

EXPLORING TRANSIT FEASIBILITY IN PARK COUNTY, WYOMING

**Identifying Transportation Alternatives
that Nurture Economic Development and Opportunity**

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Like many rural areas and small communities, Park County, Wyoming, is looking for opportunities to address mobility needs that can also encourage economic development. The cost of transportation has important implications for area residents: The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016) indicated that transportation was the second highest expense for a family of four, representing 17.6% of all expenses, and was only behind housing expenses, which represent 31.2% of household expenses. Moreover, commuting in rural counties often involves long distances. For example, many commuters in Park County travel between Powell and Cody, a roundtrip distance of 50 miles, which represents estimated commuting costs for a full-time employee of \$8,250 per year (American Automobile Association, 2016).



In 2015, the County initiated discussions concerning mobility with the region's two leading economic development organizations: Powell Economic Partnership (PEP), Inc. and Forward Cody, Inc. Together, these partners were interested in transportation options that could increase access for employees and clients to workplaces, hospitals, educational institutions, and commercial centers; facilitate access for tourists to the county's scenic, cultural, and recreational opportunities; and improve safety and quality of life for county residents.

In partnership with these three entities, the Western Transportation Institute at Montana State University (WTI) completed a study in 2016 to evaluate the feasibility of a transit system, as well as other transportation options that might provide alternatives to personal vehicles. The three main tasks associated with the feasibility study were to conduct data collection and a literature review, collect public input through stakeholder engagement, and identify additional transportation alternatives and potential funding strategies. This article presents an overview of the study, with a focus on highlights from the study's findings and recommendations.

AREA PROFILE

Park County, Wyoming, with an estimated population of 28,753, is the northwestern most county in the state and the fifth largest county by land area. Cody, Powell, and Meeteetse are the three largest communities in the county. Clark, Frannie, Garland, Ralston, and Wapiti are smaller and unincorporated towns in the county.

According to data from the 2014 American

Community Survey (ACS) of the US Census, the major employment sectors of Park County are: Educational Services, Health Care and Social Assistance (21.7%); Retail Trade (13.2%); Arts, Entertainment, Recreation, Accommodation and Food services (13%); and Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting, and Mining (12.7%). Approximately 15,609 or 67% of people over the age of 16 are in the labor force. The county also has a large senior population – more than 18% of residents are 65 years and older.

Currently, most residents rely on a personal vehicle for their transportation needs. Based on ACS data, nearly all households in Park County possess a vehicle. In fact, households without access to a personal vehicle, referred to here as “no-vehicle households,” make up only about 2.5% of all households. Nonetheless, analysis of ACS data on household size and vehicle ownership suggests that more than 1,200 households in the county likely need alternate forms of transportation. Potential riders include young people who are not old enough to drive, students who cannot afford a vehicle, recent college graduates, seniors, people with low incomes, and/or people with a disability. However, very few mobility alternatives currently exist. The Cody Council on Aging, the Powell Senior Center, Heartland Assisted Living, and the Meeteetse Recreation District provide demand response transit services that primarily serve seniors and people with disabilities. The Cody Town Taxi, Cody Shuttle, and Cody Trolley Tours are options that provide private transportation services in Park County.

PUBLIC INPUT

Stakeholders, including large employers and



community organizations such as Northwest College, West Park Hospital, and Y-Text, were engaged in a number of ways including: public meetings, phone interviews, email, and personal meetings. Additionally, stakeholders played a key role in distributing an online public survey designed by the research team to gather input on the need for a public transit system to serve Park County.

The survey generated 450 responses for analysis, with percentages for responses based on the number of people ("N") who responded to the particular question. With regard to existing transportation options, 99.3% of respondents stated that they own a personal vehicle. In response to the question, "What form(s) of transportation do you use on a daily basis? (Check all that apply)," 437 respondents (97.8%, N=447) checked personal motor vehicle, 108 (24.2%) checked walk, 38 (8.5%) checked bicycle, and 8 (1.8%) checked carpool/vanpool. When asked how likely they would be to utilize public transit in Park County, most responded that they were either unlikely or very unlikely to use public transit. However, a large majority (74%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that, "providing public transportation options is important for Park County." Further, 88.6% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that users of the transit system should pay a fare.

To evaluate transportation (modal) options beyond public transportation (transit), the research team also developed a mobility survey. The mobility survey, different from the public survey, was distributed both in-person and via email, in conjunction with stakeholder meetings conducted in April 2016, and 83 responses were received. Respondents were asked about access to a vehicle and if owning a vehicle was a financial burden to them or their family. Most respondents agreed that they have access to a vehicle whenever they need it, with 70% strongly

agreeing. When asked if a temporary loss of vehicle would cause mobility challenges for their household, 63% of respondents generally agreed, with 31% strongly agreeing. The impact of a temporary vehicle loss is further illustrated by the fact that nearly one quarter of respondents (23%) feel strongly that they do not have enough money set aside to cover a \$500 repair to their vehicle.

TRANSPORTATION AND OPTIONS

Initially, this study focused on identifying public transportation services that could enhance economic development and enable workforce sharing between Cody, Powell, and Meeteetse.

As the study progressed, additional transportation options were identified. As a result, the following services were evaluated for their potential to improve mobility in Park County:

- Taxi
- Transportation Network Companies (Uber, Lyft, etc.)
- Ride matching
- Car pool
- Van pool
- Volunteer Driver Programs
- Demand Response Transit
- Fixed Route Transit

The analysis (available in the final report at http://surfc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Park-County-Mobility-Report_Final-05-31-16.pdf) detailed each of these transportation services and highlighted the role each might play in improving mobility for people in Park County.



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Establishing the feasibility of public transportation in Park County requires evaluation and understanding of many factors from potential ridership to public support and opportunities for funding. It is also critical to understand how the success of a system will be measured. In this study, the data collection, public input, and stakeholder input provided valuable insight into all of these factors. Furthermore, it informed the evaluation of a broad range of transportation options, from public transportation services such as fixed route transit, to quasi-public services (e.g. van pools), and private transportation options (e.g. taxis).

The public input demonstrates a desire for expanded transportation options, and broad support for public transportation. Enhanced mobility allows improved customer access to businesses, including healthcare facilities, and allows more potential employees access to jobs, both of which support economic development. However, stakeholders identified key feasibility challenges. While they express support for the concept of supporting economic development through increased transportation options, they note that the County and its residents are generally tax averse and have expressed opposition to using sales

taxes to support a transit system. The stakeholders indicated that the majority of the funding for any new services should come from private sources, but added that the county might consider contributing if the transit system proves to be feasible and well used.

Based on all of these considerations, the study concluded that currently there is insufficient support to implement a public transportation system with fixed route transit in Park County. Instead, the study proposed the following short-term recommendations:

- Establish a permanent Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC).
- Expand the existing demand response transit system.
- Work with major employers and other stakeholders to establish ride matching services, including car pool and van pool programs.

A permanent Transportation Advisory Committee will leverage existing momentum and stakeholder engagement to continue mobility improvement efforts. Expansion of the existing demand response system will increase options for residents who lack transportation to attend to their critical needs. Establishing ride matching, car pool and van pool programs is an excellent first step to creating more robust transportation options, and will provide opportunities for continued dialogue about innovative ways to meet the mobility needs of Park County residents, and enhance the economic development in the area.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors thank the sponsors and all the stakeholders who contributed to this project, in particular, Christine Bekes of the Powell Economic Partnership and James Klessens of Forward Cody.

