

Five-Year Transit System Plan



Prairie Lakes Transit

Prepared by:



and



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Chapter 1. Executive Summary

Overview

The Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) completed the Greater Minnesota Transit Investment Plan (GMTIP) in May 2017. The GMTIP set forth a framework to expand transit service to meet critical unmet mobility needs. As part of this strategic effort, MnDOT is funding the development of short-range Five-Year Transit System Plans (FYTSP) for rural transit systems across the state. The Prairie Lakes Transit (PLT) FYTSP is to provide an understanding of:

- Strengths and weaknesses of the PLT System,
- Unmet needs and future transit service changes, and
- How best to deploy resources to increase ridership/usage across the network.

The FYTSP will provide PLT with a fiscally responsible framework to work with local government officials, local planning agencies, board members and other stakeholders to build local support for improving their transit system.

Summary of Major Components

The FYTSP includes a description of the governance structure, operating environment, and current services of Prairie Lakes Transit, as well as a summary of capital and operating costs. Projected future capital and operating expenses for the years 2020 to 2025 are estimated based on recommended service expansion concepts.

Recommendations are organized by the following categories: **Service, Staffing, Facilities/Fleet, Technology, and Marketing**, and are summarized into an Action Plan beginning on page 67.

Summary of Technical Memoranda

A previous technical memorandum included a description of public engagement efforts. Major findings from that document are included in this report.

Needs Assessment

Consultants conducted a performance review of Prairie Lakes Transit services to identify where service is being operated efficiently and where improvements can be made to increase ridership while enhancing cost effectiveness and efficiency.

Prairie Lakes Transit currently operates the following services:

- One deviated route and three demand response services in Faribault County with service each weekday and limited Saturday service.
- Two deviated routes and four demand response services in Martin County.
- One demand response shuttle route between Blue Earth and Fairmont, with seven round trips each weekday.
- The Purple bus also runs a limited number of trips to Albert Lea in Freeborn County on Mondays and Thursdays if enough trips are requested.

Consultants facilitated a series of on-site interviews with Prairie Lakes Transit staff and surveys with stakeholders identified by Prairie Lakes Transit staff to learn how well service is meeting needs and identify gaps in service as well as capital and operational needs. Through this engagement, the following potential areas for improvement were identified: awareness of service, accessibility, on-time performance, service area, days and hours of service, and transit facilities.

Recommendations

This report identifies short- and long-term recommendations for Prairie Lakes Transit to better serve its current and future users. The following improvements are recommended for the short term:

- Extend Saturday Buccaneer service to Winnebago and Elmore.
- Limit length of demand response trips in Faribault County.
- Implement regional service between Fairmont and Mankato.
- Add evening and weekend service in Fairmont.
- Explore partnerships with local organizations such as nonprofits and civic associations.
- Develop and track performance metrics.

The key long-term service recommendation for Prairie Lakes Transit is to expand service hours to better meet transportation needs on weekday evenings and weekends.

Chapter 2. Why a Five-Year Capital and Operational Plan?

The 2017-2037 Greater Minnesota Transit Investment Plan (GMTIP) created a 20-year strategic plan for rural districts across the state and calculated service needs at the individual transit provider level. For the GMTIP, the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) considered all parts of Minnesota outside the Twin Cities metro area, but did not include specific direction for each transit agency.

Along with all other rural transit agencies across the state, Prairie Lakes Transit (PLT) is now developing a short-range Five-Year Transit System Plan (FYTSP) that will translate the investment needs identified in the GMTIP to the local level based on PLT-specific priorities. The five-year planning process will help PLT to:

- Understand its strengths and weaknesses
- Identify unmet needs and future transit service changes
- Develop a financial plan that is adaptable to changing environments, including revenue sources, grant opportunities, variable local match requirements, and state and / or federal regulations or requirements

PLT's services are essential to an individual's quality of life and the community's health, environmental and transportation network in Faribault and Martin Counties. The FYTSP will explain how to improve the coordination of services and it will outline how to meet transit needs in the evolving socioeconomic conditions in southern Minnesota. It will determine how to best deploy available statewide and local resources to the markets, services, and programs that will increase ridership and efficiency across the transit network in Faribault and Martin Counties.

The five-year plan will establish a vision and details on service improvements in Martin and Faribault Counties, which will allow PLT to develop better year-to-year budgets. As the funding and service landscape evolves, there will be an increasing need to cooperate with outside entities, including private providers and community-based services to realize economic and service efficiencies. As such, the PLT Five-Year Transit Service Plan will help PLT work with local government officials, local planning agencies, PLT board members and other organizations to prepare for these changes. It will also assist MnDOT and the Minnesota Public Transit Association (MPTA) to articulate transit needs to transit governing bodies as well as local, regional and statewide elected officials.

Chapter 3. Agency Overview

Background

Prairie Lakes Transit (PLT) emerged out of a consolidation of the Martin County Transit and Faribault County Prairie Express transit agencies in January 2016, after the establishment of a Joint Powers Board of Commissioners in January 2015. Prior to consolidation:

Martin County Transit operated curb-to-curb service throughout the county as well as express commuter trips to Blue Earth in Faribault County. Martin County Transit contracted operations, dispatching, and maintenance to Fairlakes Transportation, providing service Monday through Saturday in the City of Fairmont and Monday through Friday throughout the rest of the county.

Faribault County Prairie Express operated curb-to-curb service within its county boundaries, but extended into portions of adjacent counties to the west, north, and east, including portions of Martin County. Prairie Express service also traveled to the north and east to serve Mapleton, Amboy, and Albert Lea, among other destinations. Service provision was an in-house operation and employees accrued vacation and paid sick time.

A Transit for the Future Grant funded transition activities in 2015, leading to an official merger on January 1, 2016 when Martin County Transit and Faribault County Prairie Express ceased operations and PLT began coordinated operations. Operations were carried out by a third-party contractor with PLT's only employee being the Transit Director for 9 months. After a rough transition merging service models, the contract with the third-party provider was terminated in October 2016 and all operations were brought "in-house" under the leadership of the Prairie Lakes Transit Board and Transit Director. Today, all staff are employees of PLT, typically about 30 at a time depending on the number of drivers on staff.

Mission

PLT has not adopted an official mission statement. PLT officials aim to provide public transit service for the people of Martin and Faribault Counties in the most customer friendly and efficient way possible.

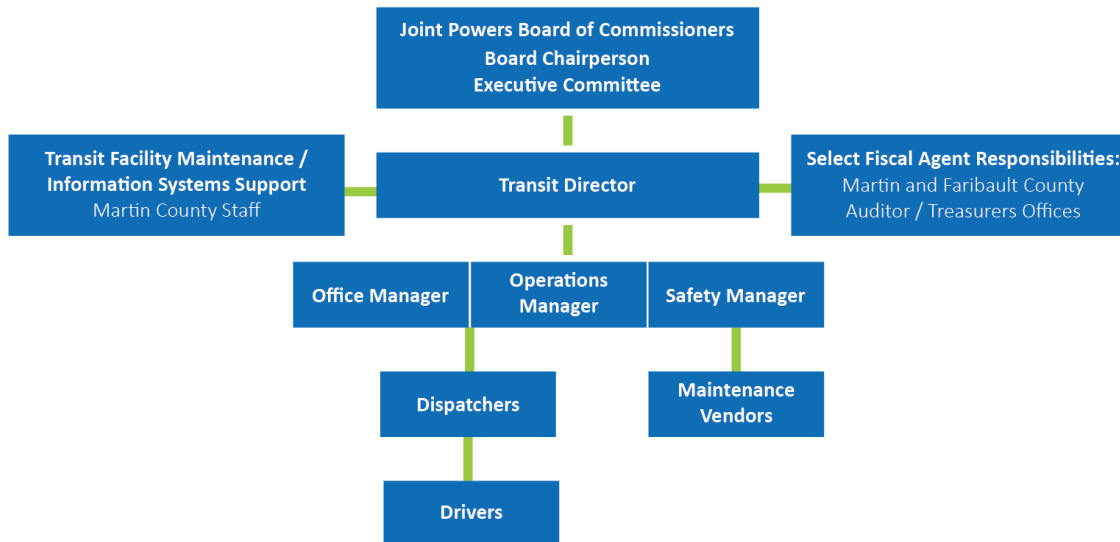
Vision

Prior to consolidation, transit systems in both counties were run like a taxi service, rather than a dependable option for routine needs. PLT seeks to create a community in which the residents and employees of each county, all of them, can travel with ease to reach their jobs, shopping, and medical destinations.

Governance

The organizational structure for PLT is outlined in Figure 1 Organizational Structure for Prairie Lakes Transit.

Figure 1 Organizational Structure for Prairie Lakes Transit



Joint Powers Board

PLT is led by a Joint Powers Board of Commissioners that possesses decision-making authority and includes representation from both Faribault and Martin counties. The Joint Powers Board was established in January 2015, after the completion of a merger feasibility study completed for MnDOT by Nelson\Nygaard.

The transit board (hereafter referred to as the Full Board) consists of ten commissioners from different districts split evenly across the two counties, with each commissioner possessing one vote. The Board’s Executive Committee officers includes a Chair, Vice-Chair, Secretary, and Treasurer, all of whom are elected by the Full Board for one-year terms. The Transit Director is an ex-officio member of the Full Board. No one county may hold both the Chair and Vice Chair positions or both the Secretary and Treasurer positions. The Full Board remains separate from each county, but is reliant on the member counties for funds during any revenue shortfalls. Current membership is reflected in Figure 2 2018 Prairie Lakes Transit Board Members.

Administrative functions are provided by direct employees of PLT. The Full Board also hires drivers and dispatchers, allowing for a high level of control and accountability, and direct control over recruiting, hiring, and training operations personnel. In addition, select accounting and maintenance services are contracted out to local vendors. A Transit Director oversees all aspects of service, from managing the daily operations to service and financial planning. The transit Operations Manager

conducts marketing and public outreach, ensures compliance with state and federal requirements, and handles customer relations.

Figure 2 2018 Prairie Lakes Transit Full Board Members

Commissioner	Role	County
Tom Loveall	Chair	Faribault
Elliot Belgard	Vice-Chair	Martin
Bill Groskreutz	Secretary	Faribault
Tom Mahoney	Treasurer	Martin
John Roper	Commissioner	Faribault
Kathy Smith	Commissioner	Martin
Greg Young	Commissioner	Faribault
Dan Schmidtke	Commissioner	Martin
Tom Warmka	Commissioner	Faribault
Steve Flohrs	Commissioner	Martin
Jeremy Monahan	Transit Director	

Transit Advisory Committee

PLT also seeks guidance from a Transit Advisory Committee (TAC) that meets quarterly to discuss any proposed changes, present concerns and recommendations, and compile notes in published TAC meeting minutes. The purpose of the TAC is to provide an opportunity to engage first hand with persons who use the service, citizen advocates, and business owners, and to bring together key stakeholders, who are able to develop successful initiatives, resolve emerging issues/problems, and provide for ongoing dialogue. Each County Board appoints equal representation to the TAC; TAC members include those who have an interest in transit services, city government, and persons/representatives/providers for those with disabilities, the elderly, and those who have low income, and other required stakeholders as recommended by MnDOT.

For current TAC membership as of 2018, see Figure 3 on the following page.

Figure 3 2018 Prairie Lakes Transit TAC Committee Members*

Commissioner	Member	City	Representation
Belgard			
Groskruetz	Patsy Beckman	Wells	Broadway Apts. - Wells / Low Income Housing
Loveall	Tami Beto	Wells	Wells City Library
Mahoney	Moni Harper	Fairmont	MRCI / Disabled Community Representative
Flohers			
Schmidtke	Randy Musser	Silver Lake	Silver Lake Township Official
Smith	Tom Hawkins	Fairmont	Elected Official - Fairmont City Council
Roper	Ron Fox	Blue Earth	Driver Representative
Warmka	Douglas Trytten	Kiester	Elected Official - Mayor Of Kiester
Young	Laura Borris	Fairmont	Social Assistance

* Note: This table reflects the composition of the Prairie Lakes Transit TAC in 2018; positions are subject to change.

Decision-Making Process

The Full Board maintains its principal office in Fairmont and holds regular meetings, generally every other month. Special meetings may also be called. The meetings are held in various locations throughout the service area. Motions are passed by majority vote.

The Full Board has also formed an Executive Committee as described above, which meets monthly and makes recommendations to the Full Board.

The Full Board and Executive Committee meetings are publicized through notices in community newspapers in both Fairmont and Blue Earth, and are open to the public. Separate public input meetings are held when considering service changes. These meetings are also publicized through the newspapers in Fairmont and Blue Earth, at least two days prior to being held.

As of this writing, the Full Board still needs to notify MnDOT about service changes adopted for PLT.

Service Area

Transit service in the Prairie Lakes Transit service area is a mix of deviated route and demand-response services, and service is limited in span of hours, days of the week, and/or frequency. Two deviated routes operate in Fairmont and one deviated route operates in Blue Earth. Additionally, the Gold Route shuttle connects Fairmont and Blue Earth. Demand-response service is also available throughout the rural parts of each county.

Faribault County

Located south of Mankato along the Iowa-Minnesota border and comprising the eastern half of the Prairie Lakes Transit service area, Faribault County has a population of 13,966.¹ The largest municipality and the county seat, Blue Earth, has 3,169 residents. Notable other communities in Faribault County include Elmore, Bricelyn, Easton, Delavan, Wells, Winnebago, and Kiester. Primarily rural in character, Faribault County spans 722 square miles and is bisected horizontally by I-90. Primary industries in Faribault County include manufacturing, health care and social assistance, retail, wholesale trade, and hospitality services.

Martin County

Located southwest of Mankato and making up the western half of the PLT service area, Martin County has a population of 20,084 spanning 730 square miles. The county seat of Fairmont has 10,251 residents. Notable other communities include Ceylon, Sherburn, Welcome, Northrup, Trimont, Dunnel, and Granada. Primary industries in Martin County include manufacturing, health care and social assistance, and retail.

Demographic and Economic Characteristics

To determine the potential for improved and more integrated transit service in the PLT service area, this market analysis presents the underlying conditions as they relate to the demand for transit service, including population, employment, and socioeconomic characteristics:

- **Population and Employment:** There is a correlation between development patterns and transit ridership. In areas with denser development, where larger numbers of people live and/or work in close proximity, transit can become very convenient, and thus attractive and well used. In most cases, these “external” factors outweigh those directly controlled by the service provider.
- **Socio-Economic Characteristics:** Demographic characteristics such as age, income, minority status, and disability status provide indications of demand among populations that have a high propensity toward transit use.

¹ 2012-2017 American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates

These factors are the primary drivers of transit demand and, as such, provide strong indications of underlying transit demand. However, it should also be noted that other factors also influence transit demand, including:

- **Urban Form/Land Use:** Providing a diversity of uses at street-level, good connectivity of the multimodal network, major destinations along reasonably direct corridors, and comfortable and safe spaces for people all can influence transit demand.
- **Pedestrian Environment:** In many cases, demand for transit service (as well as the type of transit provided) may depend on the availability and quality of pedestrian infrastructure and amenities. In urban environments, well-connected sidewalks and safe street crossings enable many customers to use fixed-route transit. However, in more rural environments, such as those served by PLT, pedestrian networks are often less complete, and passengers depend on demand-response or route-deviation services to reach their destinations safely and comfortably.
- **Service Design:** In dense urban environments, it is generally preferable to design fast, direct service along major travel corridors to minimize travel time and maximize ridership. However, in areas with lower overall transit propensity, it is important to balance the need for efficient travel times with the need to reach specific destinations that may be difficult to serve via fixed routes. In certain cases, route deviation service can serve as a hybrid model that meets the various needs of rural transit customers.
- **Travel Times Relative to Other Options, Primarily Driving:** Most people accept that trips by transit take longer than trips by car, and the time differences can be offset by other differences. However, when the differences are smaller, ridership will be higher, and when the differences are larger, ridership will be lower.

In order to assess both needs and capacity within the PLT service area, detailed GIS databases were created using population demographics, collected from the 2016 ACS 5-year estimates and 2010 United States Decennial Census, and of current and future projected economic conditions, collected from the County Business Patterns dataset.

The datasets are from different sources and use different geographic references (census tracts versus zip code tabulation areas). As such, MnDOT overlaid a surface area of hexagons measuring 0.5 miles in diameter over all of the data to create a standard geographic reference type. This created a standard geographic reference, and also helped identify smaller data patterns.

Community Profiles

Demographics

In addition to population and employment density, socioeconomic characteristics influence an individual's propensity toward transit use. National research shows that many population groups have a higher propensity for transit use than the overall population. The most influential ones include:

- **Low-Income Individuals**, who tend to use transit to a greater extent than those with higher incomes because transit provides significant cost savings over automobile ownership and use. For the purposes of this study, low-income individuals are defined as those whose income is at or below 150% of the federal poverty line.
- **Zero-Vehicle Households**, which have limited transportation options other than transit. In small cities and other areas that are oriented toward automobile travel and where transit options are much more limited, people without automobiles largely consist of those with lower incomes or those who do not drive.
- **People with Disabilities**, many of whom cannot drive or have difficulty driving. Public transportation, including regular fixed-route bus service as well as specialized paratransit services, is an essential resource to ensure people with disabilities are able to remain active, productive, and part of the community.
- **Minorities (non-white, Hispanic or non-Hispanic)**. There is a large amount of overlap between minority populations, low-income individuals, and zero-vehicle households; however, the presence of high numbers of minority residents still provides an additional strong indicator of transit demand. The provision of effective transit service to minority populations is also particularly important to the Federal Transit Administration and is a requirement under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

When significant numbers of these individuals cluster together, they can influence the underlying demand for transit to an extent that is not captured when only considering total population or employment. Demand can be higher or lower than the population or employment densities indicate depending on the underlying socio-economic characteristics of a population. High transit propensity (sometimes referred to as “transit need”) also does not necessarily mean that traditional fixed-route services will work in a given area. Some locations have a high transit need but low population or employment density. The influence of socio-economic characteristics can be hard to capture graphically, however, because determining the precise overlap between the groups is difficult with the data available. In this analysis, we will therefore look at overall patterns and clusters of these groups, and factor those results into our subsequent work. Ultimately, each community must set their own priorities for balancing service to transit-need and transit-supportive areas.

Transit Dependency Index

MnDOT developed the transit dependency index to highlight communities that have higher demand for transit services based on several data attributes that are associated with dependency on public transit (see Figure 4). The color-based legend is based on standard deviations and is relative to the region. Communities labeled “very high” indicates a much higher than average need for transit services. A very high vulnerability score indicates a notably large combination of barriers to independent rural transportation, such as low incomes, no auto ownership, language fluency issues, or various disabilities. The database attributes in the index include:

Population percent disabled: The percentage of the population who identifies as disabled, with high percentages signaling community transit needs (American Community Survey 5-year estimates)

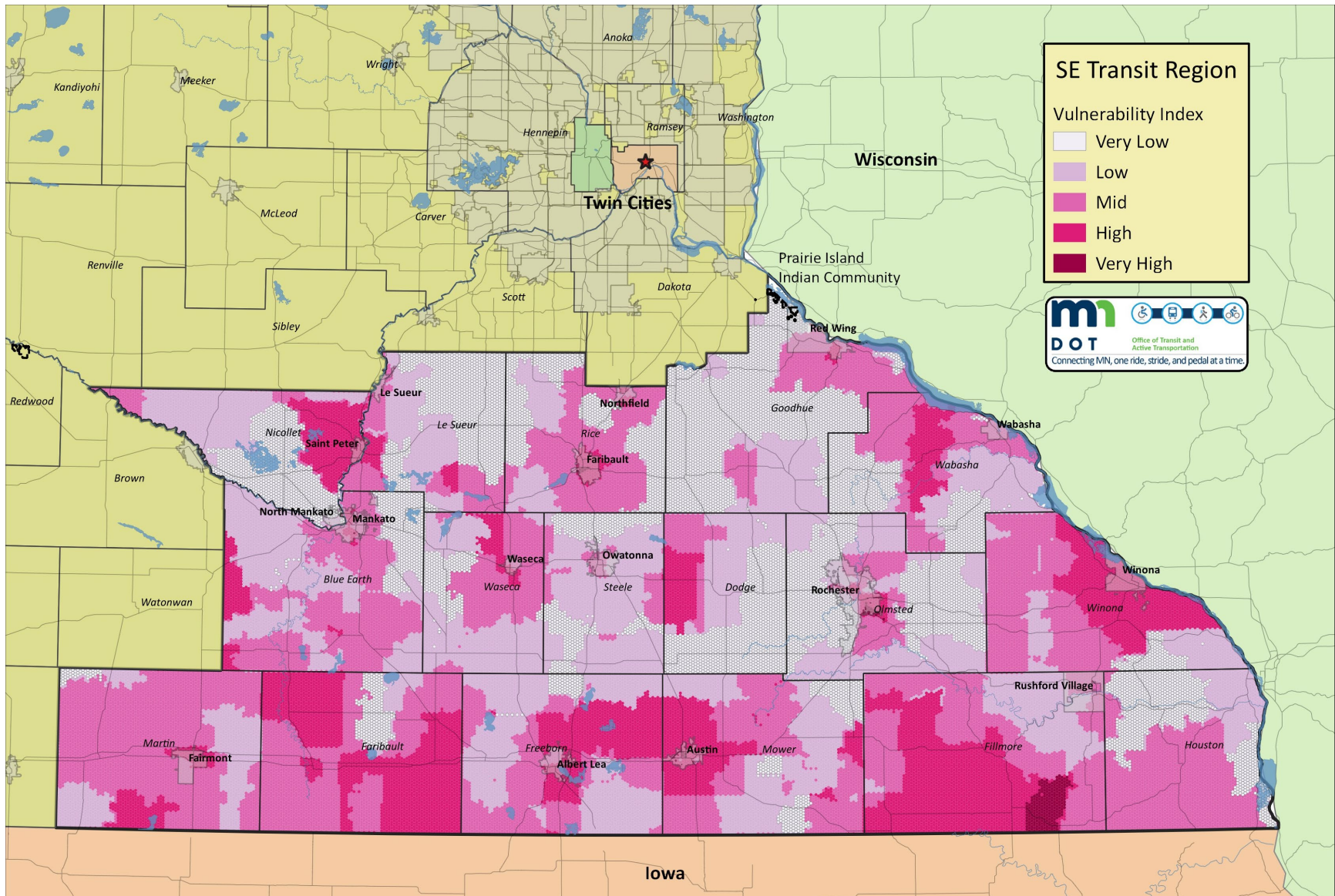
Zero vehicle households: The percentages of households with zero vehicles available, signaling increased transit needs (American Community Survey 5-year estimates)

Limited English proficiency: The percentage of households with limited English spoken within, identifying areas with higher transit needs (American Community Survey 5-year estimates)

Median household income: which was the one dummy variable that was subtracted as a factor in the index (American Community Survey 5-year estimates)

Both Martin County and Faribault County have concentrated regions of high transit dependency. Within Faribault County, the southeast and northwest corners of the county are especially burdened. Walters, Kiester, Bricelyn, Winnebago, Delavan, and Blue Earth itself have a high index value. Easton, however, has a very low vulnerability score. Much of Martin County is less transit dependent by comparison. Within Martin County, the towns of Granada, Imogene, East Chain, and Dunnell have low vulnerability index scores relative to the rest of southeastern Minnesota. Sherburn and Welcome have medium scores, but Ceylon and Fairmont have high transit dependence.

Figure 4 Southeast Transit Region MnDOT Vulnerability Index



Economic

Economic health can be measured using many types of information. The Minnesota Department of Transportation developed an index using four different database attributes to develop one map that shows economic health in southeast Minnesota (see Figure 5 Southeast Transit Region MnDOT Economic Health Index).

Darker color areas with “very high” or “high” indicate that the health of the local economy is robust and healthy relative to the region. The database attributes in the index include:

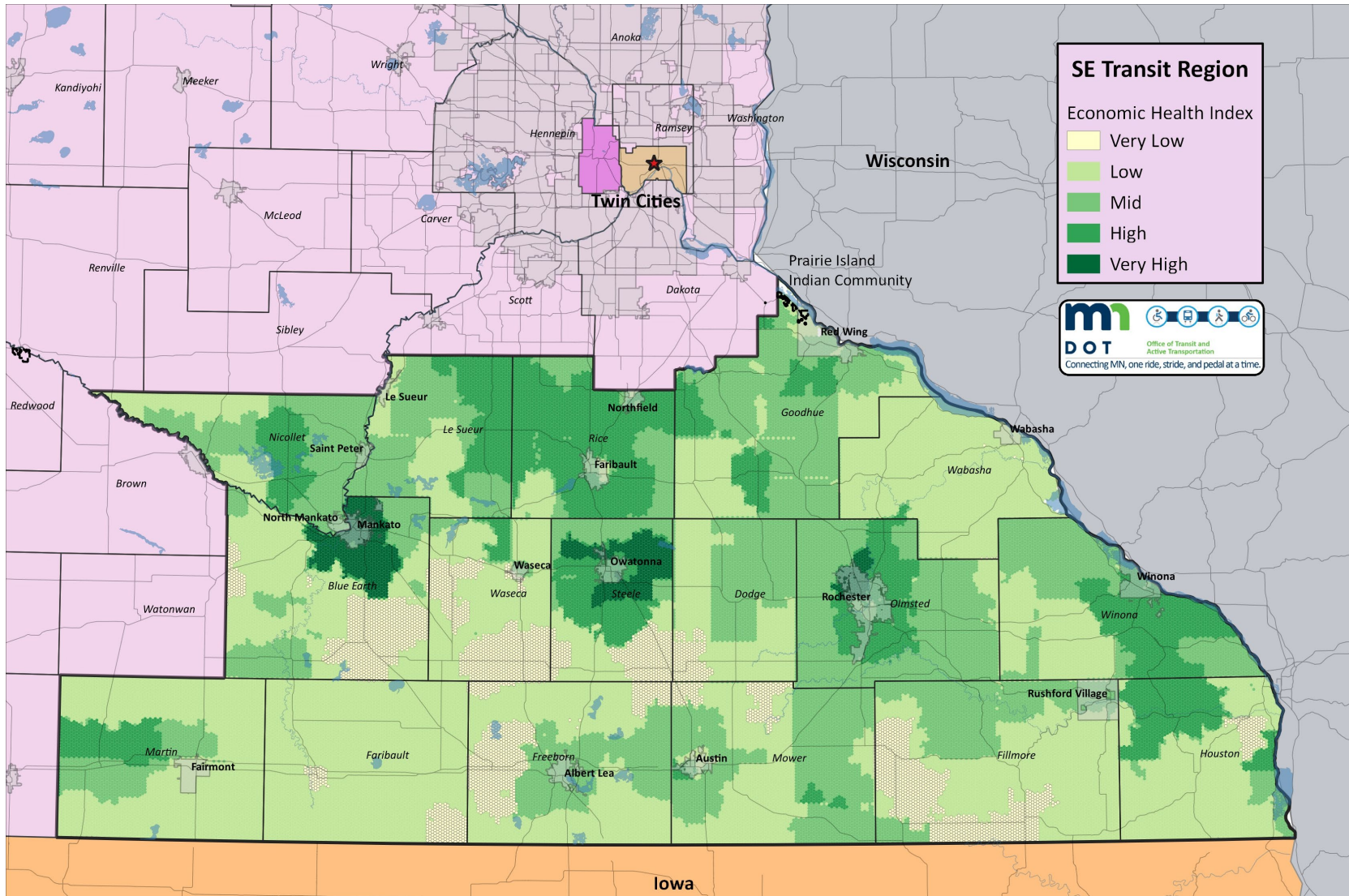
1. *Average number of employers: 2011-2015* as a way to measure employment density (zip code tabulation area) from County Business Patterns dataset.
2. *Projected Business Growth*: Metric of increasing or decreasing business projections to assess where the number of jobs for the near future are forecasted.
3. *Labor participation*: Percentage of residents actively participating in the labor force as a sign of economic vitality (Census tract level data from 2016 ACS 5-year Estimates).
4. *Population change*: Percent change of population in areas by comparing 2010 Census data with values from 2016 ACS Estimates; population growth was considered a sign of economic health.

Both Martin and Faribault County have low economic health compared to the rest of the southeast Minnesota region. West of Fairmont, Welcome and Sherburn all have higher economic health than the rest of the region. Northrop has economic health scores on average with the rest of the region, and all other municipalities have lower economic health than much of southeast Minnesota, owing to their rural nature and small or negative population growth. In particular, Blue Earth and Kiester have very low economic health.

Local Changes Impacting Transit

The Walmart in Blue Earth recently closed, which means that more people will need to travel to the Walmart in Fairmont for shopping. This store closure also reflects a general decline in population throughout much of the PLT service area, which will exacerbate the challenges of serving a low-density area.

Figure 5 Southeast Transit Region MnDOT Economic Health Index



Chapter 4. Transit Service Provision

PLT provides public transportation in two counties in southeast Minnesota, Faribault and Martin, with a limited number of trips to Albert Lea in Freeborn County. The two counties have a population of approximately 34,300 spread over 18 communities who receive transit service (see Figure 6 Communities with Prairie Lakes Transit Service).

Figure 6 Communities with Prairie Lakes Transit Service

Community Name	County	Population
Blue Earth	Faribault	3,254
Wells	Faribault	2,388
Winnebago	Faribault	1,341
Minnesota Lake	Faribault	616
Elmore	Faribault	571
Kiester	Faribault	478
Briceylen	Faribault	325
Frost	Faribault	215
Delavan	Faribault	215
Easton	Faribault	204
Fairmont	Martin	10,311
Sherburn	Martin	1,078
Truman	Martin	1,057
Trimont	Martin	779
Welcome	Martin	716
Ceylon	Martin	347
Dunnel	Martin	167
Albert Lea	Freeborn	

Population is derived from 2016 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

This section reviews the existing local and regional public transit operators in each county of PLT’s service area to provide a complete picture of transportation services and options in the region.

The service summary listed by county below will discuss a variety of services. The following terms have been provided in order to provide a guide to what these services are:

- **Deviated Route:** a hybrid of conventional deviated route service, which operates along a prescribed route according to a fixed schedule, and demand response service. It assimilates fixed-route services with fixed stops and schedules, but is allowed to provide door-to-door service to users who either have trip ends located out of service coverage area or require accessible services such as paratransit.
- **Demand Response:** Service to individuals that is activated based on passenger requests. Usually passengers call the scheduler or dispatcher and request rides for dates and times.

The service operated by PLT in each county is described in more detail in the following sections.

Martin County

PLT operates two deviated routes and four demand response services in Martin County (See Figure 7 and Figure 8).

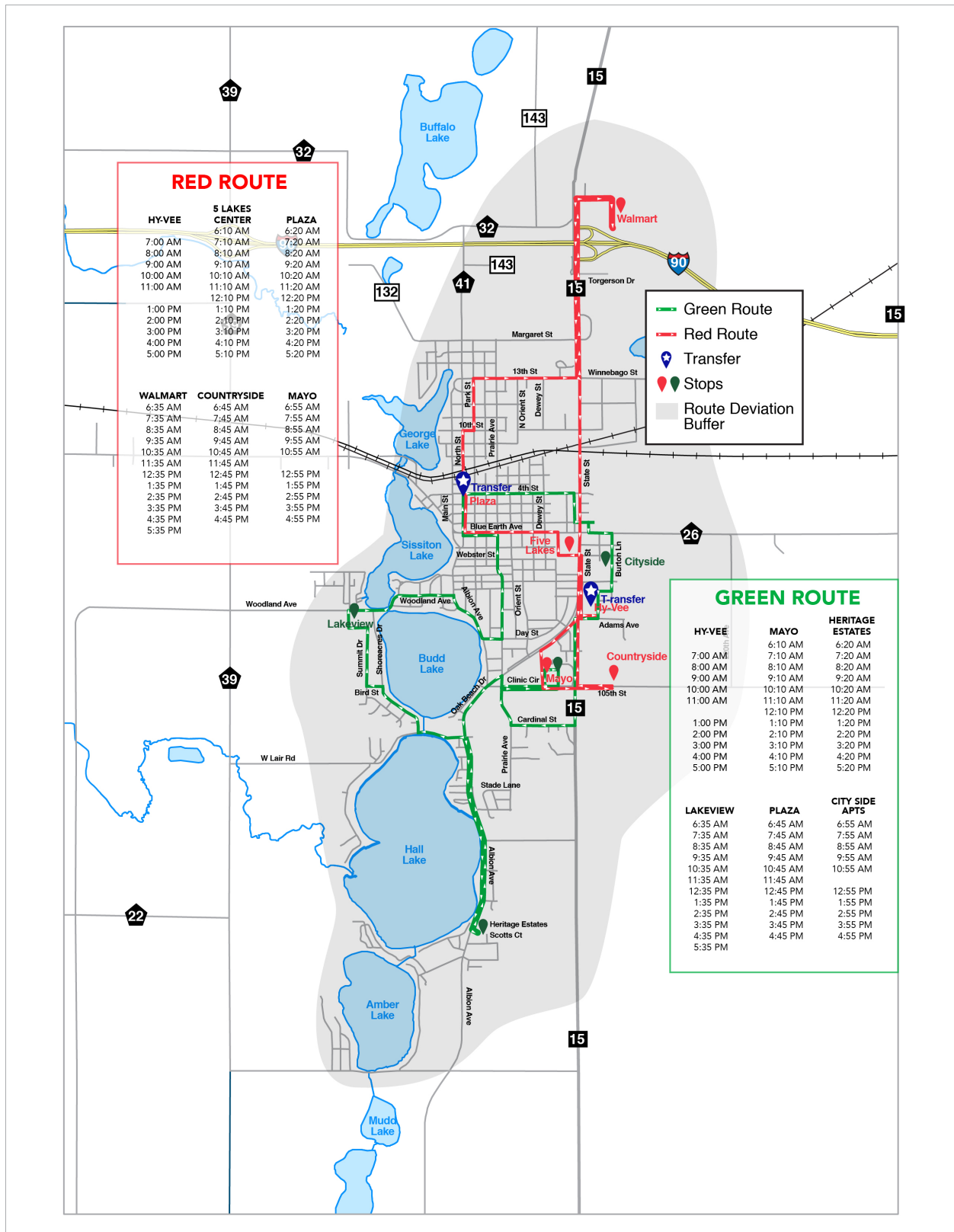
Deviated Routes

The two deviated routes operate exclusively in Fairmont to connect housing complexes, shopping destinations, and medical centers; the Green Route covers the southern half of the city and the Red Route covers the northern half of the city, with transfer opportunities at the Hy-Vee grocery store and Downtown Plaza (See Figure 8). The deviated routes serve the key destinations in Fairmont, but use a circuitous alignment in order to cover more area. There may be opportunities to design service which follows a more direct path, even if this would increase walking distance for some patrons.

Figure 7 Prairie Lakes Transit Martin County Deviated-Route Services

Route Name	Service Span	Trips	Service Frequency	Service Description
Red	Monday – Friday: 6 AM – 6 PM (Approximate)	14	60 minutes	Loop route through northern neighborhoods in Fairmont, serving Hy-Vee, Five Lakes Center, Downtown Plaza, Lincoln School, Green Mill, Walmart, and Countryside
Green	Monday – Friday: 6 AM – 6 PM (Approximate)	14	60 minutes	Loop route through southern neighborhoods in Fairmont, serving Hy-Vee, Goldfinch, Mayo Clinic, Heritage Estates, Lakeview, St. Johns, Walgreens, and City Side apartments.

Figure 8 Prairie Lakes Deviated Route Transit Service in Martin County



Demand Response

Dial-a-ride trips and subscription demand response routes are used in Martin County to support the Red and Green Deviated Routes when needed due to capacity issues. Additionally, if a passenger in Fairmont inside the quarter-mile deviation buffer does not want to use the deviated route bus, is willing to pay the extra fare, and there is a PLT bus available, the Orange, Silver 1, or Silver 2 services may pick up that passenger.

These Orange and Silver demand response vehicles also handle the MRCI subscription routes in the morning and afternoon which bring people to/from Fairmont and the rural areas and the Work Center located just outside Fairmont near the Martin County Fairgrounds.

The Cardinal Route runs Friday evenings and Saturdays only in the City of Fairmont. It is dispatched by the driver using a Bluetooth headset and the dispatch phone is forwarded to the cellphone on board the bus.

Figure 9 Prairie Lakes Transit Martin County Dial-A-Ride Services

Routine Dial-A-Ride Trips	Service Span	Service Description
Orange	Monday – Friday: 6 AM – 6 PM	Countywide demand-response pick ups to support rural and smaller towns outside of Fairmont
Silver 1	Monday – Friday: 6 AM – 6 PM	Countywide demand-response pick ups to support rural and smaller towns outside of Fairmont
Silver 2	Monday – Friday: 6 AM – 6 PM	Countywide demand-response pick ups to support rural and smaller towns outside of Fairmont
Cardinal	Fri.: 6 PM – 10 PM, Sat.: 8 AM – 10 PM	Operates only within the City of Fairmont on Friday nights and Saturdays

Faribault County

PLT operates one deviated route and three demand response services in Faribault County (See Figure 10 Prairie Lakes Transit Faribault County Deviated-Route Services and Figure 11 Prairie Lakes Transit Faribault County Dial-A-Ride Services).

Deviated Routes

PLT operates one deviated route in Blue Earth on weekdays that serves shopping centers, medical centers, and apartment complexes throughout the city, stretching west to also reach the industrial park (see Figure 10 Prairie Lakes Transit Faribault County Deviated-Route Services). With the closing of Walmart, there may be an opportunity to redesign the route to follow a more direct and shorter path, which may enable greater frequency.

Figure 10 Prairie Lakes Transit Faribault County Deviated-Route Services

Route Name	Service Span	Trips	Service Frequency	Service Description
Blue	Monday – Friday: 6 AM – 6 PM (Approximate)	13	60 minutes	Loop route through Blue Earth, serving Ag Center, St. Lukes, United Hospital, Juba’s Supervalu, Courthouse, Blue Ridge Apartments, and the Industrial Park

Demand Response

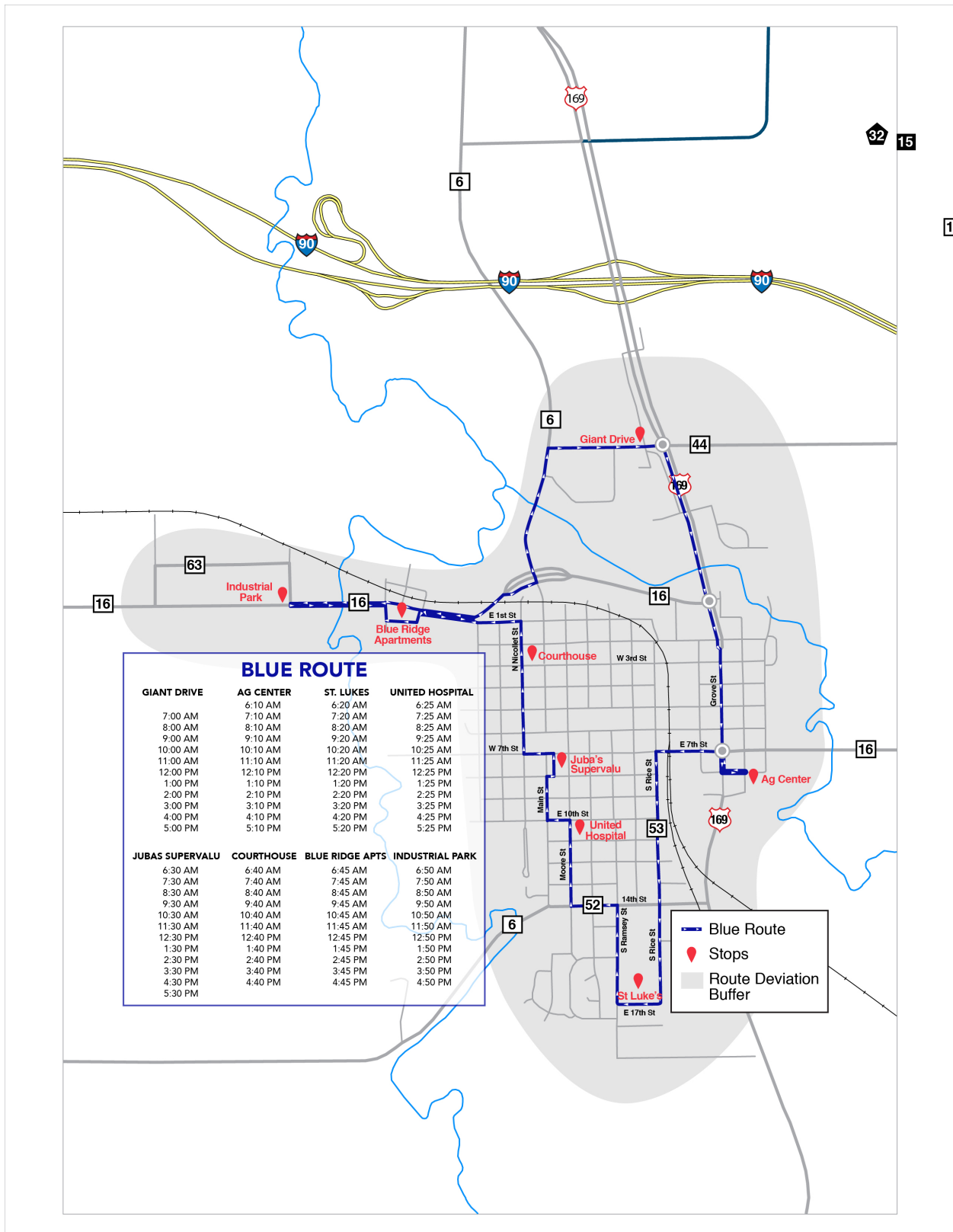
Dial-a-ride trips and subscription demand response routes are used in rural Faribault County and to support the Blue Route when needed due to capacity issues. Additionally, if a passenger in Blue Earth inside the quarter-mile deviation buffer does not want to use the deviated route bus, is willing to pay the extra fare, and there is a PLT bus available, the Purple or Grey services may pick up that passenger. Generally, Purple or Grey buses stay within their approximate service areas, unless there is a significant demand or capacity imbalance between the two.

The Buccaneer route operates only in the City of Blue Earth. Throughout 2016 and 2017 it operated on Fridays from 6:00 PM to 10:00 PM and on Saturdays from 8:00 AM to 6:00 PM, but now runs only on Saturdays due to low ridership. The revenue hours have been reallocated to create another Gold Middy round trip between Blue Earth and Fairmont. The Buccaneer trips are dispatched by the Cardinal Route driver (in Fairmont) who will radio the Buccaneer Route driver when a ride request comes in for them.

Figure 11 Prairie Lakes Transit Faribault County Dial-A-Ride Services

Routine Dial-A-Ride Trips	Service Span	Service Description
Purple	Monday – Friday: 6 AM – 6 PM	Countywide demand-response pick-ups to support rural and smaller towns outside of Blue Earth
Grey	Monday – Friday: 6 AM – 6 PM	Countywide demand-response pick-ups to support rural and smaller towns outside of Blue Earth
Buccaneer	Sat.: 8 AM – 6 PM	Only in City of Blue Earth

Figure 12 Prairie Lakes Transit Deviated Route Service in Faribault County



Inter-County Travel

PLT runs one demand response shuttle route between Blue Earth and Fairmont, with seven round trips per day (See Figure 14 Prairie Lakes Transit Gold Route Shuttle).

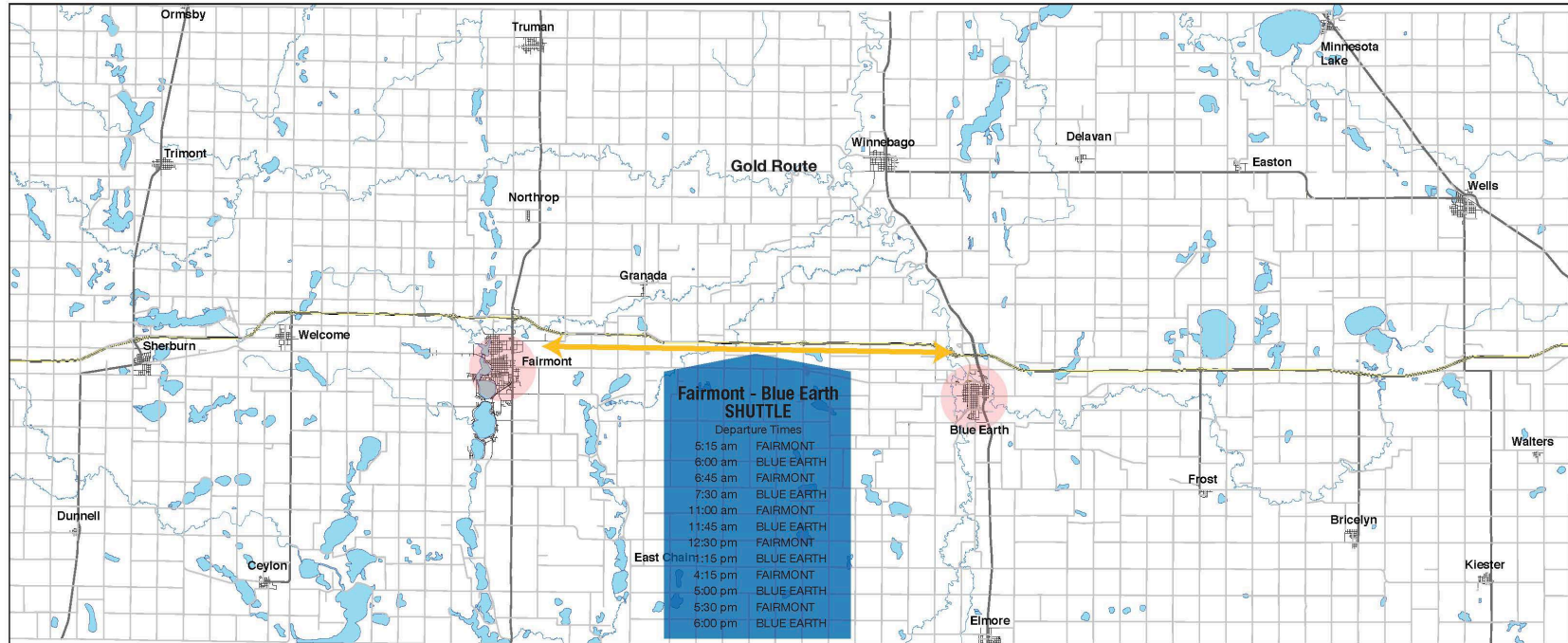
The Purple bus also runs a limited number of trips to Albert Lea in Freeborn County on Mondays and Thursdays if enough trips are requested. When the Purple bus does make these trips, no other Faribault County trips can be made during those times on the Purple bus.

Figure 13 Prairie Lakes Transit Inter-County Dial-A-Ride Services

Routine Dial-A-Ride Trips	Service Span	Service Description
Gold	Monday – Friday: 5 AM – 7 PM	Shuttle between Fairmont and Blue Earth
Purple	Monday & Thursday: 9AM, 12PM, or 3PM	Shuttle between Blue Earth and Albert Lea, when sufficient demand exists

Figure 14 Prairie Lakes Transit Gold Route Shuttle

DEMAND RESPONSE SERVICE AREA



GOLD ROUTE SHUTTLE • FAIRMONT - BLUE EARTH

Service Guidelines

Deviated Route

Any rider may board the bus at any designated stop (marked on maps above) and depart at any stop if feasible. However, the route will deviate up to one-quarter mile off the route to pick up or drop off riders. A rider wishing to be picked up on a deviation from the route must call dispatchers ahead of time for a reservation. If that rider's destination is also a deviation from the route, it must be communicated as part of the reservation for pick up. Additionally, if a rider boards at a designated stop and their destination is a deviation from the route it must be communicated with the driver upon boarding.

Demand Response

Demand response service will only be provided during specified service hours (see Figure 15 Prairie Lakes Transit Demand Response Service Span).

Figure 15 Prairie Lakes Transit Demand Response Service Span

Service Day	Service Area	Service Span
Monday-Friday	Fairmont, Blue Earth	6 AM – 6 PM
Friday	Fairmont Only	6 AM – 10 PM
Saturday	Fairmont	8 AM – 10 PM
Saturday	Blue Earth	8 AM – 6 PM

Reservation System

Reservations for deviated route or demand response trips may be taken up to two weeks in advance. PLT recommends reserving a trip at least 24 hours in advance to help guarantee a pick up. Though PLT does not guarantee same-day reservations, they do accept same-day trip requests. Same-day dial-a-ride reservations are handled on a first come –first served basis and accommodated around already scheduled trips. Similarly, deviated route pick up requests may be made the day of, but are not guaranteed.

Pick Up Window

Scheduling and dispatching considers the length of trip and the ability for the bus to complete the trip and return on time. Pickup windows include 15 minutes before and after the scheduled pickup time for demand response service, and five minutes before and after the scheduled pick up time for deviated fixed routes.

No-Show Policy

Cancellations for a demand response trip or a pick up for the deviated routes in Fairmont and Blue Earth must occur at least two hours prior to the reservation. After three “no shows” without cancellation from a single passenger, PLT may suspend that passenger for one week. Routine “no show” offenders may be billed for trips not taken after a reservation.

Service Contracts

PLT does not contract with any private employers or human service providers to operate trips outside of the deviated routes or demand response service. Driver operations are conducted with PLT staff, including part-time drivers.

Fare Structure

PLT charges three types of fares, depending on the service type and day of the week. Designated riders also receive discounts from the base rate. Children under four years of age accompanied by a parent can ride for free. Children between five and 12 years of age pay a half-price fare. Aides and attendants accompanying a paying passenger can ride for free. See Figure 16 Prairie Lakes Transit Fares for a fare breakdown.

Figure 16 Prairie Lakes Transit Fares

Fare Type	Regular Fare	Child Under 4	5-12 year olds	Aide/Attendant
Deviated Route	\$2.00	Free	\$1.00	Free
Demand Response	\$4.00	Free	\$2.00	Free
Demand Response (Friday Evening, Saturday)	\$3.00	Free	\$1.50	Free
Gold Route (Fairmont-Blue Earth Shuttle)	\$3.00	Free	\$1.50	Free

Transfers: Passengers must pay new fare for every transfer between buses.

Fare Payment Options

Fares are paid with tokens accepted by bus drivers on each transit vehicle at the time of boarding. No multi-day passes are available for purchase, however tokens are available in bulk packs for a 25% discount. Passengers may purchase \$40 worth of tokens for \$30, or \$20 worth of tokens for \$15. Tokens and bulk packs are sold at:

Martin County Courthouse Auditor/Treasurer Office - 201 Lake Avenue, Suite 201, Fairmont, MN 56031

Faribault County Courthouse Auditor/Treasurer Office - 415 North Main Street, Blue Earth, MN 56013

Prairie Lakes Transit Building - 1023 Dewey Street North, Fairmont, MN 56031

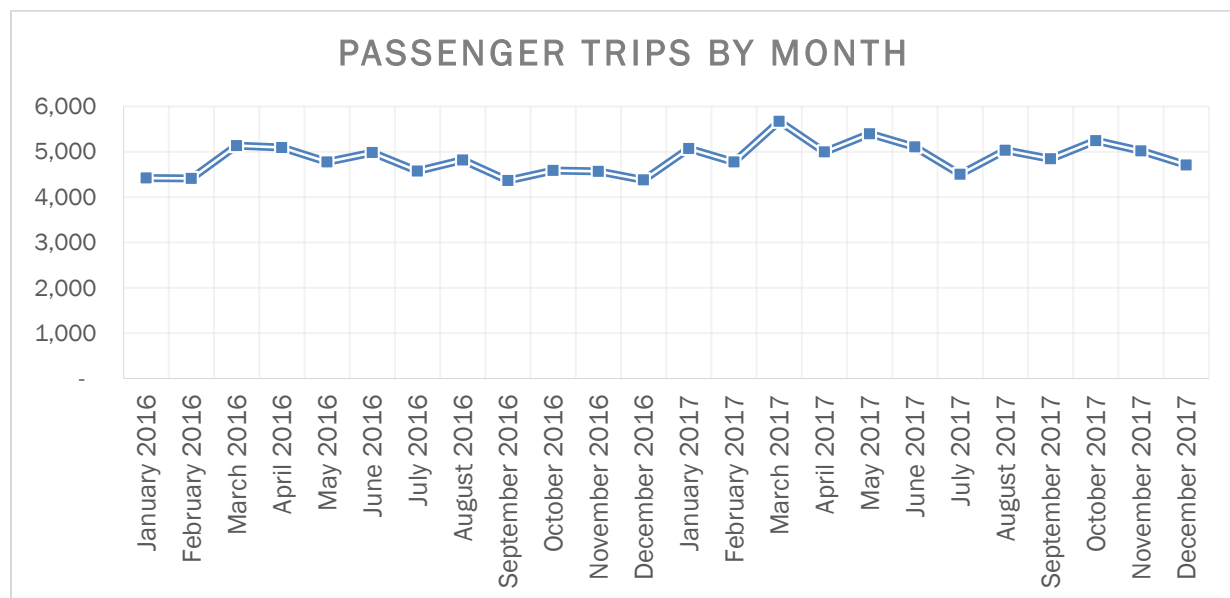
On board PLT buses – Drivers do not carry cash to give change

Ridership

Ridership for PLT was reported for the period between January 2016 and December 2017. Over this period, PLT deviated routes and demand response services provided 116,436 one-way passenger trips. Ridership increased from 2016 to 2017 by 7.5%. The highest monthly ridership was in March 2017.

More than 60,300 one-way trips were completed in 2017, with 21,256 trips on deviated routes (65%) and 39,067 trips on dial-a-ride services (35%).

Figure 17 PLT Ridership by Month 2016-17



Rider Characteristics

Rider demographics are tracked by driver logs, with dispatching input entered into RouteMatch software. Passenger demographics are shown in Figure 18.

Figure 18 Passenger Demographics

Year	Disabled	Elderly	Adult	Student	Children	Total Passenger Trips
2016	5,790	7,399	39,965	1,665	1,286	56,105
2017	4,105	7,773	45,051	1,793	1,599	60,321
2018 projections	3,800	8,100	49,000	1,700	2,400	65,000
Definition	Using Wheelchair Lift to Board / Depart	Aged 63 and over	Aged 18 - 62	Aged 6 - 17	Aged 0 - 5	

Behaviors

No customer survey information is available at this time. The Greater Minnesota Transit Survey provided more information about transit passengers for most agencies across the state. The data used in the survey analysis was collected during the Spring of 2015 (for MnDOT District 6) and Fall 2015. However, since PLT had not yet been a unified agency, no survey information about passengers or passenger preferences is available.

Attitudes and Opinions

No customer survey information is available at this time.

Stakeholder Engagement

The consultant team interviewed stakeholders in order to understand more about the effectiveness of existing services, as well as improvements desired. Interviews included representatives from the following organizations within PLT’s service area:

- PLT Staff
- PLT Transit Advisory Committee
- PLT Executive Committee

Questions were sent in advance of the interviews in order to facilitate a robust discussion, and all interviewees were promised confidentiality. Therefore, responses have been grouped into themes and not attributed to anyone specifically.

General themes from stakeholder feedback included the following:

- Continue ongoing efforts to raise awareness of PLT services

- There is demand for service to Mankato, for shopping and medical trips
- Volunteer drivers would help, but a consistent supply would be a challenge
- The state assistance program payment schedule can result in some cash flow issues
- Most pressing capital need is to complete the ownership transfer for Fairmont bus facility
- Extending the hours of service is desirable, if resources are available

The full report on stakeholder engagement is included as an appendix.

Transit Demands and Unmet Needs

From the analysis and outreach described above, the following are areas for potential service improvements:

- Information is not available to fully analyze the number and characteristics of requested trips which are denied.
- There have been requests for Saturday service to Winnebago and Elmore to access grocery stores available there. PLT is planning to experiment with extending the Buccaneer service to those towns.
- PLT plans to work with adjacent transit agencies to modify the existing service between Blue Earth and Albert Lea, as well as to explore service to Mankato.
- Serving the rural areas of Faribault County is extremely challenging, and some changes may be needed.
- More evening and weekend service is needed, as resources allow.

Chapter 5. Capital

The Capital section includes a review of the current assets of Prairie Lakes Transit (PLT), including fleet, facilities, and technology. The recent history of changes to capital assets is then described, followed by the projected needs for the next five years.

Background

Fleet Characteristics

PLT owns 14 vehicles. Details of the current fleet (as of 2018) are shown in Figure 19 below.

Figure 19 PLT Existing Fleet (2018)*

Vehicle ID Number (VIN#)	Vehicle Class (200-700)	Vehicle Contract Year	Fuel type	Current Milage	Vehicle status	Vehicle Condition Rating
DC23377	400	2017	gas	48,419	in service	5- Excellent
DC28256	300	2016	gas	114,455	in service	5- Excellent
DA07037	300	2015	gas	136,228	in service	4- Good
DA52812	300	2011	gas	222,208	in service	3- Adequate
DB05335	300	2009	gas	310,407	being disposed - in process	1-Poor
DC22522	400	2016	gas	89,461	in service	5- Excellent
DA05763	300	2014	gas	135,436	in service	3- Adequate
DA05696	400	2014	gas	176,338	in service	3- Adequate
D1114299	400	2013	gas	166,521	in service	3- Adequate
DA22849	400	2009	diesel	249,572	spare	2 - Marginal
DB42992	400	2008	diesel	267,014	spare	2 - Marginal
DB30520	400	2011	gas	238,819	spare	2 - Marginal
DB51720	400	2008	diesel	332,583	spare	2 - Marginal
DC74100	400	2017	gas	776	in service	5- Excellent

* Fleet characteristics shown here are accurate as of 2018 and may not reflect current conditions.

Maintenance Cost

In 2017, PLT spent approximately \$36,000 on preventative maintenance and \$102,000 on corrective maintenance for its 14 vehicles.

All maintenance is outsourced, including to mechanics out of the two-county service area, with no long-term contract with a transit vehicle maintenance provider. The Safety Manager performs basic level maintenance, such as adding oil and changing wiper blades. All other maintenance and mechanical work is through local vendors.

Facilities and Assets

Facilities

PLT operates out of two garages, one in Fairmont and one in Faribault County. Neither is owned by PLT currently. PLT pays \$2,400 annually to rent space within the Faribault County Highway Department facility in Blue Earth to house four transit vehicles. The remaining ten vehicles are housed in the Fairmont Transit Facility. The Fairmont Transit Facility includes space for administrative and dispatching staff.

The Full Board is finalizing the acquisition of the Fairmont Transit Facility from Martin County. As of April 2019, the transfer of the Fairmont Transit Facility from Martin County to PLT is still in process. Rehabilitation and buildout of the facility is likely to cost \$267,000, which is funded in 2019 with 80% of the cost from MnDOT and 20% funded locally.

Rider Assets

Prairie Lakes Transit does not have any signage to designate bus stop locations for the deviated routes operated in Blue Earth and Fairmont. These stop locations also do not have passenger amenities, including route maps, shelters, or benches provided by PLT. Some private businesses and municipalities provide benches and waiting areas, but they are not assets controlled by PLT. This is partially the result of the number of deviations made to pick up passengers directly at their homes or pick-up locations. Signage and benches are planned to be installed in future years.

Capital Plan

The capital plan focuses on replacing existing vehicles. Two vehicles are to be replaced during 2019, and one-to-two vehicles every year thereafter until 2025.

History

Assets were transferred to PLT as part of the merger of the two prior agencies. Although there have been administrative changes, the capital assets for each of the two counties remain mostly independent of each other. Since PLT was formed in 2016, the main issue relating to capital assets

has been securing ownership and/or rights to use the Fairmont facility over the long term. As mentioned above, this is still in progress, although is expected to be complete during 2019.

Five Year Capital Plan

The capital investments required for PLT in the next five years are mostly for fleet replacement. The existing fleet size will be sufficient for vehicle operation and maintenance, which means that the current sources for capital funding can largely sustain the proposed transit system by replacing vehicles at the rate of one bus per year.

Some capital investment will be required to complete the buildout of the Fairmont Transit Facility, for new Rider Guides, and for bus stop improvements. With federal and state grants available, the local match required is expected to be less than \$100,000.

Figure 20 Required Funding For PLT Capital Costs Other than Vehicles

Year	Funding Source	Total Cost	Note (all items after 2019 only if not funded in 2019)
2019	State/local	\$267,000	Fairmont facility buildout
2020	State/local	\$30,000	Drainage at Fairmont facility; Vehicle camera system upgrades; Cell phones for staff; Surface parking at Fairmont facility
2021	State/local	\$30,000	Furniture and equipment for Fairmont facility; communications upgrade for Fairmont facility
2022	State/local	\$40,000	Indoor climate-controlled vehicle storage at Blue Earth facility
2023	State/local	\$40,000	Tractor/snow blower; bus stop improvements and Rider Guides

Additionally, between 2020 and 2025, PLT plans on purchasing six to ten replacement bus vehicles. All buses would be shorter than 30 feet. One additional bus would be needed for new service to Mankato.

Update: As of 9/30/2019, PLT plans to move \$40,000 from 2023 to 2020 for the purchase of a tractor/snow blower and related equipment. PLT management also clarified that since they now anticipate a local match requirement of 10 percent, the agency now expects to be able to replace two vehicles per year, for a total of 10 vehicles by 2025.

Figure 21 PLT Fleet Funding Sources

Year	Total Estimated Purchase Cost	MnDOT Cost (80%)	PLT Cost (20%)	Note
2020	\$82,000	\$65,600	\$16,400	Bus Replacement
2021	\$84,000	\$67,200	\$16,800	Bus Replacement
2022	\$87,000	\$69,600	\$17,400	Bus Replacement
2023	\$90,000	\$72,000	\$18,000	Bus Replacement
2024	\$92,000	\$73,600	\$18,400	Bus Replacement
2025	\$94,000	\$75,200	\$18,800	Bus Replacement
2022	\$87,000	\$69,600	\$17,400	Service Expansion

Update: As of 9/30/2019, PLT management anticipates a local match requirement of 10 percent, allowing the replacement of two vehicles per year, for a total of 10 vehicles by 2025. The agency also anticipates purchasing one additional vehicle for expansion in 2020 at a cost of \$60,000.

Chapter 6. 2020 – 2025 Annual Needs

The five key components needed for PLT to achieve the service improvement goals are facilities, fleet, staffing, technology, and marketing. These categories were used to identify specific short-term and long-term needs for PLT, as described in the following sections.

Facilities

The Fairmont Transit Facility should be transferred to PLT control in the near future. At that time, the buildout of the facility for improved PLT operations and administration should begin. This buildout is already planned and funded in FY19, with the state paying 80% of the cost and a 20% local match covering the remainder.

Future needs include other upgrades to the Fairmont facility, such as improving drainage, updating communications systems, outfitting the garage with furniture and equipment, and providing employee and visitor parking.

The Blue Earth facility can benefit from indoor climate-controlled vehicle storage. Some improvements to bus stops are also recommended, including shelters and posted schedules.

Fleet

PLT needs two vehicles replaced during 2019, since none were replaced during 2018. In subsequent years, one-to-two vehicles would be replaced each year at the end of their useful life. In addition, one new vehicle would be needed for implementing regional service to Mankato.

During the five-year horizon of this plan, a replacement of the vehicle camera system is also needed, due to obsolete and problematic existing equipment. Finally, it is recommended that a tractor with snow blower attachment be purchased, in order to facilitate improved operations around the bus maintenance facilities.

Staffing

PLT employs two full-time employees and 31 part-time employees. Full-time staff carry out management and supervision activities, although two part-time employees help with management and supervision. The remaining part-time employees are split between dispatching/scheduling and drivers. Five employees help with dispatching and scheduling.

PLT employs a staff of 24 part-time drivers. There are no volunteer drivers for help with operating demand response trips. There have been limited discussions to coordinate with local volunteer

organizations to begin recruiting drivers as well as to attempt to launch a Volunteer Driver System through an in-house program.

Three new part-time driver positions will be required for implementation of new service before 2025.

Technology

The agency uses RouteMatch software for reservations, scheduling, and dispatching. An upgrade is needed to enable Automatic Vehicle Location notifications available to passengers, as well as allowing integration with phone apps. A typical budget for this type of upgrade is approximately \$50,000.

Pre- and post-trip RouteMatch modules will also allow PLT to move away from pen and paper tracking for daily driver logs.

Any software upgrades could also be accomplished through a statewide procurement, since the needs of many rural agencies are similar. RouteMatch would be one potential provider. Pennsylvania recently implemented a statewide contract with Ecolane. Other emerging software providers include TransLoc and Via.

Marketing

In 2018, PLT spent \$26,000 on advertising, marketing, and promotional charges. Marketing materials include specialized “Rider Guides” for passengers in Fairmont, in Blue Earth, and in surrounding rural communities in Faribault and Martin Counties. Updated versions (the current, soon-to-be-obsolete copies have been depleted) have also printed for Fall 2018 system design modifications and service hour changes. The PLT website (pltransit.com) has current route, span, fare, and frequency information. Digital copies of the Rider Guides are available on the system’s website, but not all riders are digitally savvy or have access to cellular internet and some prefer hard copies.

Television advertisements are currently run on FOX and CBS networks out of Mankato at a very low per-ad cost. Response to the advertisements was positive for both rider perception and ridership. PLT is developing a new commercial to refresh content.

The PLT Board is in the process of developing a social media presence. So far, a Facebook page has been created and will be increasingly active throughout 2019. No page or account currently exists on Twitter, Instagram or other social media networks.

Figure 22 Prairie Lakes Transit Marketing Activities

Type of Activity	Target Market	Description
Radio Ads	General Public	Regular radio ads on multiple area stations. Sponsorship of news and weather forecasts. Special date packages available; holiday weekends
Television Ads	General Public	Potential, television ads on local cable access station along with ongoing regional network television ads.
Billboard Ads	General Public	Assume 1-2 billboards active for the year
Newspaper Ads	General Public	Assume 4 area newspapers with one ad weekly
Exterior Bus Enhancement	General Public	Visual modifications to vehicles to promote the system and make public aware of system. Continued mobility when demand response buses are not in demand.
Miscellaneous Promotion	General Public	Multiple year-round parade participation, other public outreach activity.
Social Media	General Public	Transit System Website with system information.

The current spending on Marketing is about 2% of the overall operating budget, and so it is recommended that future expenditures remain at this level overall. Marketing efforts should continue to evolve, based on results of prior efforts, new technology, and potential partnerships with area organizations.

Chapter 7. System Performance

Historical

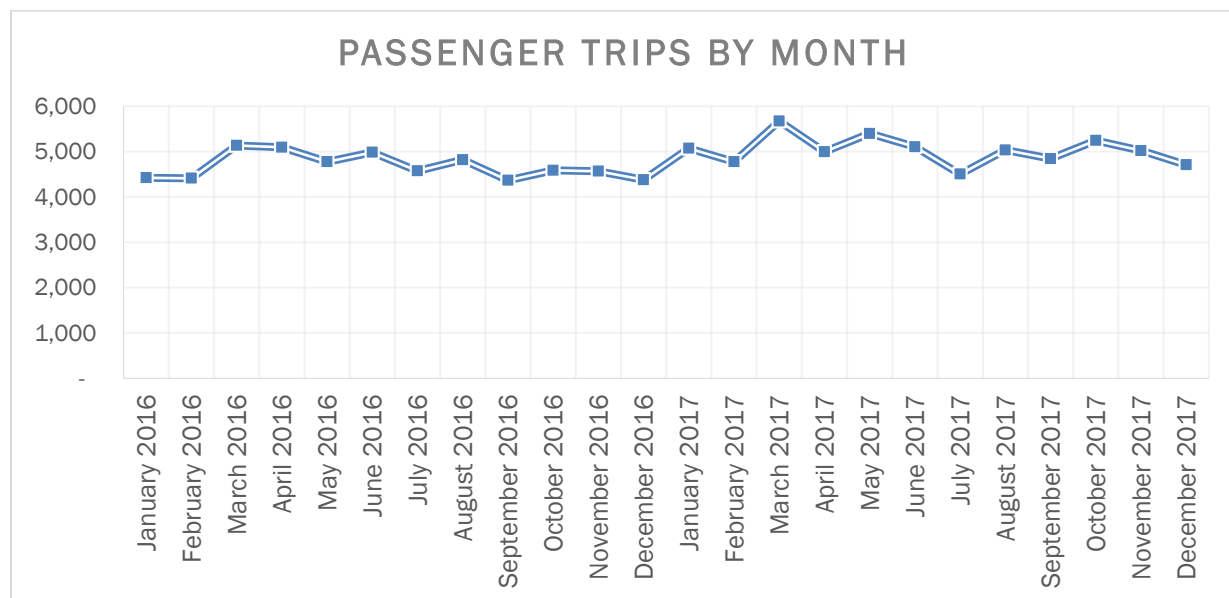
Ridership

PLT's services are essential to many individuals' quality of life and the community's health, environmental and transportation goals in Martin and Faribault Counties. Transit in the PLT service area is a mix of deviated route and demand-response services, and the service is often limited in span of hours, days of the week, and/or frequency. Two deviated routes operate in Fairmont, one deviated route operates in Blue Earth, and one route operates between both municipalities. Demand-response service is also available throughout the rural parts of each county.

As noted in Chapter 4, PLT deviated routes and demand response services provided 116,436 one-way passenger trips between January 2016 and December 2017. Ridership per month increased from 2016 to 2017 by 7.5%. The highest monthly ridership was in March 2017.

More than 60,300 one-way trips were completed in 2017, with 21,256 trips on deviated routes (65%) and 39,067 trips on dial-a-ride services (35%).

Figure 23 PLT Ridership 2016-2017



Performance Measures and Indicators

The GMTIP suggested several System Performance Standards to evaluate the productivity and efficiency of transit services provided within a particular system. To be responsible and dynamic, PLT must consistently measure and adjust its service to help achieve these performance standards. They serve as indicators of route and demand response performance and call attention to service offerings that may need adjustment.

The use of multiple standards provides better indications of operational and financial performance, and allows PLT to balance the cost and ridership of each route and demand response option in the system's service area. The metrics below describe the current service efficiency and effectiveness across both counties, and demonstrate why performance measurements are important to continuously collect and monitor.

Service Span

The GMTIP target span of service for small urban areas with populations of more than 2,500 people is 12 hours on weekdays, which PLT meets in Fairmont and Blue Earth. The state requires nine service hours per Sunday for municipalities larger than 7,000 residents, which exempts Blue Earth, but not Fairmont. PLT meets the state targets for span of service on Monday through Saturday, but currently offers no Sunday service. Only the Cardinal and Buccaneer routes serve passengers on Saturdays. In rural areas, the state standard requires just eight hours per day and only three days of service per week, which PLT provides in both Martin and Faribault Counties.

Service Productivity

Figure 24 Performance Statistics for 2017 Prairie Lake Transit Services includes a summary of service efficiency measures for PLT routes during 2017, based on service type.

Figure 24 Performance Statistics for 2017 Prairie Lake Transit Services

Route Name	Community / County	Type of service	Revenue Generated from Route (\$)	Annual Operating cost for route	Cost per hour	Cost per Trip	Passengers per hour
Orange	Martin Co.	DAR	\$24,799	\$ 112,981	\$ 38.39	\$ 11.25	3.41
Red	Fairmont	Deviated	\$24,685	\$ 117,319	\$ 38.39	\$ 11.74	3.27
Silver 2	Martin Co.	DAR	\$19,197	\$ 125,420	\$ 38.39	\$ 16.14	2.38
Silver 1	Martin Co.	DAR	\$19,194	\$ 125,420	\$ 38.39	\$ 16.14	2.38
Green	Fairmont	Deviated	\$17,357	\$ 117,319	\$ 38.39	\$ 16.70	2.30
Blue	Blue Earth	Deviated	\$10,460	\$ 117,166	\$ 38.39	\$ 27.67	1.39
Gold	Blue Earth & Fairmont	Shuttle	\$10,394	\$ 86,723	\$ 38.39	\$ 20.61	1.86

Route Name	Community / County	Type of service	Revenue Generated from Route (\$)	Annual Operating cost for route	Cost per hour	Cost per Trip	Passengers per hour
Cardinal	Martin Co.	DAR	\$7,672	\$ 37,737	\$ 38.39	\$ 12.15	3.16
Purple	Faribault Co.	DAR	\$7,580	\$ 119,431	\$ 38.39	\$ 38.92	0.99
Grey	Faribault Co.	DAR	\$7,240	\$ 117,780	\$ 38.39	\$ 40.18	0.96
Buccaneer	Faribault Co.	DAR	\$420	\$ 15,432	\$ 38.39	\$ 90.78	0.42
Overall			\$149,004	\$ 1,092,728	\$ 38.39	\$ 18.11	2.12

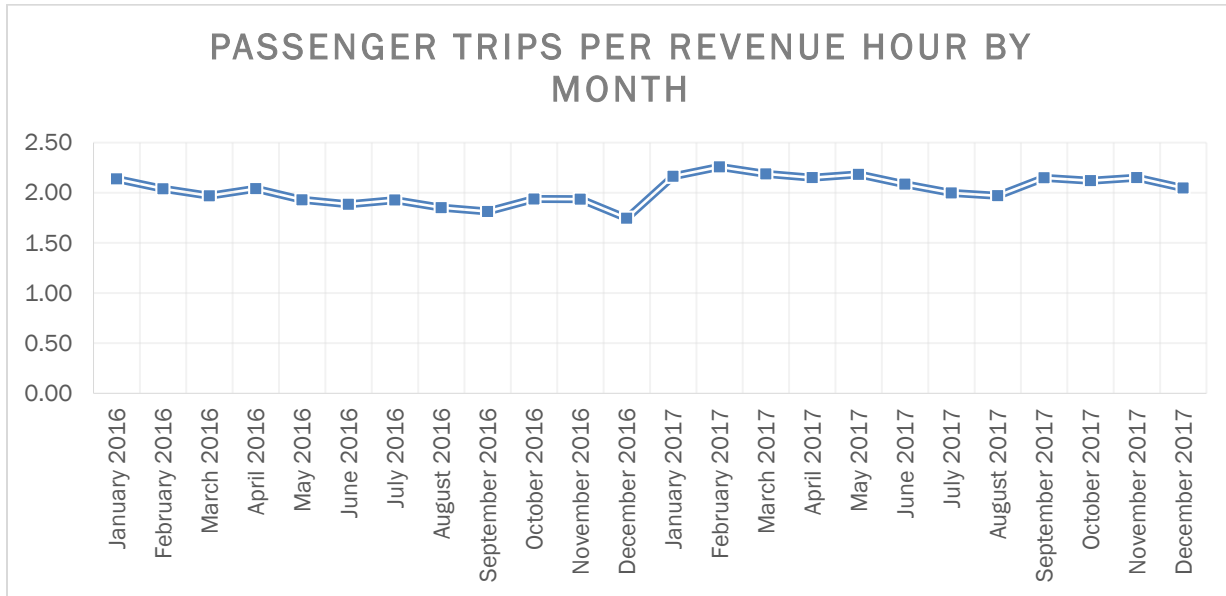
Productivity: Passengers per Hour

Productivity is calculated by the total number of passengers carried divided by the total service hours. A high number of passengers per hour show a route is serving more people. The passengers per hour metric is calculated at both the route and trip level but can be also viewed on a per bus basis to establish a minimum standard of route performance.

During 2017, all PLT services averaged 2.12 passengers per service hour. The GMTIP target for demand response is three passengers per hour in urban areas (two per hour in rural areas). The target is achieved by the Orange, Silver, and Cardinal routes. The Orange demand response trips in Martin County, primarily outside of Fairmont, are the most efficient service overall, slightly higher than the Red deviated route in Fairmont. The Buccaneer route is the least efficient service, operating on Saturdays between 8:00 AM and 6:00 PM. Service in Faribault County, including even the deviated route service in Blue Earth, fails to meet the two passengers per hour standard. None of the deviated routes meet the target of five passengers per hour in rural communities.

Average systemwide trips per hour has been fairly consistent throughout the brief history of PLT service.

Figure 25 PLT Passengers per Hour by Month



Cost Effectiveness: Expenses per Vehicle Revenue Hour

Costs are well below the state targets of \$50.00 per hour for deviated routes and \$60.00 per hour for DAR service.

Cost Effectiveness: Revenue Generated/Cost Recovery

Cost recovery is calculated by dividing revenue by operating expenses, and can be calculated systemwide or by route in the PLT service area. Since each county in the PLT service area operates independent demand response service, cost recovery can be calculated by county as well. Revenue includes fares, contract revenue, local contributions or local tax subsidy.

For 2017, fares generated 13.6% of operating costs, which meant that the counties also had to fund some of the operations in order to meet the 15% local share required.

Cost Effectiveness: Expenses per Passenger Trip

Due to the relatively low ridership, all but two PLT services had costs per passenger trip which were higher than the state targets. Goals are for deviated routes to cost no more than \$6.00 per passenger trip and DAR service to cost no more than \$15.00 per passenger trip. Only the Orange and Cardinal demand response service operate at less than \$15.00 per trip, at \$11.25 and \$12.15 respectively.

Productivity: Ridership per Capita

Annual transit trips per capita in the PLT service area averaged 1.64 during 2016, and increased to 1.76 during 2017.

Other Indicators and Performance Targets

Although PLT does not currently have the ability to incorporate a reliability measure for on-time performance (OTP), the agency plans to collect OTP data if new RouteMatch software modules can be purchased and incorporated. The specific target for OTP would align with the MnDOT recommendation of 90 percent on time within published pickup window based on GMTIP (2017).

As part of this FYTSP effort, PLT picked three performance targets to achieve in the next five years.

Figure 26 Provider Performance Targets

Measure	Target	Current Status
Cost Recovery	15%	13.6%
Ridership per Capita	2.00	1.76
Ridership per Hour	2.50	2.12

Historical Performance

The route level productivity and performance statistics are included in Figure 27 Productivity and Performance Statistics for PLT Service (2017).

Peer Performance Comparison

To provide additional context on the agency's performance, a peer analysis was conducted to compare PLT to other transit agencies with similar service. Five peer agencies were selected, including two Minnesota agencies (Isanti County and Kanabec County) and three out-of-state agencies (Hornell Area Transit in New York, Door County in Wisconsin, and Mecosta-Osceola Transit Authority in Michigan).

PLT is similar to peer systems on a number of metrics, including annual passenger trips, operating cost per passenger trip, and annual operating costs. Productivity (passengers per hour) is lower than the peer agency average, which shows one potential area for improvement, but the PLT operating cost per hour is significantly cheaper than peers, despite driving more annual revenue hours. A summary of key statistics for PLT and peer agencies is shown in Figure 28 Productivity and Performance Statistics for PLT and Peer Systems (2017).

Figure 27 Productivity and Performance Statistics for PLT Service (2017)

Route Name	Type	Vehicles Operated in Max. Service	Annual Passenger Trips	Annual Revenue miles	Annual Revenue Hours	Annual Operating Cost	Passengers per Hour	Operating Cost per Hour	Operating Cost per Trip
Orange	DAR	1	10,040	44,390	2,943	\$ 112,981	3.41	\$ 38.39	\$ 11.25
Red	Deviated	1	9,994	39,226	3,056	\$ 117,319	3.27	\$ 38.39	\$ 11.74
Silver 2	DAR	1	7,772	58,668	3,267	\$ 125,420	2.38	\$ 38.39	\$ 16.14
Silver 1	DAR	1	7,771	58,667	3,267	\$ 125,420	2.38	\$ 38.39	\$ 16.14
Green	Deviated	1	7,027	39,415	3,056	\$ 117,319	2.30	\$ 38.39	\$ 16.70
Blue	Deviated	1	4,235	23,529	3,052	\$ 117,166	1.39	\$ 38.39	\$ 27.67
Gold	DAR	1	4,208	60,945	2,259	\$ 86,723	1.86	\$ 38.39	\$ 20.61
Cardinal	DAR	Off-peak	3,106	11,451	983	\$ 37,737	3.16	\$ 38.39	\$ 12.15
Purple	DAR	1	3,069	64,264	3,111	\$ 119,431	0.99	\$ 38.39	\$ 38.92
Grey	DAR	1	2,931	60,048	3,068	\$ 117,780	0.96	\$ 38.39	\$ 40.18
Buccaneer	DAR	Off-peak	170	2,767	402	\$ 15,432	0.42	\$ 38.39	\$ 90.78
PLT TOTAL / AVERAGE	--	9	60,323	463,370	28,464	\$1,092,728	2.12	\$ 38.39	\$ 18.11

Source: Prairie Lakes Transit

Figure 28 Productivity and Performance Statistics for PLT and Peer Systems (2017)

Peer System	Vehicles Operated in Max. Service	Annual Passenger Trips	Annual Revenue miles	Annual Revenue Hours	Annual Operating Cost	Passengers per Hour	Operating Cost per Hour	Operating Cost per Trip
Door County (WI)	14	64,737	380,029	31,491	\$1,158,899	2.06	\$36.80	\$17.90
Hornell Area Transit (NY)	11	86,900	325,366	28,389	\$984,856	3.06	\$34.69	\$11.33
Isanti County (MN)	8	52,485	380,948	17,518	\$1,389,640	3.00	\$79.33	\$26.48
Mecosta Osceola Transit Authority (MI)	9	53,361	313,094	13,258	\$829,837	4.02	\$62.59	\$15.55
Kanabec County (MN)	6	49,982	199,944	12,201	\$941,968	4.10	\$77.20	\$18.85
PEER SYSTEM AVERAGE	9.6	61,493	319,876	20,571	\$1,061,040	3.25	\$58.12	\$18.02
PLT TOTAL / AVERAGE	9	60,323	463,370	28,464	\$ 1,092,728	2.12	\$ 38.39	\$ 18.11

Source: National Transit Database, 2017.

Peer systems were selected from among rural transit providers with between 5 and 15 vehicles in maximum service, between 10,000 and 50,000 annual revenue hours, and between 30,000 and 100,000 annual unlinked passenger trips.

Agencies are listed in order of annual revenue hours.

Chapter 8. Operations

PLT’s services are essential to an individual’s quality of life and the community’s health, environmental and transportation network in Martin and Faribault Counties. Like all transit providers, PLT seeks to offer customer friendly service in the most efficient way possible to help people travel with ease to their jobs, shopping, recreational, or medical destinations. This five-year service plan presents how to best deploy available statewide and local resources so PLT can increase ridership and efficiency across its service area. This section will highlight past trends for the operating budget, as well as the impact of proposed changes on operations over the next 5 years.

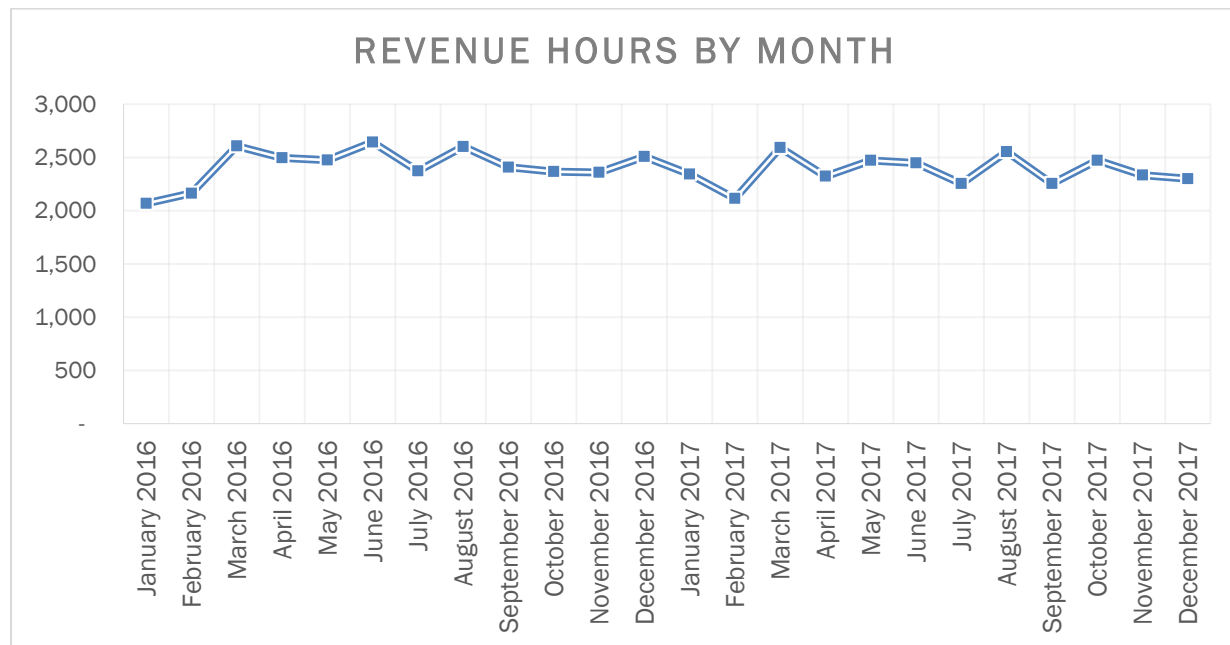
Historical and Projected Annual Summary

Historical Operations

Service Supplied

PLT served an average of 2,400 monthly vehicle revenue hours during 2016 and 2017. Monthly vehicle revenue hours ranged from 2,068 during the first month of service to a peak of 2,643 in June 2016. The vehicle revenue hours by month for 2016 and 2017 are shown below:

Figure 29 PLT Vehicle Revenue Hours by Month*



* Note: Ridership in January and February 2016 may have been lower than average due to the implementation of electronic dispatch.

Figure 30 Service Statistics for 2017 Prairie Lake Transit Services shows the operating statistics for each PLT service in 2017, when data by route is available. The Orange demand response service provides the most passenger trips, closely followed by the Red deviated route in Fairmont. Consequently, both generated the most fare revenue.

Figure 30 Service Statistics for 2017 Prairie Lake Transit Services

Route Name	Community / County	Type of service	Annual Passenger Trips (one-way)	Annual Revenue miles (#)	Annual Revenue hours	Revenue Generated from Route (\$)
Orange	Martin Co.	DAR	10,040	44,390	2,943	\$24,799
Red	Fairmont	Deviated	9,994	39,226	3,056	\$24,685
Silver 2	Martin Co.	DAR	7,772	58,668	3,267	\$19,197
Silver 1	Martin Co.	DAR	7,771	58,667	3,267	\$19,194
Green	Fairmont	Deviated	7,027	39,415	3,056	\$17,357
Blue	Blue Earth	Deviated	4,235	23,529	3,052	\$10,460
Gold	Blue Earth & Fairmont	Shuttle	4,208	60,945	2,259	\$10,394
Cardinal	Martin Co.	DAR	3,106	11,451	983	\$7,672
Purple	Faribault Co.	DAR	3,069	64,264	3,111	\$7,580
Grey	Faribault Co.	DAR	2,931	60,048	3,068	\$7,240
Buccaneer	Faribault Co.	DAR	170	2,767	402	\$420
Overall			60,323	463,370	28,464	\$149,004

Background

This section includes information on PLT’s most recent operating budget.

Operating Budget

Figure 31 shows a summary of the 2018 operating budget for the agency. The largest investment of the agency is in its personnel, followed by administrative costs and vehicles. A large portion of the operating funding comes through state and federal grants, while farebox revenue covers 13 percent and system revenue covers two percent. PLT had an operating deficit of \$1,049,750 in 2018.

Figure 31 PLT Operating Budget Summary for 2018 (Estimated)

Item	Balance	Percentage
Personnel	\$785,400	63%
Administrative	\$92,950	7%
Vehicles	\$319,000	26%
Operations	\$15,400	3%
Insurance	\$36,000	1%
Taxes and Fees	\$1,000	0.1%
Operating Expenses	\$1,249,750	
Farebox	\$165,000	83%
System Revenue	\$20,000	10%
Fuel Refund	\$15,000	8%
Operating Revenue	\$200,000	
Surplus/Deficit	(\$1,049,750)	

Staffing

As previously noted in Chapter 6, PLT currently employs two full-time employees and 31 part-time employees. Full-time staff carry out management and supervision activities, although two part-time employees also help with management and supervision. The remaining part-time employees are split between dispatching/scheduling and driving. Five employees help with dispatching and scheduling.

PLT employs a staff of 24 part-time drivers. There are no volunteer drivers for help with operating demand response trips. There have been limited discussions to coordinate with local volunteer organizations to begin recruiting drivers as well as to attempt to launch a Volunteer Driver System through an in-house program. Challenges include obtaining insurance and recruiting a steady commitment.

Three new part-time driver positions would be required for the implementation of expanded service as outlined below.

Five Year Operating Plan

Figure 32 Service Characteristics of Proposed Transit Service shows the proposed service characteristics of each route, including peak frequency and daily round trips.

Clock-face schedules are proposed for all of the recommended routes, and recovery times are projected to fall between 10 and 20 percent of total cycle time for nearly every route. When recovery time is less than 10 percent of total cycle time, there is a high risk of poor on-time performance because there is insufficient buffering between trips. With insufficient recovery time, one late trip can lead to another, causing a bus to get further and further behind schedule. On the other hand, if there is more than 20 percent recovery time in a schedule, buses are sitting unproductively for long periods of time.

Figure 32 Service Characteristics of Proposed Transit Service

Existing Route	Proposed Route	Span of Service	Frequency	Daily Round Trips
Purple & Grey	Limit each service to zone covering each ½ of Faribault Co.	Same	Same	Demand Response
Buccaneer	Expand from Blue Earth to include Winnebago and Elmore	Same (Saturday only)	Same	Demand Response
None	Fairmont to Mankato	Mon and Wed only	3 round trips	3 round trips each day
Cardinal	Add Mon-Thurs nights	6:00pm-10:00pm	Demand Response	Demand Response
Cardinal	Add Sunday	9:00am-4:00pm	Demand Response	Demand Response

The recommendations are summarized in Figure 33 Five-Year Operating Plan Summary below.

Figure 33 Five-Year Operating Plan Summary

1-Year Plan (2020)	3-Year Plan (2022)	5-Year Plan (2024)
Marketing: Expand marketing efforts to increase ridership and partnerships	Marketing: Further expand social media presence, media advertising, local event participation	Monitoring: Upgrade monitoring of on-time performance and missed trips, using new software
Monitoring: Continue monitoring for productivity, cost recovery, and on-time performance as data allows	Frequency and Span: Add Cardinal service in Fairmont on Mon-Thurs evenings from 6-10PM	Frequency and Span: Add Cardinal service in Fairmont on Sundays from 9AM-4PM
Service Realignment: Realign Purple and Grey demand response service in Faribault Co., so that each service covers ½ of county only	Service Expansion: Add regional service from Fairmont to Mankato on Mon and Wed; continue current service to Albert Lea on Fridays only	
Service Realignment: Expand Saturday Buccaneer service from Blue Earth to include Winnebago and Elmore		
Total Revenue Hours: 28,464 (same as FY19)	Total Revenue Hours: 30,232 (+1,768)	Total Revenue Hours: 30,596 (+364)
Additional FTEs Required: 0	Additional FTEs Required: +1.0	Additional FTEs Required: +0.2

Update: As of 9/30/2019, PLT plans to extend the span of the Cardinal service to include Monday-Thursday evenings from 6 to 10 PM in 2020 instead of 2022. This would add approximately 1,004 revenue hours in 2020 and 2021.

Financial

Background

Current and future projected revenue sources, and PLT’s ability to enhance revenue streams for expanded service, are important to understanding how to implement the five year service plan. While federal and state funding sources may increase in the future, service expansions proposed in this plan will require an increase in the local match funding beyond the current farebox revenue. Service expansion, particularly the intercity routes, will most likely increase farebox revenue, but not necessarily at the current farebox recovery ratio.

History

PLT provides its local match funding share through its farebox revenues and funding from Martin and Faribault County. The projected revenues for 2018 are listed in Figure 34 Projected Operating Revenue, 2018.

Figure 34 Projected Operating Revenue, 2018

Item	Revenue	Percentage
System Revenue	\$20,000	11%
Farebox	\$165,000	89%
Total	\$185,000	

Projected Needs and Revenues

The proposed service expansion in this plan will require an additional \$100,662 annually by 2025.

Figure 35 Projected Operating Expenses and Revenues, 2019 – 2025

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Operating Expenses – Current Level of Service ²	\$1,271,793	\$1,309,946	\$1,349,245	\$1,389,722	\$1,431,414	\$1,474,356	\$1,518,587
Operating Revenue – Current Level of Service ³	\$1,251,193	\$1,288,728	\$1,327,390	\$1,367,212	\$1,408,228	\$1,450,475	\$1,493,989
Deficit	\$20,600	\$21,218	\$21,855	\$22,510	\$23,185	\$23,881	\$24,597
Additional Operating Expense – Service Expansion ⁴	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$76,392	\$78,684	\$97,730	\$100,662
Expansion Local Share (20%)	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$15,278	\$15,737	\$19,546	\$20,132
Additional Local Operating Funding Necessary (Deficit + Expansion Local Share)	\$20,600	\$21,218	\$21,855	\$37,789	\$38,922	\$43,427	\$44,730

Update: As of 9/30/2019, PLT plans to allocate an additional \$41,000 annually for weekday span improvements on the Cardinal service in Fairmont, now starting in 2020 instead of 2022.

² Projected operating expenses for 2018 were provided by PLT. Projected future operating expenses for current service levels were increased by 3 percent per year to account for expected inflation.

³ Projected operating revenue for 2019 was estimated as a 3 percent increase from 2018 actual revenue. Projected future operating revenue for current service levels were increased by 3 percent per year to account for improved marketing and awareness efforts.

⁴ Additional operating expenses for future service expansions on existing routes were calculated by multiplying the projected increase in revenue hours for each route by its projected 2019 cost per hour, then increased by 3 percent per year to account for expected inflation. For new routes, cost per hour was estimated as PLT's 2019 systemwide average cost per hour, then increased by 3 percent per year.

Chapter 10. Agency Strategic Direction

The five-year planning process included all of the rural transit service providers (FTA Section 5311) in Greater Minnesota. The process of developing the five-year transit system plans was the first for 5311 providers in Greater Minnesota. The Plan identifies and quantifies the transit services being operated around the state, which varies greatly, and identifies potential areas for improvement, expansion and regional transit and mobility coordination. Transit services are subject to many federal and state guidelines, which may impact how improvements, expansion, and coordination is implemented. This section describes both overarching areas of potential improvement and opportunities identified across the state as well as those specific to PLT including local, state, and federal requirements.

State and Federal Requirements

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

Federal Transit Authority (FTA)

FTA Section 5311 provides formula-based grants to support rural areas for transit capital, planning, and operating assistance.⁵ Guidance on the grant, requirements, compliance and the application process is available online⁶ and through MnDOT Office of Transit and Active Transportation (OTAT).⁷

The FTA is one of the funders for 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 (sub recipients) receiving FTA Section 5311 funds, is facilitated through MnDOT as the recipient. MnDOT assists in compliance with FTA regulations such as: training, safety, maintenance, service, and procurement. Any contracted service by transit agencies, including taxi services, must also comply with FTA requirements.

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

⁵ <https://www.transit.dot.gov/rural-formula-grants-5311>

⁶ <https://www.transit.dot.gov/regulations-and-guidance/fta-circulars/formula-grants-rural-areas-program-guidance-and-application>

⁷ <https://www.dot.state.mn.us/transit/>

Olmstead Plan

In 1999, the Supreme Court affirmed that mental illness is a type of disability, that individuals with disabilities, including those with mental illness, have a right to live in their communities as opposed to forcing institutionalization, and are covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) in *Olmstead vs. L.C and E.W.*⁸ 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 2018.⁹

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 Americans with Disabilities Act (discussed below). It 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. It 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.

Title VI

FTA requires all recipients and sub recipients to comply with U.S. Department of Transportation 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).¹⁰ 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 route and demand response service, Title VI responsibilities pertain to identifying communities with limited English proficiency and providing materials and outreach in appropriate languages.

For reference go to MnDOT's Web site <https://www.dot.state.mn.us/civilrights/titlevi.html>

ADA

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 is designed to prohibit discrimination based on disability. In terms of FTA and the provision of transit service, the ADA is structured to ensure

⁸ <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/527/581/>

⁹ <https://www.dhs.state.mn.us/olmstead/>

¹⁰ https://www.transit.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/docs/FTA_Title_VI_FINAL.pdf

equal opportunity and access for persons with disabilities.¹¹ 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 route or demand response, most service-related requirements (i.e. complementary paratransit service associated with fixed route service) are inherently met by mode. 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 list 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 given to persons with disabilities or higher levels of service is a local decision

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 route service:

Route deviation policies, including distance and availability, must be advertised

Establish a reasonable service area in which deviations are permitted (e.g. $\frac{3}{4}$ 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)

¹¹ https://www.transit.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/docs/Final_FTA_ADA_Circular_C_4710.1.pdf

Agency

MnDOT is responsible for making sure each provider (sub recipient) complies with FTA Section 5311 requirements. MnDOT also has additional requirements to support the transit service providers.

- Data Tracking
 - Service data for National Transit Database (NTD)
 - Monthly and annually
 - By mode
- Grant management
- Fleet inventory / Facility 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
 - Others (at the discretion of PLT)
 - Service hours per capita, advance reservation time, and trip cancellations

MnDOT reports annual NTD statistics and also created and maintains the Transit Asset Management (TAM) Plan for all FTA Section 5311 transit service providers, which can be found here: <http://www.dot.state.mn.us/transit/reports/transit-report/pdf/OTAT%20TAM%20Plan%2010-1-18.pdf>.

Summary of Fiscally Constrained, Near-Term Service Recommendations

Community Profile Implications

As compared to the state as a whole, and to the rest of southeastern Minnesota, the PLT service area has a larger proportion of older adults, low-income individuals, and individuals with a disability. These groups are typically dependent on transit to a greater degree than the general public. Both Martin County and Faribault County have concentrated regions of high transit dependency and low economic health. Within Faribault County, the southeast and northwest corners of the county are especially burdened. In particular, the small towns of Walters, Kiester, Bricelyn, Winnebago, and Delavan have high transit dependency. In Martin County, Ceylon has the highest transit dependency. Blue Earth and Fairmont also have high dependency, but are currently better served, with intercounty connections between them.

Since the Walmart in Blue Earth recently closed, more residents will need to travel to the Walmart in Fairmont, across county lines, for similar shopping opportunities. This store closure also reflects a general decline in population throughout much of the PLT service area, which will exacerbate the challenges of serving a low-density area.

Even the areas of Martin and Faribault County that can support fixed-route transit are on the relatively low end of viable transit demand; the Blue Earth and Fairmont routes serve fewer than 3.3 passengers per hour.

Service Recommendations

Service recommendations for PLT include enhanced demand-response and route-deviation services. These changes are intended to result in higher levels of service, including faster response times, for parts of the two counties; they may also improve operational efficiency.

Extend Saturday Buccaneer Service to Winnebago and Elmore

There have been requests to connect Winnebago, Elmore, and Blue Earth on Saturdays for shopping trips. The existing Saturday Buccaneer demand response service serves only Blue Earth, but could be extended to include Winnebago and Elmore at no additional cost. The service would still be able to meet expected demand.

Recommendation: Extend Saturday Buccaneer service to include Winnebago and Elmore.

Limit Length of Demand Response Trips in Faribault County

In Faribault County outside of Blue Earth, demand response service is less productive, averaging only 0.99 passenger per hour. This is the portion of the PLT service area which has the lowest density. The GMTIP targets 3 passengers per hour for Dial-A-Ride service.

Most demand response trips on the Purple and Grey services already travel only within the eastern or western halves of Faribault County. However, occasionally a trip will be requested for a longer distance, and fulfilling these requests can mean that other trips are significantly delayed or denied. The low density and great distances in Faribault County mean that a reasonable policy would be to restrict each demand response service to a zone which encompasses one half of the county. A transfer point could be established if needed, for those few passengers who need to travel across zones.

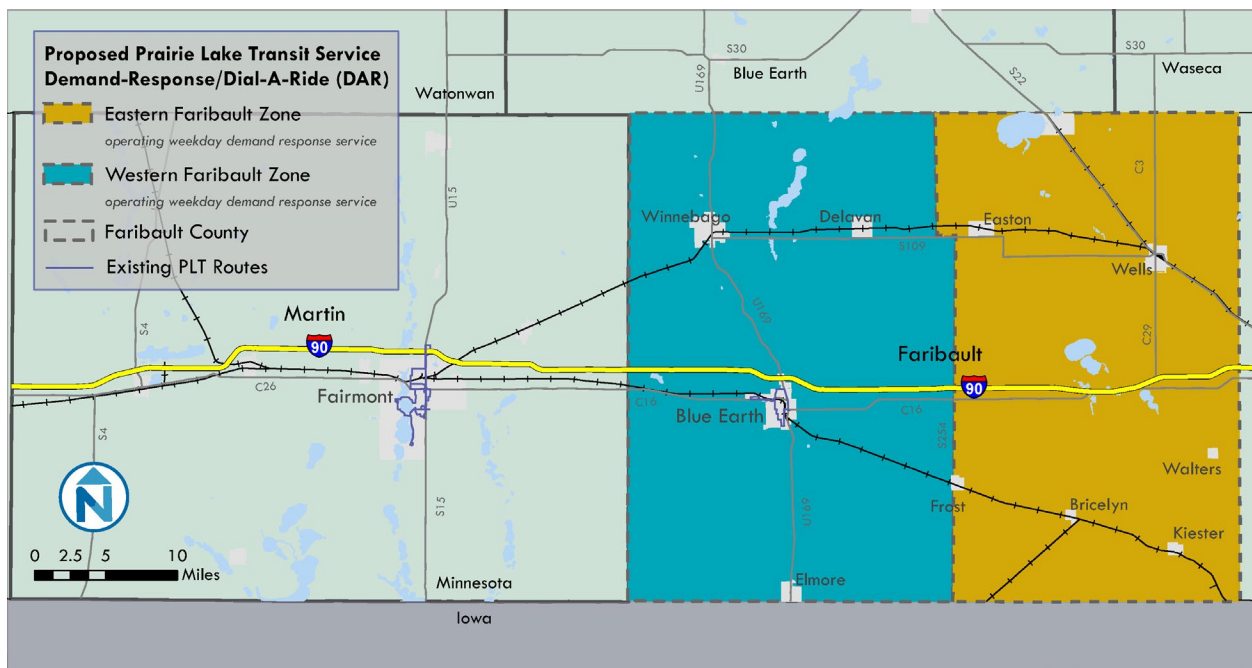
Based on travel patterns from PLT data, the following zones are recommended:

Purple DAR Service: all parts of Faribault County east of State Routes 17 and 254.

Grey DAR Service: all parts of Faribault County west of State Routes 17 and 254.

Martin County would continue to allow trips throughout the county, due to higher ridership, more vehicles available, and more dispersed travel patterns

Figure 36 Proposed Dial-A-Ride Service



Recommendation: Establish Two Demand Response Zones for Faribault County.

Implement Regional Service between Fairmont and Mankato

Demand for service to the larger city of Mankato – for access to shopping, groceries, and other specialized medical and human services – is high. Within the PLT service area, there is a comparative lack of retail opportunities and medical options. Further, there is a larger and more diverse population of medical specialists available in Mankato to provide needed consults.

Operating service two days per week (on Mondays and Wednesdays) from Fairmont for three round trips per day would allow residents to schedule appointments with confidence. Typically close to 150 Fairmont residents commute to Mankato daily for employment; another 100 commute from other municipalities in Martin County.¹² Making intermediary stops in Truman, Madelia, and/or Lake Crystal, where 25, more than 100, and almost 400 people commute into Mankato respectively may provide vital service and better connect these towns outside of the county as well (This would require collaboration with Watonwan County). Although service on only two days a week may not help most commuters, the travel for employment is an indicator of Mankato’s status as a regional activity center.

The Monday/Thursday trips between Blue Earth and Albert Lea on the Purple route has not generated the ridership for service to continue in its current form without changes. Throughout 2016, the Purple Route served an average of 0.99 passengers per hour, lower than all other PLT services besides Faribault demand response trips outside of Blue Earth and the Friday evening and Saturday Buccaneer Route. When Purple Route buses serve Albert Lea, no other destinations can be served during the day, due to the distances involved. It is recommended that service to Albert Lea be provided on Fridays only. Once the Mankato service begins on Mondays and Wednesdays, the Albert Lea service can continue to be provided on Fridays without increasing the fleet size or impacting other Purple Route demand response service.

¹² 2015 LEHD Origin-Destination Employment Statistics for Mankato city, MN

Figure 37 Proposed Service to Mankato



Recommendation: Add service on Mondays and Wednesdays only, 3 scheduled round trips between Fairmont and Mankato, with intermediate stops. Continue existing service to Albert Lea on Fridays only.

Add Evening and Weekend Service in Fairmont

The Cardinal demand response service within Fairmont has been successful on Friday evenings and all day Saturday. There have been requests for more evening and weekend service, and the restaurants and other activity in Fairmont should provide enough demand for additional service. Extending the hours of Cardinal service first to Monday-Thursday evenings from 6-10PM, and then to Sundays from 9AM-4PM, is recommended. The weekday service expansion is currently planned for calendar year 2020.

Recommendation: Operate demand-response service in Fairmont on Sunday from 9AM-4PM, and on Monday-Thursday evenings from 6-10PM, similar to Saturday operation.

Increased partnerships and marketing

Like many rural transit agencies, PLT faces challenges in building awareness of its service offerings across the two-county service area. Lack of awareness among some residents may result in lower ridership for the deviated route buses in Blue Earth and Fairmont and between Blue Earth and Albert Lea, as well as demand response service throughout the service area.

Drafting and printing an updated version of Rider Guides has recently been completed. Uploading the documents to the PLT website will also make rider information more easily obtained. For the proposed new service to Mankato, television advertisements out of Mankato will be important to build awareness of the route and continue to improve rider perception of PLT services.

Develop and Track Service Standard Metrics

Service guidelines can provide an objective and consistent basis upon which to track service performance and make service decisions. Service guidelines measure and evaluate operational performance, and support decisions about where and when service should be added, maintained, or reduced. Since resources are always limited, having quantitative criteria can help with prioritizing the most effective use of those resources. Ideally, service guidelines help to establish a network that best meets travel needs, while maintaining reasonable productivity and efficiency.

On-Time Performance (Deviated Route)

For scheduled deviated route service, customers rely on the bus arriving and departing close to the posted times on route schedules. However, unforeseen events, including traffic or weather, or unexpected route deviations can affect performance. Service standards can address this balance; adherence to established time points along each deviated route should be tracked. For PLT this might be appropriate at each scheduled stop, since there are limited stops. A window for arriving on time should be established – typically this might be from 1 minute early up to 7 minutes late. PLT service standards for reservations at deviated stops allow for a ± 5 -minute pickup/drop-off window. GMTIP specifies that no bus shall depart a formal time point before the time published in a schedule. Finally, a goal for percentage of time points for which the bus arrives on time should be created. GMTIP targets a 90% on-time performance at time points on deviated routes.

Missed Trips (Demand Response)

In Martin and Faribault Counties, the goal for PLT should be zero missed trips on any given day for demand-response trips scheduled in advance. Missed trips are demand response trips that are scheduled to be served but were not served due to the provider, driver error, or another adverse operational circumstance. There are three types of instances that would be classified as a missed trip:

1. A PLT vehicle never arrives at the designated pick-up location.
2. The vehicle does arrive at the designated pick-up location, but after the confirmed pick-up window and the customer is not present or cancels-at-door. If the vehicle arrives after the pick-

up window and the customer agrees to still make the trip, it is considered a late trip and not a missed trip.

3. The vehicle does arrive at the designated pick-up location earlier than the end of the pick-up window, and the driver departs before waiting the required number of minutes or before the beginning of the pick-up window.

Pick-up windows for PLT buses are designated at ± 15 minutes from the negotiated pick-up time at the time of scheduling, surpassing the ± 45 -minute rural standard required in the GMTIP.

Late Trips (Demand Response)

On-time performance of PLT vehicles allows riders to plan their daily lives. Late trips occur under two scenarios:

1. For pick-ups, when the on-demand vehicle arrives after the pick-up window and the customer still completes the trip.
2. For drop-offs, if the vehicle drops off the customer after the scheduled drop-off window or stated appointment time agreed upon during scheduling.

Late trips are a function of the pick-up window. If the pick-up window is 45 minutes, then the agency should have fewer than 5% of trips be late. If the pick-up window is narrowed, more late trips should be expected. Conversely if the window is lengthened fewer late trips should occur.

Late Cancellations (Demand Response)

Late cancellations occur when a customer cancels a trip on the same day as the trip, and does so within a specified time before the pick-up window. Cancellations for a demand response trip or a pick up for the deviated routes in Fairmont and Blue Earth must occur at least two hours prior to the reservation. Routine “no show” riders face sanctions. After three “no shows” without cancellation from a single passenger, PLT suspends that passenger for one week. Routine “no show” offenders may be billed for trips not taken after a reservation. PLT should target that fewer than 2% of all PLT trips incur late cancellations.

Trip Denials

Currently, PLT manually tracks trip denials for its route deviation requests and demand response service. Reasons for denials could include any of the following: not enough capacity on a particular bus, failure to negotiate a workable time, pick-up or drop-off location outside of the service area, timing outside of service hours, or another. If trip requests can be completed the next day, or a round-trip later, this still counts as a trip denial. Going forward, PLT should document with driver logs and dispatch software when requests cannot be completed on deviated routes and on demand response routes, with attention toward monthly, quarterly, or annual trends.

Currently, PLT asks that trip requests be made at least 24 hours in advance, although dispatchers can sometimes accommodate same-day requests. Similarly, deviated route pick up requests may be made

the day of, but are not guaranteed. The GMTIP sets a target that deviated route requests and requests for Dial-A-Ride service in Blue Earth and Fairmont be accommodated if made two hours in advance.

Long-Term Service Recommendations

Expand Service Hours

Stakeholders inquired about demand for expanded service on nights and weekends. The recommendations for the 5-year horizon through 2025 incorporate additional service in Fairmont, and some Saturday service to Winnebago and Elmore. However, in the longer term, expanded hours throughout the PLT service area would make the system more useful, especially for work trips on late shifts or for social events for many residents. Although these evening hours will never be the most productive, the increased span can attract some new ridership.

Opportunities

Using Volunteer Drivers

PLT staff note the challenges of a volunteer driver program, including obtaining insurance, recruiting drivers, and ensuring the safety of passengers. Still, volunteer drivers for demand response trips in outlying towns would help save operating costs and increase farebox recovery.

Becoming Certified to Handle NEMT Trips

Providing Non-Emergency Medical Transportation might increase the productivity and efficiency of the PLT system. However, it would increase the training and administrative burden in order to receive reimbursement, and would likely only be worth it if enough NEMT users would choose PLT for their trips. Nonetheless, this may warrant further discussion with DHS.

Purchase Bus Garage in Martin County

Purchasing the Fairmont bus garage from the County will secure the existing capacity to store nine transit vehicles and will help improve staff morale by providing formal office space for administrative functions.

Update: This transfer of assets was completed in 2019.

Streamline State Assistance

MnDOT will continue to support the Regional Transportation Coordination Council (RTCC) which seeks to better coordinate regional transportation providers, including rural providers like PLT. In

addition, streamlining how MnDOT reimburses PLT for service will avoid future cash flow emergencies when PLT runs out of operating funds prior to being reimbursed.

Risks and Challenges

Low Density Service Area

The service area is extremely challenging due to low density, particularly in Faribault County. Martin County has a total population of 19,850 residents according to the 2017 US Census Bureau estimate; Faribault County has 13,784 residents. Serving Martin County at a population density of 27 people per square mile, and Faribault County at 19 people per square mile, will always be a struggle, especially as many residents are spread across small towns of less than 1,000 residents. Fairmont is the largest town, by far, with just over 10,000 residents, making up more than half of all county residents.

PLT's service area population density limits the passenger efficiency of demand response routes. It also impacts the total mileage of transit vehicles, shortening their lifespan and increasing fuel and maintenance costs. Unfortunately, population is also declining in much of the PLT service area.

Continued Consolidation Hurdles

PLT is still maturing as an organization since being established as a merged transit agency in 2016. Some transitional issues, such as taking control of the bus garage, are still ongoing, but overall the organization seems to be stabilizing and ridership is increasing. Creative solutions will be needed.

Cooperation with Other Transit Agencies

As a recently-merged system, PLT's highest priority is to develop and sustain transit options within its core service areas. However, given the potential customer interaction with other nearby transit agencies, PLT should also work to develop effective communication and coordination efforts with other transit operators, including True Transit (Nicollet, Blue Earth, and Le Sueur counties) and the City of Mankato. In specific cases, there may also be opportunities for operational partnerships.

Chapter 11. Increasing Transit Use

Marketing

This chapter discusses marketing strategies to increase ridership and highlight the importance of transit to the communities served by Prairie Lakes Transit.

Greater Minnesota Transit Investment Plan

One of the goals of the Greater Minnesota Transit Investment Plan was to increase transit usage across the transportation network. The plan encourages coordinated efforts among agencies and MnDOT to promote service and highlight the role and importance of transit in the local communities. Agencies are to invest in marketing campaigns, technology, smartphone applications, provide commuter services, and develop partnerships with private providers (taxis and health care) to meet customer needs.

Marketing materials should use appropriate, accessible and easy to understand information for their websites and all written materials. The materials should be distributed using platforms such as smartphone travel apps, social media, and print materials. Travel training and outreach efforts should be used to promote the service, but also to inform the public about fare changes, large capital projects and service planning changes. For potential customers struggling with the English language, multi-lingual marketing materials should be provided. Utilizing local cultural community groups to help translate and distribute materials will build bridges and will make the community more aware of the service.

Future Marketing Strategies

Bulk Sale of Transit Passes

Transit agencies can create agreements with local institutions and employers to provide free transit service to an affiliated group in exchange for funding.

Branding

Branding brings together all the different functions of Prairie Lakes Transit, such as Deviated Route or Demand Response services, under one recognizable name. The agency can use branding to both attract new riders and build a positive relationship with current riders. A welcoming and appealing brand, whether seen on the agency's website, wayfinding signs, or social media, creates a memorable first impression and can leave a lasting impact.

PLT created a unified brand when the consolidated agency was created, and this helps riders easily identify vehicles and promotional materials. Further promotion of the brand will help riders to make connections between routes and providers.

Education and Outreach

Education and outreach is a strategic approach to connect with the community and inform them about their transit options. Often, riding public transit for the first time can be confusing, especially in rural areas without fixed routes or bus stops. Senior citizens, disabled riders, or families with young children might face additional concerns or barriers to using transit services. Transit agencies wanting to increase ridership across the system may conduct more widespread education and outreach while promotions of a specific service or route may be more focused in particular neighborhoods. Different outreach methods can be used to reach a variety of communities, including hosting information booths at local events, social media posts, public meetings, or travel training programs.

These education and outreach strategies are not something that a transit agency should do once but rather they should be implemented continuously. The type of ridership gain from education and outreach can vary depending upon how it is conducted and how many people are reached. Targeted campaigns to a specific group of people have been shown to be effective at attracting new riders. This information should include routes and schedules, fares, and relevant policies, and should be disseminated to employers, churches, social services organizations, medical facilities, educational institutions, and other partners who can help raise awareness about transit options. In many cases, directing people to a website is appropriate, as long as the website is easy to use and kept up-to-date.

Partnerships

An effective way to increase ridership is to partner with employers and institutions. Some employers, such as the Mayo Clinic in Fairmont or the Walmart, may be interested in promoting/subsidizing PLT in order to help with recruiting and retaining employees.

Online Presence and Social Media

Having a user-friendly, easily-navigable website is important to reach potential riders and to keep current riders updated. A “how-to” guide for riding the bus posted on the website can help residents with their first time using the system.

Many transit agencies maintain an effective social media presence to interact with customers, announce updates and service changes, and advertise to the local community. PLT has a Facebook page that posts several times per week and responds quickly to comments from local residents. It is recommended that PLT continue to update and expand its social media presence to meet customers’ expectations, including by adding content and adjusting to future social media platforms as needed.

Action Plan

Summary of Recommendations by Category

Service

The following service changes are recommended:

- Split Faribault County into two separate zones for demand response service
- Extend Saturday demand response service to Winnebago and Elmore
- Add regional service between Fairmont and Mankato
- Expand the hours of demand response service in Fairmont to more weeknights and Sunday

Staffing

Three new part-time drivers will be needed to implement the service recommendations. No other staffing changes are recommended.

Facilities/Fleet

The following are recommended for facilities and fleet:

- Finalize the transfer to PLT of the Fairmont Bus Facility
- Build out the Fairmont facility, and outfit with furniture and equipment; also upgrade communications systems, improve drainage, and provide on-site parking
- Provide climate-controlled (heated) indoor vehicle storage at the Blue Earth facility
- Replace one-to-two buses per year, and procure one additional vehicle for the Mankato service
- Obtain a tractor with snow blower for grounds keeping and other tasks

Technology

Upgrade the reservations/scheduling/dispatch software to provide customer real-time information, and integrate with phone apps. This could be implemented as part of a statewide procurement, either with RouteMatch or another software provider.

Marketing

Continue existing marketing efforts, and evolve tactics based on previous results.

Implementation

Service changes would be implemented as follows:

- In 2020, implement Faribault County demand response zones, and extend Saturday service to Winnebago and Elmore
- In 2020, add Fairmont demand response service on Monday through Thursday evenings
- In 2022, launch service between Fairmont and Mankato
- In 2024, add Sunday demand response service in Fairmont

Plan Approval

The Prairie Lakes Transit Five-Year Transit System Plan recommends future service improvements that reflect local priorities and advance MnDOT’s vision for Greater Minnesota transit. As an indication of local support, the following Prairie Lakes Transit staff member(s) have signed below:

Signature	Name (Print)	Role	Date
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Signature	Name (Print)	Role	Date
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Signature	Name (Print)	Role	Date
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