

Eau Claire County

Rural Transportation Project

January 2008



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I. Issues, Needs and Opportunities

OVERVIEW

Providing a balanced system of transit services, meeting as many customer needs as possible while operating within the very real constraints of budget and geography is a challenge all transit systems face. Offering an adequate system of transportation options for all people, but especially the elderly and disabled, is a critical step to ensure that these populations have access to basic human services and can maintain an adequate quality of life. Recognizing this need, Eau Claire County undertook a study to comprehensively address the transit and transportation needs of the elderly and disabled. See Figure 1 for a depiction of Eau Claire County in relation to the state of Wisconsin.

This study focuses on rural Eau Claire County and reviews the current transportation options, defines unmet transportation needs and suggests coordinated transportation options. This Technical Memorandum addresses demographic trends and directions and outlines transportation needs for the county.

TRENDS AND DIRECTIONS

Most studies of transportation needs begin with a snapshot examination of demographic trends and directions. Demographics are an important tool for understanding the transportation needs of a community. Knowing where people live and who they are helps paint a picture of where they might be going and what needs they might have.

General Population Trends

Eau Claire County is an urbanizing county located in Western Wisconsin with a current (2006) population of 94,741 (US Census Bureau). This population is spread across approximately 645 square miles. The City of Eau Claire, with a 2005 population of 62,659 (Wisconsin Demographics Services Center) is the County's largest urban area. Eau Claire County is also home to the cities of Altoona and Augusta and the villages of Fairchild and Fall Creek. According to the 2000 Census a total of 71,826 persons (77 percent) lived in urban areas with 21,316 (23 percent) living in rural areas. Little is expected to change by 2020 with the majority of the county's population living in the urban areas of Eau Claire, Altoona and Augusta. By the year 2020, 78,860 people will be living in those communities (see Table 1). The largest increase is expected to occur in the City of Eau Claire.

Overall, Eau Claire County's population is expected to steadily increase from a 2000 total population of 93,142 to a projected population in 2030 of 117,253, representing an approximate growth of 8,000 persons every ten years (see Table 2).



PROJECT LOCATION

EAU CLAIRE COUNTY RURAL TRANSPORTATION STUDY
 Eau Claire County

Figure 1

**Table 1
Urban/Rural Projected Population Growth (2000 to 2020)**

	2000	2005	2010	2020	2000-2020 % Change
Altoona, Augusta, Eau Claire	67,952	71,176	73,908	78,860	11%
Fairchild, Fall Creek	1,800	1,860	1,909	1,996	7%
Remainder of County	23,390	24,643	25,763	27,818	13%
Eau Claire County	93,142	97,679	101,580	108,674	10%

Source: Wisconsin Demographics Services Center

**Table 2
Eau Claire County Population (2000 to 2030)**

2000 Population	93,142
2010 Projected Population	101,580
2020 Projected Population	108,674
2030 Projected Population	117,253

Source: Wisconsin Demographics Services Center

Transit Dependent Populations

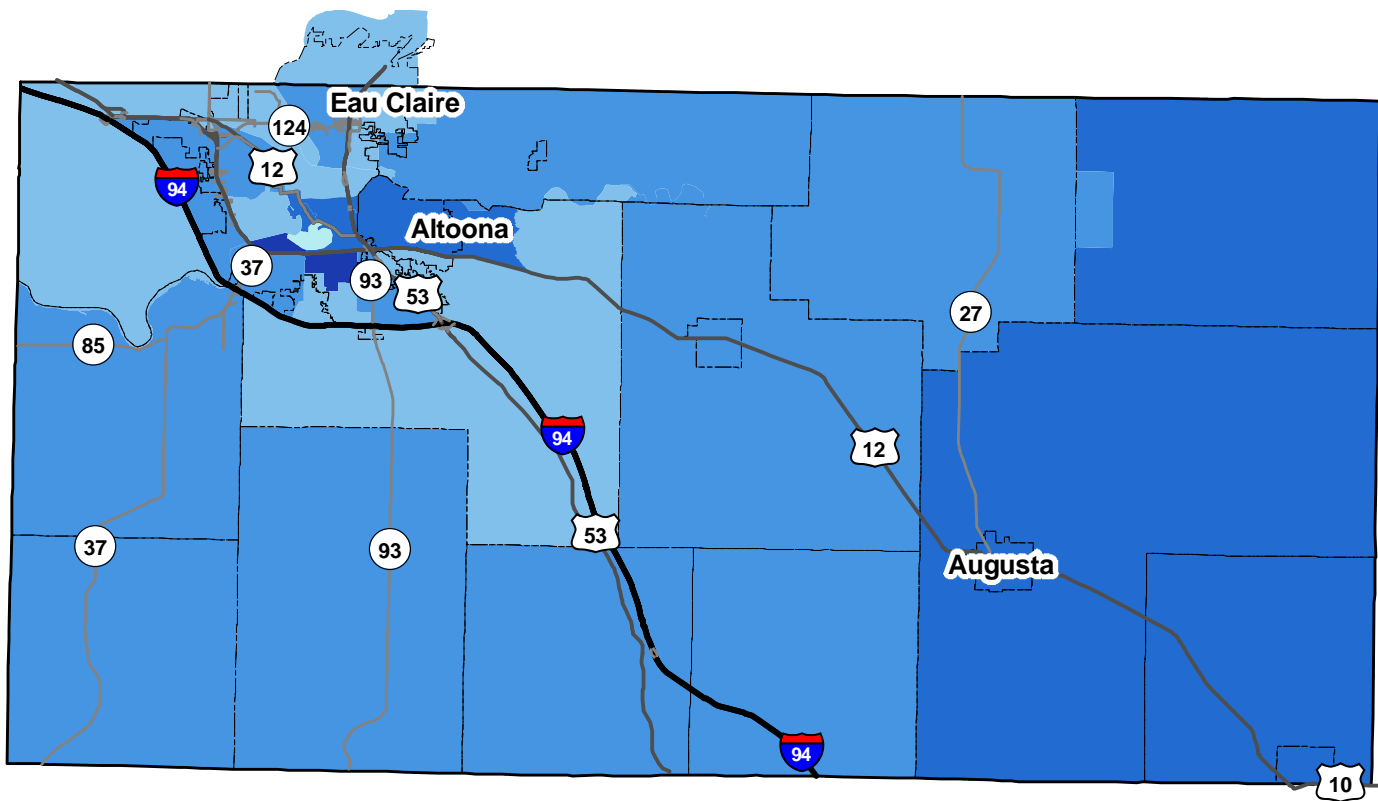
Transit dependent populations often consist of low-income persons, the elderly, the disabled and others who, for one reason or another, do not have reliable access to an automobile.

Another national trend reflected in Eau Claire County's demographic statistics is an expected increase in the older population. In 2000, approximately 20 percent of the County's population was 55 and older; by the year 2020, 29 percent of the County's population will be age 55 or older with 7 percent of its residents aged 75 or older. By the year 2030, the percentage of those aged 75 and older is expected to rise to 10 percent (Table 3). This trend also affects the surrounding counties with all seeing a rise in the percentage of the population that is 55 or 65 and older, some seeing more than a 10 percentage point increase in the aging population between 2000 and 2030. Figure 2 shows the distribution of the aging population in the county by Census Tract.

**Table 3
Eau Claire County Population Growth by Age (55 and older)**

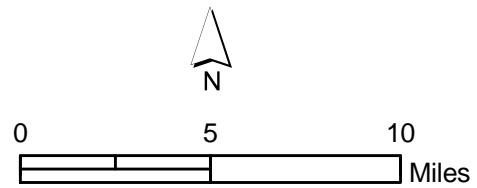
Percent of Population	2000	2010	2020	2030
55 and Older	20%	24%	29%	30%
65 and Older	12%	13%	17%	20%
75 and Older	6%	6%	7%	10%

Source: Wisconsin Demographics Services Center



Legend

- Less than 5 percent
- 5 percent to less than 10 percent
- 10 percent to less than 15 percent
- 15 percent to 20 percent
- Greater than 20 percent



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Figure 2

Two other groups of likely transit dependent populations are those living below the federal poverty level and those with a disability. Between 1990 and 2000 the number of persons living below the poverty level in the County decreased from 15 percent to 11 percent. In 2006, that percentage was estimated to have increased just 1 percent to 12 percent (US Census Bureau). Figure 3 shows the distribution of the population living below the poverty level, as defined by the US Census Bureau, in the county, by Census Tract. This is similar to statewide statistics. The percentage of the population below the poverty level was 11 percent statewide in 2006. Eau Claire County's population below the poverty level is higher than many Wisconsin counties of the same size (population of 65,000 or greater) according to the US Census Bureau, but lower than those counties with significant central cities such as Madison and Milwaukee.

According to the US Census Bureau, 10 percent of residents in Eau Claire County reported having some type of disability in 2006. This is on par with other counties of the same size (population of 65,000 or greater). Figure 4 shows the distribution of the disabled population aged five and older in the county by Census Tract. This population may require ADA-mandated transportation services.

As the population ages, Eau Claire County is likely to require significant transportation services and resources. Given the aging population and the percentage of people reporting disabilities in Eau Claire County, it is clear that reliable public and human services transportation is needed throughout the county.

Current Transportation Services

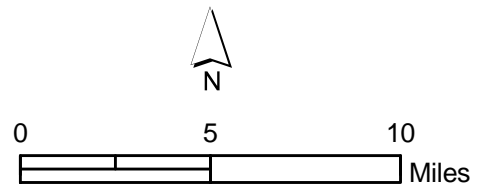
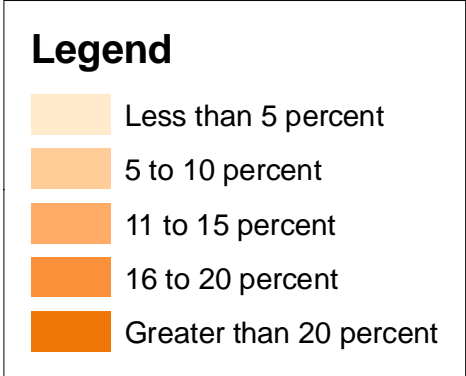
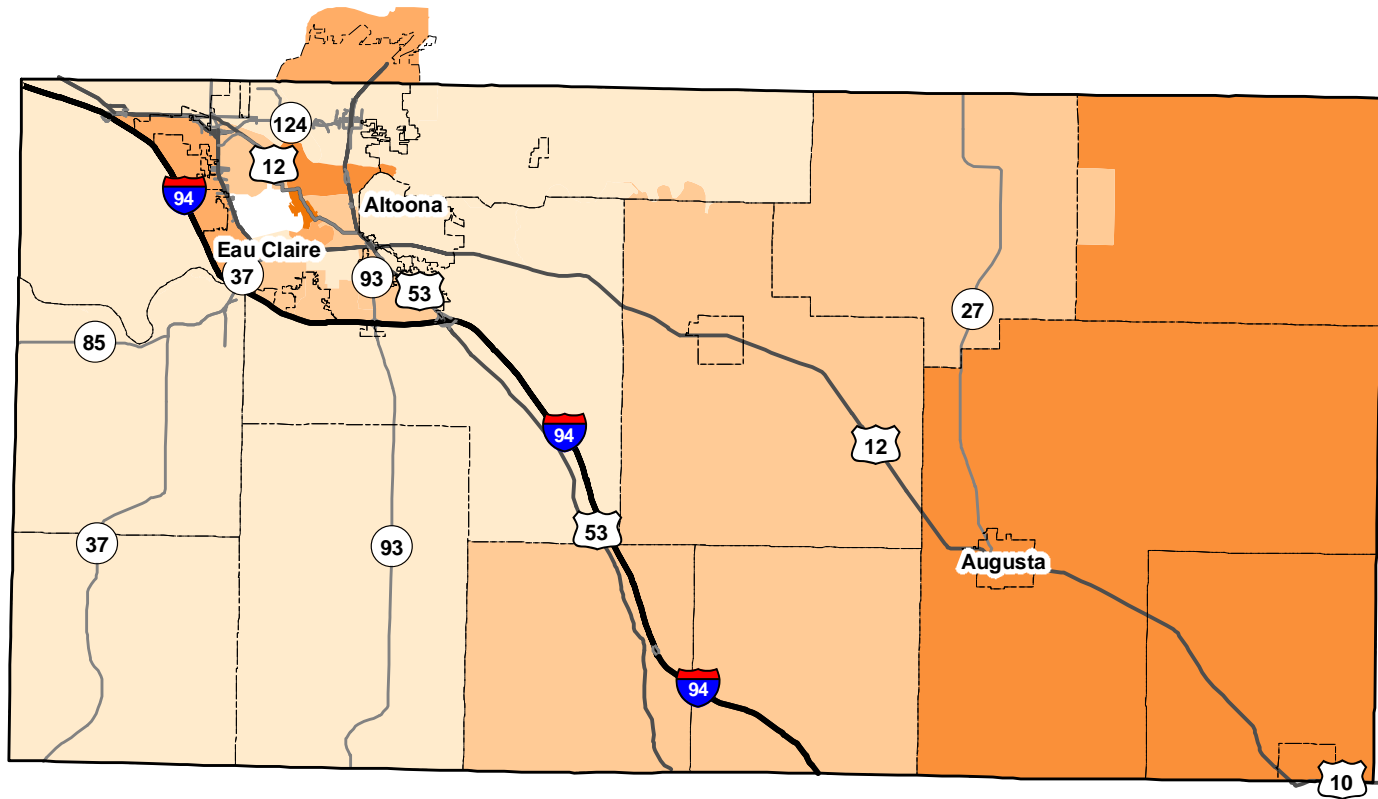
Eau Claire County is served by transportation options ranging from Eau Claire Transit, a traditional urban public transit system with large buses operating on fixed routes, to volunteer, faith-based organizations that serve individuals by providing rides in private automobiles.

Eau Claire Transit

Eau Claire Transit (ECT) is an operating department of the City of Eau Claire. ECT directly operates regular route public transit service and contracts for Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and general paratransit services within the city. The public transit service consists of city-owned buses operating on a fixed route basis in the cities of Eau Claire and Altoona. This service was initially established in 1975.

There are 11 routes serving the two communities. The service operates Monday through Friday from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. in Eau Claire and from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. in Altoona. On Saturdays, the service operates in both communities from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Eau Claire Transit has a fleet of 22 buses, six of which are 40-foot, 40-passenger buses. The remainder are 30-foot, 25-passenger buses. All buses in the fleet are low-floor accessible vehicles. Eau Claire Transit provides nearly 1 million rides a year.

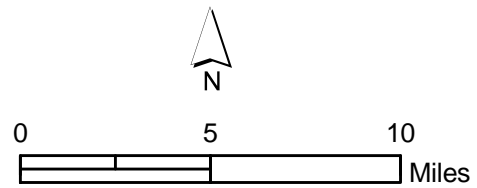
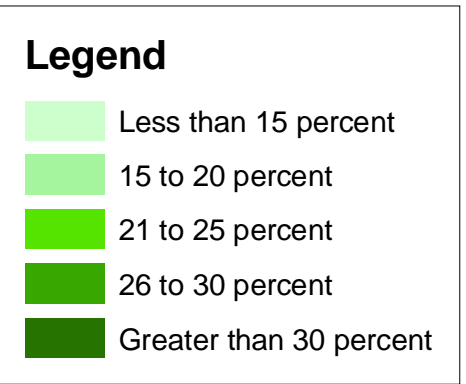
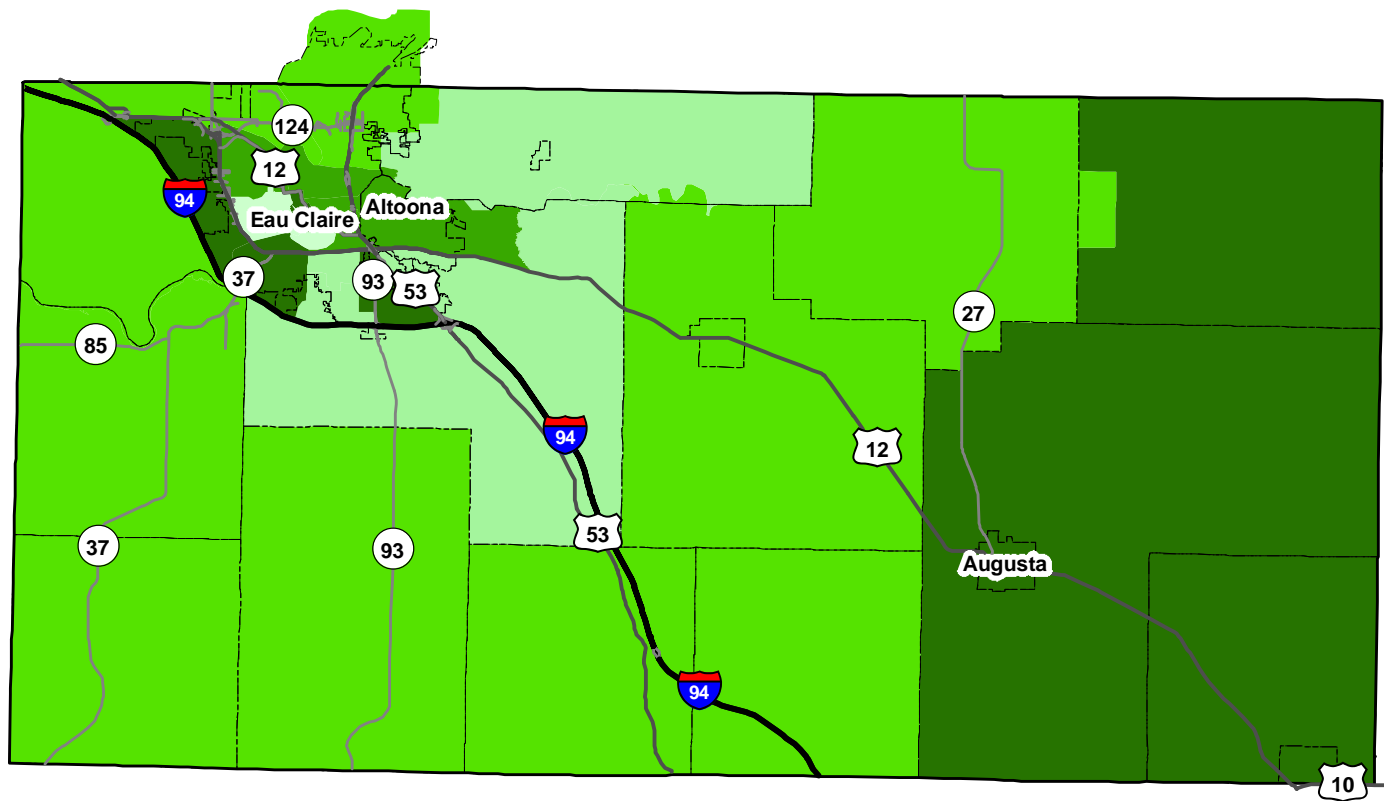
ADA paratransit services that are complementary to the regular route system are provided by Tender Care Transport under contract to ECT. Tender Care is a local private operator that utilizes accessible vans for this service. The contract is a competitive procurement that is regularly reviewed and evaluated by ECT.



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Figure 3



J:\Maps\452631EauClaire_Disabled.mxd



Eau Claire County Paratransit

Eau Claire County Paratransit is a demand-response service available to eligible elderly and disabled clients within the county. This service was initially established by the county in 1994 and then shifted to ECT management in 2002. Demand-response services are currently provided throughout the county under the Wisconsin 8521 funding program. ECT contracts with Tender Care Transport to deliver the service.

The paratransit service is available Monday through Friday from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. and Saturday from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Rides must be reserved one business day in advance. In 2006 Eau Claire County Paratransit provided more than 74,000 rides. Sixty-eight percent of the rides were made within the city limits of Eau Claire and Altoona. The Tender Care paratransit fleet is comprised of 33 vans which are primarily used Section 5310 vehicles from programs around the state. Most are minivans, some are cargo vans. About half of the vans are used daily for ECT ADA service and the other half for County paratransit service.

Other Transportation Providers

Greyhound offers intercity bus transportation to large population centers like Chicago, IL, Madison, WI the Twin Cities and Rochester, MN. The intercity bus system can provide access to major medical centers located in or near the major population centers. Jefferson Lines is also an intercity common carrier, which has initiated new service from the Twin Cities to eastern Wisconsin through Eau Claire. The bus terminals for these routes are not currently accessible by ECT regular route services on account of their remote locations.

Taxi services are available in Eau Claire, offering service both within the city limits and into rural areas of the county. There are five taxi services operating in the area with a total of 23 cars available and road-ready at any given time. With the exception of one contracted service with the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, shared-ride public taxi service common in many other parts of Wisconsin, including Chippewa Falls, is not offered in Eau Claire County. This in large part reflects on the effectiveness and coverage of the County paratransit arrangements and use of resources.

Medical and non-emergency transportation is offered by three carriers in the Eau Claire Area. At least three major charter bus companies operate in the area, and school bus services are offered by Student Transit. Two airport shuttle services have displaced most airplane service from the Regional Airport, and serve to connect Eau Claire with Menomonie and the Twin Cities with scheduled daily van trips. No significant non-profit providers, including 5310-vehicle users, were noted in the County.

Volunteer driver services are provided on a very limited basis by Triniteam, a faith-based organization. Prior to 2003, Western Dairyland Economic Development Agency also provided volunteer driver services, but difficulty in recruiting new volunteers and the growth of the County's paratransit service resulted in discontinuing this service. Western Dairyland is still very active with travel training in their five-county area, and cooperates regularly with Eau Claire Transit on transportation programs.

Summary

Transportation services in Eau Claire County are well planned and administered. They offer a well thought-out and already pretty well coordinated approach to transportation for the general public as well as for the elderly and disabled. This sets the county far ahead of most other counties in the region. Because service is offered through a one-stop-shop (ECT) for both the city bus and paratransit, potential riders have fewer numbers to remember in order to access services. Also, the level of coordination appears to provide a smooth transition between the two systems.

Most service in the Eau Claire area is open to the general public; however few are targeted to specific groups like the elderly and disabled. Most services operate Monday through Friday. There are few options available, Eau Claire Transit, for example, that offer Saturday service, and even fewer options for Sundays.

There are also a few areas where service could improve. For example, making connections to regional carriers from the local service would improve coordination between different carriers. Additionally there are individuals who need transportation but are unable to use current services because they are ineligible or are seeking services that are not provided. Examples include providing transportation to those who live in Augusta and have business in Fall Creek, or work in Altoona and live in Fall Creek. Also not included are those potential riders who would like to travel from Eau Claire city to out-county portions of Eau Claire County. Regional transportation offerings are also limited and sought after in Eau Claire County.

Transportation Needs

Rural transportation needs are diverse and require community-based solutions. Although some transportation needs can be understood by examining information on current service providers and other sources of demographic data, many of the needs can only be understood by hearing directly from stakeholders. In order to begin this dialogue two listening sessions were held in Eau Claire County. These sessions were aimed at gathering input from key stakeholders to identify needs, opportunities and issues through facilitated discussions. Participants invited to attend included transportation service providers, local elected officials, human service agency representatives, employers, medical providers and users. In addition, notice was published in area newspapers.

The listening sessions covered three basic themes:

- How well are current services meeting transportation needs (area served, time operated, eligible customers, equipment used, information provided, user costs)?
- What coordinated activities are currently in place in the county?
- What barriers exist to making improvements to the current system for transporting the elderly and disabled?

Two listening sessions were held on October 23, 2007 and October 30, 2007.

Identified Needs

During the course of the listening sessions, a number of transportation needs were identified and discussed. The following is a consolidated list of all needs expressed. These needs are grouped into three categories: Equipment and Facilities, Information and Administration and Service.

- Equipment and Facilities Needs
 - ❑ Additional Accessible vehicles available to providers (5310)
 - ❑ Need transfer and waiting facilities in outlying areas
 - ❑ Need accessible taxis
 - ❑ Need advanced technology/vehicle location(AVL) and dispatch with universal software and communications tools
 - ❑ Call center
 - ❑ Accessible vehicles for volunteers
 - ❑ Park-and-ride lots

- Information and Administration Needs
 - ❑ Regional Transit Authority
 - ❑ Mobility Manager to act as a transportation advocate, facilitator and/or coordinator
 - ❑ Resource guides for customers and staff with fare level and service availability information provided
 - ❑ Inventory of equipment
 - ❑ Trip reservation/scheduling software with web-based reservation and information sites
 - ❑ Assisted living and senior residence managers need to help coordinate trips to medical appointments
 - ❑ Expanded Veterans transportation-- inside and outside of the county
 - ❑ Service to/from nursing homes for visitation-- inside the county
 - ❑ Pre-register riders
 - ❑ All potential riders to “test drive” the system
 - ❑ Recruit more volunteers in small towns
 - ❑ Transportation “fairs”
 - ❑ Longer-term planning
 - ❑ Marketing/advertising

- Service Needs
 - ❑ Points of coordination with other counties
 - ❑ Sunday service
 - ❑ Accessible out-of-county connections for agency clients
 - ❑ Accessible out-of-county connections for general public
 - ❑ Chippewa Falls, Menomonie, Stanley, Osseo, Elk Mound

- ❑ General public transit in rural areas of Eau Claire County
- ❑ Tribal transportation assistance
- ❑ How to handle non-emergency “sudden” trips
- ❑ Escorted transportation for most challenging riders
- ❑ Volunteer or paid escorts
- ❑ Reinstate volunteer driver program
- ❑ Expanded service hours—later evening
- ❑ Shift workers (off-shift) and Carpooling and ride-matching
- ❑ Consistent, predictable county service (fixed routes)
- ❑ Fixed-route service to nutrition sites
- ❑ Intercity connections

During the listening sessions needs were prioritized during an exercise where participants were asked to identify their highest priority needs. Thus this list was distilled to a “Top 10” needs list, reflecting the needs heard most frequently from a range of stakeholders.

The top priority strategies are presented, as follows, in rank order.

1. Work to ensure accessible out-of-county connections
2. Reinstate the volunteer driver program
3. Begin planning for the long-term rather than the short-term
4. Institute a Regional Transportation Authority to act as a manager for all transit
5. Develop resource guides to provide users with comprehensive information
6. Introduce Mobility Managers to act as a resource and advocate for transit users
7. Implement a trip reservation or scheduling system
8. Work to get accessible taxis operating in Eau Claire County
9. Develop points of coordination with other counties
10. Extend service to provide for the needs of shift workers

II. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

EVALUATION OF CURRENT COUNTY TRANSPORTATION SERVICES

It is common in the transportation industry to establish metrics for measuring transportation system performance by describing “levels of service” provided. This is most frequently done using quantitative measures that are accepted as standards in the planning community. Metrics establishing the adequacy of service for human service and public transit transportation needs are not as well established, so an explanation of the scale used to report the levels of service provided by transportation providers in Eau Claire County is given here.

Levels of Service (LOS) typically are reported in ranges, with Level A being the highest and Level C (or below, depending on the scale) being the lowest. Based on studies elsewhere as well as considerations for Eau Claire County circumstances, the following ranges for level of service were used to evaluate services in Eau Claire County.

TABLE 4
Eau Claire County Transportation Levels of Service (LOS) Measures

Human Service-Oriented Transportation (e.g., medical, supportive services, and life-sustaining transportation services)		
Level of Service	Amount of Service Provided	Adequacy/Effectiveness
A	5 days/week or more 9 hours/day or more	Excellent
B	4 days/week 8 hours/day	Good
C	Less than 4 days/week Less than 8 hours/day	Inadequate
Public Transit (e.g., commuter, recreational, shopping and general transportation services)		
A	7 days/week 12 hours/day	Excellent
B	6 days/week 10 hours/day	Good
C	Less than 6 days/week Less than 6 hours/day	Inadequate

For Human Services Oriented Transportation services, Level of Service A would be achieved if a provider operated 5 days per week or more for at least 9 hours per day. This type of service allows for full coverage of time periods where most life-sustaining activities take place through agencies. Levels of Service B and C represent lesser amounts of service being available for clients requiring more planning and somewhat fewer opportunities.

For public transit services, Level of Service A represents full 7 day a week coverage with service available for 12 hours per day or more. This level would provide coverage beyond the traditional work week to allow time for personal business, social or shopping trips to be made. Operating less than 7 days per week and less than 12 hours per day limits the effectiveness of transit as a core travel mode and requires more advanced planning by potential customers.

LEVEL OF SERVICE

Based on the metrics for measuring levels of service, all of the current Eau Claire County transportation providers were evaluated and their rankings are reported below in Table 5.

Overall, the public transit gets higher marks than the human services transportation providers, but a good amount of service is being provided for the area.

TABLE 5
Eau Claire County Transportation Providers
Level of Service Provided

Human Service Transportation Providers	
Eau Claire City/County Paratransit	LOS A
Public Transit	
Eau Claire City Bus	LOS B

AREA SERVED

Another measure of effectiveness for transportation services is to gauge how well they cover the geographic service areas. Since over half of the county’s general population and the majority of transit dependents are found in the general Eau Claire vicinity, and the city is the prime destination for most of the jobs and services, it is reasonable to see most of the transportation services focused on Eau Claire. Some Human Service providers do operate to the out-county communities, albeit on a somewhat infrequent basis, to provide connections to life-sustaining activities in the city. Essentially no public transit service is available outside of Eau Claire or Altoona.

Service beyond the county is quite limited. Connections to some long-distance medical services are provided by various human service providers but this tends to be quite specialized service operated on a very infrequent basis.

VEHICLE AVAILABILITY

In Eau Claire County, there are 22 buses, medium and small size, operated by human service and public transit providers. In addition, there are 46 vans, full size to mini-vans. Altogether, this presents a capacity in excess of 800 seats per day. That may appear to be a significant amount but it translates into one seat for about every 100 County residents. Certainly the seats can be used by more than one person in a day, but the way in which

some services operate or the times they are available does limit the number of times the seat can be re-used. What this suggests is that opportunities to broaden the use of existing resources and possibly expand services should be explored where possible.

FINANCIAL STRATEGIES

There are a large number of funding streams, consisting of federal, state, local and private assistance, that Eau Claire County transportation providers access to fund their program of services.

Federal programs that support public transportation services include the following:

- Section 5307 Discretionary Formula Funding: These are discretionary capital funds driven by formulas of ridership and passenger miles produced, reported to the National Transit Database, and distributed on an annual basis by the FTA. It covers up to 80 percent of costs.
- Section 5309: New Starts Program: This is a discretionary capital assistance grant program that provides 80 percent funding for capital expenditures and system investments for urban public transit systems.
- Section 5310: Elderly Individuals and Individuals with Disabilities Program: This is a capital assistance grant program for the purchase of accessible buses and vans to provide transportation services to the disabled and elderly. Eau Claire County currently has no vehicles funded through this program.
- Section 5311: Section 5311 is a formula grant program for small urban and rural areas (under 50,000 population) that funds capital operating and administrative expenses.
- JARC (Section 5316): The Job Access and Reverse Commute program provides job access transportation designed to meet the needs of individuals who are not effectively served by public transportation. Western Dairyland is currently funding some of their transportation coordination and travel training programs through this source.
- New Freedom Program (Section 5317): This program provides for new transportation services and public transportation alternatives beyond those required by ADA to provide assistance to persons with disabilities. No New Freedom funds are presently being used in Eau Claire County.

State programs that support public transportation services include the following:

- 85.20 This program is limited to the operating expenses of an urban mass transit system. There are four tiers within this program, with each tier having a separate appropriation. The City of Eau Claire, the designated recipient operating as the transit system, is in the Tier B category for funding.
- 85.21 This program provides operating assistance for counties to provide specialized transportation services to elderly and disabled populations.

In addition to federal and state programs aimed primarily at providing transportation services, various human-service funding programs can be used for transportation services. These programs include Medical Assistance, Community Care of Eau Claire County (CCPC), the Older Americans Act and many others.

CURRENT COORDINATION ACTIVITIES

There are ongoing activities to partner and coordinate between transportation providers in Eau Claire County to provide better and broader coverage to customers. Examples of these activities include:

- Western Dairyland provides travel training and mobility management for the Eau Claire County area
- TenderCare groups trips based on hospital and clinic locations and scheduling

These are excellent examples of cross-program coordination already in place. The objective will be to look for additional opportunities like these to improve the overall effectiveness of the transportation resources.

POTENTIAL STRATEGIES TO MEET NEEDS

The following strategies were developed to address the needs in the work sessions and through reviews of available local data:

EQUIPMENT AND FACILITIES

1. Incorporate Section 5310 funds from FTA into the funding mix for Eau Claire County services directed at the elderly and individuals with disabilities.

The federal Section 5310 program is established to address the needs of the elderly and individuals with disabilities. Funds are available to each state to support the capital costs of transportation services. Eligible costs do include the acquisition of service. Eligible recipients include private non-profit agencies as well as public bodies approved by the state to coordinate services for the elderly and disabled or where no non-profit agencies are available. The Wisconsin Department of Transportation is responsible for soliciting annual applications and awarding program funds. The level of funding has been around \$2 million per year for the state with the emphasis on vehicle acquisition. Currently, there are no recipients of 5310 funds in Eau Claire County.

The guidance on this program has clearly changed at the federal level in recent years to open this program up to fund more activities. Under Title III of SAFETEA-LU, Wisconsin is one of the only a few states that are eligible to use up to 33 percent of their 5310 funds for operating expenses. Also, eligible expenses include acquisition of services including user-side services, introduction of new technology and support of mobility management activities.

Given the level of needs for these funds across the state, there may not be a great opportunity to incorporate these funds into county-wide operations for Eau Claire

County service but this change in program guidance certainly presents an opportunity for the County to further evaluate. Discussion should be held with WisDOT to determine potential next steps to use these funds to expand the county services for the elderly and disabled.

2. Identify possible locations and types of accommodations for transfer and waiting facilities in outlying areas.

Explore sites based on centralized key locations and the possibility of joint use, such as public buildings and private facilities including churches, malls, dining, or other normally open and frequently used establishments. Accessibility for elderly and disabled, sheltering from the weather, personal amenities, and available temporary parking at or near doorway should all be considered.

These locations would provide safe, convenient alternatives to home pickup for para-transit services, and a meeting location for park-and-pool and volunteer services. With the building owner's consent to voluntary joint use, cost could be low, but leases, upkeep, and finding and maintaining the sites for regular use across the County could possibly involve a medium amount of administration and expense. Unless regular use patterns develop at certain of these sites, expected utilization would be low and irregular since use would be on an as-needed basis.

3. Use accessible taxis to handle overflow and off-hour needs for disabled clients. Before proceeding, the county paid taxi providers should identify the potential market and funding for this supplemental service to determine its viability.

Participating taxi companies in the County would agree to provide a limited number of wheelchair-accessible vehicles in their fleets. The companies would potentially be able to handle a new class of customers as a result. To support this option, the County would facilitate coordination or refer clients not covered by the established services to these carriers. If funding were available, the County may also use this private capacity to supplement or expand services to remote locations, during high-demand periods when denials might occur, or during off-hours, such as service contemplated in the "New Freedoms" program. Some capital costs or reimbursement for services would be incurred by the County, while administration would be handled in part by the companies. Actual use of this capacity, and resulting financial benefit to the taxi companies may be limited due to good levels of existing services and the small client base to determine its viability.

4. Implement an in-vehicle advanced technology system that identifies vehicle position and expands communication capabilities with drivers.

There are a number of advanced technology systems and components available to improve overall transit and paratransit operations. One widely deployed system is automatic vehicle location (AVL) which transmits vehicle position information back to a dispatch office. This allows dispatchers to know where the fleet is at all times to better accommodate last minute trip requests and to improve overall fleet

management and productivity. In rural areas, AVL systems have also provided an extra level of security to allow instant communications with vehicles in the event of an incident.

Many times AVL systems are deployed in conjunction with computer-assisted reservation and dispatch systems. Combined with in-vehicle message terminals to transmit next trip and manifest information to drivers, these systems are proven assets to paratransit operations.

The systems have proven most beneficial to large urban fixed-route fleets and paratransit systems. For Eau Claire County, the benefits of deploying an AVL system would be maximized if it were combined with a computer-assisted trip reservation and dispatch system.

The initial cost of systems can range from moderate to high depending on the communications components and linkage to a dispatch system. The systems have matured significantly in recent years and now represent pretty stable products but the maintenance and upkeep of the equipment often times requires access to special technical skills and computer-system support.

5. Establish a consolidated call center and incorporate trip reservation and dispatch software to handle all transportation services within the County.

Consolidated call centers have been developed in some areas as a means to pull together dispatch resources from multiple providers to improve efficiency and customer services. When trip reservation, scheduling and dispatch functions are consolidated, often times the hours that calls can be handled expands, productivity of the fleets increase and the ability to accommodate last-minute trip needs increases. Building the center or establishing the space is one step that is often accompanied by implementing a computer-assisted reservation software tool.

Development of such a system is often times quite complex and expensive. The cost of developing the consolidated centers is often times quite high as space and equipment needs expand. The level of complexity of the reservation and communication systems also typically increase significantly. Training and maintenance needs can be significant.

Areas look to develop consolidated centers when there is a wide array of transportation providers and variation in the level of customer service. Since neither of those conditions exist in Eau Claire County, there may not be a significant short-term benefit in implementing this strategy. However, since plans and funds to develop such a center usually takes quite some time to assemble, if the County's long-range vision includes such a facility, it should begin formal planning steps in the near term.

6. Establish a County pool of accessible vehicles for use by volunteer drivers.

A specialty pool maintained by the County would enhance the flexibility and capability of volunteer services. Eau Claire County would need to identify capital funds for purchase of several of these accessible vans or buses, and also fuel,

maintain, and insure these vehicles. Insurance issues with rotating volunteer drivers may pose a significant problem in terms of liability and cost. Scheduling of the vehicles would require County staff to reserve and coordinate vehicle use. If an effective paratransit service continues to be available, this enhancement of the volunteer driver program may be duplicative and little-used.

7. Establish park-and-pool lot locations for parking vehicles and consolidating trips by clients and volunteers.

These lots could be designated as meeting and transfer points throughout the County. Lots could include joint-use surface parking lots in local town and business locations. This would allow a low initial startup cost and low maintenance expense, with minimal administration. By promoting the community benefit of the facility, and allowing for shared trips to County services, medical needs, and nutrition centers, the local support and cost saving features of this strategy could develop to a medium level of feasibility and effectiveness.

INFORMATION AND ADMINISTRATION

8. Establish a Regional Transit Authority (RTA) to oversee County and possible regional transit and para-transit activities and funding.

This would provide a source of predictable, local funding and a system for regional governance that could allow better and more responsive public transportation services in the area. The initiation of an RTA could utilize existing personnel and advisory and governing boards for forming the core administrative and governing body of the authority. Administrative costs of such an agency may likely be larger and more involved than the current structure, especially if levy powers and duties such as long-range planning and inter-agency coordination are assigned to the RTA as envisioned. This strategy was considered very important and highly popular during the public input, due to its recognized high potential for more dedicated funding and resources, local control, improved transportation coordination, and service expansion. The major impediment to the feasibility of this strategy is the fact that it depends on action by external parties, including the State Legislature, the Governor, and WisDOT in particular. Besides the unpredictability of passage, the actual makeup of the legislation, and the type of organization that it will allow, is somewhat uncertain at this stage.

9. Hire a county-wide Mobility Manager to act as a transportation advocate, facilitator, and coordinator.

The Manager's duties may include management of volunteer services if that strategy is implemented. Funding under the new 5317 (New Freedoms) federal program is possible, as is use of the Job Access and Reverse Commute (JARC) federal program and other potential state assistance.

The goal of having a dedicated person on County staff specializing in Mobility Management solves the very basic problem of having transportation concerns spread across a range of public service staff, none of whom may have transportation

as a focus or a high priority. As a result, transportation issues are often neglected, and opportunities for improved service and efficiency are not readily identified or acted on. Most midwest counties that have implemented this strategy, hire and train a single person with these specified duties. Besides advocating for transit and transportation services, the person can develop contacts and relationships with key stakeholders and providers. Active management may include contract, grant, and assistance programs, and handling the administration and support of a reasonable number of volunteers. With the proper structure and protocols, the manager may be able to coordinate 40 to 60 volunteers around the County alone, or supervise others in operating the program. This is born out by the practices of several established County programs elsewhere, including organizations that allow self-dispatched trips by the volunteers, and intermingling with paid drivers as well as other volunteer groups, with one person in an active oversight position. The potential for significant accomplishments by this transportation-focused individual make this a highly feasible strategy to adopt.

10. Prepare resource guides that contain details on county transportation services, eligibility and contact information for prospective users and staff.

Many locations have a myriad of transportation services, providers and access requirements. As a result, it can be extremely confusing for prospective users to have thorough knowledge of what services are available, where they operate, who is eligible for the service, what does it cost, how can reservation be made (if needed), and so forth. Agency staff, employers, residence managers and health care professionals who also deal directly with potential customers also may not know where to turn for information or referral for transportation services. As a result, many areas have been focusing some attention to preparing, distributing and maintaining information guide on available transportation resources.

The guides are often developed with the intent of cutting across the wide range of transportation services and providers from public to private. Surveys are typically used to get the ball rolling for gathering the information and then some type of follow-up mechanism is developed to ensure that information is regularly updated. The amount and level of information in the guides varies from simple contact information to inventories of vehicles and full-service descriptions. Key decisions on how to develop the local guide include how guides will be distributed, whether multiple language versions are needed, how often updates will be generated and should adjoining counties be included.

These guides can be a fairly-simple step in expanding customer and staff awareness of services and to begin to expand coordination thinking regarding transportation service.

11. Purchase an advanced trip reservation and scheduling system that can be used for all demand-responsive and volunteer driver programs within the County.

Trip reservation software has advanced significantly in recent years and there are moderately-priced options available that allow agencies to essentially connect via the internet. The software can be hosted locally or provided directly by vendors.

One of the prime benefits of this system would be to better utilize resources to meet last-minute trip needs and to also streamline billing and reporting processes.

Implementation of this strategy might also consider establishing one county-wide call center with one telephone number/Web site address (e.g. 1-800-RIDE-NOW) number to handle trip scheduling for multiple providers. This will result both in administrative benefits as well as greater customer recognition and ease of use.

The cost of these systems range significantly depending on the level of requirements and whether a mapping component and vehicle-messaging component are included. As with any advanced technology system, there also can be some challenges to implement, operate and maintain. Strong local computer system support is essential for successful implementation.

12. Create a program that will provide information and tools that senior living, assisted living, nursing homes, veterans services and health care service works can use to help coordinate and group transit and paratransit trips to and from their facilities.

The concept here is to expand the information available to staff and managers of these facilities and services such that they are aware of the transportation services capabilities and limitations. Grouping of trips is the most efficient use of the transportation resources but it requires some degree of coordination with the scheduling of related services at health care and social services. Staff and managers of the residential facilities can be instrumental in helping to develop expanded coordination of trips but they need to have more information and perhaps tools at their disposal to facilitate this.

The amount of information needed will need to be defined locally with each facility. At a minimum, contact information needs to be distributed and kept up to date for transportation services. Perhaps, transportation managers can meet directly with facility managers and staff and health care and social service staff to identify best practices.

This should be a very low-cost strategy to implement and it has some very good payback potential.

13. Establish a program to register prospective users of the transportation services before there is a firm need for service.

This strategy suggests that being proactive about client registrations can be beneficial to the clients. Registrations for county residents outside of the Cities of Eau Claire and Altoona take time to process (inside these cities, ADA guidelines for certification/registration are followed, limiting pre-registration options). If someone develops a sudden need for service but is ineligible, then a lot of stress develops on both the client and staff levels. If a sizable number of clients register under the county's 85.21 guidelines when they are initially eligible for service, normally at age 60 or older, then they have the opportunity to complete registration materials in a deliberate and thoughtful manner instead of an almost emergency situation.

This is a very low-cost strategy that can help raise awareness of local services and help get people in the community ready for services. This would be done on an on-going basis, or as simply as once a year during a predetermined registration period.

14. Develop a new rider initiation program to introduce services and responsibilities to customers.

This strategy looks to expand the comfort level of new riders with the available transportation services. Having a new rider initiation process will help to alleviate uncertainties over how services actually perform (pick ups, drop off, what does “on time” mean, fares, drive assistance, packages, escorts, accessibility equipment, how to arrange for service, emergency procedures, complaint procedures, etc.)

This type of program can range from preparation of a brochure addressing relevant points to arranging for transportation displays at community events or locations where prospective new riders can board the vehicles or even arrange for free rides. This is a relatively low-cost strategy which has a lot of community benefit.

15. Establish a new County-wide volunteer driver program, to recruit, support, and maintain an adequate group of local drivers.

The goal would be to use volunteers, both to supplement the capacity of the para-transit system and to provide local and more informal options for rural transportation-dependent clients. The greatest challenge is to initially recruit a sufficient number of volunteers to develop a reliable and cost-effective program. The cost of the system will include a coordinator or dispatcher, who may or may not be shared with another operation, office support, a communications system and protocol, a reservation or records system, and procedures and funds for accepted reimbursements such as mileage and meals. Maintenance of the number and quality of volunteers is the single largest ongoing challenge, but will rely on the satisfaction of both the volunteers and the clients. Friendly, supportive staff and low-key but regular recognition can play a big part in program success. Based on other successful volunteer driver models, the drivers may be intermingled with paid staff and drivers, allowed the use of agency vehicles or use their own, undergo regular training and advice sessions, and be set up to coordinate and dispatch their own trips with local registered riders.

Depending on the level of support and provision for vehicles and services, the cost may range from low to medium versus a paid para-transit system, and administration of the system will also be in this range depending on size and adopted procedures. The feasibility and cost-effectiveness of a volunteer driver program should be very high if designed and managed properly, and has the potential to provide highly flexible and well-accepted travel options in both urban and rural settings.

16. Incorporate long-range planning for transportation services into other local area planning initiatives.

Transportation and land-use are strongly connected. Development location decisions and guidance within the County should pay closer attention to the potential impacts those decisions may have on transit and paratransit users and services. Consideration of how public facilities will receive transit and paratransit service should lead the way for expanded initiatives. Doing so will improve operational efficiencies and improve customer service.

This is a low-cost strategy to adopt but the implementation may not be as straightforward. These are relatively new concepts to embrace in a lot of areas, so it may take time and perseverance to win the endorsements needed from local stakeholders.

17. Expand awareness of county transportation services through marketing and communication strategies.

Since the percentage of new users for public transit is generally quite high, usually around 20 to 25 percent tend to indicate they've been riding less than 1 year, it is always a good idea to refresh all marketing activities at least once per year. Within Eau Claire County, the college population poses a significant challenge for marketing. In addition, with the advent of the United Way 211 information system there are expanding opportunities to broaden over all transportation services marketing and communications.

Some strategies to expand awareness include:

- Expand outreach activities to spread the word on 211 and its value
- Create electronic or physical billboards
- Create/maintain provider directory for all County transportation services
- Other communication's strategies/outreach activities (transit fairs, etc.)

Marketing and advertising are generally moderate-level costs for most transit services. There may be opportunities to link these campaigns with other county campaigns to control costs if that gets to be a concern. The payback is truly there for on-going marketing activities because of the constant turnover of customers.

18. Establish communications procedures and protocols with adjoining counties and communities to better coordinate longer distance trips.

One of the emerging transportation needs within the County is for residents to travel outside the County for life-sustaining services or life-enhancing activities. These travel needs are particularly difficult for most county programs to adequately address the needs; they tend to be low volume, infrequent and the destinations are widely distributed.

One of the best strategies to tackle these trip needs is to establish relationships with the adjoining communities and counties which tend to have the highest concentration of trip needs or at least a highly visible trip destination (e.g. medical center). Through communication, the parties can identify the range of transportation options that might be possible to serve some of these trip needs. The exact configuration of the service will need to be worked out on an almost case-by-case basis but the effort is intended to greatly enhance customer opportunities to cross borders.

There are service concerns with crossing borders (should there be through-routed service or should adjoining services meet to “exchange” passengers) along with financial issues (will jurisdictions agree on a process to cover the costs of potentially operating across the border).

The key will be to open the communication lines to other areas. The first challenge will be to simply make contact in the other jurisdictions as most areas do not have one stop information or service contacts. This may be a strategy to implement gradually to build upon small successes. Look for a friendly transit neighbor, look for a receptive political climate, and look for potential funding assistance on a trial basis from local or state governments.

This should be a low-to-moderate cost strategy with a fairly complex implementation component.

SERVICES

19. Provide para-transit services on Sunday throughout the County.

There has been a consistent level of interest in expanding para-transit service to Sunday in Eau Claire County. This would expand existing Monday through Saturday dial-a-ride service. The cost of this expansion is assumed to be a direct addition to current contract costs on a per-hour basis, making it relatively high cost for possible trips and benefits. Service levels and time span of Sunday service will need to be closely monitored to control the cost. Administration will be relatively easy, as it will be essentially provided by the contractor. The factors that will determine feasibility will be the availability of funding, and the actual level of use. Based on experiences in other communities, use of Sunday service tends to be quite low.

20. Expand access to existing county-wide transportation services to the general public on an as-available basis.

This strategy acknowledges that existing paratransit services may have some excess capacity (open seats at various times). At the same time, there may be members of the general public that may be interested in using the services. The intent of the strategy is to continue to emphasize that the primary nature of the county-wide services is intended to serve the needs of the elderly and disabled but that the general public can utilize the services as well. If space is available and the trip need can be accommodated, it would be processed.

The strategy can address a number of individual trip needs such as the non-emergency but “sudden” trip need that might arise such as visiting someone in a hospital or getting to school to pick up children when the household car becomes unavailable. There are a wide range of trip needs that can come up suddenly.

Opening the services up will not jeopardize any program funding as the primary sources typically state to take care of the primary trip market’s needs first, the elderly and the disabled, and then take care of other needs. As a result, this type of strategy can be used to greatly expand transportation options for the whole county population when those special circumstances arise.

The cost to implement will be quite low as the service is generally already out on the street with space available. Some effort will need to go into getting the word out for potential users and to monitor use but this should be pretty straightforward to implement. One component that will greatly benefit this strategy is to utilize the computer-assisted scheduling software to be able to quickly gauge capacity and evaluate how a new trip insertion would affect the drivers manifest. This type of strategy should be seen locally as a great step toward opening services and being a “good neighbor” in time of need.

21. Establish a pool of volunteer or paid escorts to accompany the most challenging clients or paratransit service.

Some of the paratransit clients should be traveling with escorts to limit any potential unwanted interaction with the drivers. To ensure the safety of all parties, it is desirable to have a pool of available escorts identified for this purpose. It is desirable to recruit volunteer escorts if possible but it may be necessary to pay the escorts a nominal fee if an adequate number of volunteers cannot be maintained.

Implementation of this strategy requires some capability to identify which riders will need escorts before the trip is actually scheduled. The advanced computer-assisted scheduling tools typically include the capability to track this level of information about eligible clients. If such a system is not available, another quick reference database application should be developed to provide the required information.

22. Expand service hours into weekday and Saturday evenings.

Similar to Sunday service, this is a popular strategy for improved service. Expanded para-transit or supplemental taxi services to provide coverage in the off hours. The cost of expanding hours-of-service for the para-transit contract may be high compared to the number of additional trips provided at these times. The option of utilizing taxi service either under contract, vouchers, or some other compensation arrangement for County clients may be somewhat more cost-effective, and would more directly correlate to the actual volume of trips provided. In any case, the feasibility of providing significant service levels during evening hours will be somewhat low when compared to daytime services, especially when you extend into the late evening and night-time.

23. Expand transportation options for regular and off-shift commuter travel for target markets (low income and disabled populations).

To broaden the effectiveness of the overall transportation system within the County, it is desirable to expand the options to work for the primary target markets of the elderly, disabled and low-income populations. Direct service to employment locations may be an option but may not be the most effective solution in most settings.

The number of potential employment locations can be quite high with the concentration of employee trips generally quite low from specific geographic areas. This market is often more challenging to serve during the late and off-hour shifts.

A wide range of options should be evaluated including expanding rideshare and carpool options within the County. This activity could be well served if a mobility manager position is filled in the County. The first step involves identifying potential employers and employees that might be targeted for these activities.

24. Establish fixed routes outlying communities with service and activity centers, including nutrition sites, for elderly, disabled, and low income clients.

This strategy would provide a regularly scheduled option for riders to access major destinations within the County. While the cost of dedicating resources to a network of regular routes will be high, there will be a partial offset in trips saved on the para-transit system. A careful analysis of current para-transit loadings and travel patterns will be necessary to develop the best design, for both routes and times, of a scheduled network. For instance, routes may not need to run every day to every community, but might travel only on alternate days or a single specified day each week. Administration of the system will be relatively easy except for a higher than normal need for regular and frequent evaluation of the service. Any remaining service by paratransit or volunteers should attempt to feed the regular routes to the highest degree possible. While this system would provide greater freedom and flexibility for some riders, the utilization of such a service has historically been little better than a dial-a-ride, and with a committed expenditure of resources locked in.

25. Establish connections between County transit and para-transit services, and the intercity bus and airport shuttle carriers.

This will provide for convenient and scheduled transfers between local and long distance services. Two major private intercity bus lines, Greyhound and Jefferson Lines, provide services between the Twin Cities, Eau Claire, and various destinations in Wisconsin and Illinois. In addition, two airport shuttle services connect the Regional Airport with Menomonie and the Twin Cities. The terminals for all of these carriers have been established in the northern County, just outside of the City of Eau Claire, and are not connected to City regular route service or para-transit service except on an individual trip arrangement. Both the transit and para-transit system could schedule and/or advertise and coordinate trips to meet the intercity and shuttle trips. Since the intercity trips in particular are run once a day, a

connecting route would not require a large investment or ongoing expense to establish and maintain that daily connection. A new connection could actually foster some new business with college students and others. However, the very small number of intercity bus passengers currently using these carriers will not generate any significant passenger traffic for transit, nor will elderly or disabled clients consider this service as an option even when connected through para-transit meets at the bus terminals.

26. Expand the number of available providers than can be contracted and used for client services.

Foster a higher level of competition in the area transportation market and control prices while promoting better service. The County currently contracts with one para-transit carrier for ADA and County service, and receives a good level of professional service from the contractor. The use of several providers instead of one, and/or more frequent bid opportunities, would promote more competition locally. This could work to control costs and provide more operational capacity and flexibility. However, more contract and procurement management would result for the County, and if multiple providers become a standard policy, some effort will have to be extended to keep their individual work loads adequate enough to insure each of the contractor's profitability.

27. Develop a voucher system for trip payment on para-transit and taxi providers, to expand user choice and options while controlling costs.

Vouchers can serve as tickets on various carriers for trips by County clients. They can be designed to pay all or part of the cost of a trip, and be circulated or restricted as needed. A social worker, job trainer, or teacher can give out vouchers for a trip home and a return trip, for instance, to pay for the transportation but control the cost and give the traveler incentive to return. It lowers the need for trip planning and transportation management, but usually increases accounting paperwork to some extent. The cost is usually not too much different from a directly reimbursed, contracted trip, but the traveler's convenience is improved. If carefully designed and used, a voucher system has a good chance of being a benefit for both the riders and the providers.

EVALUATION OF STRATEGIES

Understanding that in a world of limited resources, it is not possible to meet the needs all of the time, the full range of needs strategies, as discussed above, was evaluated to identify the best candidates for near-term implementation. Strategies were evaluated by likely initial costs that may be incurred (e.g. the purchase of new equipment or capital improvements) as well as ongoing operating costs and by administrative requirements (e.g. the need to establish new partnership agreements or changes in existing agreements/contracts). These two criteria were then merged into one overall feasibility ranking that can be used to identify the most promising strategies for implementation in the short term.

The evaluation summary is presented in Table 6.

Table 7
Evaluation of Transportation Strategies

	Strategy	Implementation or Operating Cost	Administrative Requirements	Overall Feasibility
EQUIPMENT AND FACILITIES				
1.	Look to use FTA Section 5310 funds	Low-medium	Medium	Low-Medium
2.	Develop transfer and waiting areas	Medium	Medium	Medium
3.	Provide accessible taxis	Medium	Low	Low
4.	Implement in-vehicle advanced technology-location equipment	Medium-High	Medium-High	Low
5.	Establish a county call center	High	High	Low
6.	Establish a pool of accessible volunteer vehicles	Medium	Medium-High	Low
7.	Establish park and pool lots	Low	Low	Medium
INFORMATION AND ADMINISTRATION				
8.	Establish a regional transit authority	Low	High	Low-Medium
9.	Hire a county-wide mobility manager	Low-Medium	Low-Medium	High
10.	Prepare and distribute resource guides	Low	Low	High
11.	Implement advanced trip reservation system	Medium	Medium	Medium-High
12.	Create a program to foster trip coordination	Low	Medium	Medium
13.	Establish a program to pre-register eligible customers	Low	Low	Medium
14.	Develop a new-rider initiation program	Low	Low-Medium	Medium-High
15.	Establish a county-wide volunteer program	Low-Medium	Medium-High	High
16.	Incorporate long-range planning	Low	Low-Medium	Low-Medium
17.	Expand marketing	Medium	Low-Medium	Medium-High
18.	Establish communications with neighbors	Low	Medium	Low-Medium
SERVICES				
19.	Provide Sunday paratransit	Medium-High	Low	Low-Medium
20.	Open services to the general public on "on-available" basis	Low	Low-Medium	Low-Medium
21.	Establish a pool of escorts for challenging clients	Low-Medium	High	Low
22.	Expand service hours later in the evening	Medium	Low-Medium	Low-Medium
23.	Develop commuter options	Low	Medium	Low

Strategy		Implementation or Operating Cost	Administrative Requirements	Overall Feasibility
24.	Establish fixed routes within the county	Medium	Low-Medium	Low-Medium
25.	Establish connections to inter-city services and shuttles	Low	Low	Low
26.	Expand number of providers	Low	Medium	Medium
27.	Develop voucher system	Medium	Medium	Low-Medium

HIGHEST RATED STRATEGIES

The strategies deemed to have the best level of benefits and highest return on investment, with a reasonable level of implementation actions attached to them are as follows:

9. Hire a County-Wide Mobility Manager to act as a transportation advocate, facilitator, and coordinator.
10. Prepare resource guides that contain details on county transportation services, eligibility and contact information for prospective users and staff.
15. Establish a new County-wide volunteer driver program, to recruit, support, and maintain an adequate group of local drivers.

Those strategies with very good payback and moderate cost and administrative implementation actions are as follows:

11. Purchase an advanced trip reservation and scheduling system that can be used for all demand-responsive and volunteer driver programs within the County.
14. Develop a new rider initiation program to introduce services and responsibilities to customers.
17. Expand awareness of county transportation services through marketing and communication strategies.