable. Transit service providers and MnDOT have many opportunities to increase the efficiency of service provision and improve customer service through investment in technology. Two primary opportunities came up with regard to technology with many providers:

- Increase awareness of public transit service and the ability to understand how the service works by developing and publishing general transit feed specifications for flexible route service (GTFS-Flex) for each transit service provider. This would enable anyone using Google Maps or Apple Maps or other mainstream online trip planners to see a transit service provider's service area or routes, hours of operation, and trip reservation procedure when they enter in an origin and a destination. It would automatically show whether transit service was available and how to use it.
- Save money, connect adjacent systems, and build regional connectivity and collaboration through bulk procurement of technology, especially scheduling/dispatching software.

10.2.2 Trailblazer Transit

Opportunities identified specific to Trailblazer Transit included:

- Workshops to educate the public on how the service works – Trailblazer Transit, like so many other operators of demand response, continuous need to educate the public on the shared-ride nature and pick-up window policy of demand response. Ongoing workshops to educate the public about how Trailblazer Transit's service works coupled with training for dispatchers and schedulers on how to improve consistency and effectively communicate how the pick-up windows operate and why they exist could alleviate the confusion about the service or myth amongst stakeholders that the levels of service are inappropriate. For many customers the concern with the 20-minute window is the uncertainty about when the vehicle will arrive, by implementing software that sends a notice to individuals 5 minutes before the vehicle arrives it could help alleviate this stress.
- Training for dispatchers/schedulers to improve quality/consistency
- 5-minute warning/call ahead for passengers
- Expand Wright county service – Trailblazer Transit operates 17 bus schedules in Wright County but needs 32 bus schedules according to the Gold benchmark for service levels. Increasing service in the county would require a new or expanded facility, and a temporary solution would be to store the vehicles in a county garage until such time an appropriately-sized facility could be constructed, or the Buffalo facility could be expanded.
- Evening service and weekend service – Expanding service to nights and weekends or through creating regional connections will further increase the mobility of residents. Evening service would be extended by one hour to 6:30 p.m. in 2022. In the more populated areas, weekend service would be added in 2025. Increasing regional connections to destinations outside of the current Trailblazer Transit service area can be achieved through coordinating with neighboring service providers. Regional connections identified included Elk River (Tri-Cap Service areas), Rogers (Metro District), Big Lake (Tri-Cap Service areas), and Sherburne County (Tri-Cap Service areas). Increasing coordination would require additional vehicles and a new or expanded facility as the current ones are at capacity.
- Regional connections to City of Waconia, Highway 212 Medical Center in Chaska and the western portion of Hennepin County including the cities of Corcoran, Greenfield, Independence, Long Lake, Maple Plain, Medina, Minnetrista, Mound, Orono, and St. Bonifacius.

- Provide feeder service to other transportation providers offering commuter services to the Twin Cities and St. Cloud starting in 2025 in response to requests for longer-distance commuter service options.

10.3 Risks/Challenges

As with opportunities, risks and challenges were also identified. Risks and challenges are summarized in this section in terms of themes throughout Greater Minnesota (Section 10.3.1) and specific to Trailblazer Transit (Section 10.3.2).

10.3.1 Southwest Region

Potential risk and challenge themes identified across Greater Minnesota included:

- Funding
  - Longevity and dependability
  - Local match
  - Contracts
  - Performance-based (can systems meet performance standards?)
- Staffing
  - Drivers
  - Professional staff (number of staff and qualifications)
- Fleet
  - Vehicles, number of wheelchair positions
  - Expansion
  - Replacement
  - Fleet size/spare ratio
- Data collection/data tracking
- Performance tracking (how to evaluate system performance)

Funding is a frequently cited concern in Greater Minnesota. Concerns are related to the longevity and dependability of state and federal funding; use of tax revenue for local match vs. fare and contract revenue; contracts, including multi-year contracts; and any future performance-based requirements for funding. Historically, some transit service providers have been conservative about instituting new services because of perceived performance pitfalls and longevity of funding. Moving forward focusing on improvement and expansion of service, funding dependability, diversification, data collection, and reporting will be important.

Most providers mentioned difficulty in finding, hiring, and retaining drivers – both professional drivers and volunteer drivers. Training drivers and supporting drivers while working towards a Commercial Driver's License (CDL) is also a challenge and can be costly. Additionally, finding qualified staff to fill roles associated with operations, management, dispatching/scheduling, marketing, technology, etc. can be challenging in rural areas. Generally, people with higher technical skills live and work in metropolitan areas, where there are generally more

opportunities for high skilled labor than in rural areas. [14] The labor pool is much smaller in rural areas and can lack the quality of people needed to operate a successful, efficient, and complaint transit system .

Other potential challenges focus on fleet. Some transit service providers operate in rural areas with high proportions of disabled riders. As such, some require vehicles with more than two wheelchair positions. Diversifying vehicles available for use in Greater Minnesota may be required to implement some of the solutions identified in the five-year transit system plans and to realize the opportunities described in the previous section. Other areas for concern regarding fleet include being able to expand the fleet based on unmet needs; replacing vehicles that have higher-than average maintenance costs even if they have not exceeded their useful life; policies for classifying fleet and using retired vehicles in service or as spares; and maintaining and appropriate spare ratio. Several transit service providers reported service reductions due to an ineffective spare ratio or the inability to expand the fleet.

Finally, potential challenges exist with regard to data collection, data tracking, and performance tracking. As mentioned in the previous section, an opportunity exists to standardize data collection, reporting and tracking. This is an ambitious goal due to the variety of scheduling software that are being used, the lack of any software in some cases, and the variety of operating models that exist. In order to realize some of the opportunities, some level of standardization would be required. Further regionalization and consolidation would be beneficial in this regard.

10.3.2 Trailblazer Transit

During the outreach process and through in-person meetings with Trailblazer transit, the following risks/challenges to providing and improving service were identified. Potential risks and challenges identified by Trailblazer Transit included:

- Challenge: Finding and retaining qualified staff
- Risk: Deploying the new Reveal dispatching software will take longer than anticipated
- Challenge: Communicating pick-up window policy/reasons for pick-up windows to customers
- Challenge: Insufficient service in Wright County
- Challenge: Lower numbers of administrative staff relative to its peer group, which puts a strain on the entire staff and bottlenecks the work that needs to be completed.
- Challenge: Ongoing challenges with governing board discord
- Challenge: Belief amongst some Sibley County and McLeod County stakeholders that they are not provided an appropriate level of service
- Risk: Inaccurate performance data from current dispatching software is misleading and makes data-driven decision making challenging
- Challenge: Staff turnover and change within MnDOT administration
- Challenge: Political differences between Trailblazer Board Members

[14] Workforce Skills across the Urban-Rural Hierarchy, Federal Reserve Bank of New York Staff Report February 2012 https://www.newyorkfed.org/medialibrary/media/research/staff_reports/sr552.pdf.

11. Increasing Transit Use for Agency

As the goal set forth by state legislature is to understand what level of funding it would take to meet 90% of the transportation needs in Greater Minnesota by 2025, the primary assumption in the development of the five-year transit system plans is that transit agencies need to expand and grow ridership in order to meet the 90% of transportation needs. Strategies to improve transit services and increase ridership were described in detail in previous chapters. Another crucial element to increasing ridership and growing transit mode share in an area is a comprehensive marketing and education strategy. Ridership will not increase if the community does not know that the service exists or how to use it.

Section 12.1 describes the elements of a comprehensive marketing and education program that could help Trailblazer Transit grow ridership and community awareness. Section 12.2 describes an action plan for growing ridership and community awareness

11.1 Marketing

Complementing the recommendations previously described in this five-year transit system plan, continuous marketing and education on the transit services available and how they work are crucial to the success of the transit program and to entwining the service into the fabric of the community. Some goals for marketing and education could include:

- Increase awareness, understanding, and utilization of the transit service by residents, employees and visitors
- Promote transit service as both a fiscally responsible and green choice
- Position Trailblazer Transit as the bus service in the region

Possible strategies to achieve these goals include:

- Update website
  - Include concise, clear instructions on how to use the service and who is eligible (everyone!)
  - Include easy-to-understand schedules and maps of services
  - Link to website from other town/city/county/partner websites
  - Provide downloadable brochures
  - Embed an online trip planner or link to an online trip planner
  - Add a ‘Where’s my Bus’ option to the website
- Develop a social media presence
  - Post/update regularly
  - Advertise changes
  - Profile riders
  - Introduce new programs
  - Announce weather delays or cancellations
  - Promote the benefits of transit service

- Consider smartphone apps
  - Develop GTFS so that provider services show up as an option in common mapping apps (e.g., Google Maps, Apple Maps) and/or online trip planners. GTFS-Flex is the appropriate specification for deviated fixed route or demand response service
  - Add a 'Where's my Bus' option to the website or a separate app so that customers can track their rides
  - Allow customers to request trips/negotiate trips with schedulers
- Embrace the mobility management role in the community
  - Add a mobility manager to staff or share a regional mobility manager with partner transit service providers
  - Train schedulers and dispatchers to function as mobility managers
    - Educate on all services/programs available in the service area and beyond
    - Train to negotiate and make connections until the customer has a viable option to meet their request/need
- Preserve and strengthen the Trailblazer Transit brand
- Create a warehouse of high-quality transit related clip art and graphics that can be used for flyers, ads, brochures, etc.

11.2 Action Plan

Based on discussions with Trailblazer Transit throughout the fall and winter of 2018-2019, stakeholder outreach, and the survey results, the following ideas were identified:

- Education on how the service works through ongoing workshops
- Training for dispatch/schedulers to improve the quality of customer service
- Develop an app that allows people to plan a trip
- Develop high-quality transit related clip art for flyers, ads, brochures, etc.

Other possible strategies include:

- Put together a marketing campaign that 'speaks' to potential customers – identify local advocates who have positive stories to share about their use of Trailblazer Transit bus service. Some examples may include:
  - Provide an example of a rider who used to spend X on commuting costs, but riding the bus to commute only costs Y, a savings of % percent annually
  - Work with local senior groups to identify benefits to seniors in longevity and quality of life when mobility options are available that allow them to get out of their homes and attend events, run errands, and make it to medical appointments
- Include a 'Benefits of Transit Service' section on the website and brochures
  - Use national research statistics on the benefits of transit service
  - Identify different themes to capture the attention of different audiences and strategically utilize the themes in materials publicized with community partners and on Trailblazer Transit materials
  - For mainstream materials, periodically focus on different themes to capture different audiences and re-engage others

- Benefit themes may include: economic development, aging in place, reduction in air pollution, technology, community building, access to education and employment opportunities, quality of life for seniors and disabled persons, reduction in dependence on personal vehicles, mobility options for people living in rural areas, attraction of international tourists who will only visit destinations that do not require the use of personal vehicles, etc.

Appendix A Capital and Operating Plans for 2020-2025

Five Year Capital Plan

Trailblazer

Line Number	Line Item Name	2019 Budget	Inflation Factor (3% / year)	2020	2020 (local match)	2021	2021 (local match)	2022	2022 (local match)	2023	2023 (local match)	2024	2024 (local match)	2025	2025 (local match)
1711	Vehicle Cost	$ -		$ 968,000	$ 193,600	$ 1,001,000	$ 200,200	$ 940,000	$ 188,000	$ 485,000	$ 97,000	$ 600,000	$ 120,000	$ 1,030,000	$ 206,000
1712	Farebox(es)	$ -			$ -		$ -		$ -		$ -		$ -		$ -
1713	AVL/MDT	$ -		$ 43,260	$ 8,652	$ 44,558	$ 8,912	$ 45,895	$ 9,179	$ 47,271	$ 9,454	$ 48,690	$ 9,738	$ 50,150	$ 10,030
1714	Camera(s)	$ -			$ -		$ -		$ -		$ -		$ -		$ -
1715	Logos	$ -			$ -		$ -		$ -		$ -		$ -		$ -
1716	Radio (Communication Equipment)	$ -			$ -		$ -		$ -		$ -		$ -		$ -
1717	Other Bus Related Equipment	$ -			$ -		$ -		$ -		$ -		$ -		$ -
1720	Lift, Ramp Expenses, etc.	$ -			$ -		$ -		$ -		$ -		$ -		$ -
1730	Radio Equipment Expenses	$ -			$ -		$ -		$ -		$ -		$ -		$ -
1740	Fare Box Expenses	$ -			$ -		$ -		$ -		$ -		$ -		$ -
1750	Other Capital Expenses	$ -			$ -		$ -		$ -		$ -		$ -		$ -
1760	Facility Purchase and/or Construction Cost	$ -		$ 140,080	$ 28,016	$ 144,282	$ 28,856	$ 148,611	$ 29,722	$ 153,069	$ 30,614	$ 157,661	$ 31,532	$ 162,391	$ 32,478
	Total Capital Budget	**$ -**		**$ 1,151,340**	**$ 230,268**	**$ 1,189,840**	**$ 237,968**	**$ 1,134,505**	**$ 226,901**	**$ 685,341**	**$ 137,068**	**$ 806,351**	**$ 161,270**	**$ 1,242,541**	**$ 248,508**
Capital	Total 1711 - 1740 (only)	$ -	$ -	$ 1,011,260	$ 202,252	$ 1,045,558	$ 209,112	$ 985,895	$ 197,179	$ 532,271	$ 106,454	$ 648,690	$ 129,738	$ 1,080,150	$ 216,030

Operations PLANNING - Trailblazer summary table

		2018	2020	2020	2021	2021	2022	2022	2023	2023	2024	2024	2025	2025
			total cost	local share	total cost	local share	total cost	local share	total cost	local share	total cost	local share	total cost	local share
		$	plus 3%	20%	plus 3%	20%	plus 3%	20%	plus 3%	20%	plus 3%	20%	plus 3%	20%
Status Quo (Maintain)		$ 5,294,000.00	$ 5,616,404.60	$ 1,123,280.92	$ 5,784,896.74	$ 1,156,979.35	$ 5,958,443.64	$ 1,191,688.73	$ 6,137,196.95	$ 1,227,439.39	$ 6,321,312.86	$ 1,264,262.57	$ 6,510,952.24	$ 1,302,190.45

	Implementation Y	2019	2020	2020	2021	2021	2022	2022	2023	2023	2024	2024	2025	2025
			total cost	local share	total cost	local share	total cost	local share	total cost	local share	total cost	local share	total cost	local share
		$	plus 3%	20%	plus 3%	20%	plus 3%	20%	plus 3%	20%	plus 3%	20%	plus 3%	20%
Expand/Grow				$ -		$ -		$ -		$ -		$ -		$ -
Additional Service Wright County (3 buses)	2020	$ 605,925.00	$ 624,102.75	$ 124,820.55	$ 642,825.83	$ 128,565.17	$ 662,110.61	$ 132,422.12	$ 681,973.93	$ 136,394.79	$ 702,433.14	$ 140,486.63	$ 723,506.14	$ 144,701.23
Additional Service Wright County (3 buses)	2021	$ 605,925.00	$ 624,102.75	$ 124,820.55	$ 642,825.83	$ 128,565.17	$ 662,110.61	$ 132,422.12	$ 681,973.93	$ 136,394.79	$ 702,433.14	$ 140,486.63	$ 723,506.14	$ 144,701.23
Additional Service Wright County (3 buses)	2022	$ 605,925.00	$ 624,102.75	$ 124,820.55	$ 642,825.83	$ 128,565.17	$ 662,110.61	$ 132,422.12	$ 681,973.93	$ 136,394.79	$ 702,433.14	$ 140,486.63	$ 723,506.14	$ 144,701.23
Additional Service Wright County (3 buses)	2023	$ 605,925.00	$ 624,102.75	$ 124,820.55	$ 642,825.83	$ 128,565.17	$ 662,110.61	$ 132,422.12	$ 681,973.93	$ 136,394.79	$ 702,433.14	$ 140,486.63	$ 723,506.14	$ 144,701.23
Additional Service Wright County (3 buses)	2024	$ 605,925.00	$ 624,102.75	$ 124,820.55	$ 642,825.83	$ 128,565.17	$ 662,110.61	$ 132,422.12	$ 681,973.93	$ 136,394.79	$ 702,433.14	$ 140,486.63	$ 723,506.14	$ 144,701.23
2024 Evening Service Expansion (fleet size, 32)	2024	$ 615,520.00	$ 633,985.60	$ 126,797.12	$ 653,005.17	$ 130,601.03	$ 672,595.32	$ 134,519.06	$ 692,773.18	$ 138,554.64	$ 713,556.38	$ 142,711.28	$ 734,963.07	$ 146,992.61
Regional Connections -Waconia City (1 bus)	2022	$ 226,406.00	$ 233,198.18	$ 46,639.64	$ 240,194.13	$ 48,038.83	$ 247,399.95	$ 49,479.99	$ 254,821.95	$ 50,964.39	$ 262,466.61	$ 52,493.32	$ 270,340.60	$ 54,068.12
Regional Connections - Hwy 212 (1 bus)	2022	$ 226,406.00	$ 233,198.18	$ 46,639.64	$ 240,194.13	$ 48,038.83	$ 247,399.95	$ 49,479.99	$ 254,821.95	$ 50,964.39	$ 262,466.61	$ 52,493.32	$ 270,340.60	$ 54,068.12
Regional Connections - Hennepin County (1 bus)	2023	$ 226,406.00	$ 233,198.18	$ 46,639.64	$ 240,194.13	$ 48,038.83	$ 247,399.95	$ 49,479.99	$ 254,821.95	$ 50,964.39	$ 262,466.61	$ 52,493.32	$ 270,340.60	$ 54,068.12
Weekend Service Extension (8 vehicles)	2025	$ 306,592.00	$ 315,789.76	$ 63,157.95	$ 325,263.45	$ 65,052.69	$ 335,021.36	$ 67,004.27	$ 345,072.00	$ 69,014.40	$ 355,424.16	$ 71,084.83	$ 366,086.88	$ 73,217.38
Feeder Commuter Service (3 vehicles)	2025	$ 344,916.00	$ 355,263.48	$ 71,052.70	$ 365,921.38	$ 73,184.28	$ 376,899.03	$ 75,379.81	$ 388,206.00	$ 77,641.20	$ 399,852.18	$ 79,970.44	$ 411,847.74	$ 82,369.55
			$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -
			$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -
			$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -
			$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -
			$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -
			$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -
Expansion/Growth Cost		**$ 4,975,871.00**	**$ 624,102.75**	**$ 124,820.55**	**$ 1,285,651.67**	**$ 257,130.33**	**$ 2,481,131.72**	**$ 496,226.34**	**$ 3,492,361.55**	**$ 698,472.31**	**$ 5,013,121.91**	**$ 1,002,624.38**	**$ 5,941,450.19**	**$ 1,188,290.04**
NEW TOTAL BUDGET	-	-	**$ 6,240,507.35**	**$ 1,248,101.47**	**$ 7,070,548.40**	**$ 1,414,109.68**	**$ 8,439,575.36**	**$ 1,687,915.07**	**$ 9,629,558.50**	**$ 1,925,911.70**	**###########**	**$ 2,266,886.95**	**###########**	**$ 2,490,480.49**

Five Year Transit Sytem Plan -- Operating Budget																			
Provider	Trailblazer																		
Line Item	Operating Expenses	2018 Budget	2018 (local match)	2019 Projected	Cost Factor	Inflation Factor (3% / year)	2020	2020 (local match)	2021	2021 (local match)	2022	2022 (local match)	2023	2023 (local match)	2024	2024 (local match)	2025	2025 (local match)
1010	Admin, Management & Supervisory Salaries	$292,000.00	$ 58,400.00	$ 300,760.00	Fixed	3%	$ 309,782.80	$ 61,956.56	$ 319,076.28	$ 63,815.26	$ 328,648.57	$ 65,729.71	$ 338,508.03	$ 67,701.61	$ 348,663.27	$ 69,732.65	$ 359,123.17	$ 71,824.63
1020	Operator's Wages	$1,754,000.00	$ 350,800.00	$ 1,806,620.00	$ / Hour	3%	$ 1,860,818.60	$ 372,163.72	$ 1,916,643.16	$ 383,328.63	$ 1,974,142.45	$ 394,828.49	$ 2,033,366.73	$ 406,673.35	$ 2,094,367.73	$ 418,873.55	$ 2,157,198.76	$ 431,439.75
1030	Vehicle Maintenance and Repair Wages	$40,000.00	$ 8,000.00	$ 41,200.00	$ / Mile	3%	$ 42,436.00	$ 8,487.20	$ 43,709.08	$ 8,741.82	$ 45,020.35	$ 9,004.07	$ 46,370.96	$ 9,274.19	$ 47,762.09	$ 9,552.42	$ 49,194.95	$ 9,838.99
1040	General Office Support Wages	$194,000.00	$ 38,800.00	$ 199,820.00	Fixed	3%	$ 205,814.60	$ 41,162.92	$ 211,989.04	$ 42,397.81	$ 218,348.71	$ 43,669.74	$ 224,899.17	$ 44,979.83	$ 231,646.15	$ 46,329.23	$ 238,595.53	$ 47,719.11
1050	Operations Support Wages	$477,000.00	$ 95,400.00	$ 491,310.00	Fixed	3%	$ 506,049.30	$ 101,209.86	$ 521,230.78	$ 104,246.16	$ 536,867.70	$ 107,373.54	$ 552,973.73	$ 110,594.75	$ 569,562.95	$ 113,912.59	$ 586,649.83	$ 117,329.97
1060	Fringe Benefits	$1,267,000.00	$ 253,400.00	$ 1,305,010.00	variable	3%	$ 1,344,160.30	$ 268,832.06	$ 1,384,485.11	$ 276,897.02	$ 1,426,019.66	$ 285,203.93	$ 1,468,800.25	$ 293,760.05	$ 1,512,864.26	$ 302,572.85	$ 1,558,250.19	$ 311,650.04
Personnel Services	Total 1000 (1010 - 1060)	$ 4,024,000.00	$ 804,800.00	$ 4,144,720.00			$ 4,269,061.60	$ 853,812.32	$ 4,397,133.45	$ 879,426.69	$ 4,529,047.45	$ 905,809.49	$ 4,664,918.87	$ 932,983.77	$ 4,804,866.44	$ 960,973.29	$ 4,949,012.43	$ 989,802.49
1110	Management Fees		$ -	$ -	Variable	3%	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -
1120	Drug and Alcohol Testing and Administration Fee Expenses	$12,000.00	$ 2,400.00	$ 12,360.00	Variable	3%	$ 12,730.80	$ 2,546.16	$ 13,112.72	$ 2,622.54	$ 13,506.11	$ 2,701.22	$ 13,911.29	$ 2,782.26	$ 14,328.63	$ 2,865.73	$ 14,758.49	$ 2,951.70
1130	Advertising, Marketing and Promotional Charges	$30,000.00	$ 6,000.00	$ 30,900.00	Variable	3%	$ 31,827.00	$ 6,365.40	$ 32,781.81	$ 6,556.36	$ 33,765.26	$ 6,753.05	$ 34,778.22	$ 6,955.64	$ 35,821.57	$ 7,164.31	$ 36,896.22	$ 7,379.24
1140	Legal, Auditing, and Other Professional Fees	$70,000.00	$ 14,000.00	$ 72,100.00	Variable	3%	$ 74,263.00	$ 14,852.60	$ 76,490.89	$ 15,298.18	$ 78,785.62	$ 15,757.12	$ 81,149.19	$ 16,229.84	$ 83,583.66	$ 16,716.73	$ 86,091.17	$ 17,218.23
1150	Staff Development Costs	$5,000.00	$ 1,000.00	$ 5,150.00	Variable	3%	$ 5,304.50	$ 1,060.90	$ 5,463.64	$ 1,092.73	$ 5,627.54	$ 1,125.51	$ 5,796.37	$ 1,159.27	$ 5,970.26	$ 1,194.05	$ 6,149.37	$ 1,229.87
1160	Office Supplies	$38,000.00	$ 7,600.00	$ 39,140.00	Variable	3%	$ 40,314.20	$ 8,062.84	$ 41,523.63	$ 8,304.73	$ 42,769.33	$ 8,553.87	$ 44,052.41	$ 8,810.48	$ 45,373.99	$ 9,074.80	$ 46,735.21	$ 9,347.04
1170	Leases and Rentals - Administrative Facilities	$223,000.00	$ 44,600.00	$ 229,690.00	Variable	3%	$ 236,580.70	$ 47,316.14	$ 243,678.12	$ 48,735.62	$ 250,988.46	$ 50,197.69	$ 258,518.12	$ 51,703.62	$ 266,273.66	$ 53,254.73	$ 274,261.87	$ 54,852.37
1180	Utilities	$85,000.00	$ 17,000.00	$ 87,550.00	Variable	3%	$ 90,176.50	$ 18,035.30	$ 92,881.80	$ 18,576.36	$ 95,668.25	$ 19,133.65	$ 98,538.30	$ 19,707.66	$ 101,494.45	$ 20,298.89	$ 104,539.28	$ 20,907.86
1190	Other Direct Administrative Charges	$20,000.00	$ 4,000.00	$ 20,600.00	Variable	3%	$ 21,218.00	$ 4,243.60	$ 21,854.54	$ 4,370.91	$ 22,510.18	$ 4,502.04	$ 23,185.48	$ 4,637.10	$ 23,881.05	$ 4,776.21	$ 24,597.48	$ 4,919.50
Administrative Charges	Total 1100 (1110 - 1190)	$ 483,000.00	$ 96,600.00	$ 497,490.00	Variable		$ 512,414.70	$ 102,482.94	$ 527,787.14	$ 105,557.43	$ 543,620.76	$ 108,724.15	$ 559,929.38	$ 111,985.88	$ 576,727.26	$ 115,345.45	$ 594,029.08	$ 118,805.82
1210	Fuel	$475,000.00	$ 95,000.00	$ 489,250.00	$/mile	3%	$ 503,927.50	$ 100,785.50	$ 519,045.33	$ 103,809.07	$ 534,616.68	$ 106,923.34	$ 550,655.19	$ 110,131.04	$ 567,174.84	$ 113,434.97	$ 584,190.09	$ 116,838.02
1220	Preventive Maintenance (PM) Labor, Parts and Material Expenses (Vehicles)	$25,000.00	$ 5,000.00	$ 25,750.00	$ / Mile	3%	$ 26,522.50	$ 5,304.50	$ 27,318.18	$ 5,463.64	$ 28,137.72	$ 5,627.54	$ 28,981.85	$ 5,796.37	$ 29,851.31	$ 5,970.26	$ 30,746.85	$ 6,149.37
1230	Corrective Maintenance (CM) Labor, Parts and Materials Expense (Vehicles)	$200,000.00	$ 40,000.00	$ 206,000.00	$ / Mile	3%	$ 212,180.00	$ 42,436.00	$ 218,545.40	$ 43,709.08	$ 225,101.76	$ 45,020.35	$ 231,854.81	$ 46,370.96	$ 238,810.46	$ 47,762.09	$ 245,974.77	$ 49,194.95
1240	Tires	$58,000.00	$ 11,600.00	$ 59,740.00	$ / Mile	3%	$ 61,532.20	$ 12,306.44	$ 63,378.17	$ 12,675.63	$ 65,279.51	$ 13,055.90	$ 67,237.90	$ 13,447.58	$ 69,255.03	$ 13,851.01	$ 71,332.68	$ 14,266.54
1250	Other Vehicle Charges	$22,000.00	$ 4,400.00	$ 22,660.00	$ / Mile	3%	$ 23,339.80	$ 4,667.96	$ 24,039.99	$ 4,808.00	$ 24,761.19	$ 4,952.24	$ 25,504.03	$ 5,100.81	$ 26,269.15	$ 5,253.83	$ 27,057.23	$ 5,411.45
Vehicle Charges	Total 1200 (1210 - 1250)	$ 780,000.00	$ 156,000.00	$ 803,400.00			$ 827,502.00	$ 165,500.40	$ 852,327.06	$ 170,465.41	$ 877,896.87	$ 175,579.37	$ 904,233.78	$ 180,846.76	$ 931,360.79	$ 186,272.16	$ 959,301.62	$ 191,860.32
1310	Purchase of Service		$ -	$ -	$ / Hour	3%	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -
1330	Mileage Reimbursement for Public Transit Service	$3,500.00	$ 700.00	$ 3,605.00	Fixed	3%	$ 3,713.15	$ 742.63	$ 3,824.54	$ 764.91	$ 3,939.28	$ 787.86	$ 4,057.46	$ 811.49	$ 4,179.18	$ 835.84	$ 4,304.56	$ 860.91
1340	Repair and Maintenance of Other Property	$21,000.00	$ 4,200.00	$ 21,630.00	Variable	3%	$ 22,278.90	$ 4,455.78	$ 22,947.27	$ 4,589.45	$ 23,635.69	$ 4,727.14	$ 24,344.76	$ 4,868.95	$ 25,075.10	$ 5,015.02	$ 25,827.35	$ 5,165.47
1350	Leases and Rentals of Facilities or Equipment		$ -	$ -	Variable	3%	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -
1360	Other Operations Charges	$50,000.00	$ 10,000.00	$ 51,500.00	$ / Hour	3%	$ 53,045.00	$ 10,609.00	$ 54,636.35	$ 10,927.27	$ 56,275.44	$ 11,255.09	$ 57,963.70	$ 11,592.74	$ 59,702.61	$ 11,940.52	$ 61,493.69	$ 12,298.74
Operation Charges	Total 1300 (1310 - 1360)	$ 74,500.00	$ 14,900.00	$ 76,735.00		3%	$ 79,037.05	$ 15,807.41	$ 81,408.16	$ 16,281.63	$ 83,850.41	$ 16,770.08	$ 86,365.92	$ 17,273.18	$ 88,956.90	$ 17,791.38	$ 91,625.60	$ 18,325.12
1410	Public Liability and Property Damage on Vehicles	$21,000.00	$ 4,200.00	$ 21,630.00	Fixed	3%	$ 22,278.90	$ 4,455.78	$ 22,947.27	$ 4,589.45	$ 23,635.69	$ 4,727.14	$ 24,344.76	$ 4,868.95	$ 25,075.10	$ 5,015.02	$ 25,827.35	$ 5,165.47
1420	Public Liability and Property Damage - Other than on Vehicles	$16,000.00	$ 3,200.00	$ 16,480.00	Fixed	3%	$ 16,974.40	$ 3,394.88	$ 17,483.63	$ 3,496.73	$ 18,008.14	$ 3,601.63	$ 18,548.39	$ 3,709.68	$ 19,104.84	$ 3,820.97	$ 19,677.98	$ 3,935.60
Operation Charges	Total 1400 (1410 - 1420)	$ 37,000.00	$ 7,400.00	$ 38,110.00			$ 39,253.30	$ 7,850.66	$ 40,430.90	$ 8,086.18	$ 41,643.83	$ 8,328.77	$ 42,893.14	$ 8,578.63	$ 44,179.93	$ 8,835.99	$ 45,505.33	$ 9,101.07
1510	Vehicle Registration and Permit Fees	$500.00	$ 100.00	$ 515.00	Fixed	3%	$ 530.45	$ 106.09	$ 546.36	$ 109.27	$ 562.75	$ 112.55	$ 579.64	$ 115.93	$ 597.03	$ 119.41	$ 614.94	$ 122.99
1520	Federal Fuel and Lubricant Taxes and Excise Taxes on Tires		$ -	$ -	Fixed	3%	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -
1540	Other Taxes and Fees		$ -	$ -	Fixed	3%	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -
Taxes and Fees	Total 1500 (1510 - 1540)	$ 500.00	$ 100.00	$ 515.00			$ 530.45	$ 106.09	$ 546.36	$ 109.27	$ 562.75	$ 112.55	$ 579.64	$ 115.93	$ 597.03	$ 119.41	$ 614.94	$ 122.99
1594	Fuel Tax Refunds	($105,000.00)	$ (21,000.00)	$ (108,150.00)	Fixed	3%	$ (111,394.50)	$ (22,278.90)	$ (114,736.34)	$ (22,947.27)	$ (118,178.43)	$ (23,635.69)	$ (121,723.78)	$ (24,344.76)	$ (125,375.49)	$ (25,075.10)	$ (129,136.76)	$ (25,827.35)
1596	Insurance Reimbursement		$ -	$ -	Fixed	3%	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -
	TOTAL OPERATING BUDGET	$ 5,294,000.00	$ 1,058,800.00	$ 5,452,820.00			$ 5,616,404.60	$ 1,123,280.92	$ 5,784,896.74	$ 1,156,979.35	$ 5,958,443.64	$ 1,191,688.73	$ 6,137,196.95	$ 1,227,439.39	$ 6,321,312.86	$ 1,264,262.57	$ 6,510,952.24	$ 1,302,190.45

Appendix B Stakeholder Summary

The objective of the Five Year Transit System Plan (FYTSP) is to communicate to key stakeholders, including legislators, the financial investments needed to achieve the transit system's objectives to improve and expand the public transit service to meet the goals identified in the Greater Minnesota Transit Investment Plan, Health and Human Services Coordination Plans, and other plans and legislative requirements, such as the Olmstead Act. The FYTSP includes an emphasis on the operational and financial effectiveness of the transit system.

Specifically, the FYTSP explains what the transit system is currently doing, identifies the demand for public transit service in the geographical service area, evaluates how well the transit system is currently meeting the demand, determines what is needed to improve the public transit service, identifies the capital and operating costs necessary to implement the enhancements, prioritizes the investment strategies, and helps coordinate the efforts at the local, state, and federal levels to obtain the funding necessary to make strategic improvements over the next five years.

The Minnesota Public Transit Association (MPTA) orchestrated the statewide initiative to have each rural public transit system in Greater Minnesota create a five-year plan. The national consulting firm AECOM completed Trailblazer Transit's FYSTP. The Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) Office of Transit and Active Transportation provided 100% of the funding for the consultants to complete the plan, which totaled approximately $75,000. Although MnDOT specified the overall organization and format of the FYTSP plan document to maintain consistency between the plans from all the rural transit systems throughout the state, Trailblazer Transit was able to provide input, modify language, and add sections to customize the plan.

Overview of Transit System

Trailblazer Transit provides Federal Transit Administration (FTA) Section 5311 general public transit service throughout Sibley, McLeod, and Wright counties. Trailblazer Transit also provides transit service in neighboring communities located in Scott, Le Sueur, Nicollet, Brown, Renville, Meeker, Sherburne, Hennepin, and Carver counties.

Trailblazer Transit is operated by a government entity called the Trailblazer Joint Powers Board. The governing board consists of six elected officials representing Sibley County, McLeod County, and Wright County. Each county appoints two county commissioners to serve on the Trailblazer Board. However, Wright County has the option to substitute one county commissioner with an elected official from a city within Wright County to serve on the Trailblazer Board.

The span of service for the entire Trailblazer Transit service area is 6:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. on weekdays. There is no weekend service. The service type is demand responsive transit service, with standing orders and contract service.

Trailblazer Transit is currently programmed to operate 32 buses in service with a fleet of 38 MnDOT Class 400 transit buses. Trailblazer Transit operates out of two facilities, each with office space and vehicle storage capabilities. One facility is located in Glencoe in the southern portion of McLeod County and the other facility is located in Buffalo in central Wright County.

Demographics

The combined population of Sibley, McLeod, and Wright counties is 180,805 (U.S. Census Bureau ACS 2016). The population of Sibley County is 14,957. The population of McLeod

County is 35,926. The population of Wright County is 129,922. More detailed demographic information is shown on Table 1.

Table 26. Current Demographic and Socioeconomic Profile

County/ Community	Population	Jobs	Median Household Income	% People Living Below the Poverty Level	Households without Vehicles	% Seniors	% Disabled
Service Area	180,805	56,343	$68,306	6.4%	3.8%	13.0%	9.0%
McLeod County	35,926	15,313	$57,738	8.1%	3.8%	17.6%	11.3%
Sibley County	14,957	3,983	$59,596	9.8%	4.0%	17.5%	10.8%
Wright County	129,922	37,047	$75,705	5.6%	3.8%	11.2%	8.2%
Minnesota	5,450,868	2,557,046	$63,217	10.8%	7.0%	14.3%	10.6%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau ACS 2016, LEHD 2015 Jobs

Demand

Trailblazer Transit utilizes two methodologies to estimate service levels and ridership goals. The gold benchmark is called “10/4” and refers to a ridership target that 1) averages 10,000 rides annually per bus in service and 2) calls for one bus in service each weekday for every 4,000 people in a geographic area. The bronze benchmark is called “9/5” and refers to a ridership target that 1) averages 9,000 rides annually per bus in service and 2) calls for one bus in service weekday for every 5,000 people in a geographic area. Based on these criteria, Trailblazer Transit’s projected service levels and ridership targets are provided below based on 2016 population data.

Table 27. Projected Service Levels by County

County/ Community	Population	Range: Bronze to Gold	Range: Bronze to Gold
Service Area	180,805	36.16 to 45.20 buses/day	325,440 to 452,000 rides/year
McLeod County	35,926	7.18 to 8.98 buses/day	65,620 to 89,800 rides/year
Sibley County	14,957	2.99 to 3.73 buses/day	26,910 to 37,300 rides/year
Wright County	129,922	25.98 to 32.48 buses/day	233,820 to 324,800 rides/year

Source: U.S. Census Bureau ACS 2016, Trailblazer Transit

The two methodologies historically provide an excellent target range for the higher and lower ends of the spectrum that produce an optimal balance between acceptable baseline service levels and operational efficiency. Although there are exceptions, service levels that exceed the

gold benchmark generally do not meet minimum performance standards for public transit service and service levels that fall below the bronze benchmark generally do not meet the demand. The two methodologies are intended as guidelines to establish service levels and ridership goals that can be adjusted upward or downward depending on a number of factors including, but not limited to, funding levels, demand, and performance metrics.

Based on MnDOT's ambitious goal of meeting 90% of statewide transit needs by 2025, Trailblazer Transit should utilize the gold benchmark (10/4) to establish *minimum* service levels for 1) Sibley County and McLeod County combined and then for 2) Wright County separately. This approach is being used due to geographical and operational considerations. Sibley and McLeod Counties have smaller populations that are generally served by the buses operating out of the Glencoe garage and Wright County has a much larger population that is generally served by the buses operating out of the Buffalo garage.

In 2019, Trailblazer Transit is programmed to operate 15 bus schedules in Sibley County and McLeod County combined. These two counties are currently served by more bus schedules than recommended by the gold benchmark. However, the transit system is well-used in these counties and the performance statistics are acceptable, so the service levels will not be reduced.

In 2019, Trailblazer Transit is programmed to operate 17 bus schedules in Wright County, which is 15 bus schedules short of the gold benchmark of 45 bus schedules for baseline public transit service in that county. Therefore, the goal is to increase service by three bus schedules per year starting in 2020 and then re-evaluate service levels in 2025 to see if more service is needed to meet demand.

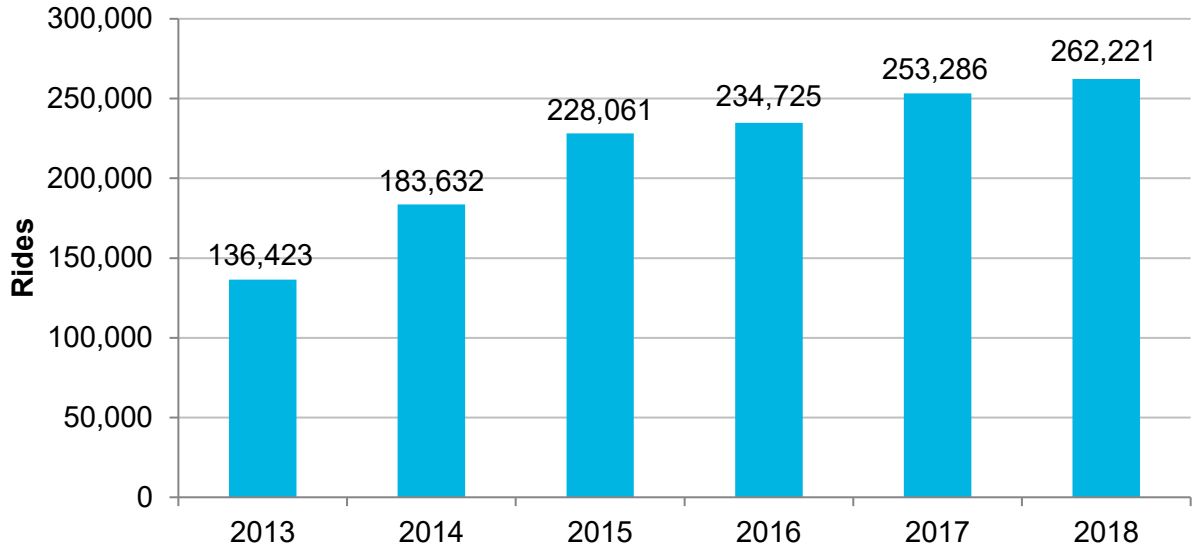
System Performance

Passenger and Operating Statistics

Trailblazer Transit has grown considerably in recent years. The increase in passenger trips is primarily due to the expansion of service into Wright County in the summer of 2014.

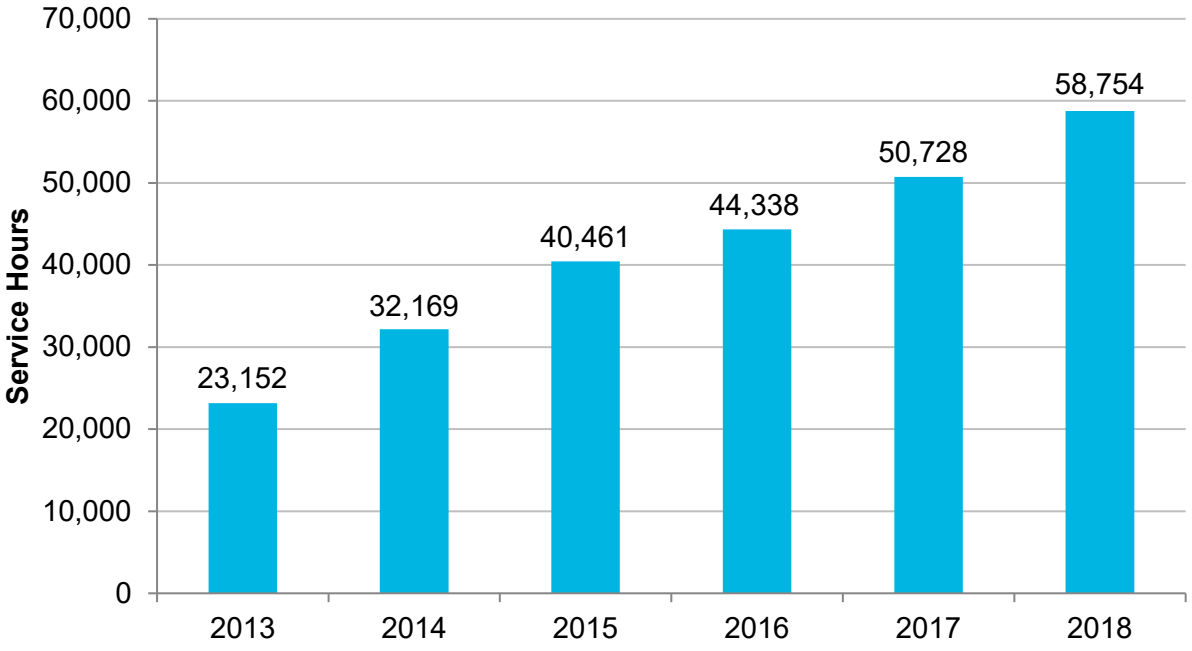
Trailblazer Transit's total ridership has grown from 136,423 in 2013 to 262,221 in 2018. This is an increase of 125,789 rides, or 92%. The ridership from 2013 through 2018 is shown in Figure 67.

Figure 42 Ridership (2013-2018)



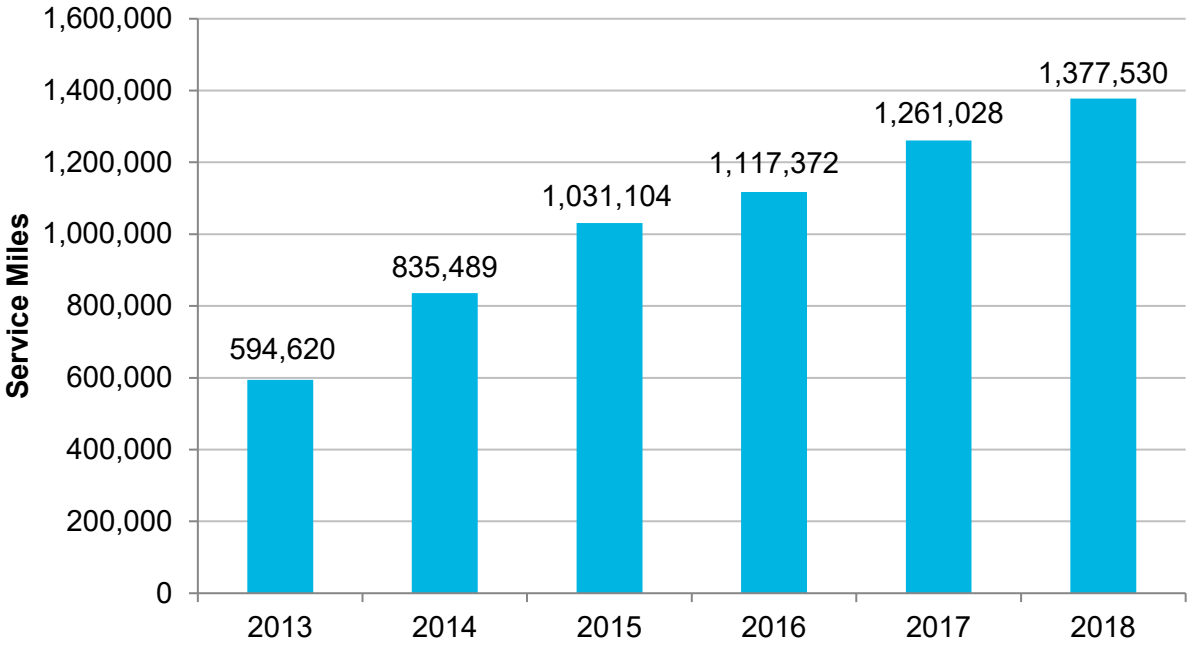
Trailblazer Transit's total service hours have increased from 23,152 to 58,754 from 2013 to 2018. This is an increase of 35,602 hours, or 154%. Total service hours from 2013 through 2018 are shown on Figure 68.

Figure 43 Service Hours (2013-2018)



Trailblazer Transit's total service miles have increased from 594,620 to 1,377,530 from 2013 to 2018. This is an increase of 782,910 hours, or 132%. Total service miles from 2013 through 2018 are shown on Figure 69.

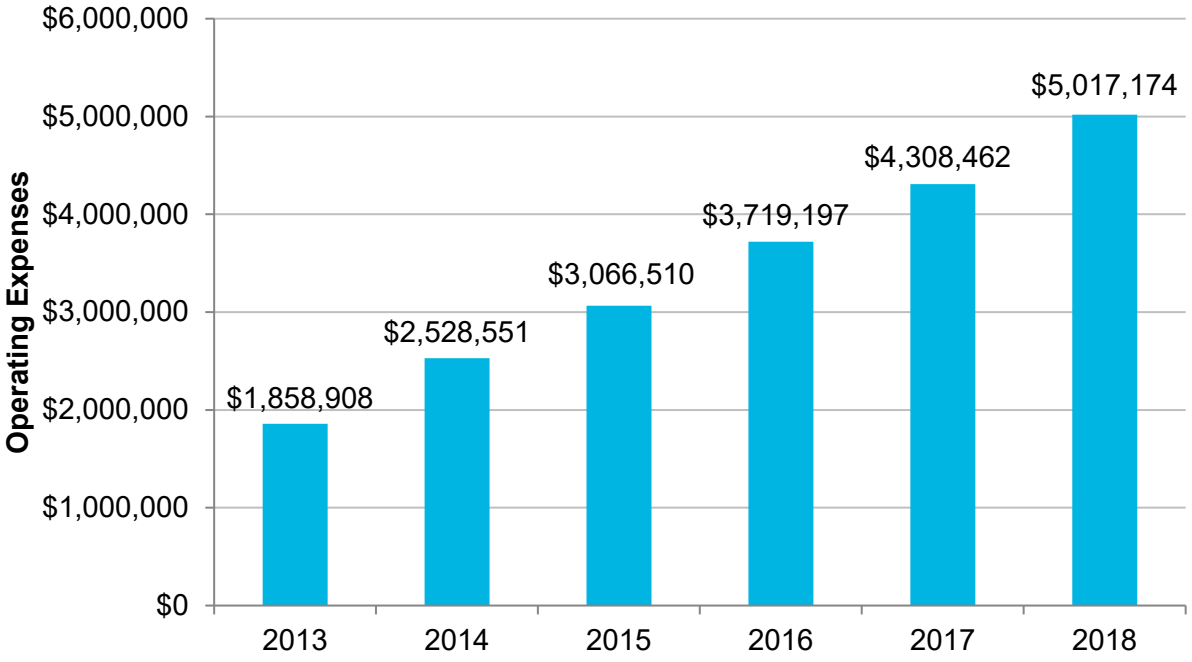
Figure 44 Service Miles (2013-2018)



Financial Status

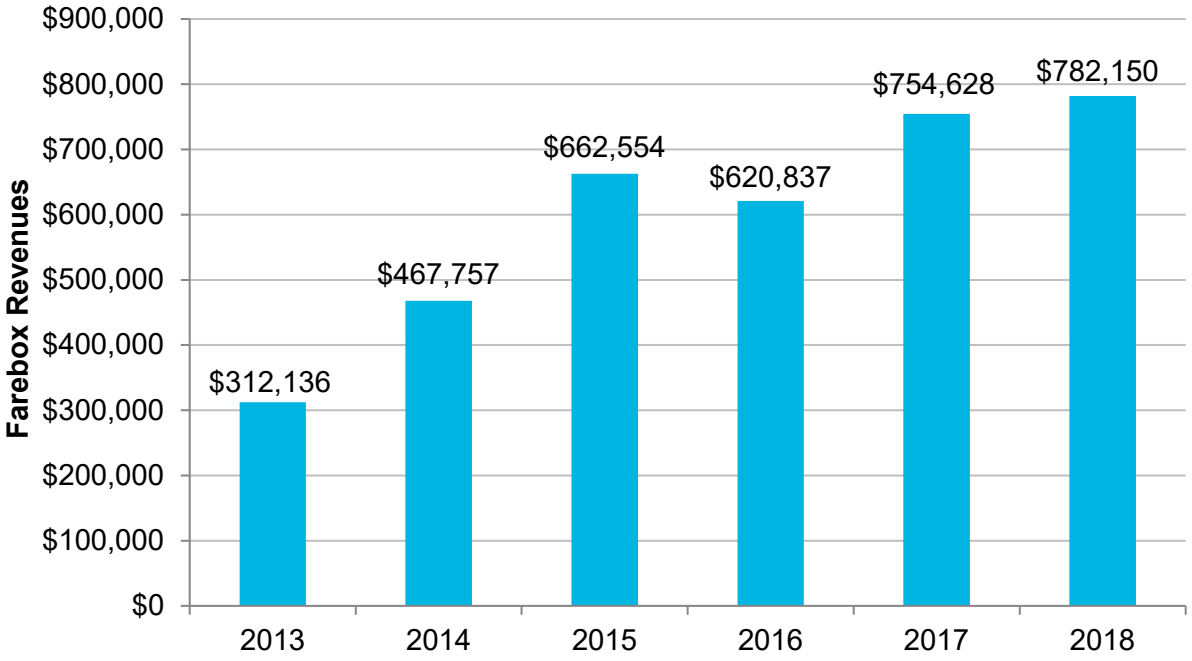
Trailblazer Transit's total operating expenses have increased from $1.86 million in 2013 to $5.02 million in 2018. The operating expenses have increased by $3.16 million, or 170%. Total operating expenses from 2013 through 2018 are shown on Figure 70.

Figure 45 Operating Expenses (2013-2018)



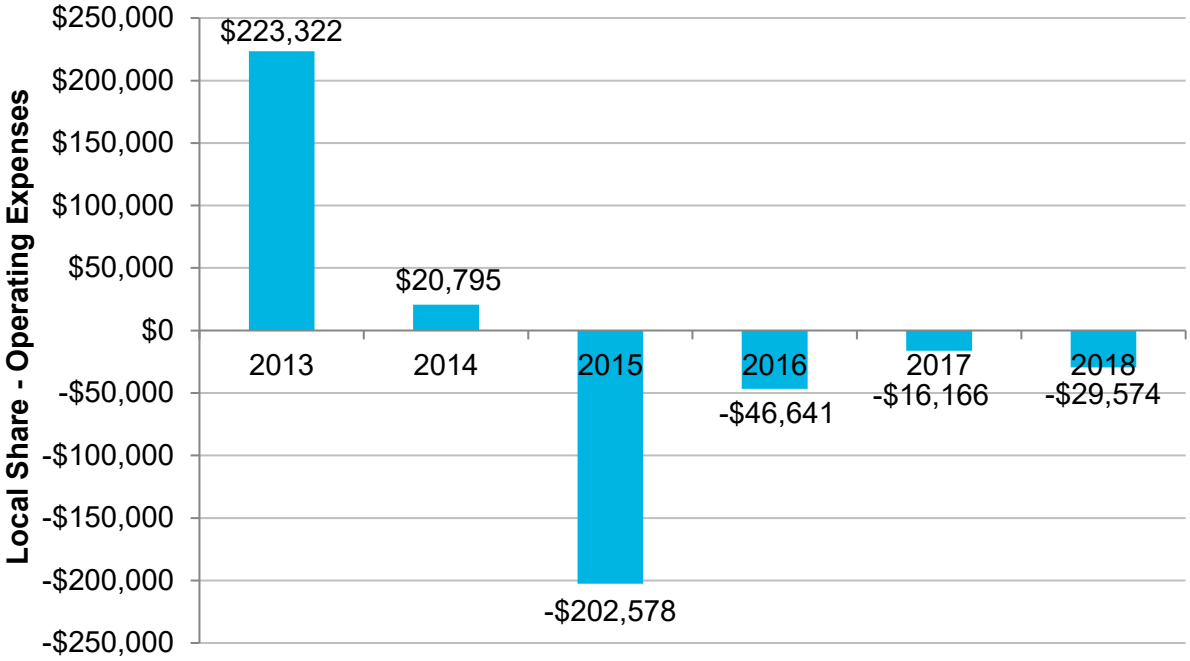
Trailblazer Transit's total farebox revenues have increased from $312,136 in 2013 to $782,150 in 2018. The farebox revenues have increased by $470,014, or 151%. Total farebox revenues from 2013 through 2018 are shown on Figure 71.

Figure 46 Farebox Revenues (2013-2018)



Despite steadily increasing operating costs, Trailblazer Transit's total local share for operating expenses has decreased significantly from 2013 to 2018 due in large part to the revenue produced by the additional service being provided in Wright County. Total local share for operating expenses from 2013 through 2018 is shown on Figure 72. A negative local share means that there is excess operating revenue that can be applied to capital expenses or placed into a protected reserve account for future 5311 expenses.

Figure 47 Local Share – Operating Expenses (2013-2018)

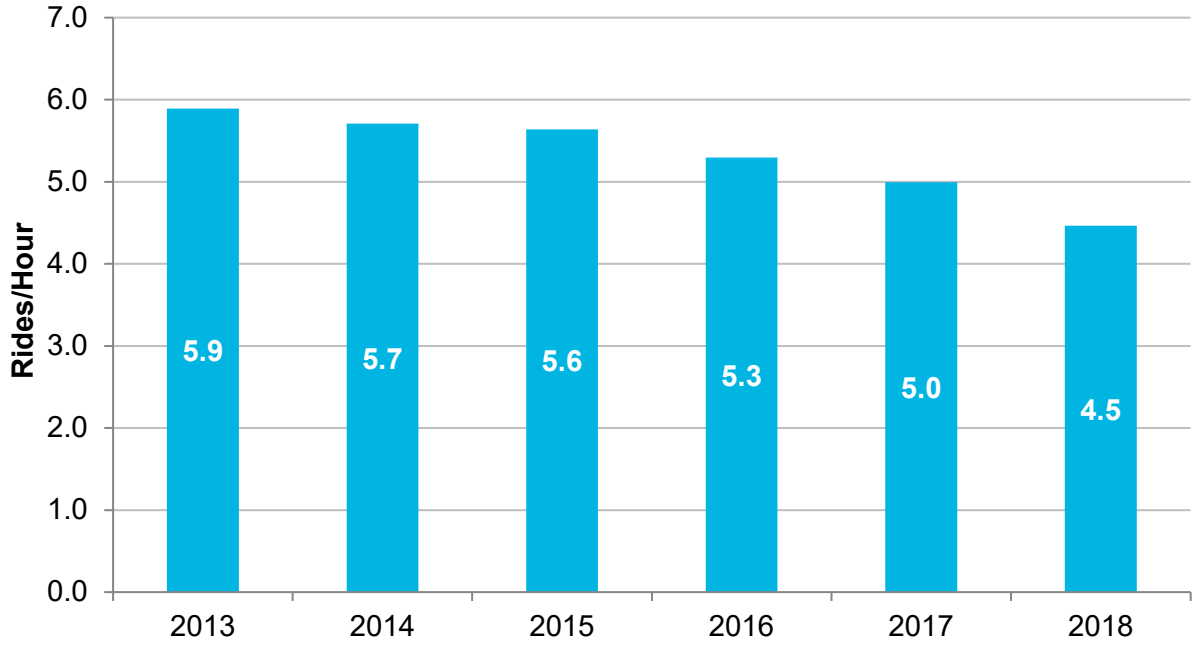


Basic Performance Measures

Trailblazer Transit's basic performance measures for rides per hour, miles per ride, cost per ride, and cost per hour are shown in the figures below.

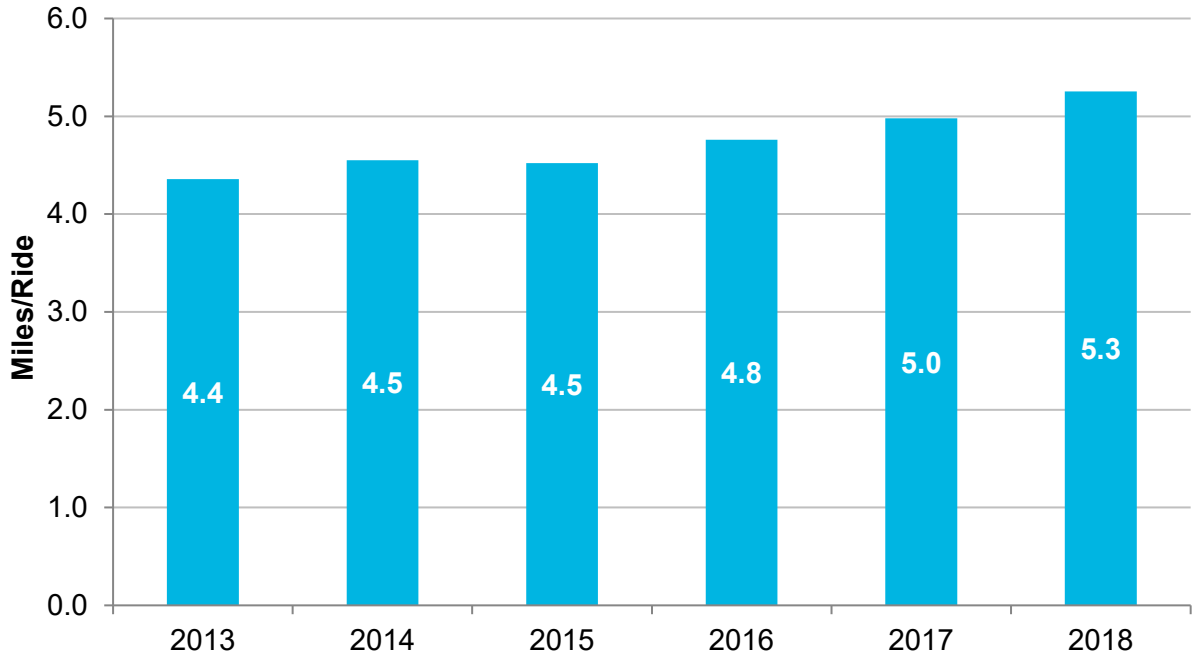
Rides per hour is a measure of productivity. Rides per hour has been decreasing from 2013 to 2018 primarily due to the increased distances that need to be traveled in order to cover a large three-county area and meet the stakeholder request of community connectivity.

Figure 48 Rides/Hour (2013-2018)



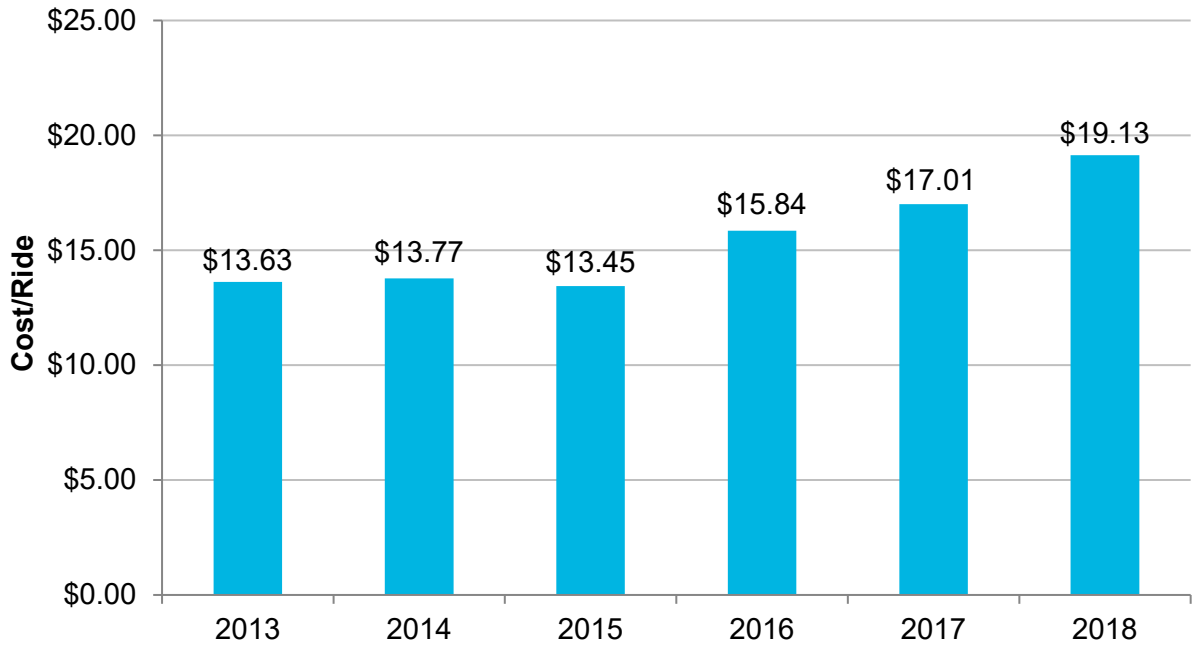
Miles per ride is another measure of productivity. The distances travelled by riders have been increasing from 2013 to 2018. As with the decreasing rides per hour, the increasing distance per trip is associated with the larger service area from the addition of Wright County, the response to stakeholder requests for community connectivity, the gap between the demand for services and the resources available, and the documented lapses in the dispatching software in Wright County. With the new technology coming online in 2019/2020 and the increases in service proposed in the FYTSP, the performance statistics should improve steadily.

Figure 49 Miles/Ride (2013-2018)



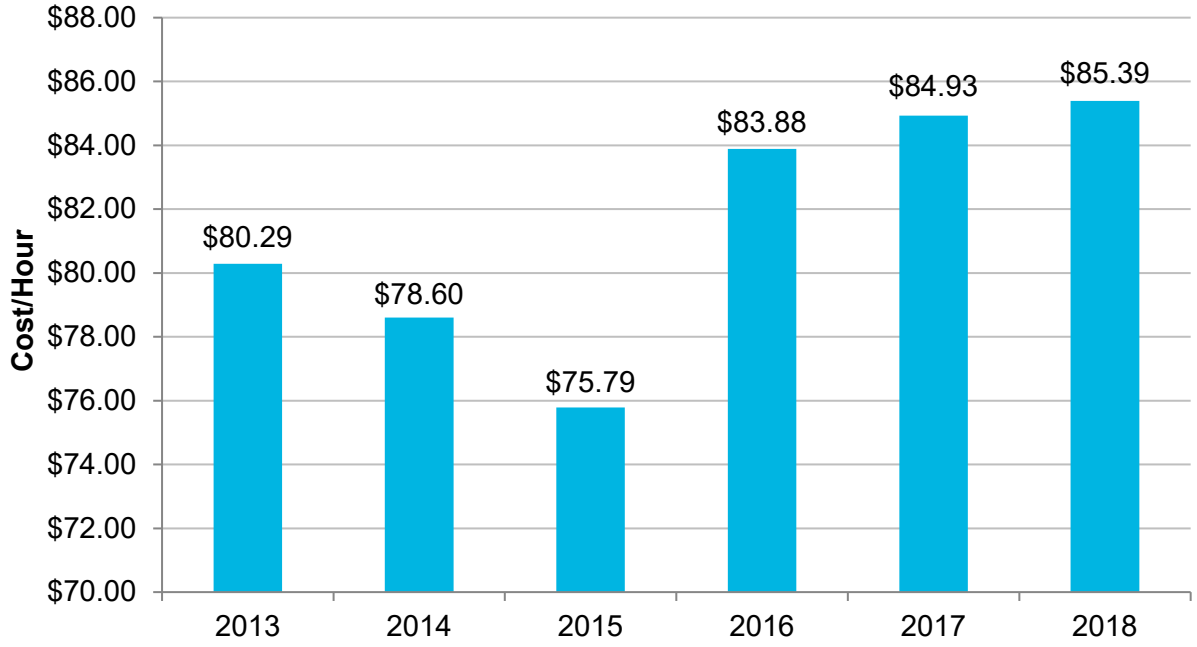
Cost per ride is a measure of financial efficiency. It indicates the actual average cost to provide a ride. Cost per ride has been increasing from 2013 to 2018.Trailblazer Transit's labor costs result from the transit system's proximity to the Twin Cities and the increased competition for qualified staff. Trailblazer Transit also worked with its partners to develop an innovative way to lease a newly-constructed transit facility in Buffalo. However, the facility lease increases the operating costs and decreases the financial performance measures for the transit system. Trailblazer Transit is in an excellent position to increase ridership via service expansion that should improve the financial performance statistics.

Figure 50 Cost/Ride (2013-2018)



Cost per hour is a measure of service efficiency. It indicates the actual cost to operate an hour of transit service. As with cost per ride, cost per hour has increased from 2013 to 2018, reflective of increased costs of doing business, especially with proximity to the Twin Cities metro area, and should improve with the implementation of the FYTSP as described above.

Figure 51 Cost/Hour (2013-2018)



Customer Survey

A rider and non-rider community survey was administered by Trailblazer Transit and study team in November and December of 2018. The survey was available online and on paper. The survey was very successful, with 865 responses received from respondents throughout the three-county service area. The survey provided an indication on how/why/where riders use the service, opinions on the current service, and desired improvements to the service including possible areas of expansion or growth.

For non-rider community members, travel patterns, level of support of public transit, and reasons for not using public transit were examined. Most (70%) non-rider community respondents were individuals employed outside the home (commuters). Most (71%) non-riders indicated that they don't use public transit because they have access to a private vehicle. The vast majority (78%) of non-rider community respondents recognize Trailblazer Transit's value to the community, even if the individual respondent does not intend to use the public transit service (unless they were unable to drive or did not have access to a personal vehicle).

Trailblazer Transit riders are loyal. The majority (72%) have been riding for more than one year. Most (63%) use the service weekly if not every day, which is a very positive sign for the transit system because a third of respondents always have a private vehicle available and another third occasionally have a private vehicle available, indicating that riders are choosing public transit over other modes of travel. Most (82%) Trailblazer Transit riders are satisfied with the service. For those who indicated some level of dissatisfaction, it was primarily because they would like Trailblazer Transit to operate longer hours of service; an indication of the need for expanded service. Additionally, when asked what they would like to see improved, respondents were united in asking for more service (weekend service, later evening service, earlier morning service, service outside the existing service area, and generally more trips available). When asked what they like best about Trailblazer Transit, respondents overwhelmingly stated the drivers, the customer service, and the overall quality of the service. The majority (69%) of riders would definitely recommend Trailblazer Transit to a family member or friend, with 28% probably recommending the service.

A full description of the survey results is included in the full FYTSP.

SWOT Analysis

A SWOT analysis can be used to identify an organization's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. A SWOT analysis for Trailblazer Transit is presented in this section.

Strengths

Trailblazer Transit is led by an experienced, well-qualified administrative team. The service operates effectively and efficiently, and service is already available in 100% of the cities in the primary service area. Same-day service, which is rare in rural and small urban communities, is available. In addition, service levels in Sibley County and McLeod County are sufficient to meet a high percentage of the demand during the weekdays. In fact, the current resources programmed for Sibley County and McLeod County already combine to exceed the gold benchmark for service levels in those counties. Trailblazer Transit operates its service professionally and efficiently, and the buses and facilities are extremely clean and well-maintained. Trailblazer Transit has done well marketing the transit system and benefits from a positive brand image that the staff has worked hard to create. Trailblazer Transit has developed extensive statistical tracking measures and analyzes the data on a daily basis to make service adjustments to operate more efficiently and to better meet the needs of its customers. Trailblazer Transit's service is very flexible and can be adjusted quickly to best meet the demand. The organization has also developed a service called SMART-RIDE, which is a non-subsidized, locally-funded transportation service intended to complement the public transit system to provide rides when and where Trailblazer Transit does not operate. Therefore, SMART-RIDE operates during the evenings, on weekends, and outside the service area of the public transit system. Trailblazer Transit has already successfully resolved many of the issues with which other 5311 transit service providers in Greater Minnesota struggle.

Weaknesses

Although Trailblazer Transit has accomplished some great things with hard work, persistence, and above-and-beyond dedication, the project team identified some concerns about the organization's governing board. From participating in local meetings and researching the catalog of local media, there appear to be strong differences of opinion among board members about the value, purpose, and the need for public transit in the three counties. The challenges with the governing board adversely affect the transit system's public image, and the ability to effectively execute the mission to expand public transit service. Trailblazer Transit is also struggling with a severe driver shortage that has prevented the transit system from operating bus service that has already been approved and funded. Like nearly all transit systems in Greater Minnesota, and in many regions nationally, Trailblazer Transit is struggling with record-low unemployment and is having difficulty recruiting employees, especially drivers. Retention of quality employees is not generally a concern, but the turnover resulting from hiring less-qualified employees is a significant challenge. Trailblazer Transit also struggles with lower numbers of administrative staff relative to its peer group, which puts a strain on the entire staff and bottlenecks the work that needs to be completed. The dispatching software that Trailblazer Transit uses is also inadequate. The problems with the software result in long wait times for customers on the telephone, inefficient routing, problems with service reports, and increased stress for dispatchers and drivers. The service levels in Wright County are also substantially inadequate to meet the demand, resulting in several problems related to operations and customer service.

Opportunities

Trailblazer Transit's operational effectiveness and other accomplishments have positioned the transit system to grow and expand effectively given the funding, administrative support, and

local political initiative. Trailblazer Transit's experienced leadership, technical capabilities, facilities, and equipment will allow the transit system to add service in Wright County, extend the span of service, and add weekend service in areas with higher population densities. In addition, Trailblazer Transit is poised to extend its transportation capabilities beyond the base level of service in the primary counties and should start to develop regional connections in Carver, Sherburne, and Hennepin counties. In addition, the development of these regional connections will likely lead to discussions with other government entities about formally partnering with the organization. Adding more partners and expanding the service area is a real possibility and would benefit all the communities in the region.

The opportunity may also exist for Trailblazer Transit to carefully utilize social media to further enhance its already effective marketing efforts. However, there may be some limitations to how social media can be used given the significant gap between the demand for public transit services and the resources available to meet the demand. Although Trailblazer Transit has a Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC) to assist in the expansion of service in Wright County, the TAC for Sibley and McLeod Counties was discontinued due to lack of participation and was replaced with *How to Use Transit* Workshops. Although Sibley and McLeod counties do not require a TAC to advocate for additional transit service, it may be useful for Trailblazer Transit to reconvene a TAC for educational purposes. The community survey revealed some apparent misunderstandings about the role and purpose of the public transit system that could possibly be better addressed by supportive stakeholders that understand and promote the benefits of coordinating rides on a public transit vehicle. Trailblazer Transit also has developed relationships with technology vendors that may allow the transit system to further enhance the customer experience through mobile apps that provide the ability for the customers to track the buses and to receive arrival notifications.

Trailblazer Transit carefully monitors performance daily for every vehicle in service and proactively looks for ways to improve performance. Although already within acceptable ranges, Trailblazer Transit is in an excellent position to increase ridership via service expansion that should, along with the technology upgrade, improve the financial performance statistics.

Threats

The severe driver shortage is a concern relative to Trailblazer Transit's ability to keep current service on the road and to expand service. The shortage of highly-qualified administrative staff places a significant strain on the current administration and increases the likelihood of burnout and/or management turnover. It is nearly impossible to replace the loss of institutional knowledge built over years of transit operations experience and MnDOT does not currently have a manual for the management of transit services, so training of staff from outside of transit operations is a challenging and time-consuming task.

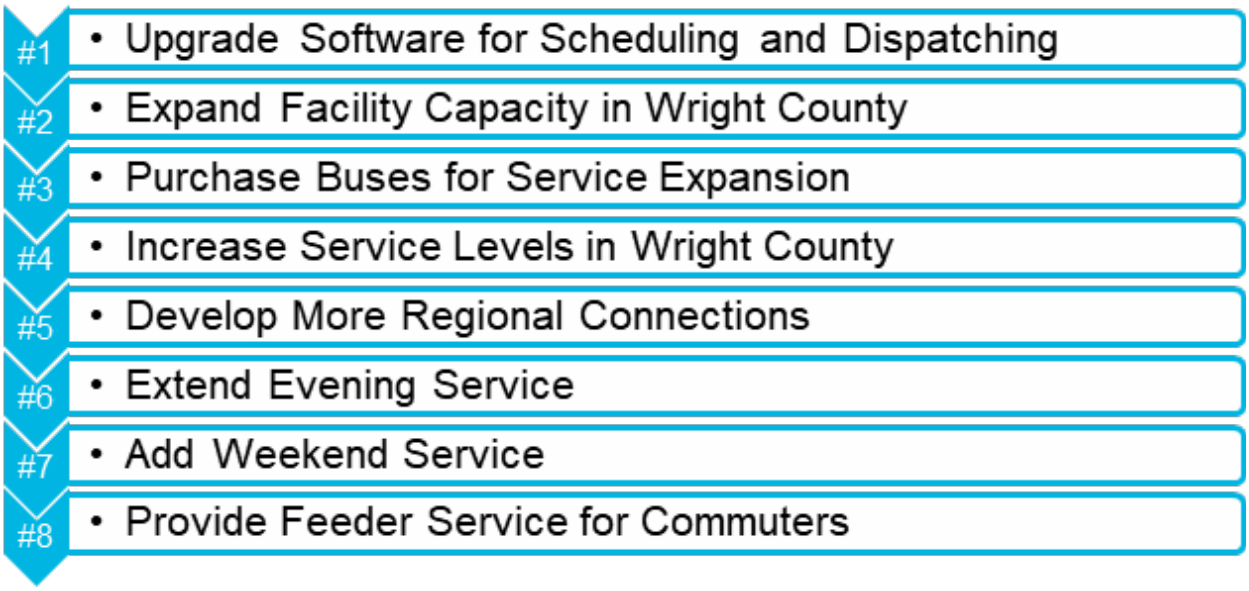
As with some other regions of the state, and based on local media research, the project team has concerns about the compatibility of the counties in the partnership and the commitment of the board members to public transit. The cornerstone of successful, quality public transit systems is the support of local elected officials and the strengths of the partnerships that are formed. This is an area that Trailblazer Transit needs to address before the transit system can move forward effectively. A long-term solution is needed to eliminate the concerns about governance and to establish a stable and supportive board that will allow the organization to effectively execute the recommendations in this plan to improve and grow the transit service.

Recommendations

Prioritized List of Strategic Investments for Trailblazer Transit

In addition to the project team's independent research and the results of the community survey, the consultants gathered input from employees, customers, and stakeholders throughout the project (starting in the fall of 2018 through the summer of 2019) to learn about the agency's operating structure, environment, challenges, and opportunities for improvement. Based on a comprehensive analysis of the data collected, Trailblazer Transit's investment needs were identified and prioritized for the next five years. The list was developed without fiscal constraints, meaning that finances were not a barrier to the identification and ranking needs. The project team, with input from Trailblazer Transit administrative staff and other stakeholders, prioritized the strategic investments that need to be made to increase operational efficiency and to expand service to better meet the needs of the community. Figure 77 illustrates the prioritized list of strategic investments.

Figure 52 Prioritized List of Strategic Investments for Trailblazer Transit



#1 Upgrade Software for Scheduling and Dispatching

The software enhancements for scheduling and dispatching include improved administrative features for more efficient customer billing, the ability to coordinate transportation requests with/for other providers (both public and private), and an app for customers to interface directly with the software for automatic vehicle location and bus arrival notification.

#2 Expand Facility Capacity in Wright County

To support the operation of additional bus service in Wright County, Trailblazer Transit will need to expand the storage capabilities of the Buffalo facility. Plans are already underway to expand the garage in 2019 in cooperation with Wright County.

#3 Purchase Buses for Service Expansion

Trailblazer Transit will need to expand its fleet by 18 MnDOT Class 400 buses by 2025 to accommodate the additional 15 schedules to be introduced over the next five years. This represents a spare ratio of 20% (just for the additional service). Therefore, the total fleet size would increase from 38 to 56 buses system-wide. This total represents 15 bus schedules for Sibley and McLeod Counties and 32 bus schedules for Wright County, which leaves 9 spare

buses for a system-wide spare ratio of 19.1%. The FTA recommends a spare ratio of no more than 20%.

#4 Increase Service Levels in Wright County

Using the gold benchmark to estimate service levels, Trailblazer Transit will need to increase service in Wright County from 17 buses deployed in daily operation in 2019 to 32 buses in 2025, which represents a total of 15 additional buses in service (an average expansion of 3 buses per year).

#5 Develop More Regional Connections

In July 2018, Trailblazer Transit started providing service from Sibley County to the City of New Ulm. In January 2019, Trailblazer Transit started providing service into Big Lake Township, the City of Big Lake, and the City of Elk River in Sherburne County. Also, in January 2019, Trailblazer Transit started providing service into the City of Rogers in Hennepin County.

In response to identified needs, Trailblazer Transit would like to continue developing regional connections to the following areas within the next five years:

- Service into the city limits of Waconia starting in 2022.
- Service to the Highway 212 Medical Center in Chaska starting in 2022.
- Service into the western portion of Hennepin County, including the cities of Corcoran, Greenfield, Independence, Long Lake, Maple Plain, Medina, Minnetrista, Mound, Orono, and St. Bonifacious starting in 2023.

Trailblazer Transit would need an additional three buses to provide the aforementioned service for additional regional connectivity. Each bus schedule would require 3,072 annual driver labor hours.

#6 Extend Evening Service

Trailblazer Transit understands that the local communities desire evening bus service. In response to this need, Trailblazer Transit would like to extend its span of service by one hour per day in the evening starting in 2024. Therefore, bus service would be available throughout the service area until 6:30 p.m. instead of 5:30 p.m.

#7 Add Weekend Service

Trailblazer Transit wants to add weekend service in select portions of the service area with higher population densities starting in 2025. Either Saturday or Sunday service would be provided on a trial basis to determine if the service merits continuation. Eight buses would be in operation on either Saturday or Sunday. The planned weekend service would require 12 driver labor hours for each bus schedule per day plus 26 labor hours for dispatch per day.

#8 Provide Feeder Service for Commuters

Trailblazer Transit also desires to provide feeder service to other transportation providers offering commuter services to the Twin Cities and St. Cloud starting in 2025 in response to requests for longer-distance commuter service options. However, Trailblazer Transit does not intend to provide the type of traditional commuter service typically operated by much larger urban transit systems and private, for-profit companies. Such an initiative would require a significant capital investment in an entirely new type of commuter bus that is much different than the classification of bus that Trailblazer Transit currently uses. Trailblazer Transit would need an additional three MnDOT Class 400 buses to start this feeder service.

Required Investments

The project team developed estimates for capital and operating expenses to show the projected costs for investing in the prioritized improvements between 2020 and 2025. All expenses include a 3% inflation factor per year into the future.

#1 Upgrade Software for Scheduling and Dispatching

$42,000 annually plus 3% increase per year

#2 Expand Facility Capacity in Wright County

$136,000 per year in extra lease payments for 20 years

#3 Purchase Buses for Service Expansion

Capital Expenses:

- 2020 4 expansion buses (includes 1 spare)
- 2021 3 expansion buses (no spare)
- 2022 4 expansion buses (includes 1 spare)
- 2023 3 expansion buses (no spare)
- 2024 4 expansion buses (includes 1 spare)

#4 Increase Service Levels in Wright County

Operating Expenses:

- 2020 $208,034 X 3 bus schedules
- 2021 $214,275 X 3 bus schedules
- 2022 $220,324 X 3 bus schedules
- 2023 $227,324 X 3 bus schedules
- 2024 $234,144 X 3 bus schedules

#5 Develop More Regional Connections

Operating Expenses:

- $247,400 to $270,340 per bus schedule (depending on year) X 3 bus schedules

Capital Expenses:

- 3 expansion buses

#6 Extend Evening Service

Extending the service in the evening would require 32 hours of driver labor per day plus 8 hours of dispatch labor per day. Fuel and maintenance costs would also be part of the additional operating expenses.

Operating Expenses:

- $22,298 to $22,968 per bus schedule depending on year X 32 bus schedules

#7 Add Weekend Service

Eight bus schedules would be operated 10 hours per weekend. This would require 11 labor hours for each bus schedule plus 24 labor hours for dispatch per day.

Operating Expenses:

- $45,761 per bus schedule X 8 bus schedules

#8 Provide Feeder Service for Commuters

Operating Expenses

- 2024 $137,283 X 3 bus schedules

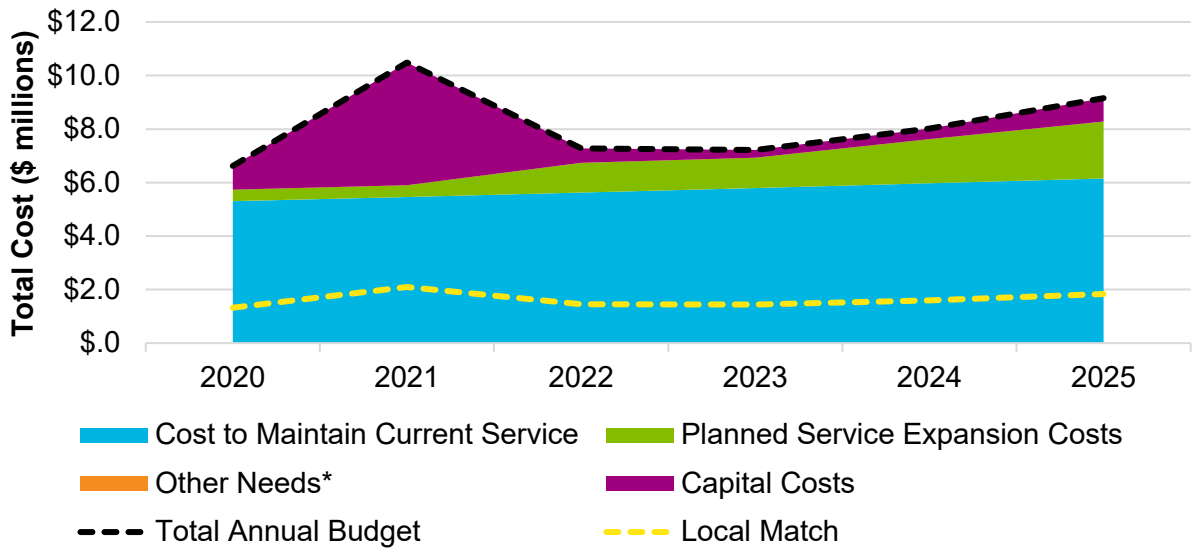
Capital Expenses

- 3 expansion buses

Aggregate Funding Requirements

Figure 78 summarizes the costs of investing in these improvements. The detailed plans are included in the full FYTSP.

Figure 53 Funding Requirements for Strategic Investments (2020-2025)



Action Plan

A five-year plan will sit on a shelf unless action is taken to execute the elements of the plan. The project team developed the following action steps to help the organization implement the recommendations outlined in the plan. The ultimate objective is to enhance and expand public transit service and to meet 90% of the demand in the service area by 2025.

- Trailblazer Transit needs to execute the two-year contract with MnDOT for service in 2020 and 2021.
- Stakeholders at multiple levels need to be reassured that the Trailblazer Transit governance structure is able to function at a high level and that the board members support the continued improvement and expansion of the transit system.
  - Representatives from Sibley County, McLeod County, and Wright County need to meet in November and December 2019 to evaluate the current transit partnership and the structure of the governing board.
  - The meeting(s) should be facilitated by a third-party professional with knowledge of 1) the rural transit industry, 2) MnDOT, and 3) Trailblazer Transit's operations.

  - The counties need to discuss their goals, objectives, and concerns to ensure all parties are compatible for a continued partnership.
  - MnDOT needs to explain what options are available for each county regarding the operation of a public transit system to all governing board members.
  - The counties need to fully understand and acknowledge the consequences of any changes to the current transit partnership including the loss of one or more counties.
  - Consideration should be given to developing alternate transit partnerships with other counties that may have more similar values and beliefs. This exercise should either open the door for new partnerships or allow all parties to focus on improving the existing transit partnership.
  - Provided a decision is made by one or more counties to go a different direction, a plan needs to be created over a two-year period to divide the assets of the transit system and to reorganize transit in each county to ensure the continuity and quality of service.
  - Given a collective commitment to continue working together, the counties should evaluate the possibility of growing the transit system and expanding the service area by inviting other counties or cities to join the organization.
- Trailblazer Transit needs to continue to recruit, train, and develop front line staff.
  - Additional administrative staff and drivers are needed to operate efficiently and effectively, especially when considering the expansion needed to meet 90% of the transit needs statewide by 2025.
  - The compensation and benefits package need to be competitive in today's labor market in order to attract and retain qualified staff. This is a statewide and nationwide concern as unemployment rates reach record lows.
- Trailblazer Transit needs to implement new dispatching software that can accommodate the growth of the transit system. The software needs to effectively and efficiently schedule a much larger number of rides and to handle the billing and reporting needs of the growing organization.
- A mobile app needs to be developed that will interact with the dispatching software to allow customers to identify the location of the buses and to be notified of bus arrivals.
- Trailblazer Transit needs to continue its efforts to market the transit system to maintain and enhance its already strong brand name. Social media should be incorporated into the marketing plan to expand the transit system's digital footprint.
- Trailblazer Transit should consider reinstating the Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC) for Sibley and McLeod Counties to interact with stakeholders to continually understand changing mobility needs and to reinforce the role of a public transit system to coordinate rides. The TAC in Wright County should continue to assist in the expansion of service, communicate mobility needs, and serve as an opportunity to increase the awareness and use of public transit service.
- This plan should be referenced and used a guide to make decisions about service levels grant/funding applications.
- Trailblazer Transit has built a strong foundation of transit services and partnerships in the three counties. This plan should be used to realize the benefits of the strong foundation and use the momentum to continue to grow and embrace new opportunities.
- The plan should be distributed to key stakeholders and legislators.
- Trailblazer Transit should work with MnDOT to update the FYTSP every two or three years.

Appendix C Service Area Map

Appendix D Survey Results

Introduction

As part of the Trailblazer Transit *Five-Year Transit System Plan*, community members and riders were surveyed. The goal of the survey was to engage the community and riders in a discussion about transportation needs and how public transportation can best fit into the fabric of the community now and into the future. The survey was conducted between November 26 and December 31, 2018. The following is an analysis of the survey results for both the community and rider surveys.

Methodology

The survey questions were prepared in consultation with Trailblazer Transit staff. One survey was used with different response paths for either riders or non-riders using built-in logic to the survey platform online. The rider survey asked questions about residency, current public transit usage, scheduling, satisfaction, and improvements. The community survey (i.e., the non-rider survey) asked questions about travel patterns, destinations, and knowledge and/or support of Trailblazer Transit. Targeted email blasts were sent to a large and diverse group of stakeholders containing a link to the online survey. There was a robust campaign to encourage people to complete the online survey, which was produced using Survey Monkey. All the survey promotional content included a brief description, a link to the survey, and a QR code that – when scanned – provided a direct link to the survey. The survey was also conducted by distributing paper copies to various stakeholder groups. The data from both the online and paper collection methods were combined into a single data set.

Online Survey

The online survey opened on November 26, 2018, and was available through December 31, 2018. The survey was open to all individuals who live, work, or visit the Trailblazer Transit service area, regardless of current bus usage. Individuals were asked where they live and whether they currently use any public transit services. Based on this response they were directed to the appropriate set of questions (i.e., the rider survey or the non-rider community survey). All survey respondents were also asked to provide any additional comments they might have.

Responses

The survey received 865 responses[15]. Of these, 416 were completed online and 449 were completed on paper and entered into the online system by study staff. Figure 42 shows the trend for online responses by date. The peak number of responses – approximately 79 – were received on December 3.

All survey respondents were asked where they currently live; of the 64 unique locations mentioned, 19 were not within Sibley, McLeod, or Wright counties. Locations not within the three counties served by Trailblazer Transit made up 5.1% of the responses. Twenty-four individuals did not provide a response. The top three locations were Buffalo (212), Hutchinson (102), and Monticello (92), which together made up 49% of the responses. Figure 43 shows the spatial distribution of where respondents live. In Annandale, Otsego, and St. Michael, there were a

[15] Not all respondents answered all of the survey questions. As such, the percentages in all figures are based on the number of responses received for that question rather than on the total number of responses.

higher percentage of community respondents than rider respondents, while in Buffalo and Hutchinson the reverse was true. Place of residency by transit usage is explored further under each survey question in the following sections.

Figure 54. Survey Response by Date

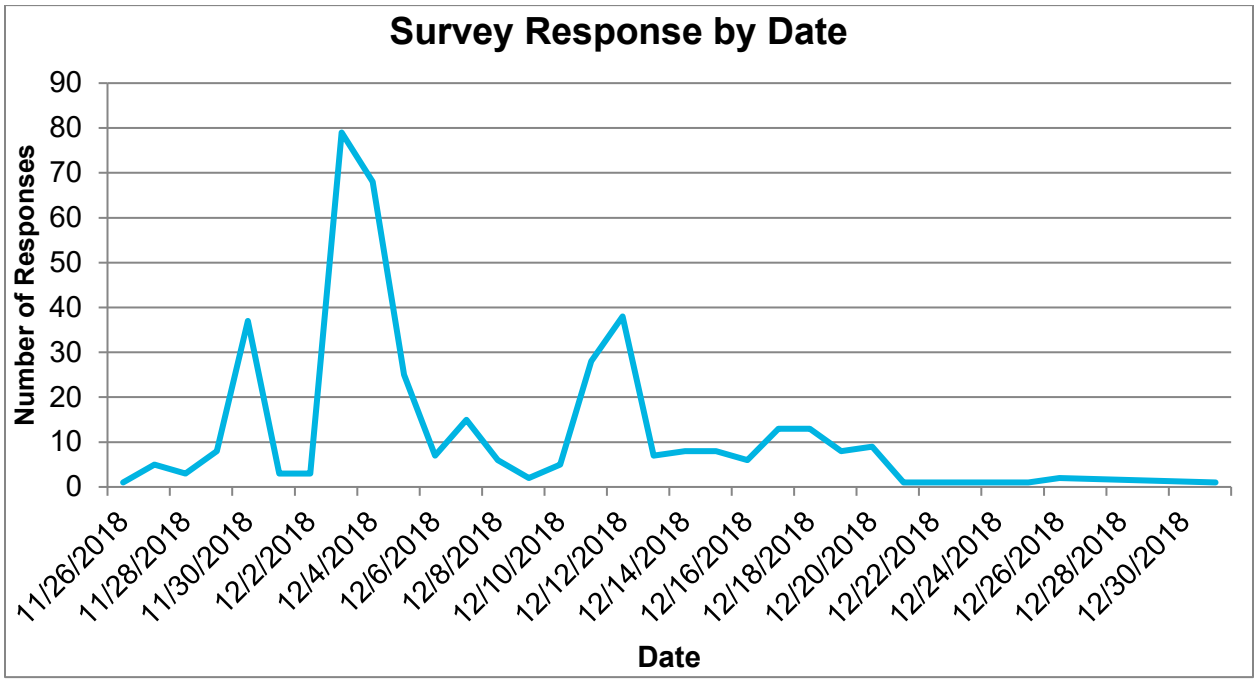
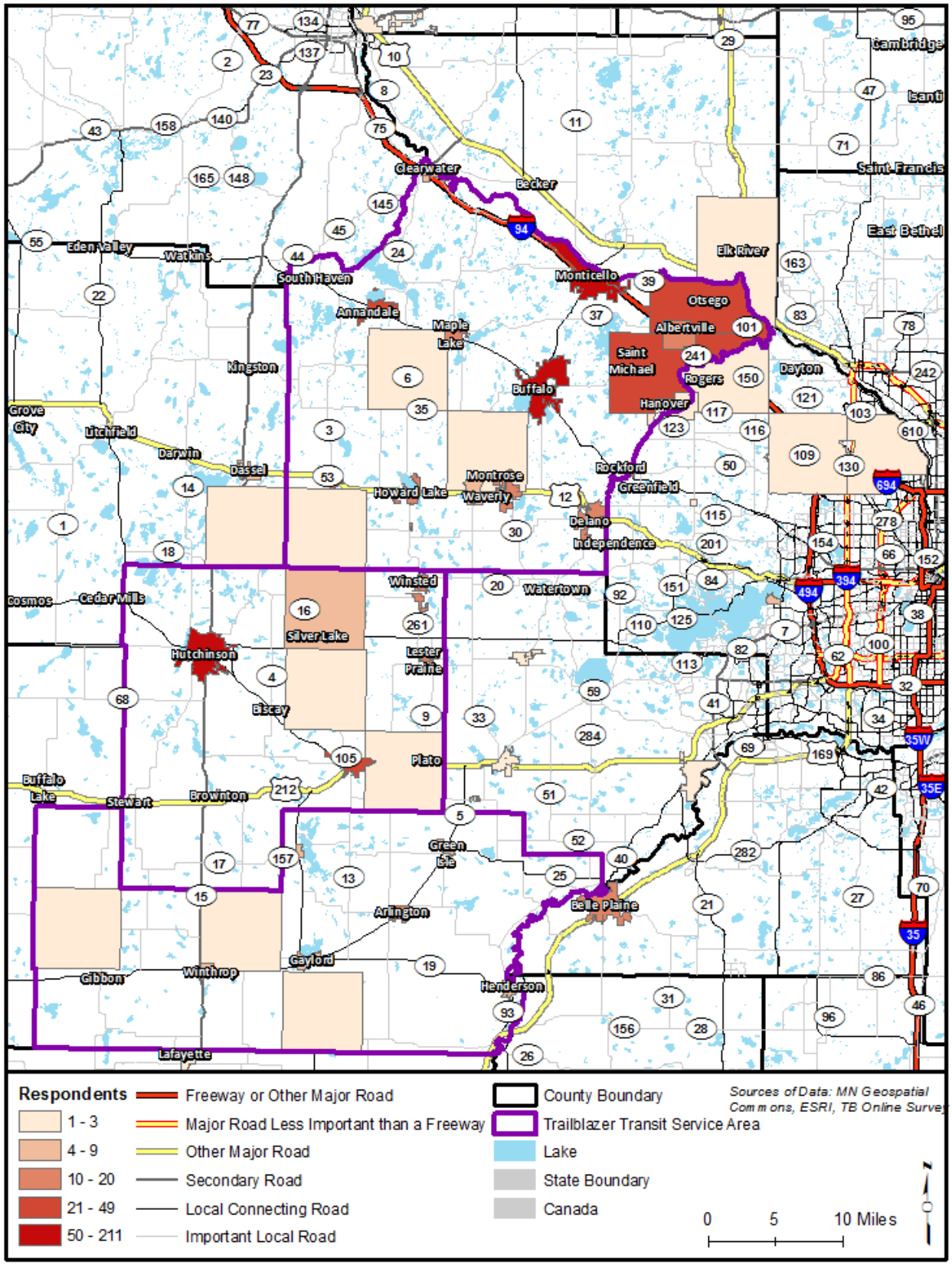


Figure 55. Map of Respondent Home Locations



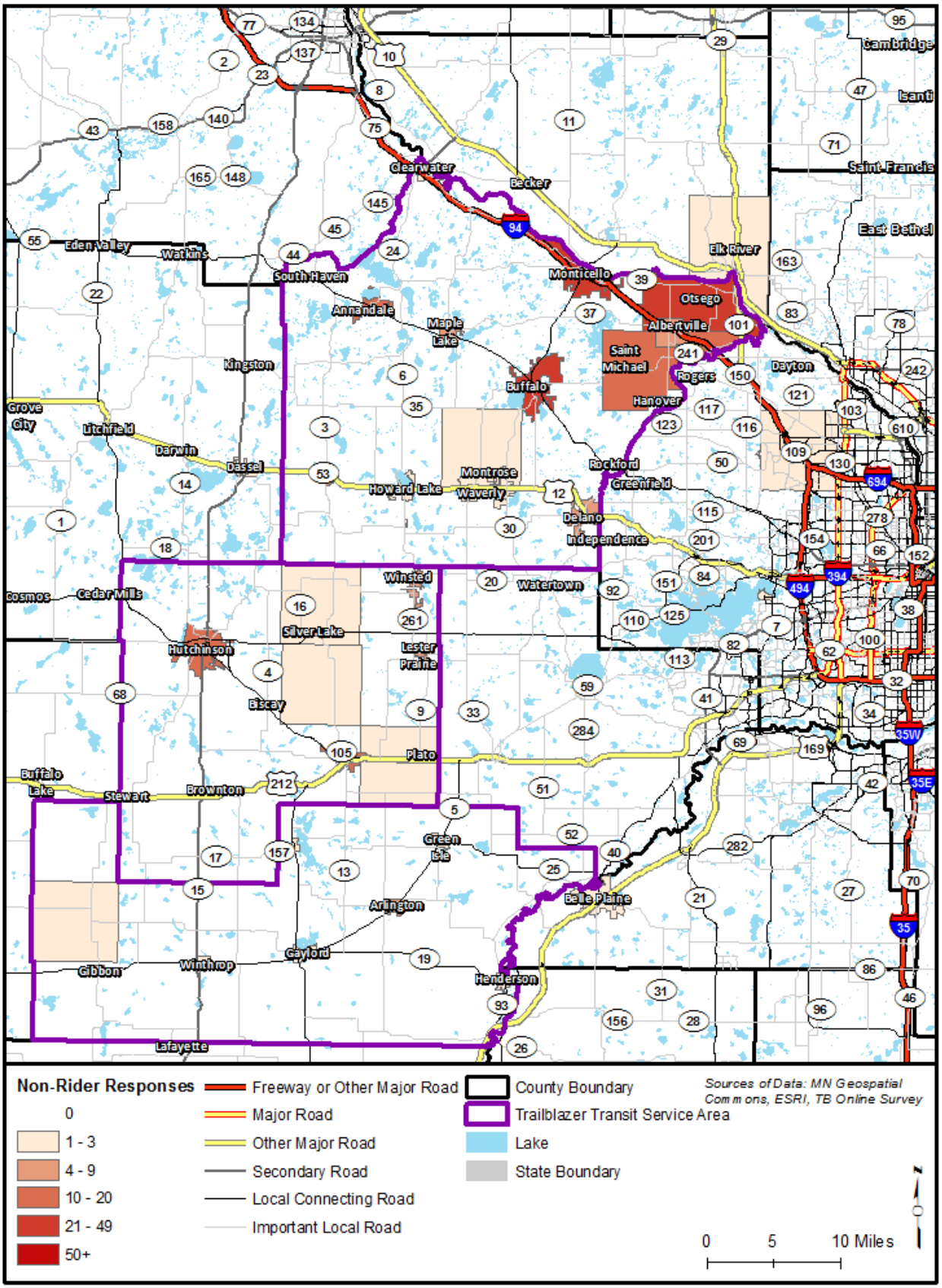
Community Survey

The following questions were asked on the community survey.

What city or township do you currently live in?

The 226 respondents to the community (i.e., non-rider) survey live in 40 different communities. The largest percentage of respondents, 63.7%, came from Wright County, followed by McLeod County (24.8%) and Sibley County (8.0%). Seven of the 40 communities were not within Sibley, McLeod, or Wright counties and represented 3.5% of the non-rider respondents. Overall, the greatest percentage of respondents live in Buffalo (15.9%), followed by Otsego at 10.6%, and Monticello at 9.3%. Figure 44 shows a distribution of responses clustered in northeastern Wright County.

Figure 56. Map of Non-Rider Home Locations



When you leave your current residence, to what city or township do you travel most of the time?

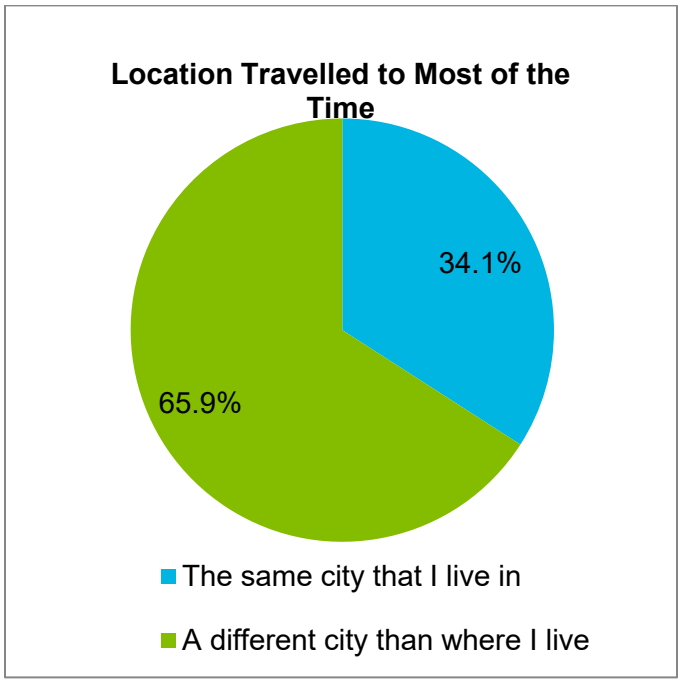
For this question, respondents were able to select one of two responses (i.e., either “the same city that I live in” or “a different city than where I live). If “a different city than where I live” was selected, a follow-up question was asked as to where they traveled. As shown on Figure 45, slightly over one-third travel most often within the city that they live, and two-thirds travel elsewhere.

For those that travel to a different city, the top locations are Buffalo (36), Glencoe (14), Hutchinson (11), Maple Grove (11), and Minneapolis (10).

The top three origin-destination pairs for place of residence and the location to which they travel most frequently are within the same city as they live; these top three pairs were Buffalo-Buffalo (20), Hutchinson-Hutchinson (16), and Monticello-Monticello (10).

Only one origin-destination pair for travel to a different city than their residential community indicated that five or more individuals made the trip; this pair was Buffalo to Annandale.

Figure 57. Location Travelled to Most of the Time



When you leave your current residence, what is the primary reason for your travel?

For this question, individuals were asked to select their primary trip purpose, which was then correlated back to the prior question about where individuals travel most frequently in order to develop Table 26. Responses that totaled less than three were classified as “other.” The greatest number of individuals reported going to Buffalo, followed by Hutchinson. The most prevalent trip purpose was for “work,” followed by “shopping.” Top work destinations include Buffalo, Glencoe, and Hutchinson. Top shopping destinations were Buffalo, Hutchinson, and Monticello. The trip purposes with the lowest responses were “medical” and “social/family visit.” The responses for other activities varied, but common responses included taking children to school and traveling to social service appointments.

Table 28. Reason for Travel by Community

Municipality	Work	Medical	Recreation/ Entertainment	School/ Training	Shopping	Social/ Family Visit	Other	Total
Annandale	5	0	2	1	1	0	0	**9**
Buffalo	33	0	0	4	11	3	2	**53**
Eden Prairie	2	0	0	0	0	1	0	**3**
Glencoe	12	1	0	1	0	0	2	**16**
Hutchinson	13	1	1	0	8	1	1	**25**
Lester Prairie	7	1	0	1	1	0	1	**11**
Minneapolis	8	0	1	0	0	0	0	**9**
Monticello	7	0	1	1	8	0	0	**17**
New Ulm	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	**3**
Otsego	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	**3**
Plymouth	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	**3**
Rogers	4	0	0	0	1	0	1	**6**
St. Cloud	1	2	1	1	0	0	0	**5**
St. Michael	2	0	1	0	0	0	1	**4**
Other	29	2	2	1	2	2	3	**41**
Total	**129**	**7**	**9**	**10**	**35**	**7**	**11**	**208**

How often do you have access to an automobile to get you to where you need to go?

As shown in Table 27, over 93.0% of respondents have access to an automobile almost all the time, and 4.3% rarely or never have access to an automobile. Individuals that lack auto access live in Monticello, Buffalo, Hale, Hutchinson, Arlington, Montrose, Gibbon, and Maple Lake. Half of those without automobile access travel outside of their residential community most often.

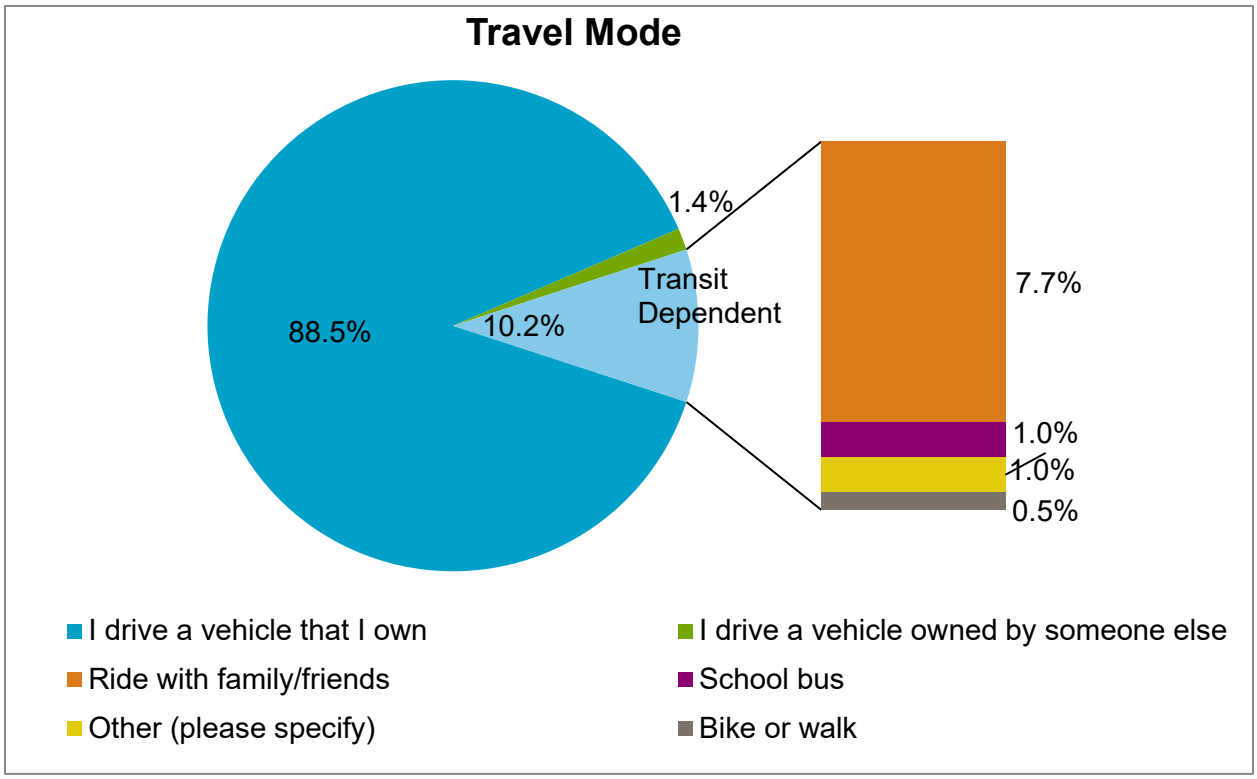
Table 29. Automobile Access

Automobile Access	Count	Percent
Almost all the time	195	93.3%
Occasionally	5	2.4%
Rarely	4	1.9%
Never	5	2.4%

How do you usually travel to where you need to go?

Over 88.0% of respondents drive alone; the remainder used alternate modes. The most frequently used alternative mode is to get a ride with family or friends (7.7%), as shown in Figure 46. There were no responses for Uber/Lyft, taxi, volunteer driver program, and private transportation or provider. Approximately 10.0% are considered transit dependent and either get a ride from others (7.7%), use a school bus (1.0%), bike/walk (0.5%), or indicated “other” (1.0%). Those without auto access all responded that they usually travel by getting a ride from a friend or family member.

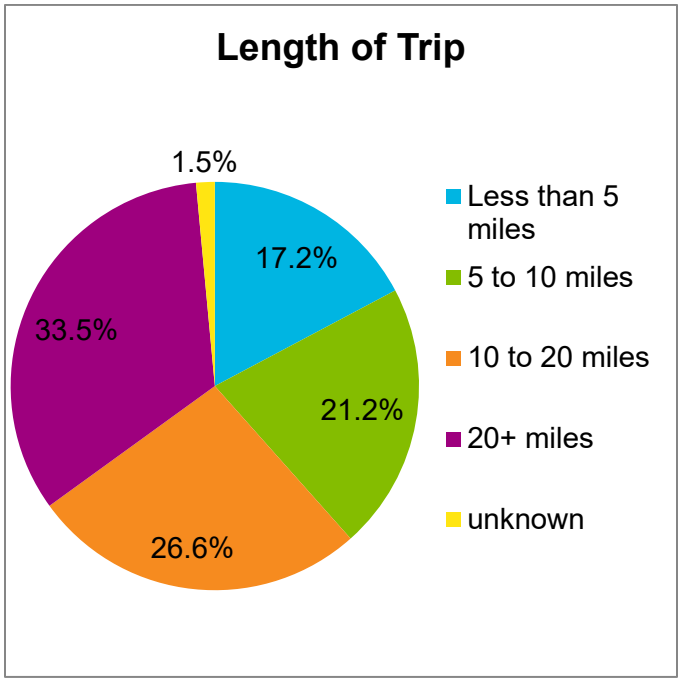
Figure 58. Most Frequent Mode of Travel



When you leave your current residence, how many miles do you typically travel?

As shown on Figure 47, the majority of respondents (33.5%) travel over 20 miles, with the lowest percentage traveling less than 5 miles. Respondents overall travel farther distances then the nation as a whole. According to the Federal Highway Administration’s National Household Travel Survey (2017), over half of all vehicle trips are less than 10 miles long, but 38.4% of the survey respondents travel less than 10 miles. Hutchinson and Buffalo residents tended to have shorter trips, with over 30.0% of respondents traveling less than 5 miles. Otsego and Annandale residents traveled farther, with over 40.0% of respondents from these locations each traveling 20 or more miles.

Figure 59. Length of Trip



What is your current employment status?

As shown in Table 28, the majority of respondents (70.0%) are employed outside of the home for work. This is not surprising, as 62.0% of respondents indicated that the primary reason for travel was employment. The second highest response in terms of employment status was retirement (15.8%), with their primary reason for travel being shopping. Very few respondents (less than 3.0% for each category) were homemakers, students, unemployed, or unable to work. There were no responses for “choose not to work” or “other.”

Table 30. Trip Purpose and Employment Status

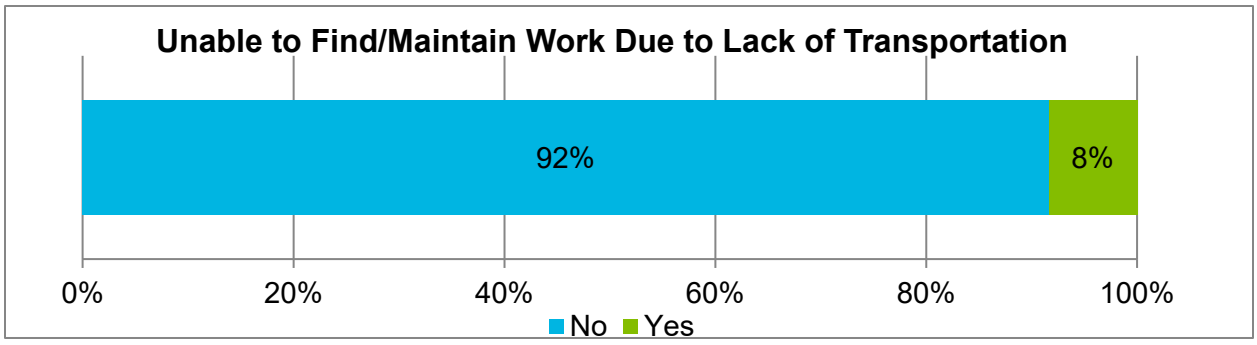
Employment Status	Work	Medical	Recreation/ Entertainment	School/ Training	Shopping	Social/ Family Visit	Other	Total
Homemaker				2	3	1		**6**
Retired	1	6	5		12	2	6	**32**
Student attending class outside the home				2	1	1		**4**
Student studying at home					1			**1**
Unable to work				1				**1**
Unemployed but looking for work				1	1		1	**3**

Employment Status	Work	Medical	Recreation/ Entertainment	School/ Training	Shopping	Social/ Family Visit	Other	Total
Work at home	2			2	9	1		**14**
Work outside the home	123	1	3	2	7	2	4	**142**
Total	**126**	**7**	**8**	**10**	**34**	**7**	**11**	**203**

Have you ever been unable to find or maintain desirable employment due to a lack of reliable transportation at any point in your lifetime?

As shown on Figure 48, 8.0% of respondents have at some time been unable to find or maintain desirable employment due to a lack of reliable transportation. These individuals had a higher percentage (23.5%) of getting a ride from friends/family as their most frequent mode of travel when compared with those individuals who have not experienced lack of work because of transportation issues (5%).

Figure 60. Inability to Find Work Due to Lack of Transportation



Before starting this survey, did you know that Trailblazer Transit provided public transportation services?

Overall, respondents had some level of familiarity with Trailblazer Transit. The majority of respondents (152 individuals, or 75.0%) are aware that Trailblazer Transit provides public transit, and 25.0% were unaware. Of the 25.0% that were unaware, 88.0% live in Wright County. The municipality with the greatest percentage of those unaware of the service is Otsego, where 87.5% of the community respondents did not know that Trailblazer Transit provided public transportation services.

Do you know that the Trailblazer Transit bus service is available to the general public, meaning that almost anyone can ride the bus for almost any reason?

Two-thirds of respondents are familiar with how Trailblazer Transit operates and that the service is open to the general public. One-third are not aware that it is open to the general public. Of those that are not aware it is open to the general public, 25.0% were aware Trailblazer Transit was a public transit provider and 75.0% were not.

If you wanted information about Trailblazer Transit, how would you obtain it?

Respondents were asked how they would find information about Trailblazer Transit. Responses were open-ended but then categorized into seven different options including “other” (as shown

in Table 29). The largest response, 70.6%, was from those who would look it up online, including using a Google search, social media, and the Trailblazer website. The second largest response was from those who would call Trailblazer Transit directly to obtain information (15.2%). All other categories of response had less than 5.0%. ”Other” includes those who said they would not look it up or responses that were unrelated to the question.

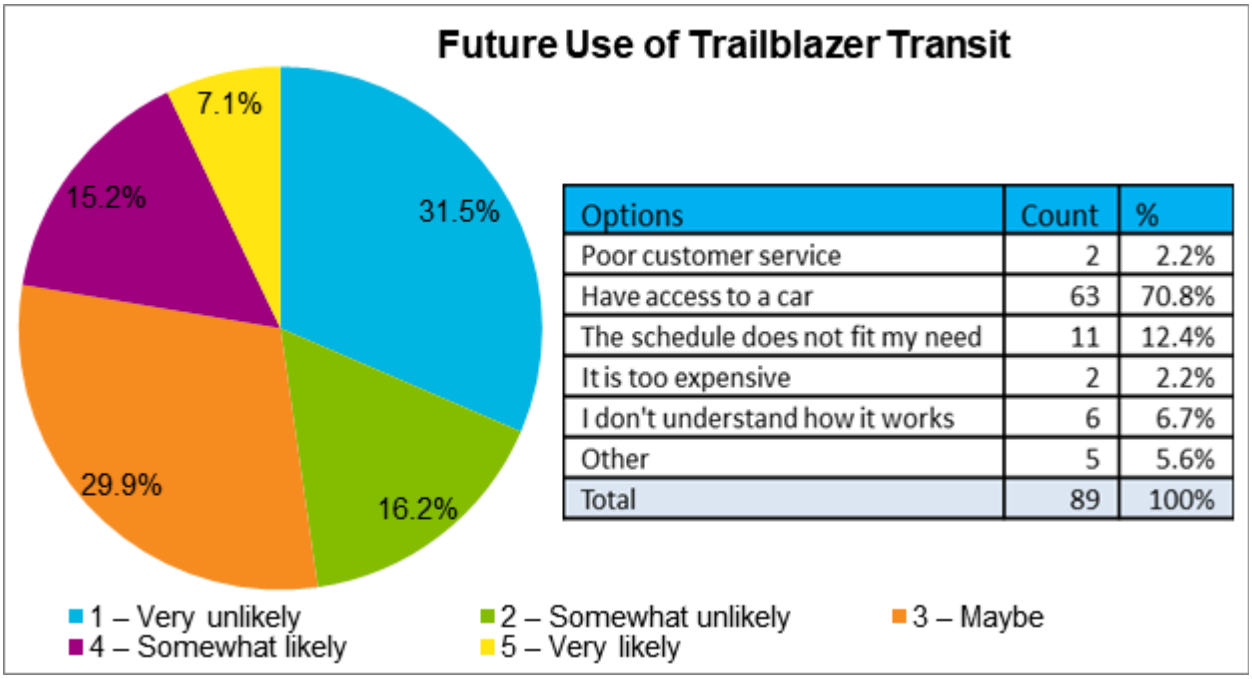
Table 31. How Respondents Would Obtain Trailblazer Transit Information

Obtaining Trailblazer Transit Information	Count	Percent
Ask friend/Family	4	2.0%
Online	139	70.6%
Call Trailblazer	30	15.2%
Newspaper	2	1.0%
Email Trailblazer	6	3.0%
Unknown	7	3.6%
Other	9	4.6%
Total	**197**	**100.0%**

How likely are you to use Trailblazer Transit bus service in the future?

As shown on Figure 49, about 22.3% indicated they are either very or somewhat likely to use Trailblazer Transit in the future. The largest response came from those that are very unlikely to use Trailblazer Transit in the future, at 31.5%. Those that were very unlikely or somewhat unlikely to use it in the future (47.7%) were asked to explain why; these responses were categorized into six different options including “other.” The largest response (70.8%) was from those who have access to a car. The second largest response was from those who stated the schedule does not fit their need because it does not operate the hours/days that they need, go where they need to, or don’t like the demand response aspect and would prefer a scheduled fixed route.

Figure 61. Future Use of Trailblazer Transit



Options	Count	%
Poor customer service	2	2.2%
Have access to a car	63	70.8%
The schedule does not fit my need	11	12.4%
It is too expensive	2	2.2%
I don't understand how it works	6	6.7%
Other	5	5.6%
Total	89	100%

Under what conditions would you consider using Trailblazer Transit bus service?

Respondents were asked to write in under what conditions they would consider using Trailblazer Transit bus service. Six common themes were identified, and all other responses were categorized as “other.” As shown in Table 30, the largest response (48.1%) came from those who said they would use it if they were either unable to drive anymore or did not have access to a vehicle. About 15.7% said they would use it if the schedule met their need and had either regularly scheduled fixed routes, could be used as a park-and-ride into Minneapolis, or if the service provided the ideal schedule for their need. Only 7.0% said they would never use it. The category of “other” responses accounted for 16.2% of answers and included those whose answers were too vague to fit into one of the six categories or provided responses that were not relevant to the question asked.

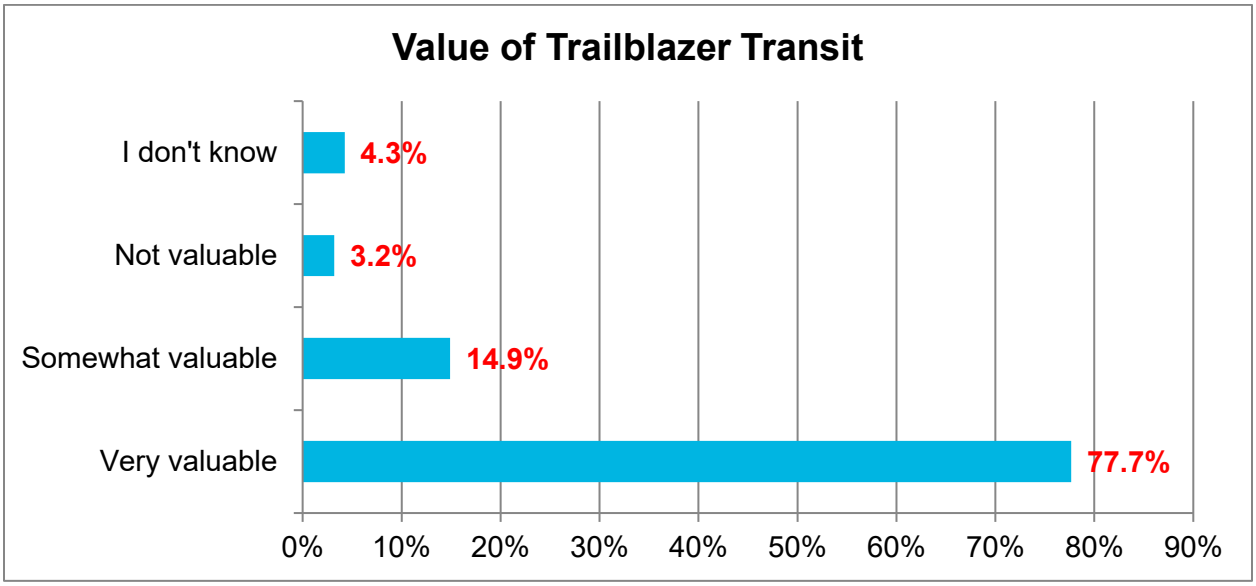
Table 32. Conditions under Which Respondents Would Use Trailblazer Transit

Condition for Using Trailblazer	Count	Percent
Was unable to drive or didnt have a vehicle	89	48.1%
The schedule/service delivery fit my need	29	15.7%
If the hours were expanded	6	3.2%
I would not	13	7.0%
School transportation	12	6.5%
Bad weather	6	3.2%
Other	30	16.2%
Total	**185**	**100.0%**

Do you feel that public transportation is a valuable resource in Sibley, McLeod, and Wright Counties, even if you don't currently ride or aren't likely to ride the bus in the near future?

As shown on Figure 50, 92.6% of respondents feel that public transportation in Sibley, McLeod, and Wright counties is a valuable resource, even if they do not ride and likely will not ride in the future. About 3.2% stated it was not valuable and 4.3% were unsure and indicated "I don't know." People recognized the value Trailblazer Transit provides in increasing people's access to healthcare, education, employment, and overall mobility. In addition, they recognized Trailblazer Transit's value in that not everyone has access to a car.

Figure 62. Value of Trailblazer Transit



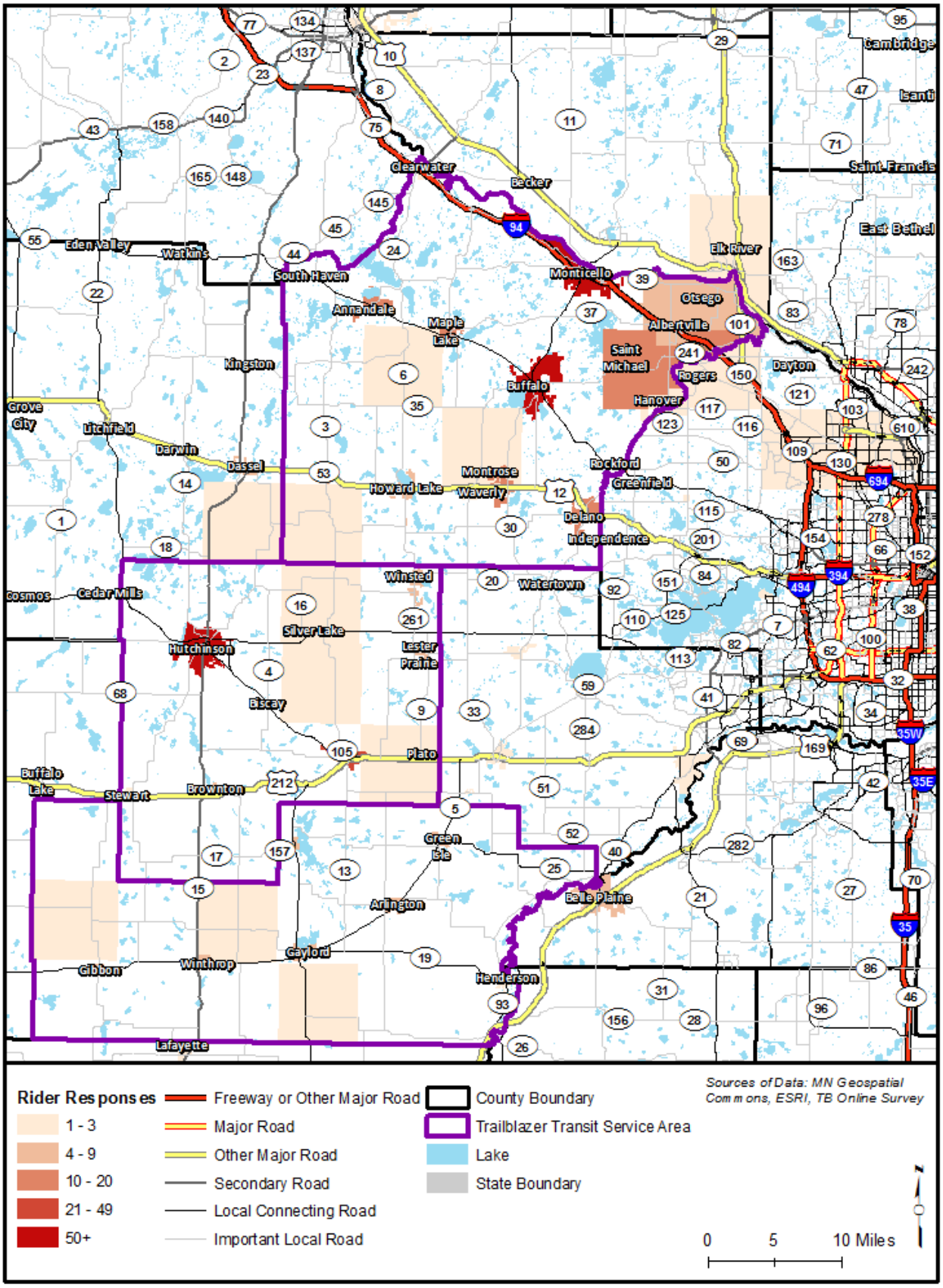
Rider Survey

The following questions were asked on the community survey.

What city or township do you currently live in?

There were 639 respondents to the rider survey, who live in 54 different communities. The largest percentage of respondents (60.1%) came from Wright County, followed by McLeod County (26.5%), and Sibley County (7.5%). Seventeen of the 54 communities were not within Sibley, McLeod, or Wright counties and represented 5.7% of the rider respondents. Overall, the greatest percentage of respondents live in Buffalo (28.6%), followed by Hutchinson at 13.5% and Monticello at 12.6%. Figure 51 shows the distribution of responses, with concentrations in the larger cities.

Figure 63. Map of Rider Home Locations



How did you first learn about Trailblazer Transit?

As shown in Table 31, the greatest percentage of individuals (34.4%) learned about Trailblazer Transit from a friend or family member, followed by those who saw a Trailblazer Transit bus providing service. Learning about Trailblazer Transit from a human services provider made up 12.8% of responses; many of these indicated Functional Industries or Adult Training and Habilitation Center (ATHC). Those who learned about Trailblazer Transit from other transportation providers wrote in previous providers such as River Rider and the Hutchmobile. “Other” accounted for 3.9% of responses; these responses were too vague to categorize into one of the other 10 categories.

Table 33. How Riders Learned about Trailblazer Transit

First Learn About Trailblazer Transit	Count	Percent
Friend or Family	194	34.4%
Saw a bus	97	17.2%
Human Services Provider	72	12.8%
County Resource	57	10.1%
Community Bulletin	27	4.8%
Work	27	4.8%
Newspaper/Ad	27	4.8%
Other	22	3.9%
Trailblazer website	18	3.2%
Other Transportation Provider	17	3.0%
School	6	1.1%
Total	**564**	**100.0%**

How long have you used Trailblazer Transit’s bus service?

For those that use Trailblazer Transit, 72% have been using it for more than one year. The highest usage rates were found to be those who have been using it between 1 and 2 years and those who have used it less than 1 year, with each group representing 28.0% of the responses (Figure 52).

Respondents who have used Trailblazer Transit for more than 5 years had a higher proportion from Hutchinson, with 31.5%; this group also represented 40.1% of all Hutchinson riders.

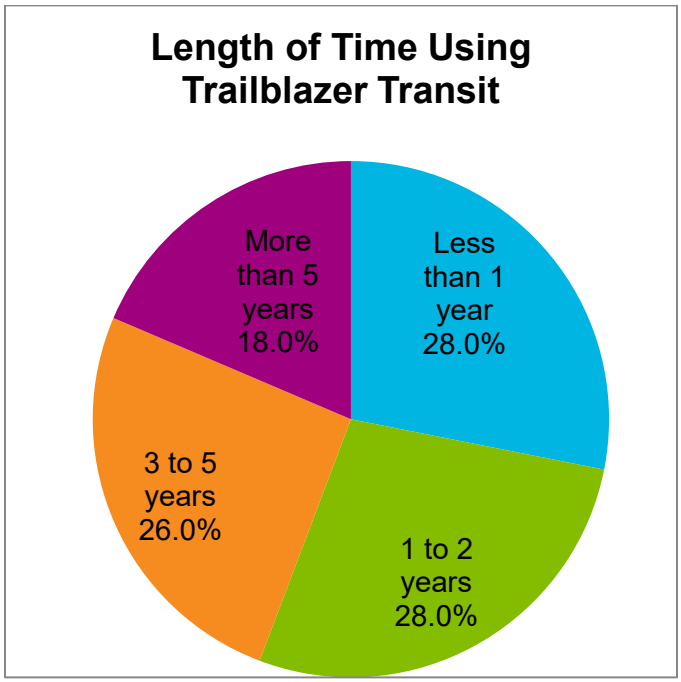
While Monticello residents accounted for 12.6% of the overall ridership, they accounted for 1.8% of the long-term (i.e., 5 years or more) riders. The greatest percentage of Monticello riders (51.9%) have been using Trailblazer Transit for 1 to 2 years; the Monticello riders made up 25.0% of the those riding for 1 to 2 years.

About 30.0% of the long term (i.e., 5 years or more) riders were from Buffalo and made up 18.9% of riders from Buffalo.

Generally, individuals who first became aware of Trailblazer Transit by seeing a bus in their community or heard about it through friends and/or family members have been using the service

for a shorter period of time, while individuals who heard about it through human service providers have been using it for longer periods of time.

Figure 64. How Long Respondents Have Been Using Trailblazer Transit



How often do you typically use Trailblazer Transit bus service?

As shown in Table 32, just under two-thirds (63.1%) of Trailblazer Transit riders use the bus at least once a week, with 36.0% using it daily.

Table 34. Trailblazer Transit Usage

Trailblazer Transit Usage	Count	Percent
Almost every day	217	36.0%
A few times per week	163	27.1%
A few times per month	103	17.1%
A few times per year	75	12.5%
Seasonal	3	0.5%
Unknown	8	1.3%
I do not use it	8	1.3%
Other	25	4.2%
Total	**602**	**100.0%**

Occasional riders include those who only use it a few times per year or seasonally; they comprise 13.0% of the respondents. A small percentage (1.3%) were unsure how often they use

it. While this survey question was for riders, 1.3% did indicate they do not use Trailblazer Transit[16]. Respondents who indicated "other" represented 4.2%.

Write-in responses included "only use Trailblazer Transit when needed," but they did not indicate how often that is, or it was their first time using Trailblazer Transit, or they have not used Trailblazer Transit in a long time.

Those that use Trailblazer Transit at least once a week have been doing so for 1 to 2 or 3 to 5 years and live in Buffalo (33.2%), Monticello (13.7%), and Hutchinson (11.3%).

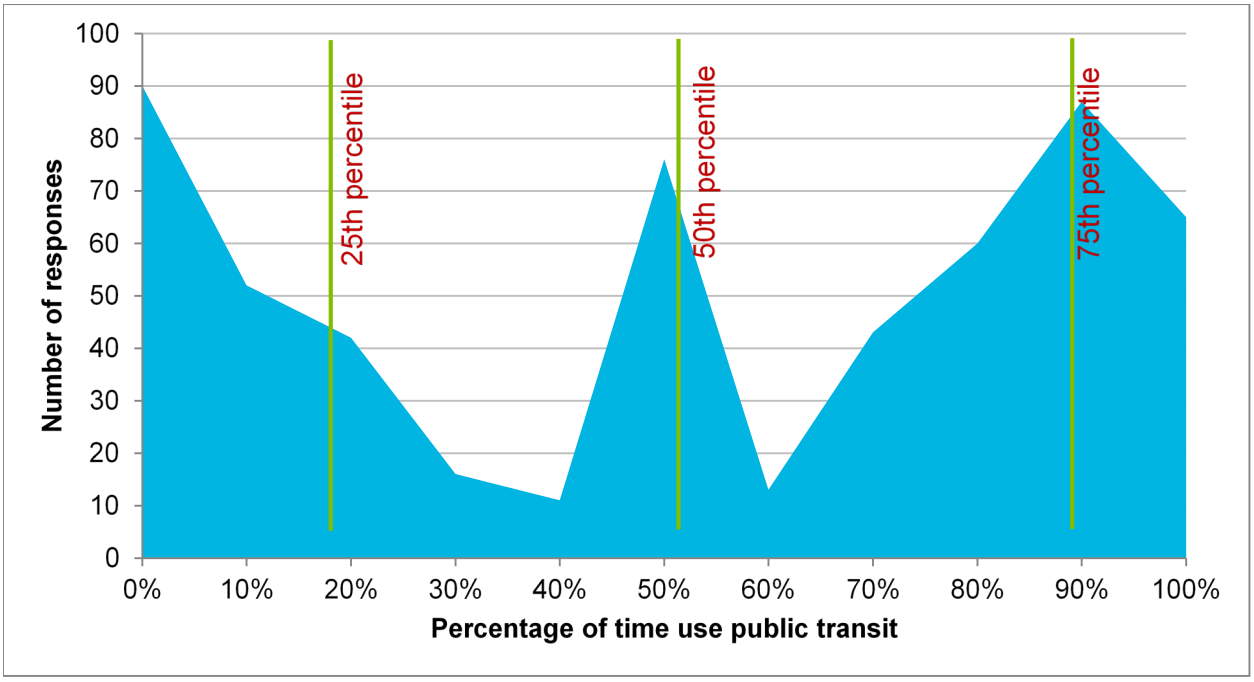
Those that use Trailblazer Transit occasionally have been using it less than 1 year (41.8%). While the greatest percentage (43.0%) of occasional riders is found in Wright County, this is lower than the percentage of overall riders who are from Wright County (60.1%). McLeod County experiences the inverse; it makes up 28.4% of all riders but occasional riders from McLeod County make up 35.0% of riders. This indicates that while McLeod County had a smaller response rate it had a higher proportion of those individuals who are occasional riders.

What percentage of the time do you use public transit for your transportation?

Respondents were asked to state what percentage of time they use public transit as their mode of transportation. The range was 0-100, with the average response being 53.9%, and 62.0% of passengers using it at least 50% of the time. The average is very close to the mean and mode, which were both 50%.

Figure 53 shows the distribution of response and percentiles. Responses are not distributed evenly; 0.0% has a high response rate, which then decreases until 50%, where a spike occurs, then it drops again at 60.0% but then begins to increase, with another peak at 90.0%. The most common group of those who use it 50% of the time or more live in Buffalo (34.9%).

Figure 65. Percentage of Time Public Transit is used over Other Modes



[16] It is possible that individuals filling out the survey selected yes because someone in their care uses Trailblazer Transit, but then answered the questions as themselves and not the person in their care.

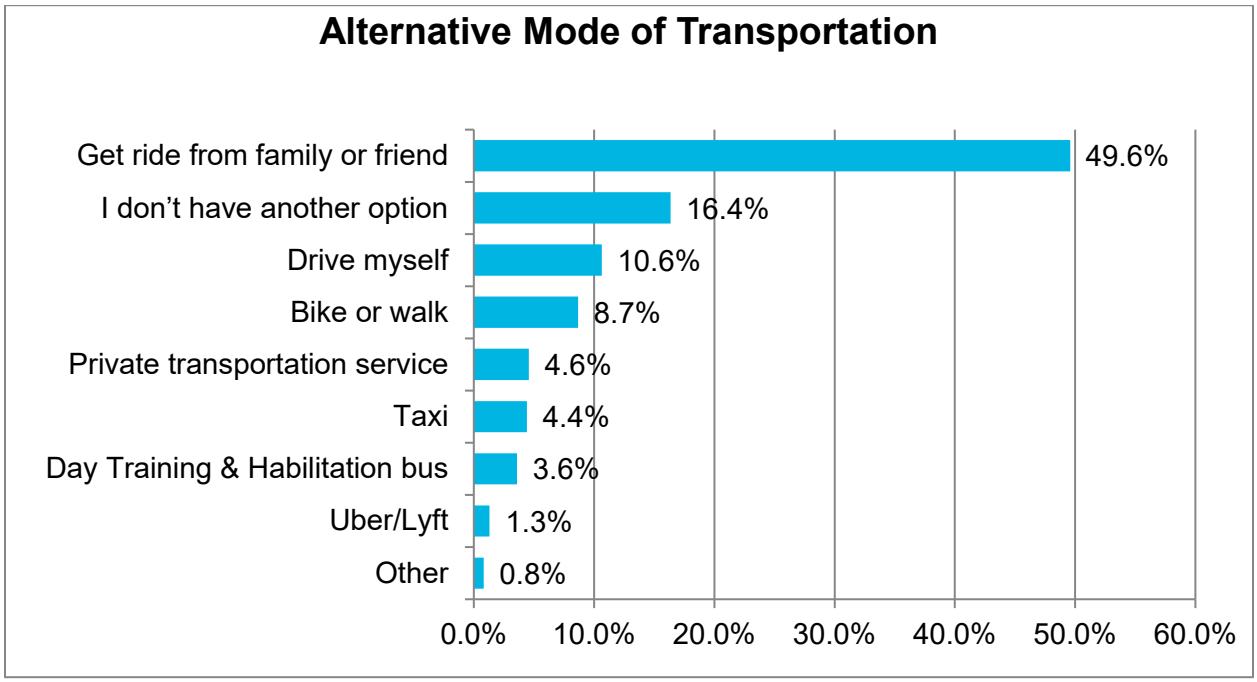
If the Trailblazer Transit bus service was unavailable, what would be your next available option to get you where you need to go?

As shown on Figure 54, if Trailblazer Transit was not available, the greatest response for alternative transportation was to get a ride from a family member or friend (at 49.6%), the smallest response was for "other" (at 0.8%)[17], followed by Uber/Lyft (at 1.3%).

Write-in responses indicate that several of those who responded "private transportation service" meant non-emergency medical transportation (NEMT) providers.

About 16% responded that they do not have another option, which indicates that without Trailblazer Transit they would be unable to make their trip. This is supported by the fact that those who do not have another option use Trailblazer Transit for 71.0% of trips, as opposed to those who have the option to drive themselves only using Trailblazer Transit for 22.9% of trips.

Figure 66. Alternate Mode of Transportation



How satisfied are you with the Trailblazer Transit bus service?

As shown on Figure 55, about 81.8% were satisfied with Trailblazer Transit, 9.0% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, and 9.2% were dissatisfied.

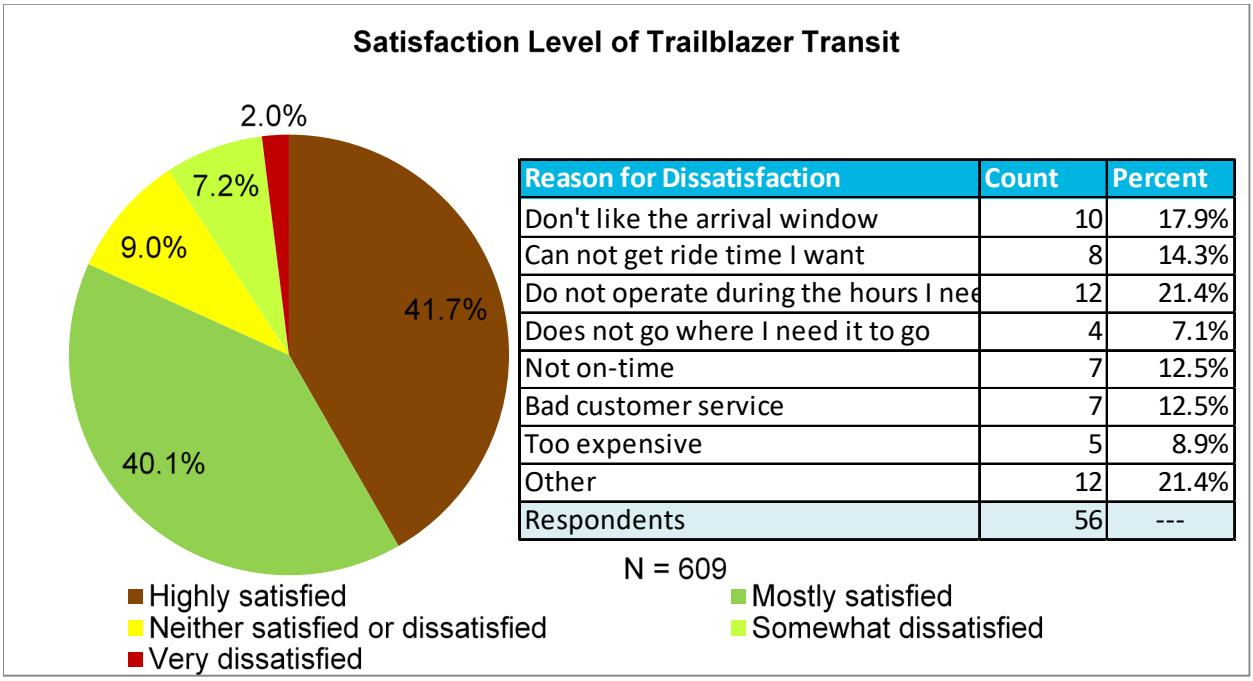
Those that were dissatisfied were asked why in an open-ended response. The open-ended responses were categorized into eight possible responses including "other." Two respondents did not indicate why they were dissatisfied. The largest percentage of those that were dissatisfied indicated it was because Trailblazer Transit does not operate during the hours which they need it to operate (this includes weekends).

Of those who are satisfied with Trailblazer Transit, there was no difference in terms of the length of time they have been using Trailblazer Transit or how often they ride the service compared to all respondents.

[17] "Other" originally represented 2.95 percent of response but after reading the write in responses most were reclassified to fit one of the categories based on the write in.

For those that are not satisfied they tend to use Trailblazer Transit less frequently (a few times a month or less) than those who are satisfied with the service. Approximately 55.0% of non-satisfied individuals used Trailblazer Transit a few times a month or less, compared to the 30.0% of the overall respondents and 24.0% of the satisfied users.

Figure 67. Level of Satisfaction



Reason for Dissatisfaction	Count	Percent
Don't like the arrival window	10	17.9%
Can not get ride time I want	8	14.3%
Do not operate during the hours I nee	12	21.4%
Does not go where I need it to go	4	7.1%
Not on-time	7	12.5%
Bad customer service	7	12.5%
Too expensive	5	8.9%
Other	12	21.4%
Respondents	56	---

N = 609

What do you like best about Trailblazer Transit?

Respondents provided open-ended responses for what they like best about Trailblazer Transit. Responses were categorized into 10 categories; if multiple reasons were given regarding what they like best, more than one category was selected. Table 33 lists each of the 10 categories and the definition used to classify answers. Categories were based on common themes identified through reading the responses. As shown on Figure 56, 555 individuals provided a response, with 689 classifications; 106 individuals had responses that were put into more than one category. Drivers/customer service ranked the highest, with just under 50.0% of respondents stating this is what they like best about Trailblazer Transit, followed by the quality of the service at 19.8%.

What individuals like best was compared to how long they have been using Trailblazer Transit in Table 34 and then with how often they use the service in Table 35. Values in red indicate it is 10.0% less than the overall response rate for that category regardless of tenure or frequency of use; green indicates it is 10.0% greater[18] for that category. Those with a lower response rate of what they like best had more variations in terms of usage length; this is expected in a smaller sample size. Those who had been using it longer than 5 years had a higher response rate for “it exists.” Respondents who use the service daily had less responses proportionally for the quality of service, affordability, and “it exists,” and those who use it a few times a month had a higher response rate for affordability.

[18] N indicates the number of responses. Values may total to less than the number presented on Figure 12 as it does not include those who selected “other” in question 3 and the fact that some individuals did not provide a response to question 3 or question 4.

For those that were satisfied with Trailblazer Transit service, there were no large deviations between what they like best about Trailblazer Transit and the overall response rate, whereas this differed for those who were not satisfied. Unsatisfied individuals had a higher response rate for selecting affordability and “it exists” and a lower rate for drivers/customer service as what they like best. Those who indicated what they like best is the drivers/customer service had a higher average for how often they use the service (66.0% of the time), compared to the mean of 53.0%. These individuals use public transit 20.0% more of the time than those who like that it is affordable or that “it exists” best.

Table 35. Categories and Definitions for What Riders like Best

Category	Definition
Drivers/Customer Service	Includes dispatch, scheduling, drivers, or any staff members
Quality of Service	Includes reliability, availability, dependability, and they like where/when it operates
Affordability	Low cost
On-time	The vehicle is on-time or it gets them to/from their destination on-time.
Convenience	Either the word “convenient” was used or the response indicates they are not dependent on the service
It exists	Individuals are glad it is there to get them where they need to go
Vehicles	Cleanliness, comfort, or ability to use lift
Ease of Use	Indicated that the service is easy to use
Safety	Used the word “safety”
Other	Everything else

Figure 68. What Riders Like Best about Trailblazer Transit

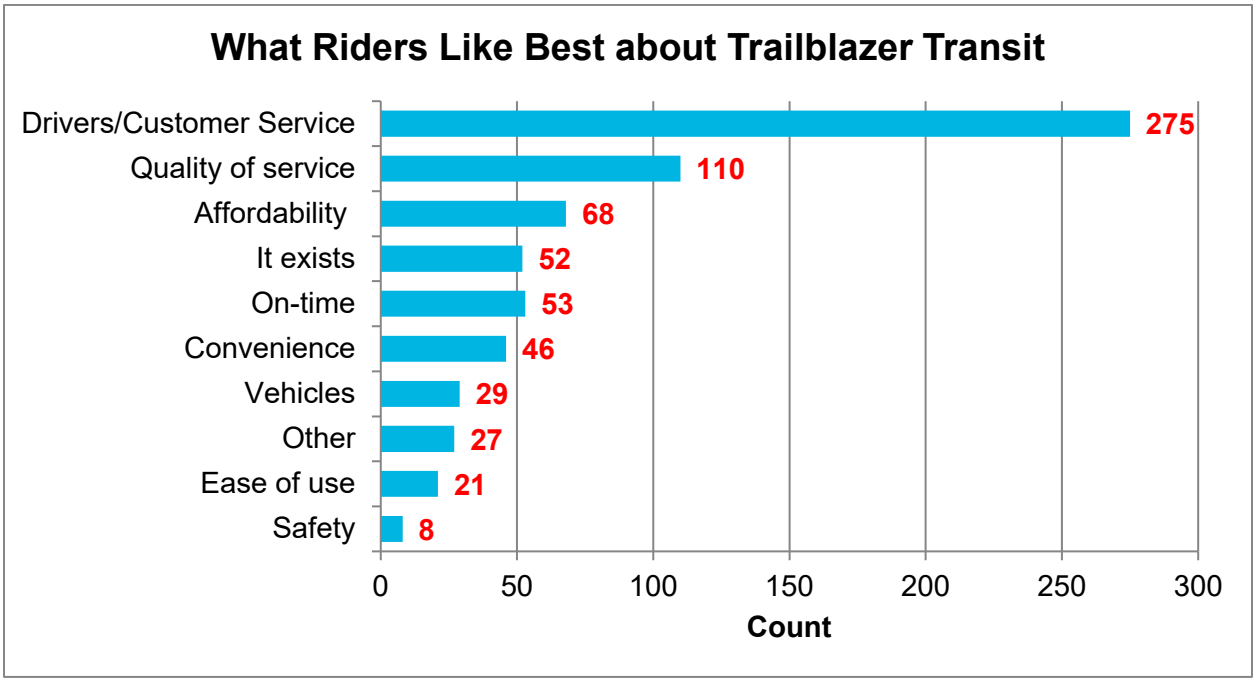


Table 36. Length of Use Compared to what is Liked Best

Length Using Trailblazer Transit	Safety	Ease of use	Other	Vehicles	Convenience	On-time	It exists	Affordability	Quality of service	Drivers/ Customer Service
Less than 1 year	13%	43%	56%	31%	28%	34%	28%	32%	35%	21%
1 to 2 years	38%	24%	15%	28%	28%	36%	15%	25%	25%	32%
3 to 5 years	0%	10%	11%	24%	26%	13%	23%	21%	20%	28%
More than 5 years	50%	24%	19%	17%	17%	17%	32%	21%	18%	19%
N =	**8**	**21**	**27**	**29**	**46**	**53**	**52**	**67**	**109**	**275**

Table 37. Frequency of Use Compared to what is Liked Best

Frequency Using Trailblazer Transit	Safety	Ease of use	Other	Vehicles	Convenience	On-time	It exists	Affordability	Quality of service	Drivers/ Customer Service
Almost every day	50%	14%	19%	31%	24%	34%	19%	13%	25%	45%
Few times per week	38%	38%	37%	21%	37%	34%	26%	25%	29%	28%
Few times per year	0%	14%	15%	10%	11%	0%	17%	22%	15%	4%
Few times/ month	13%	19%	7%	21%	15%	19%	15%	32%	15%	13%
Other	0%	10%	22%	14%	11%	11%	21%	7%	14%	8%
N =	**8**	**20**	**27**	**29**	**45**	**52**	**52**	**67**	**109**	**271**

What suggestions do you have for improvement?

Respondents provided open-ended responses for suggestions. As shown in Table 36, responses were categorized into 14 categories; if multiple suggestions were given, more than one category was selected. Table 36 shows that 346 individuals (59.0% of rider respondents) provided 476 suggestions for improvements[19], and 93 responses had more than one suggestion. Categories were based on common themes identified through reading the responses where there were at least 10 suggestions. The largest category for improvement suggestions was weekend service at 23.7%, followed by more trips available with 22.0%. Suggestions for improvements to on-time performance, the use of technology, converting service to a scheduled fixed route, and "irrelevant" each had less than 5.0% for responses.

Table 38. Suggestions for Improvements

Suggestion	Count	Percent
Weekend service – Saturday or Sunday or both	82	23.7%
Later evening service – Service after 6p.m.	54	15.6%
Earlier service in the morning – Service before 6a.m.	33	9.5%
Service outside the existing area – locations and connections to other transit providers	33	9.5%
Shorter pick-up window – includes notifying passengers when bus is about to arrive	20	5.8%
On-time – both being within the pick-up window and getting to their destination in time	14	4.0%
Improved scheduling - shorter wait time on the phone and any suggestions about scheduling that didn't reference technology or on-line options	20	5.8%
Improved customer service – drivers, dispatchers, schedulers and staff	18	5.2%
More trips available – during the existing service hours	76	22.0%
Technology – all types including on-line reservation, smart card payments, use of GPS	17	4.9%
Convert to a fixed route – or deviated fixed route, but with a set schedule so individuals did not need to make reservations	13	3.8%
Policy change - any Trailblazer Transit policy that isn't federally regulated or the pick-up window. Federally regulated policy suggestions are under "other"	34	9.8%
Other – all responses that did not fit into one of the other categories	51	14.7%
Irrelevant – response not relevant to the question asked, typically Human Resource issues	10	2.9%
Unique respondents	**346**	**---**

[19] Note that 144 individuals skipped this question and 100 responses were deleted because the response was N/A, Nothing, No, et cetera.

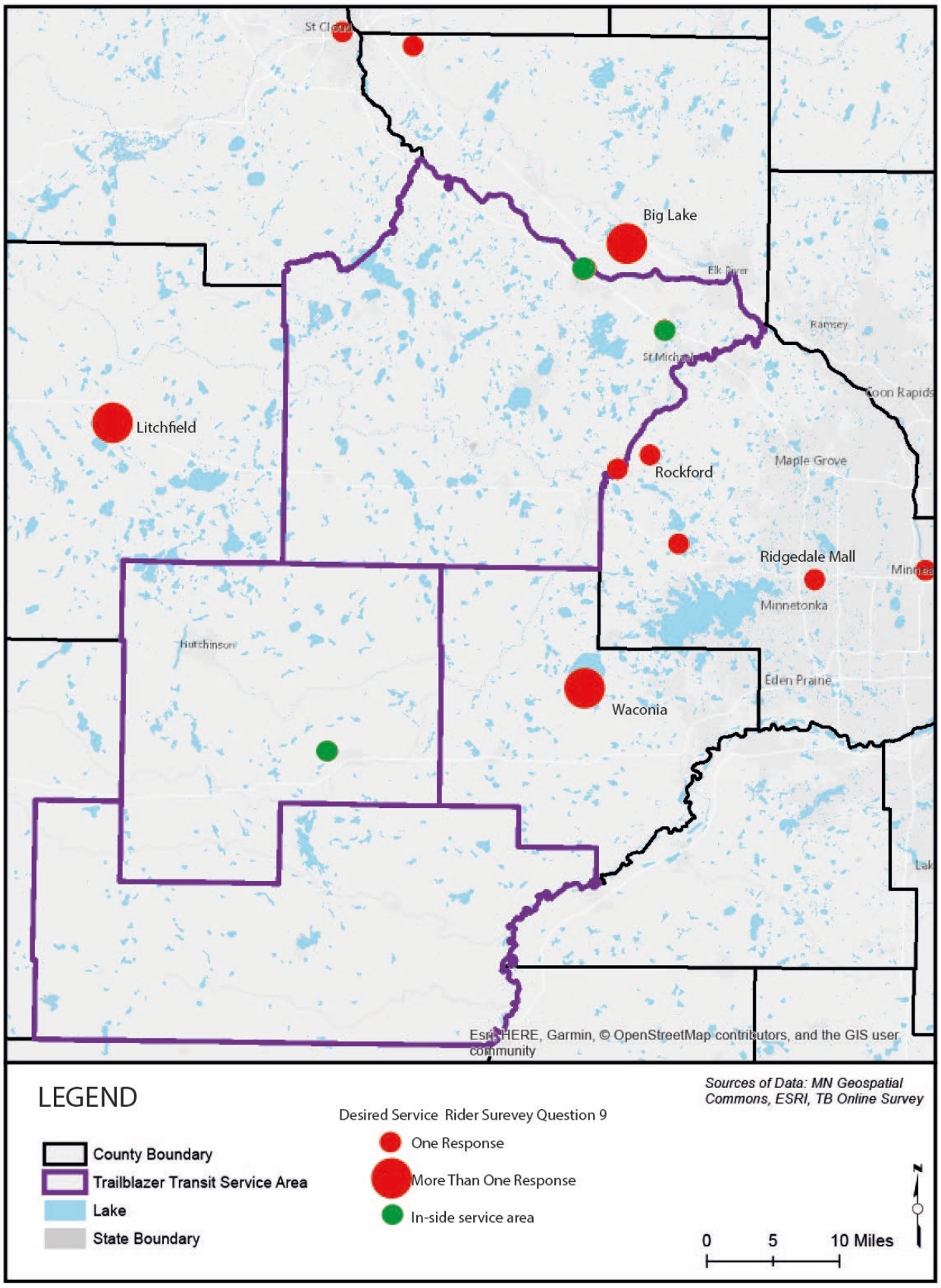
Figure 57 shows a map of areas outside the existing service area that individuals suggested there be service to. More than one response was for service to the Northstar train station in Big Lake and the METRO transit system to get into the Twin Cities. Weekend late evening and early morning service was most wanted by those living in Wright County, with a focus in Buffalo. Buffalo accounted for 40.0% of the responses with requests for weekend service, and 18.9% of Buffalo riders responded this way. Buffalo respondents accounted for 30.0% of those wanting later evening service and 38.0% of those wanting earlier morning service. Those with suggestions for a shorter pick-up window, improved scheduling, and improved customer service stated they were satisfied with the service 72.0 to 75.0% of the time; this is slightly less than the 81.8% of overall respondents who were satisfied.

There were 34 suggestions for policy changes; policies mentioned include the no-show/cancellation rule, bag limit, allowing drinks on board, and the return pick-up policy for medical trips.

The “other” category includes all that could not be categorized elsewhere; eight responses had to do with the shared-ride nature of the service and that it is open to the general public. Several of these respondents indicated they have contracts and do not want the general public riding the bus with their clients.

Finally, nine responses were related to fares and three to the vehicles.

Figure 69. Places Individuals Want Service To

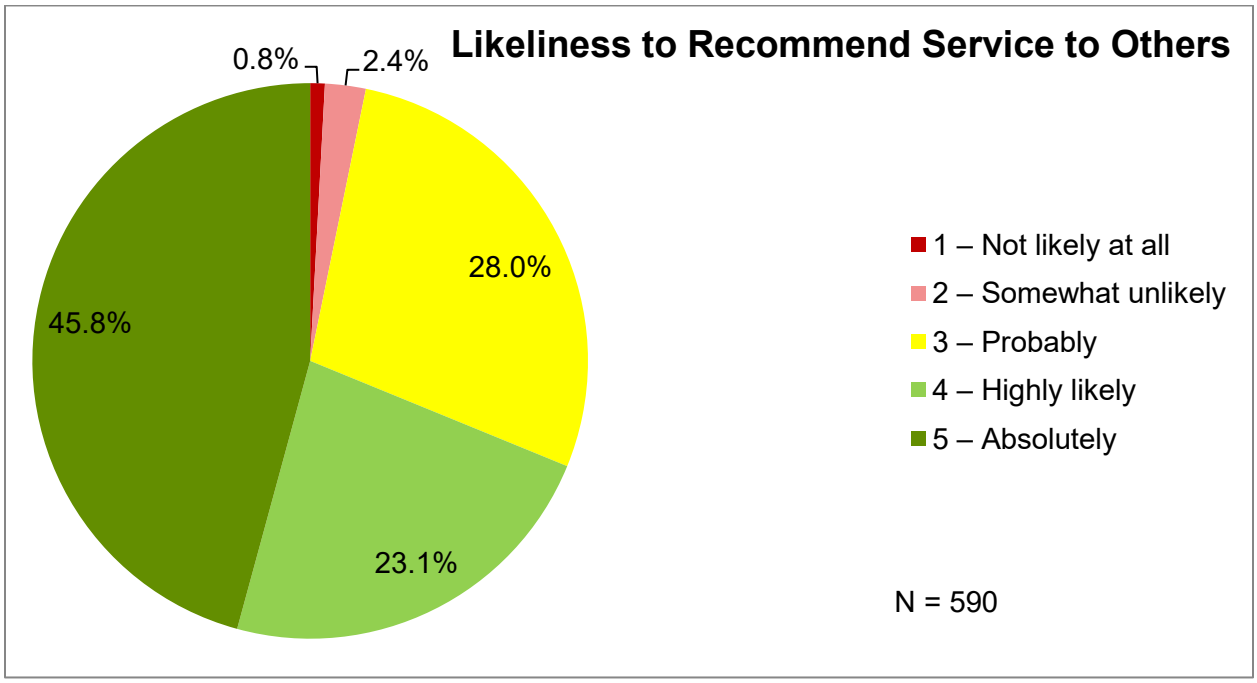


How likely is it that you would recommend Trailblazer Transit bus service to a family member or friend?

Overall, respondents would recommend Trailblazer Transit to others. As shown on Figure 58, the majority of respondents (406 individuals, or 68.9%) would recommend Trailblazer Transit; 28.0% would probably recommend the service, while 3.2% are unlikely to recommend Trailblazer Transit.

Those that were unlikely to recommend the service were asked why in an open-ended response. There was a large variation in the open-ended responses, but common themes were scheduling difficulties (7 out of 19), customer service issues (2 out of 19), and available hours of service (2 out of 19).

Figure 70. Likeliness to Recommend Service to Others



How far in advance do you typically schedule your bus rides?

Respondents were asked how far in advance they typically schedule their ride. The original selection choice had seven options, including “other.” Due to the high response rate for “other” (81 responses), it was broken down further based on common responses into “standing orders,” “someone else schedules the ride” (meaning the survey respondent does not know), “varies” for those who responded accordingly, and “other” for all remaining responses.

As shown in Table 37, the greatest response rates came from those who do it the same day (17.2%) and those who do it 7 days in advance (17.7%), which is the farthest out one can schedule a non-standing order ride. Of the write-in responses, the greatest percentage was those with a standing order (7.4%). Those who do not schedule their rides have a higher satisfaction rating for Trailblazer Transit than those who do schedule their own rides. All other categories except “other” and “3 to 4 days in advance” were within five percentage points of the distribution for satisfied responses; “other” was 13.4% less and 3 to 4 days in advance was 5.0% less.

Table 39. Time in Advance Ride is Scheduled

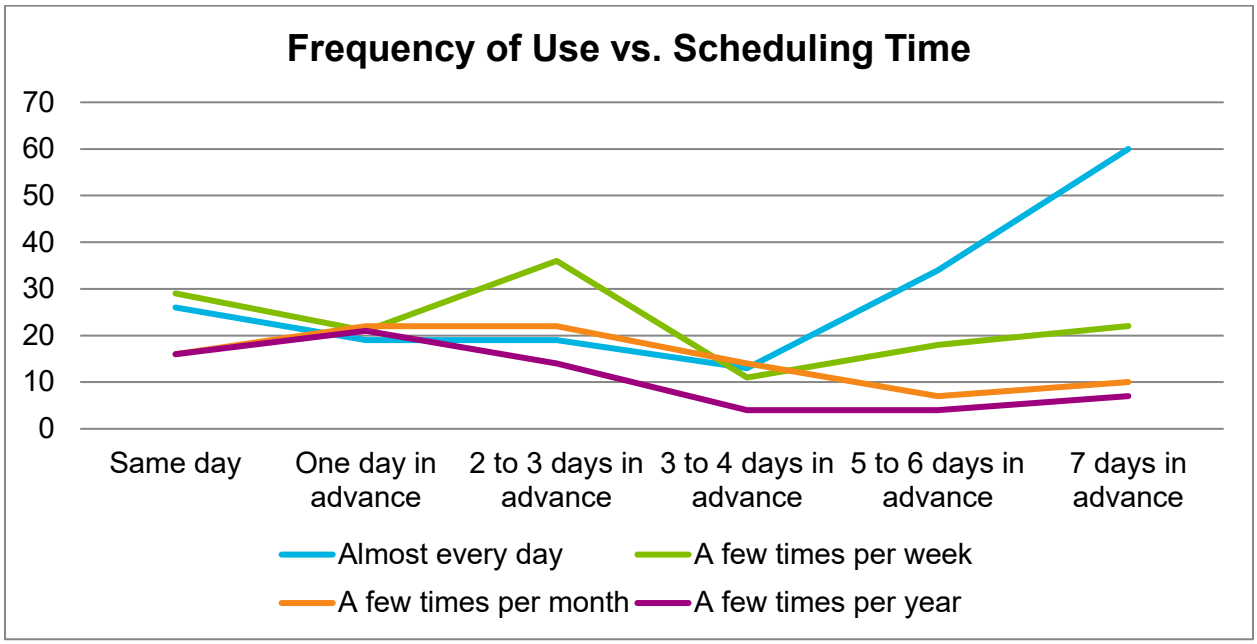
How Far in Advance Ride is Scheduled	Count	Percent
Same day	100	17.2%
One day in advance	92	15.8%
2 to 3 days in advance	98	16.8%
3 to 4 days in advance	42	7.2%
5 to 6 days in advance	66	11.3%
7 days in advance	103	17.7%
Standing orders	43	7.4%
Someone else schedules my ride	13	2.2%
Varies	5	0.9%
Other	20	3.4%
Total	**582**	**100.0%**

Figure 59 shows the frequency that respondents use Trailblazer Transit compared with when they schedule the trip.

Generally, individuals that use it daily schedule their trips further in advance. Infrequent users (a few times a month or less) will schedule the trip with less notice. Infrequent users had less satisfaction using Trailblazer Transit; which may be due to scheduling closer to the trip time, as typically less spots are available.

Long-time users also schedule further in advance, with 46.8% scheduling five or more days in advance, compared to those who have used it less than a year, where 15.4% schedule service five days in advance or more.

Figure 71. Trailblazer Transit Frequency Usage Compared to When Individuals Schedule Their Trips



How often is Trailblazer Transit able to negotiate reasonable pickup times with you (within 60 minutes of your requested times)?

Trailblazer Transit riders are able to negotiate the time they want to be picked up always or usually approximately 90.9% of the time. As shown on Figure 60, the largest category was "usually" at 62.5% of the time. Very few (1.5%) responded they never get the time they want. Those who responded "never" or "rarely" were asked what times they are unable to get[20], and 9 (21.0%) responded with times outside of the current service hours. Table 38 shows a breakdown of times of the day individuals are unable to get a ride; the largest response was split evenly between mornings and all times of the day, with 23.2% each. A correlation was found between those having difficulties getting the time they want and how far in advance they schedule their ride. Only 10.0% of those who cannot get the time they want schedule 7 days in advance, compared to the 19.0% of respondents who can get the time they want and schedule 7 days in advance.

[20] Several did not supply a time.

Figure 72. How Often Riders Get the Pick-Up Time Requested

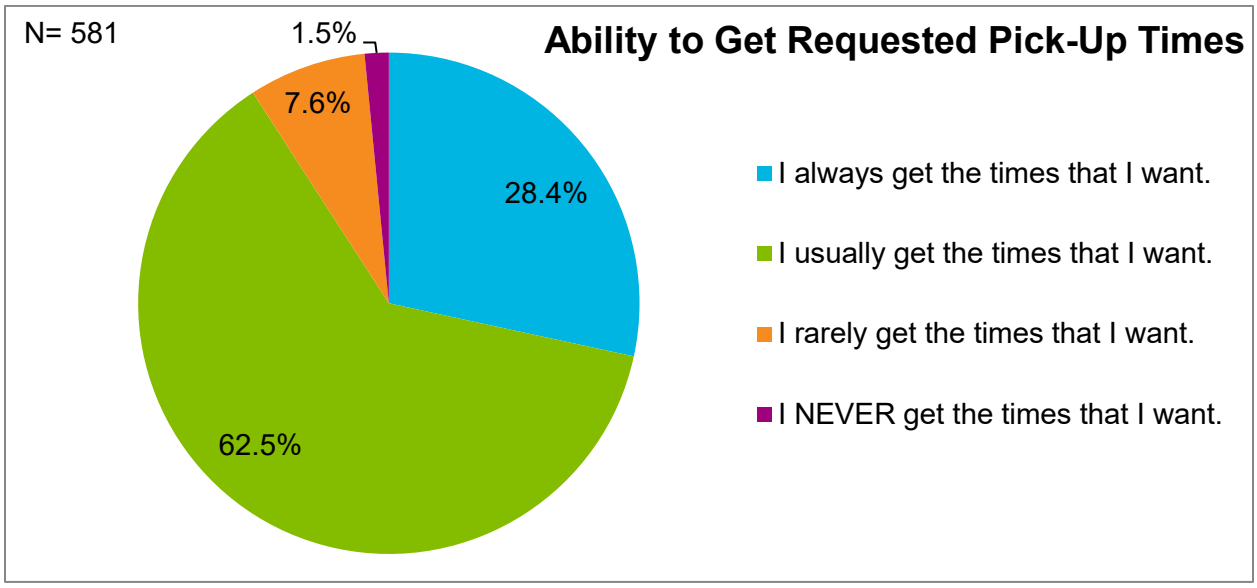


Table 40. Unavailable Times

Time	Count
Early morning	5
Morning	10
Midday	0
Afternoon	6
Evening	8
Late evening	4
All	10
Total	**43**

How successful are you at scheduling rides to the areas/cities that you want to go?

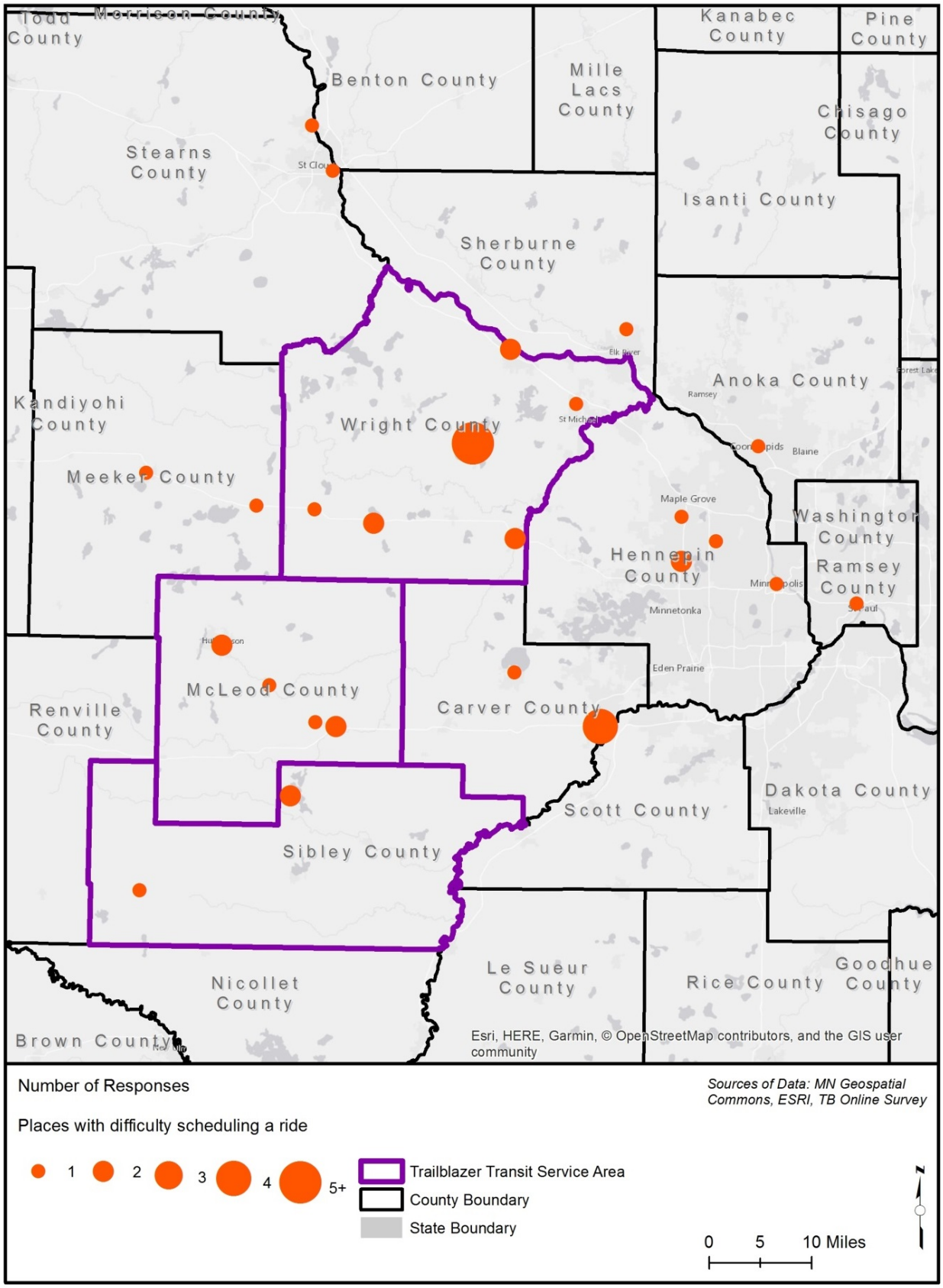
Respondents were asked how successful they are at scheduling rides to where they want to go, and as shown in Table 39, 91.6% are usually successful at scheduling rides to where they want to go.

Those that were not successful were asked where they want to go; Figure 61 shows a map of these locations. Of the 42 responses, 24 were within the Trailblazer Transit service area while 18 were not. Within the service area the place respondents were least successful at scheduling a ride to was Buffalo, while outside the service area it was Minneapolis.

Table 41. Level of Success Scheduling Rides Where They Want to go

Level of Success Scheduling Rides Where They Want to go	Count	Percent
I can always ride the bus to the areas/cities that I want.	233	41.2%
I can usually ride the bus to the areas/cities that I want.	285	50.4%
I can rarely ride the bus to the areas/cities that I want.	23	4.1%
I can NEVER ride the bus to the areas/cities that I want.	25	4.4%
Total	**566**	**100%**

Figure 73. Places Riders Have Difficulty Scheduling a Ride to



How successful are you at scheduling rides on the days of the week that you want?

As shown on Figure 62, 95.6% of respondents are able to schedule a ride on the days of the week that they want. As shown on Figure 63, the days individuals have the greatest problem scheduling rides for are on Fridays and Mondays. Ten individuals selected either Sunday, Saturday, or both weekend days, which are days that the service does not operate.

Figure 74. Success Getting Ride on Day Requested

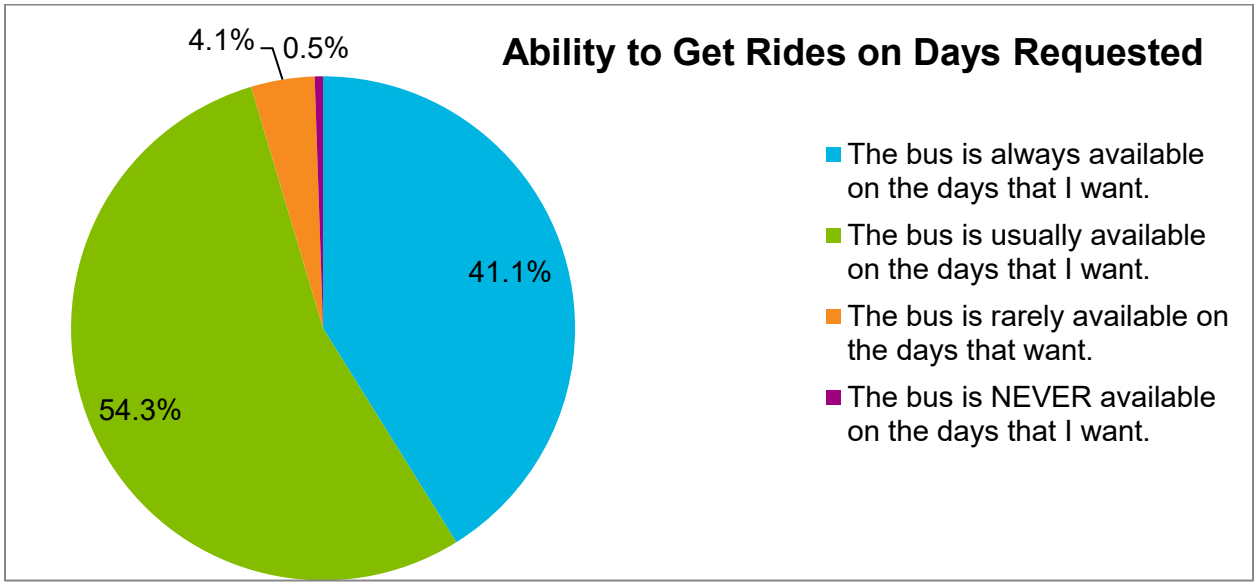
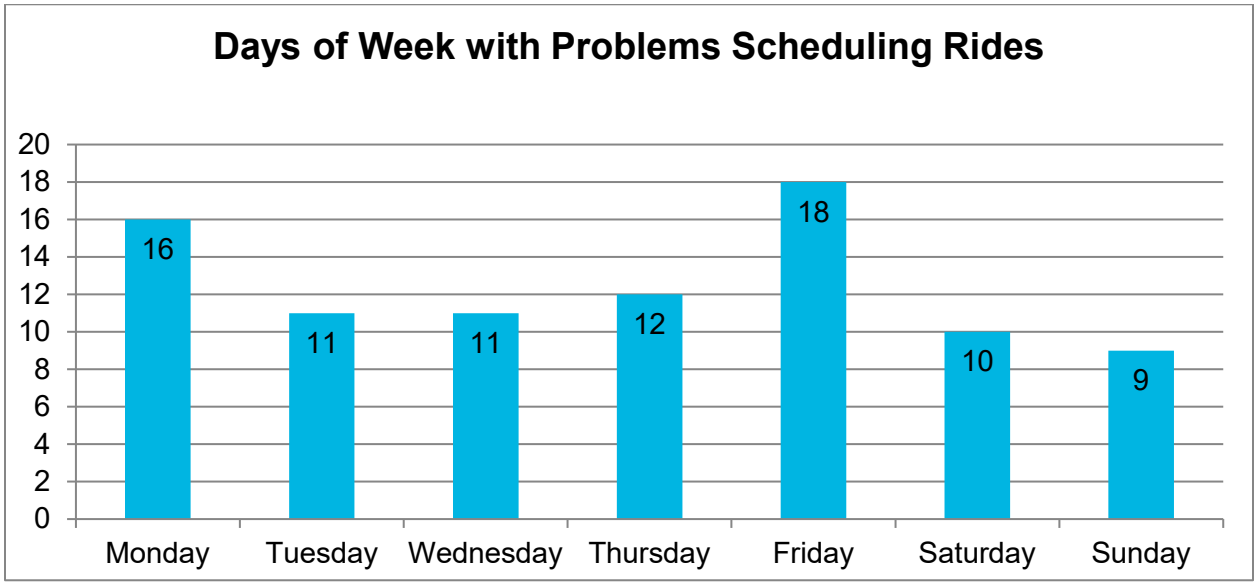


Figure 75. Days of Week with Problems Scheduling Rides



How often do you have access to an automobile to get you where you need to go?

Automobile access for riders is split roughly into equal thirds. About one-third of riders have access to an automobile most of the time, one-third have access to an automobile occasionally, and the remaining third rarely or never have access (Figure 64), making them “transit dependent.” This is evident by the percentage of time these respondents use public transit to

make their trip (66.2%), which is 12.3 percentage points higher than the overall response rate (53.9%).

Those without access to a vehicle that stated if Trailblazer Transit bus service was not available they would not have any other option to get around had a greater percentage (29.4%) than the overall response rate of 16.4%. They are also twice as likely to walk or bike if bus service was not available compared with those who have some level of access to an automobile (Figure 65).

By county and city/township, there is no difference in the percentage that do not have automobile access compared with the breakdown of where respondents live.

In regard to suggestions for improvements, those without automobile access were less likely to want weekend service and more likely to want improved on-time performance, shorter pick-up windows, and the service to operate more like a scheduled fixed route.

Figure 76. Rider Automobile Access

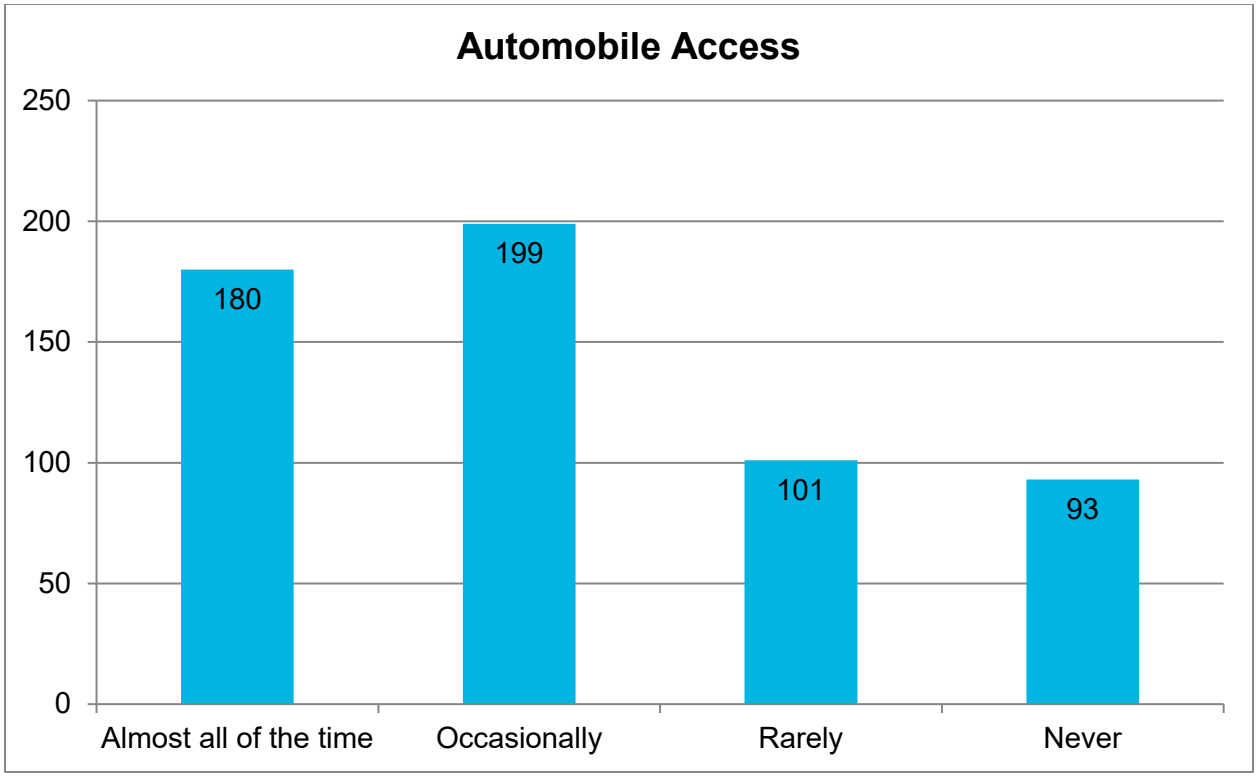
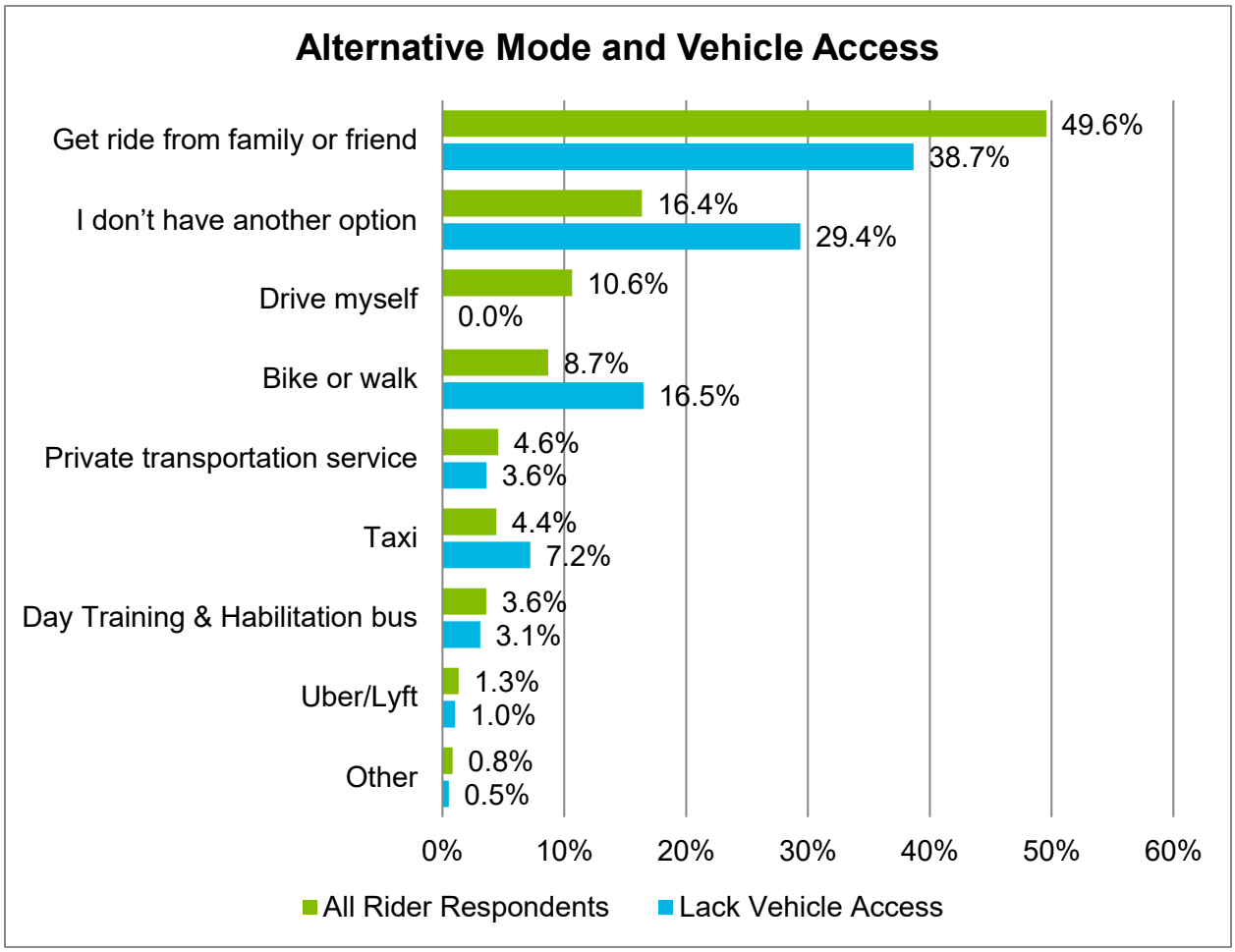


Figure 77. Alternative Mode of Transportation Compared to Vehicle Access



Other Comments and Suggestions

All respondents were asked to provide additional comments and suggestions regardless of whether they are a current Trailblazer Transit user. Respondents provided open-ended responses for any suggestions or comments they might have. Responses were initially categorized into one of six categories; if multiple suggestions were given more than one category was selected. As shown in Table 40, 316 individuals (36.0% of respondents) provided 353 comments[21], and 32 responses had more than one comment. Approximately one-third of each the rider group and community group provided comments.

Categories were based on the following: positive comment about Trailblazer Transit, suggestion for improvement, complaint, requires education/marketing, not relevant, and "other." The greatest number of responses was split almost evenly between positive comments and suggestions for improvement (Table 40). The smallest number of responses was "requires education/marketing of service" and had to do with improved advertising of the service or a lack of understanding about public transit and the limitations imposed by federal regulations. "Other" responses were relevant to the study and were either questions, comments about the survey, vehicle related, or general statements that were not a suggestion, complaint, or positive. Non-

[21] Note that 68 individuals skipped this question and 254 responses were deleted because the response was N/A, Nothing, No, et cetera.

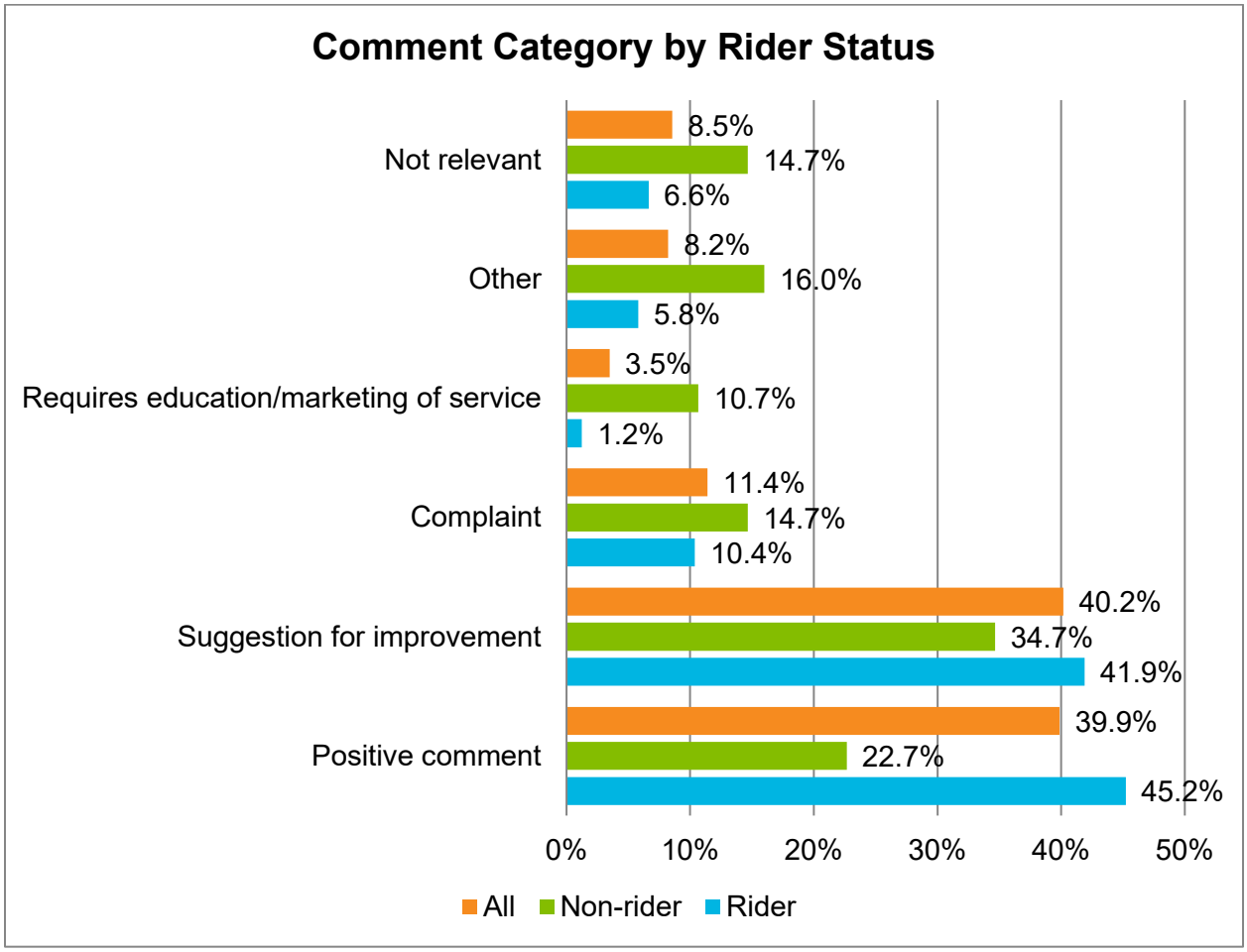
relevant responses were most often about other transportation providers or Trailblazer Transit human resource issues.

The type of comment was further broken down by riders and non-riders to compare to the average (Figure 66). Current riders provided a higher percentage of positive comments and suggestions for improvement, whereas non-riders had a higher percentage of complaints and "requires education/marketing."

Table 42. Comment Categories and Response Rate

Comment Category	Count	Percent
Positive comment	126	39.9%
Suggestion for improvement	127	40.2%
Complaint	36	11.4%
Requires education/marketing of service	11	3.5%
Other	26	8.2%
Not relevant	27	8.5%
Number of unique respondents	**316**	

Figure 78. Common Category by Rider Status



Suggestions for improvement and complaints were further broken down based on the categories developed in Question 9[22]. The suggestions were broken down into six sub-categories, and the one with the most responses was “additional service hours” (this includes morning, evening, and weekend service) plus additional trips available during existing service hours (Table 41); this was particularly high for existing users.

Complaints were broken down into five sub-categories and the greatest complaint was scheduling difficulties (Table 42). Several of these comments had to do with scheduling the return trip for a medical appointment (i.e., individuals schedule a trip but then the appointment runs late and they miss the return trip and have to wait for a rescheduled trip).

Table 43. Breakdown of Suggestions

Suggestion Categories	Count
Additional service hours	74
Service outside the existing area	22
Policy change	12
Technology	5
Shorter pick-up window	5
Convert to a fixed route	9

Table 44. Breakdown of Complaints

Complaint Category	Count
Scheduling difficulty	15
Cost	5
On-time	2
Customer service issue	6
Other Complaint	8

Key Findings

The following are key findings from the survey:

- Individuals travel longer distances for trips then the nation as a whole and are more likely to go to places outside of the city they live in.
- “Work” was the most common reason to take a trip (62.0%), which aligns with the majority of respondents (non-rider) who work outside of the home.
- Individuals shop in Buffalo, Hutchinson, or Monticello.

[22] Weekend service, earlier and later service hours, and more trips available were lumped together under additional service hours

- About 10.0% of the non-riders were considered “transit dependent” (based on how they usually travel) compared to 90.0% of the existing riders, who would not be able to drive themselves if bus service was not available.
- Among those who have been unable to get employment due to a lack of vehicle access, there was a higher response for “getting a ride from family/friend” as their most frequent mode of travel compared to those who have not had such experience.
- Non-riders are aware that Trailblazer Transit exists but not all were aware of the services it provides.
- The internet is the most common way to obtain Trailblazer Transit information.
- While a majority of non-riders are unlikely to use Trailblazer Transit in the future, this is because they have vehicle access. Many stated they would use it if they no longer had access to a vehicle.
- About 92.0% of respondents feel that public transportation in Sibley, McLeod, and Wright counties is a valuable resource even if they do not ride and likely will not ride in the future.
- Over half of the riders live in Buffalo, Hutchinson, or Monticello.
- Non-riders are much more likely to have access to a vehicle than riders.
- Hutchinson riders have been using Trailblazer Transit the longest, as have those who heard about it through human service providers.
- About 63.0% of users take the bus at least once a week.
- McLeod County had a lower response rate, but it had a higher proportion of those individuals who are occasional riders.
- About 62.0% of passengers use public transit at least half of their time to take their trip.
- About 15.7% responded that they do not have another option, which indicates that without Trailblazer Transit they would be unable to make their trip.
- About 80.0% of riders are satisfied, and those who are not are infrequent riders.
- “Drivers/customer service” is what riders like best, especially among those who are frequent riders.
- Weekend service was the most frequent suggestion, particularly in Buffalo.
- Those with suggestions for a short pick-up window, improved scheduling, and improved customer service stated they were satisfied with the service 72.0 to 75.0% of the time; this is slightly less than the 81.7% of respondents overall who were satisfied.
- Riders typically schedule their ride the same day or 7 days in advance, with infrequent users scheduling their trip with less notice, resulting in lower satisfaction levels. Frequent riders typically scheduled their trips further in advance.
- Respondents desired connection to Big Lake and the Northstar train station.
- Less than 10.0% do not get the scheduled time they want, with mornings having the greatest number of responses for unavailable times.
- About 90.0% are usually successful at scheduling rides to where they want to go.
- About 95.0% of respondents are able to schedule a ride on the days of the week that they want. Mondays and Fridays were the toughest days to schedule trips on.
- Education is needed for customers, particularly those with contracts, about the constraints Trailblazer Transit has because it is federally funded.

Appendix E Transit Need and Demand Analysis (TCRP 161)

Transportation need/ Mobility Gap in each County	the annual number of trips (1-way) needed because no access to a vehicle.
McLeod	396,900
Sibley	139,900
Wright	1,125,800
Total Need for service area	1,662,600

Demand for Public Transit (tab "3. Demand)	Demand only occurs in places where public transit service already exists.
McLeod	22,300
Sibley	9,300
Wright	62,700
Total Demand for public transit in service area	**94,300**
Total Demand for public transit in service area	**160,500**

Commuters from Rural Counties to Urban Centers (MSP metro area)	Demand only occurs in places where public transit service already exists.
McLeod	146,400
Sibley	119,300
Wright	N/A
Total Demand for public transit in service area	

Target Ridership = ½ mobility gap * 90%	MnDOT Ridership Targets
2020 ridership target	293,020
2021 ridership target	336,973
2022 ridership target	387,519
2023 ridership target	445,647
2024 ridership target	512,494
2025 ridership target	748,170