

Chapter 6

Public Transportation



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6.1 Introduction

This chapter of the Transportation Plan is intended to portray current transit service and operations in the Hamilton Area. Transit operations were examined in the Hamilton Area through the development of “Transit Development Plan (TDP)” updates. The most recent TDP Update was completed for the period of 2003 to 2007 for Ravalli County by LSC Transportation Consultants, Inc. Transit development plans are generally intended to analyze current transit system operations and determine how well the transit systems are meeting the needs of the community. Projecting future growth patterns and future transit needs are also examined in great detail.

Within the Hamilton planning area, the designated rural public transit provider is the BitterRoot Bus, operating under the 5311 grant program administered by Montana Department of Transportation. Another major public provider serving Ravalli County is Missoula Ravalli Transportation Management Association (MR TMA) which operates vanpool and carpool programs. Three other public transit providers having Public Service Commission authority to operate in Ravalli County are the Bitterroot Taxi, the Airport Shuttler, and Medicab. This chapter describes these **five general public transit providers**, as well as a variety of private transit providers serving a specific sector of Hamilton’s populations.

The Montana Department of Transportation requires each transportation service area to have a local Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC). The Ravalli County Transportation Advisory Committee, consisting of local transportation providers and any interested community residents, serves as the local advisory and planning group who reviews and discusses transportation needs and resources for the local Hamilton area.

It is important to recognize that transit service in the community is sometimes the only mode of transportation utilized by citizens. This is especially true for many of the community’s elderly and disabled citizen population. With a generally aging population in Hamilton, the town becomes more transit-dependent. The primary goal of the transit system should be to provide reliable service to its users and make that service available to all members of the public. A secondary goal is to make mass transit work for the community, by reducing parking demand, traffic congestion, and the need for roadway expansion wherever possible.

In 2008, Ravalli County Board of Commissioners applied for a DOT/Federal Transit Administration Grant to conduct public transportation research. The purpose of the grant would be to create a structure for public participation in rural transportation and transit planning. Rural Ravalli County does not have transportation or transit planning occurring in fast-growing rural areas, which are seldom involved in public

transportation planning. Lately ridership is exceeding the existing capacity of fleets. The grant would allow an opportunity for transit coordination between rural counties and metropolitan areas. Overall, the citizen-based community would become actively involved and informed of transportation-related issues, projects, and programs. Recently, the grant application was not approved for the opportunity to pursue public transportation research for Ravalli County.

6.2 BitterRoot Bus

BitterRoot Bus, the rural general public transportation provider, is operated by the Ravalli County Council on Aging and operates under the 5311 grant program administered by Montana Department of Transportation. This service is offered to all people in Ravalli County, operating Monday through Friday between 8:00 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. with fares based on the distance traveled and frequency of stops. A 24-hour advance reservation is required for the “curb to curb” service. The BitterRoot Bus is a Medicaid-approved transportation provider, with direct billing for clients traveling to and from approved medical facilities. Every Tuesday, BitterRoot Bus provides transportation to Missoula for the general public, including the elderly and disabled.

In Fiscal Year (FY) 2009, BitterRoot Bus provided approximately 8,560 passenger-trips, with 15% general public ridership and 85% disabled and seniors. BitterRoot Bus has seen a growth in ridership in recent years. In FY 1998-1999, total ridership was 4,088.

BitterRoot Bus boarding data for FY 2009 was used to analyze trip patterns. Boarding data are also used to analyze the existing ridership and determine which locations in Ravalli County have the greatest transit demand. Recorded activity by location is present in Table 6-1.

Table 6-1
Primary Destination of BitterRoot Bus
Passengers

Locations	FY 2009 (Total)
Riverfront Counseling	544
Missoula Metropolitan Area	248
Marcus Daly Memorial Hospital	131
Albertsons	109
Super 1 Foods	97
Bitterroot Clinic	61

BitterRoot Bus currently has six vehicles for passenger transportation. The vehicle inventory for passenger transit is shown below in Table 6-2. As shown in the table, there are currently capital replacement needs. The vehicles have a vehicle-life based on the Federal Transit Administration Guidelines, ranging from five to seven years, depending on the type of vehicle.

**Table 6-2
BitterRoot Bus Fleet Inventory**

#	Manufacturer	Year	Wheelchair Accessible	Capacity	Condition	Odometer (Dec. 2009)	Replacement Year
1	Ford	1996	Y	5 WC or 12 passenger	Fair	134,027	2003
2	Dodge	1998	N	7 passenger	Fair	171,581	2003
3	Dodge	2001	N	7 passenger	Good	177,694	2006
4	Chevrolet	2003	Y	5 WC or 12 passenger	Good	116,036	2010
5	Dodge	2005	N	7 passenger	Excellent	107,211	2010
6	Dodge	2009	N	7 passenger	Excellent	22,037	2014

As shown in Table 6-2, BitterRoot Bus have kept existing transit vehicles past the FTA vehicle-life expectation due to continuous maintenance of the vehicles, keeping them in good condition.

The office of the BitterRoot Bus is located in the Ravalli County Council on Aging on Old Corvallis Road in Hamilton, with the vehicles housed in the BitterRoot Bus Barn adjacent to the Ravalli County Council on Aging.

6.3 Missoula-Ravalli Transportation Management Association (MR-TMA)

MRTMA was established in the 1990's during the environmental impact statement process for US Highway 93 reconstruction. MRTMA is the Transportation Management Association which operates out of Missoula, due to maintenance requirements, for Missoula, Ravalli, Lake, Mineral and Flathead County. MRTMA operates the I Ride Vanpool program which includes a Guaranteed Ride Home benefit, park-and-ride sites and school outreach program for schools in Missoula and Ravalli County. They also coordinate carpooling, ride matching and a resource center. MRTMA was established to assist citizens and businesses of the five valley region to develop and implement comprehensive transportation alternatives to reduce traffic and parking congestion, protect the environment, provide a transportation option for low-income individuals to seek and retain employment, and improve the overall quality of life of residents of the five counties. The MRTMA

vanpool program has been operating at capacity for the past four years and maintains a waiting list for when more vehicles can be secured.

MRTMA has commuter vanpools from the Bitterroot Valley, Mission Valley, Flathead Valley and along the I-90 corridor. The first park-and-ride lot was established in Hamilton with several more extending along the Highway 93 corridor from Hamilton to the Columbia Falls area. Drivers are volunteer members who ride for free the week if they drive two or more days. MRTMA operates twelve vans to and from Ravalli County, one from Flathead County into Lake County; one traveling within Lake County, one from Lake County to Missoula; one from Alberton to Missoula.

Vanpools originating out of Hamilton leave for Missoula at 6:20AM from Farmer's State Bank; originating out of Stevensville at 6:45AM from Super One Foods; originating out of Florence at 6:35AM; originating out of Missoula leave for Hamilton at 6:45AM from Wal-Mart South; originating out of Alberton leave for Missoula at 6:30 from Petty Creek; originating out of Ronan at 6:20AM for Missoula; originating out of Columbia Falls leave for Polson at 6:50AM. Fares are based on one-way and roundtrip situations with the lowest fare per mile being for those riding the highest number of days and traveling the highest number of miles. Fares range from one day rates to monthly rates.

MRTMA also operates a free carpool matching web site as an option for individuals who are not interested in vanpooling or cannot access the vanpool program due to its capacity issues.

MRTMA has a School Outreach program which offers free transportation presentation to local schools. Presentations are developed to be highly interactive for the students and are age appropriate for K-12. Topics have been developed for science, math, life skills, government and general studies classes.

6.4 Ravalli Services Corporation

Ravalli Services Corporation is a private, nonprofit agency providing transportation support to their clients with developmental disabilities in Ravalli County. The agency contracts with the State of Montana to provide these transportation services. Ravalli Services Corporation operates three residential facilities, which provide transportation services to the residents seven days per week.

6.5 The Discovery Care Center

The Discovery Care Center in Hamilton provides transportation to people four to five days per week year-round. The Care Center transports residents to scheduled medical appointments in Missoula and leisure activities in the valley. The Care Center uses a 1986, 12-passenger conversion van that is wheelchair lift-equipped. The Discovery Care Center budgets approximately \$12,500 per year for transportation costs to provide approximately 350 trips per year. The Care Center registers approximately 25,000 vehicle-miles per year.

6.6 Valley View Estates

Valley View Estates provides a home to help seniors with long-term care. They specialize in a Memory Loss Program and rehabilitation services. Primarily the activity department staff provide transportation using a 1993, 13-passenger Ford Van equipped with a wheelchair lift. Transportation is provided free of charge to residents for medical appointments and special outings. On average, Valley View provides two or three trips per weekday. Service is also available on the weekend and after hours on weekdays. BitterRoot Bus provides transit services to Valley View residents for medical appointments in Missoula.

6.7 Ravalli Head Start

Since 1965, the Ravalli Head Start Program is a child development program that has served low-income children and their families. Head Start and Early Head Start are comprehensive child development programs which serve children from birth to age 5, pregnant women, and their families. The agency programs are child-focused and have the overall goal of increasing the school readiness of young children in low-income families.

The Ravalli Head Start provides transportation using three vehicles; one 1988, 33-passenger, wheelchair-accessible bus and two 1985, 20-passenger buses not equipped with lifts. The agency has three set routes along the Highway 93 corridor between Florence and Darby. The Darby route is 85 miles, the north route measures 100 miles, and the Victor/Corvallis route is approximately 150 miles.

The agency logs approximately 300 miles per day on the vehicles. Currently, there are approximately 100 to 115 children enrolled in the program. Similar to other Head Start programs across the United States, Ravalli Head Start is confronted with the challenge of staging out transportation and looking at coordinating with other existing transportation providers. This is a key opportunity for local private providers or Ravalli County Transit to provide the service within the budget constraints of the Head Start agencies.

Head Start transportation is provided Monday through Thursday, during the school year. One full-time and four part-time employees are involved with the transportation program for the Head Start program. Transportation is provided in the early morning, at noon and from 4:00 to 5:00 p.m. The transportation budget for Head Start is approximately \$33,300. Head Start estimates approximately 20,800 annual trips for the program with approximately 2,500 annual hours.

6.8 Medicab

Medicab (PSC NO. 9199) is licensed to provide non-emergency, wheelchair accessible transportation to healthcare facilities in Flathead, Granite, Lake, Mineral, Missoula, Ravalli, and Sanders and return. Medicab accepts Medicaid approved transportation for Missoula County residents only. For private pay or workers compensation

recipients, Medicab provides transportation from other counties, including Ravalli, to medical facilities in Missoula and return.

6.9 Disabled American Veterans (DAV)

Disabled American Veterans provides free transportation to American veterans to medical appointments in Missoula and Helena. DAV currently operates three vehicles, utilizing volunteer drivers; a 2006 8-passenger Ford E-350, a 2007 8-passenger Ford E-150, and a 2009 3-passenger Ford Explorer. None of the vehicles are wheelchair lift-equipped. A veteran using a wheelchair must be able to independently transfer in and out of the van, and then utilize the wheelchair provided at the medical facility, as DAV will not haul any individual wheelchairs. The DAV has regular scheduled trips to transport veterans to the VA Hospital at Fort Harrison each weekday, Monday through Friday. They are on-call in Ravalli County Monday through Friday for medical appointments in Missoula. Trips to Missoula begin at Safeway in Hamilton, and stops are made upon request to pick up veterans at select parking lots along Highway 93. DAV transports approximately 12 to 15 passengers per week and logs approximately 500 miles per day among the three vehicles.

6.10 Bitterroot Taxi

Bitterroot Taxi (PSC NO. 9469) operates within Ravalli County and also provides service to Missoula. No reservations or advanced notice is required. Bitterroot Taxi operates seven days per week with phones being answered 24 hours/day, seven days/week. Anyone requiring the use of a wheelchair must have the ability to transfer to and from the wheelchair into the vehicle.

6.11 Majestic Bus Service

Majestic Bus Service operates fourteen (14) school buses used strictly for transporting students enrolled in schools within Hamilton School District #3. Majestic vehicles are available in case of a city emergency.

6.12 Airport Shuttler

Airport Shuttler (PSC NO. 9384) provides public transit services from the Missoula International Airport to all points and places in Missoula and a seventy-five (75) mile radius thereof, which includes Ravalli County and the Hamilton area. The Airport Shuttler is strictly an airport transport service and all transportation movements must originate or terminate at the Missoula International Airport.

6.13 Bitterroot-Missoula Rail Line

Fehr & Peers Transportation Consultants recently conducted a transit analysis to address transportation issues on US 93 between Florence and Missoula. Traffic Demand Management (TDM) strategies were analyzed to look at adjusting drivers' travel patterns and means. Several implementation procedures are possible, varying from carpooling to a commuter rail system. Montana Rail Link is a private freight

service provider with limited operation in the Bitterroot Valley. Bitterroot Rail is a community interest group which studies the feasibility of rail transit with a goal of using the Montana Rail Link infrastructure to provide transportation between Missoula and destinations in the south Bitterroot Valley. The current condition of the rail line is fair with no grade-separated crossings or stations along US 93, therefore the system would require upgrades in order for passenger service to take place.

The transportation consultants focused on a comparative analysis of two similar communities who have recently implemented transit systems. The communities included Roaring Fork Valley, Colorado and Albuquerque South Valley, New Mexico. Comparisons analyses between the three communities were made based on population, employment, and ridership for each city. The differences between the factors and studied cities are summarized below.

- Communities outside the major employment center in the Roaring Fork Valley have triple the population and twice the jobs compared to the communities located within the Bitterroot study area, outside the major employment center of Missoula.
- Approximately 50% of the population and 15% of the jobs currently found in the Roaring Fork Valley equates to population and jobs in the study area at 2020.
- Communities outside the major employment center in the Albuquerque South Valley have triple the population and ten times the jobs compared to the communities outside the major employment center in the Bitterroot study area.
- Approximately 65% of the population and 10% of the jobs currently found in the Albuquerque South Valley will be present in the study area in 2020.

The transit system was studied based on the route from Stevensville to Missoula. Stevensville was chosen based on the population density and the likelihood of transit to Missoula. According to the study, the rail commuter service would require complex and costly actions for implementation. Such measures would be a purchase of a service contract and fees agreed with the Montana Rail Link, upgrading the track defined by the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA), installing a signal system, establishing station platforms and ticket vending machines, acquiring passenger trains, and all other operation and maintenance costs. The estimated capital cost for the 29.2-mile commuter rail service is approximately \$124 million, with a suggested implementation of 15 or more years into the future.

6.14 Recommendations

The Transit Development Plan Update prepared by LSC in 2002 specified a variety of actions to be taken in order to meet future transportation needs, which have been

reviewed and updated by the Ravalli County Transportation Advisory Committee. This section includes short and long-term efforts for transportation and transit planning goals.

Short-Term Recommendations

- Continue to expand the Transportation Advisory Committee membership to gain community input and support in transit planning, to include riders, businesses, medical facilities, private transportation providers, local elected public officials, Health and Human Service agencies, and other interested citizens.
- Expand the service area to address transit needs in rural areas.
- Incorporate a universal ride pass program with Mountain Line, MR-TMA, and BitterRoot Bus.
- Improve coordination with other transportation providers. Coordination could decrease costs for individual agencies and provide additional services to transportation dependent individuals.
- Develop a strong public awareness campaign, endorsed and supported by the Transportation Advisory Committee, the City of Hamilton, Ravalli County Board of Commissioners and the major transit providers.
- Fulfill a Mobility Management position to coordinate public transportation.
- Work to improve the status of public transportation at the state level pursuing additional funding opportunities.

Long-Term Recommendations

- Provide comfortable transit facilities, making transit locations attractive with adequate lighting, seating, and weather protection.
- Continue to expand Reverse Commuter Service from Missoula to Ravalli County.
- Continue to expand Highway 93 Commuter Service from Hamilton to Missoula. This will reduce Highway 93 traffic through the Bitterroot Valley and minimize parking demand in Missoula.
- Continue to expand and incorporate outlying communities in transportation use.
- Formalize outreach programs to educate the general public of transit services available.

6.15 References

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