Chapter 1

Introduction

BACKGROUND AND PROCESS

The North Carolina Department of Transportation, Public Transportation Division (NCDOT-PTD), helps provide planning assistance for the transit programs that it supports through federal and State grants. One of the planning tools utilized by the NCDOT-PTD for its local grantees is the Community Transportation Service Plan (CTSP). NCDOT-PTD guidance indicates that A CTSP is:

" A dynamic planning tool to be utilized by the transit system as a guideline in order to effectively accomplish the following:

- Identify the current performance and organizational direction of the system.
- Recommend strategies and propose performance measures of operating or managing that increase mobility options for passengers.
- Improve the efficiency and effectiveness or the organization and transportation services.
- Support and encourage defensible, results-based budgets.
- Promote the coordination of public transportation services across geographies."[1]

This final report documents the CTSP process that has been undertaken for the Western Piedmont Regional Transit Authority (WPRTA). The CTSP was directed by

[1] NCDOT-PTD, 2009 Community Transportation Conference, Community Transportation Service Plan presentation, November 2009.

WPRTA's Transportation Advisory Board (TAB), with input from WPRTA's Governing Board, NCDOT-PTD, and staff. Appendix A provides a list of TAB and Governing Board members. The study tasks were undertaken by KFH Group, Inc., in close consultation with the TAB, Governing Board, NCDOT-PTD, and staff.

This CTSP has been developed with a thorough community outreach effort, including public surveys, rider surveys, stakeholder interviews, and a series of public meetings. These outreach efforts have resulted in a plan that highlights transit service improvements that are desired by the community. The implementation of these recommended improvements will help build community support that can in turn help in the development of a dedicated source of local funding for the Authority.

Task work for the CTSP began in October 2009 and was completed in June 2010. The following interim work products were completed and presented to the TAB, staff, the NCDOT-PTD, and the Governing Board during the study time frame:

- Technical Memorandum #1: Existing Services (March 2010)
- Technical Memorandum #2: Transit Needs Analysis (March 2010)
- Technical Memorandum #3: Service and Organizational Alternatives (May 2010)

Public meetings were held during the third week in June, 2010. The public meetings were structured as informal, open-house events, from 3:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. One meeting was held in each of the four counties. The results from these public meetings are incorporated into the "public involvement description" of this CTSP (Chapter 5). Public outreach for the Plan has included the general public, private, and non-profit transportation providers, human service agencies, and targeted populations that include individuals with low incomes, and limited English proficiency.

WPRTA BACKGROUND AND STUDY PURPOSE

WPRTA, doing business as Greenway Public Transportation, was formed in 2007 and operationally consolidated in 2008. WPRTA is a four-county, urban-rural transit authority with seven jurisdictional members, including the Counties of Alexander, Burke, Caldwell, and Catawba, and the Cities of Hickory, Newton, and Conover. WPRTA was formed after several years of discussion and consensus-building in the region, including a Regional Transportation Feasibility study and a Regional Transportation Implementation Plan. Each of these plans focused primarily on organizational issues and consensus-building among elected officials, rather than service planning and public outreach.

During the development and implementation of the WPRTA, it was agreed that service on the street would remain largely unchanged for the first year of consolidated operations so that passengers of the previous four transit programs would not have to change their established patterns. With the successful consolidation of service completed, this CTSP has focused on the following issues:

- Development of a dedicated source of local funding for WPRTA.
- Analysis of current van services, with the goal of improving efficiency and effectiveness.
- Analysis of the feasibility of regional fixed routes.
- Development of a vision for public transit and the new agency.
- Analysis of the feasibility of intercity bus services on a few potential corridors -- Boone/Hickory/Charlotte; Salisbury/Asheville.
- An assessment of the current method used to split capital and operating costs between the rural and urban components of the program.

SPECIFIC GOALS AND ISSUES

At the beginning of the study process, the following goals and issues for the CTSP were articulated by WPRTA staff and TAB members:

Goal 1: Develop a vision for public transportation in the Western Piedmont region.

Issues:

- What level of public transportation services are desired by the communities?
  - Transit dependent/elderly/people with disabilities
  - Commuters/choice riders
  - Local/intra-regional/out-of-region
- What level of public transportation is affordable?
- What is the constrained and unconstrained vision for transit in the region?

Goal 2: Develop an accurate assessment of WPRTA's operating and capital costs with the ability to allocate among jurisdictions and between urban, rural, fixed-route, and demand-response services.

Issues:

- WPRTA needs to fully understand the new Authority's cost structure so that it can allocate its federal and state resources properly between rural and urban sources. Equitable cost allocation among jurisdictional partners is also important.

- WPRTA also needs to ensure that there is an equitable local match among the jurisdictional partners, based on service levels provided in each jurisdiction.

- WPRTA needs to fully understand the new Authority's cost structure so that it can cover its costs when providing contractual transportation services.

Goal 3: Identify and cultivate a stable, dedicated source of local funding.

Issues:

- Each of the member jurisdictions contributes financially to WPRTA based on the original resolution, crafted in 2007. These amounts, from each member's general fund, are used as matching funds for federal funding that the Authority receives. These amounts were predicated on the current level of service and do not support any growth of transit in the region.

- New legislation passed in the State allows for a ¼ cent sales tax to help fund public transportation. This tax can be levied by counties when approved by referendum vote. The State Legislature also authorized counties and regional transit authorities to raise vehicle registration fees for public transit. Both of these options were researched for the CTSP.

Goal 4: Examine ways in which WPRTA's services can reach a broader market, including regional and long distance commuters.

Issues:

- The WPRTA region is located along major travel corridors where commuter/express bus service within the four counties and to areas outside of the current service area may be feasible.
- Building a diverse rider base will help grow public support for the development of a dedicated source of local funding.

Goal 5: Study existing routes and services to see if there are opportunities to make changes that would better serve the riders, increase ridership, and/or improve system efficiency.

Issues:

- The merging of the four previously independent transit programs has resulted in a very large demand-response/subscription base. There may be opportunities to consolidate some of these services and/or transition them to deviated fixed routes.

- The urbanized area fixed routes may need to be adjusted based on development and ridership trends.

Goal 6: Examine the feasibility of providing intercity bus service on a few potential corridors: Boone/Hickory/Charlotte; and Salisbury/Asheville.

Issues:

- There is no intercity bus service currently provided in these major travel corridors.

- The Piedmont Authority for Regional Transportation (PART), based in the Greensboro area, has had success in implementing an intercity bus route from the Greensboro area to Boone. This success could potentially be replicated on routes originating in and passing through the WPRTA service area.

- There are specific service requirements with regard to accessing federal S.5311(f) funding for intercity bus transportation, including providing a meaningful connection to the national intercity bus network.

To the extent possible, the study process focused on these goals and issues.

FINAL REPORT

This final report documents the study process and is organized in the following manner:

- Chapter 1: Introduction
- Chapter 2: Existing Services
- Chapter 3: Transit Needs Analysis

- Chapter 4: Service and Organizational Alternatives
- Chapter 5: Five Year Plan

This final report was presented to WPRTA staff, the TAB, NCDOT-PTD, and the Governing Board. Members of these groups were afforded time to comment on the draft plan, with KFH Group incorporating the changes and then producing the Final CTSP for WPRTA. It was adopted by the WPRTA Board in August 2010.