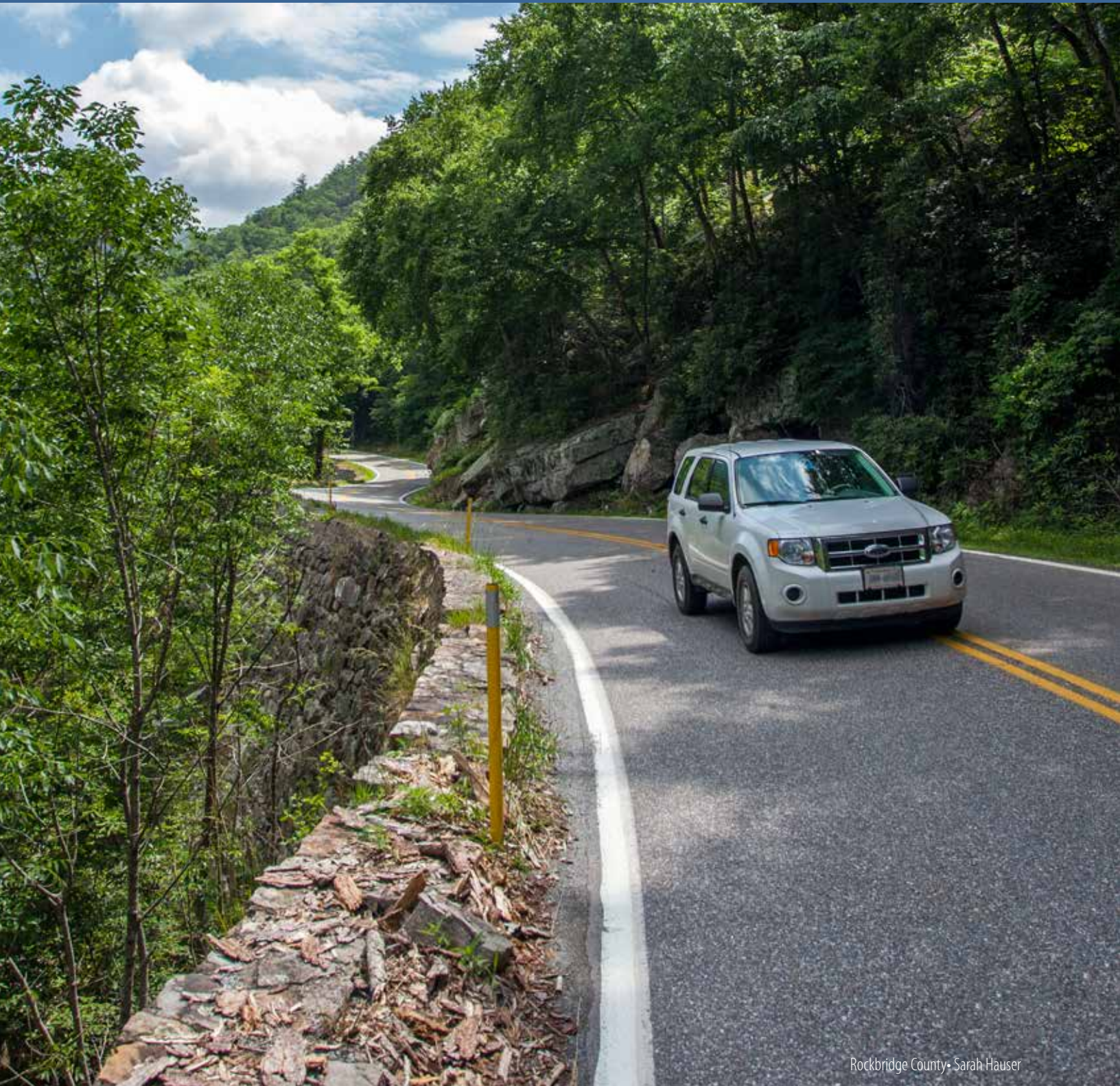


Rural Transportation



Rockbridge County • Sarah Hauser

Rural Transportation

Overview

Rural public transportation systems include demand-response public transportation (dial-a-ride), traditional and deviated fixed route services, vanpool, and reimbursement programs (1). Traditional bus services do not operate on a round-the-clock schedule which is why they are “often supported by demand-response services, or deviated fixed-route systems, where buses leave their regular routes on request” (2). However, in rural areas there is an overall lack of public transportation due to the natural topography and increased distance between private residences and intended destinations resulting in a lack of convenient locations to place commuter stops. “While approximately 20% of the U.S. population lives in rural areas, the federal government only allocates about 11% of transportation grant funding to rural areas” (3). Disproportionate transportation funding challenges the maintenance and operational upkeep of rural transportation systems making them unreliable. For these reasons, rural residents often rely on personal modes of transportation. However, this is not a universal choice due to the higher costs and licensure associated with owning and operating a personal vehicle. According to data from the US Census Bureau American Community Survey, only 2.4% of rural households have no vehicle available, compared to 2.8% of non-rural households.

The transportation infrastructure of a particular community both directly and indirectly influences multiple aspects of health. Perhaps the most obvious influence of transportation on health is the ability and convenience to access goods and services that contribute

to health and well-being such as grocery stores, medical appointments, physical activity, schools, places of employment, and places of worship. Accordingly, access to reliable and safe transportation is correlated with better health outcomes (4).

In addition to fostering a healthy community, well established transportation infrastructure is a critical economic driver. Safer and more convenient transportation options will likely increase the amount of travel into a community by tourists, government officials, and potential business partners. Reliable transportation infrastructure may also increase safety and provide for the efficient distribution of goods and services produced within the region. In 2019, rural communities experienced almost 2.5 times as many traffic fatalities per 100,000 residents as non-rural communities (20.4 compared to 8.3) despite having similar commute times.

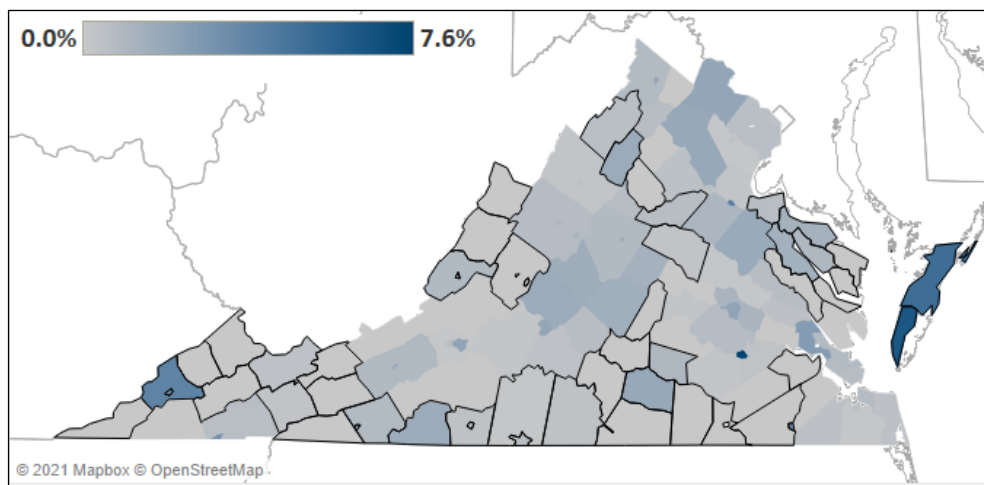
Leading Practices and Approaches

Whenever possible, examples of leading practices and approaches were taken from rural Virginia communities. Otherwise, examples were gathered from localities with comparable demographic characteristics.

The Walsh Center for Rural Health Analysis: Rural Evaluation Brief

Need addressed: Virginia’s rural population faces significant transportation challenges. Extremely low population density paired with long travel distances create an environment lacking in infrastructure that would support rural public transportation (2).

Traffic Fatalities per 1,000 Residents



Source: Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles, 2019

Rural Transportation

Approach: In the spring of 2018, the Walsh Center for Rural Health Analysis produced its Rural Evaluation Brief which listed successful practices from rural transportation program models already in place.

The Walsh Center listed the Public Transportation Model as one way to improve access to transportation. “Public transportation systems provide transit services to the public via bus, rail, or other mode on a regular and continual basis” (2). Not only would the traditional model increase access, but variations could be considered, such as the flex-route transportation system which allows buses to leave routine routes to make other stops when requested. To overcome transportation barriers, the report recommended a variety of programs that would allow services to come directly to, or close to, those in need. Mobile clinics, telehealth, clinics located in schools or workplaces, and home visiting programs were all suggested solutions (2).

The Walsh Center gave suggestions on improving the infrastructure of rural transportation by recommending active transportation models, which includes activities such as walking or biking to a destination. The report showed walking and biking are about as common in rural areas as urban ones. To improve road safety, the Walsh Center recommended lowering speed limits on rural roads and seeking methods to reduce response time of emergency vehicles (2).

Outcome(s): The Walsh Center provides solutions intended to integrate well with a community’s existing programs and resources. Rural communities should implement effective strategies to increase the availability of transportation to accommodate the needs of older adults, low income workers, and others who might lack adequate personal transportation, since access can impact the health of rural communities (2).

Mountain Empire Older Citizens, Inc. (MEOC)

Need addressed: Rural citizens face unique transportation challenges, especially when they are elderly. Southwest Virginia’s twenty-one cities and counties contain a disproportionately high number of people over the age of sixty when compared to the rest of Virginia, resulting in unique difficulties in addressing transportation needs (5).

Approach: Mountain Empire Older Citizens, Inc., was created in 1974 to provide transportation to the elderly living in Scott, Lee, and Wise Counties, and the City of Norton. MEOC directs several other organizations including Mountain Empire Transit which provides its principal mode of transporting older adults.



Wise County • Mountain Empire Older Citizens, Inc. Transit

Due to the small population of this region of Virginia, the transit service does not have a set route and runs by request. Buses are able to accommodate those with canes, walkers, and wheelchairs, and pick up citizens from locations other than a bus stop. Citizens call the number listed on the MEOC site to schedule a trip a full day before they need to be picked up. At seventy-five cents, fares are very low for minors and those over sixty. For all other adults, the fare is one dollar and fifty cents (5).

Outcome(s): MEOC's Mountain Empire Transit has helped countless rural community members in Southwest Virginia reach their destinations. Their by-request operation model and low fares for the older population efficiently serves the needs of part of Southwest Virginia.

JAUNT, Inc. (JAUNT)

Need addressed: It is difficult for citizens in the southwest and central regions of Virginia to find reliable public transportation due to the large distances and low population density.

Approach: Over forty years ago, JAUNT was created to provide transportation service to citizens of six rural counties in Central Virginia, and the city of Charlottesville. The regional public transportation system prides itself on a comprehensive driver training curriculum and excellent customer service. The JAUNT fleet of transport vehicles can average one hundred trips each day in an area of over 2,500 square miles. The system is funded by a combination of bus fares, government funding, and agency payments (6).

Outcome(s): JAUNT helps citizens in rural communities who would not otherwise have access to transportation to make trips to medical appointments, recreational activity sites, to and from work and leisure activities, and other destinations. JAUNT vehicles travel over two million miles per year. According to a 2013 case study, JAUNT served 314,994 riders, 83,394 of whom were considered to be rural residents (6).

Shore Transit and Rideshare (STAR Transit)

Need Addressed: Shore Transit and Rideshare (STAR Transit) serves the Eastern Shore of Virginia, comprised of Accomack and Northampton Counties. The 70-mile long region is part of the Delmarva Peninsula and is geographically removed from the rest of Virginia by the Chesapeake Bay. The 23-mile Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel, part of U.S. Route 13, spans the mouth of the Bay and connects the Eastern Shore to South Hampton Roads and the rest of the state (7).

Approach: In 1996, the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation (DRPT) approved a \$150,000 grant for the Accomack-Northampton Transportation District Commission (ANTDC) to initiate a public transportation system. The contract to operate and provide management services for STAR Transit was awarded to Virginia Regional Transit (VRT) in January, 2010. VRT is “a not-for-profit 501(c)(3) organization specializing in providing high quality, affordable community transportation service solutions” (7).

Outcome(s): Most of the STAR Transit service area has a population of 500 persons or less per square mile. This is lower than the service coverage standard of population densities of at least 2,000 persons per square mile; however, almost all major destinations are served by the transit service. Concentrated transit demand is typically forecast by major trip generators and is then used to determine which destinations both transit-dependent persons and choice riders are demand most. They include high density housing locations such as apartments and assisted living facilities, major employers, medical facilities, educational facilities, shopping malls and plazas, grocery stores, public buildings, and human service agencies. According to Virginia’s DRPT, STAR Transit provided 82,420 one-way passenger trips in 2013 (7).

Opportunities for Growth

1. Allocate federal and state funds to support planning and realization of transportation infrastructure

- There are deficits in available transportation in non-urbanized areas of Virginia. Federal and state funds have not always been allocated in adequate amounts to support the creation of infrastructure and maintenance of rural transportation systems.
- The Rural Transportation Planning (RTP) Program uses federal and state funding to aid in transportation planning in rural areas of the commonwealth. Federal funds are allocated as 80% of total funds so long as the local government can “match” and provide the other 20%.

- This program reviews proposed enhancement projects, executes funding agreements, trains staff involved in the rural transportation planning process, and manages contracts.
- The RTP was approved and certified by the Secretary and Chair of the Central Virginia Planning District Commission in 2020. It has created another proposal for the next fiscal year which is awaiting approval (8).

2. Invest in transportation infrastructure that prioritizes physical activity such as sidewalks, bike lanes, multi-use trails, and public transit.

- Rural communities often lack safe and reliable opportunities for active transportation, such as walking and bicycling.
- Active transportation provides the opportunity for people to be active throughout the day, “walking or bicycling as a form of transportation or walking to public transportation stations, such as bus stops, counts toward meeting the daily physical activity recommendations” (9). This can be especially true for low-income populations that may rely more heavily on public transit.
- Less car dependency can lead to a more active community and a healthier environment. Not only does more active transportation increase physical activity, it also can help reduce the amount of carbon emitted into the atmosphere by single-occupancy vehicles (10).



Roanoke • Virginia Tourism

Rural Transportation

3. Provide funding and technological assistance for non-emergency transportation programs to expand access to employment, medical appointments, necessary errands, and community activity.

- Transportation programs provide rural residents who do not otherwise have access to transportation with the ability to participate in essential travel.
- The Transportation Reimbursement Incentive Program (TRIP) in Riverside County, California, is a “mileage reimbursement transportation service that complements public transportation by encouraging volunteer friends and neighbors to transport older adults and people with disabilities to access medical services and for other purposes where no transit service exists or when the individual is... unable to use public transportation for other reasons” (11).
 - TRIP has been in place for over 20 years, providing over 10,000 trips a month, and was originally funded in partnership between the Independent Living Partnership (sponsor), Riverside County Transportation Commission, the Riverside County Office on Aging, foundations, and participating communities (11).

- The program was named “the best volunteer driver model in the nation” by The Beverly Foundation in 2009 and received the 2012 STAR (Senior Transportation Action Response) Award” (11).

4. Apply for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs’ Highly Rural Transportation Grants (HRTG)

- “Highly Rural Transportation Grants (HRTG) is a grant-based program that helps Veterans in highly rural areas travel to VA or VA-authorized health care facilities. This program provides grant funding to Veteran Service Organizations and State Veterans Service Agencies to provide transportation services in eligible counties” (12).
- Highly Rural Transportation Grants (HRTG) provide transportation programs in counties with fewer than seven people per square mile. There is no cost to participate in the program for Veterans who live in an area where HRTG is available.

Rural Transportation



Fairy Stone State Park, Patrick County • VDH SORH Staff

