

Linx: Co-op Transit in the Rural West

BY ANDREW MCLEOD

Life without a car can be challenging. Even in urban areas, waiting for the bus can be a hassle, requiring waits of 30 minutes or more; schedules often stop altogether after business hours.

In rural areas, however, some bus routes run only once or twice a day, so getting around without a car can be nearly impossible.

Mobility has become a rural crisis as the recession and gas prices makes travel by car less affordable, while larger economic shifts have closed businesses in many communities, forcing more rural people into long inter-city commutes and even longer trips for services like medical care.

As budget cuts ravage transportation budgets, carless rural residents are at risk of being stranded, forced to rely on neighbors or even hitchhike to work. And everyone is becoming more vulnerable to rising gas prices.

Seeking Solutions

The Greater Yellowstone Region consists of 27 counties in Montana, Wyoming and Idaho, with a population of about 650,000 spread over nearly 74,000 square miles — picture South Dakota with 20 percent fewer people. This vast area is served by a total of 60 public and private transit companies, with connections among these services sporadic and sometimes difficult for the public to identify.

It is a challenging place to run public transportation, especially in the winter.

In 2008, the Yellowstone Business Partnership saw the impact of \$4.00 gasoline, assembled a steering committee, commissioned a feasibility study funded by stimulus funds through the Idaho Transportation Department, and found that a transit cooperative could work.

The resulting shared services co-op is called Linx. It is expected to launch operations this summer, with an online booking system that will provide a single location to research and book travel, and create itineraries and boarding passes for trips.

Already, seven transit companies have joined Linx, and YBP's mobility project manager Jeff Osgood has been meeting regularly with others. He is also launching a series of public meetings to stir up interest among consumers, who will also have the opportunity to invest in the co-op and receive a share of profits at year's end.

Plugging the Gaps

The co-op also seeks to harmonize schedules and close gaps in the region's transit network. Because many companies provide little or no information online, potential customers learn of services by word of mouth or chance bus sightings. Even when potential customers can find schedule information, it is usually bad news: Longer trips may require several separate fares, with connection times between buses sometimes measured in hours, or worse.

"You'd come in at maybe four in the afternoon, and the connection already left at



Passengers in Ashton, Idaho board a bus for West Yellowstone, Mont. When the co-op is operational, they will have a more streamlined process for booking travel to and from other locations beyond those served by a single carrier.

photo: Salt Lake Express

seven in the morning," said Osgood.

Such a gap requires an overnight stay en route to the destination, dramatically raising the costs of travel as well as the inconvenience and time required. This causes far-reaching economic problems in the already-struggling

region, driving commerce out of the region, and worsening the economic climate.

"If you have to stay overnight anyway, why not go to Denver or Salt Lake instead of Billings?" asked Osgood.

The lack of transit also represents a missed

opportunity for tourism, which now consists mainly of people driving in from outside the region, usually with gas tanks already filled. Yellowstone National Park was once a highly popular transit destination before the auto age, served by numerous stage, rail and bus lines. It is now nearly inaccessible, with only sparse bus service skirting the park's western edge.

Transit Revival

The feasibility report determined that a prospective passenger was almost twice as likely to be discouraged by indirect routing, poorly-timed transfers, or no connection at all.

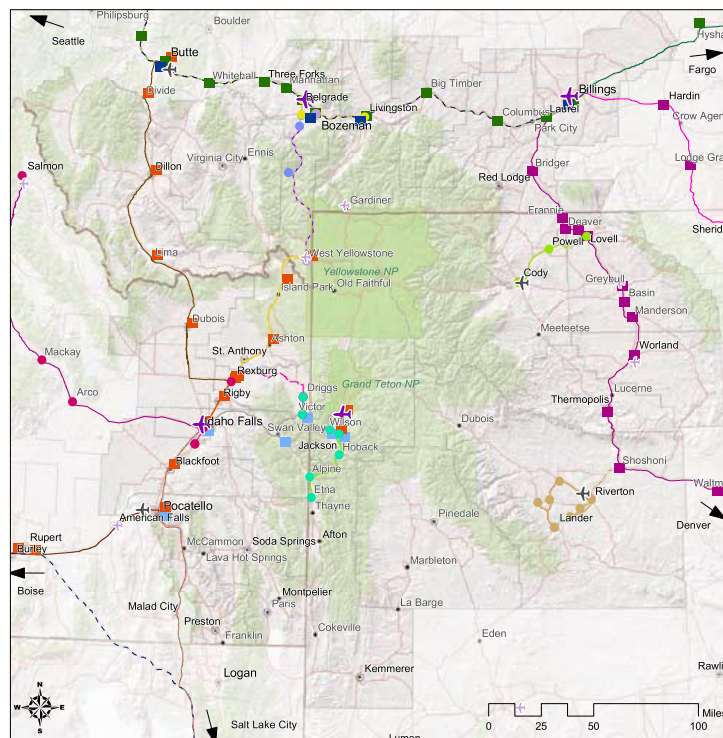
For this reason, a major goal of the co-op will be to harmonize schedules, creating coordinated connections among a variety of systems, including long-haul carriers, urban networks, and even small private operations with a single route.

The project is spread over three states, making coordination even more daunting. However, YBP used this geographic challenge as an asset, calling in assistance from three different co-op development centers that served its territory—the Northwest Cooperative Development Center, the Montana Cooperative Development Center, and the Rocky Mountain Farmers Union.

The co-op's web site, at www.linx.coop, had its soft launch in advance of this May's YBP conference in Grand Teton, Wyo. A week before the event, registrants were sent a link that they could use to make reservations for travel to the event from locations in all three states.

The site is expected to go live this summer, along with services like onboard wireless internet access and GPS tracking on some buses. Excitement is building for a chance to improve mobility in an era when many people are facing transit cuts. What began as a dream of better transit access is becoming more believable.

"We've been doing outreach for a long time," said Osgood. "This thing we've talked about is real now."



This diagram from the YBP feasibility study shows the major transportation providers in the Greater Yellowstone Region, as well as the large gaps in service. Each color represents a different provider, presenting serious scheduling challenges to would-be travelers.

map: Current Transportation Solutions