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A How-To Manual For Building a Rural Transportation Coalition

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Executive Summary

Rural communities know transportation projects succeed with diverse, committed teams behind them. The following report details best practices in coalition-building collected through interviews with 53 representatives from the ten rural communities awarded Accessible Transportation Community Initiative (ATCI) grants in 2016. Their advice and experiences are divided here into the *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *why*, and *how* of building a successful transportation coalition.

Who. ATCI coalition participants found the diversity of perspectives in their coalitions to be a key contributor to their achievements. Successful coalitions comprised a wide variety of organizations, employment positions, and personalities. Some coalitions found smaller teams to be nimbler, while others appreciated the more substantial networks present in a larger coalition. Subcommittee structures allowed coalitions to reap the benefits of all participants' expertise while focusing on a few specific projects. In every case, however, a committed core of dedicated participants was key to seeing projects through to completion. ATCI coalition members also attributed much of their success to finding a humble, trusted, well-organized project manager. A few coalitions benefitted from housing project management outside the community's most powerful organization or bringing in an impartial facilitator to run meetings. Interviewees felt building time for coalition management into the project leader's employment position was essential.

What. Leading a coalition can be an enormous logistical task, but interviewees found a few simple practices helped their coalitions stay on course. One strategy was to define goals that were narrow enough to be achievable, but broad enough to keep a diverse coalition energized around them. Basic practices like distributing concise meeting minutes, allowing members to volunteer for tasks, and using “call-in” technologies kept busy members involved. Coalitions also built engagement and bred goodwill among members with clear accountability structures, orientation for newcomers, periodic reflection exercises, and open decision-making processes.

Where. Providing rural transportation is challenging, but rural areas hold certain advantages in building successful transportation coalitions. In small communities, the phenomenon of every employee wearing “multiple hats” means professional connections are frequently dense and deep. In addition, rural communities often have a long-standing awareness of the need for transportation. ATCI coalitions found it helpful for their leaders to have “regional fluency” and to already be integrated into the community.

When. Part of building a successful coalition is seizing a moment in which conditions are ripe for action. Grants or new funding streams propelled some coalitions forward. In other cases, the recent release of a community needs assessment or other document outlining a transportation problem provided a good moment to gather those who shared a desire to address it.

Why. ATCI coalition members cited a variety of benefits stemming from participation in a coalition. Interviewees were grateful for the opportunity to build relationships and engage in mutual education on existing services. They found much more was accomplished together than apart. When asked what motivated them to participate, coalition members often cited a desire to represent the people they serve or a positive existing relationship with someone already involved. Coalitions kept their visions in the foreground throughout the grant process by writing clear mission statements and putting them on top of every agenda.

How. Coalitions benefitted from early conversations about hurdles related to liability, technology, and volunteer drivers. Interviewees said they executed projects effectively by dividing labor, remaining flexible, and addressing mistrust or concerns about inter-partner competition directly. Successful coalitions coped with staff turnover by asking organizational partners directly for replacements. Stigma against users of transportation was an ongoing challenge, but with patience and effective marketing, ATCI coalitions showed all residents that transit services are for them.

The benefits of forming a rural transportation coalition are evident in the fact that many ATCI coalitions continue to meet, despite the expiration of their shared grant. A coalition is key to sustainability; the priorities or leadership of a single organization can change, which jeopardizes a project if there is no larger team behind it. In a coalition, responsibility and benefits are distributed, and the efforts of a group lend credibility and attract attention. This report showcases the immense diversity of practices rural transportation coalitions use, but the leaders interviewed were adamant on one commonality across initiatives: transportation issues cannot be solved alone.

A How-To Manual for Building a Rural Transportation Coalition

Rural communities know transportation projects succeed with diverse, committed teams behind them. Coalition-building is both an art and a science: the recipe for success requires certain “X factors” unique to each community, but also universal ingredients of good communication, wise leadership, and a creative mix of perspectives. The following report details best practices in coalition-building collected through interviews with 53 representatives from the ten rural communities awarded Accessible Transportation Community Initiative (ATCI) grants in 2016. Their advice and experiences are divided here into the *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *why*, and *how* of building a successful transportation coalition.

ABOUT ATCI

Recognizing that accessible transit is a critical need in communities throughout the United States, Easterseals Project Action Consulting (ESPAC) created a systems-change model called the Accessible Transportation Community Initiative (ATCI). ESPAC designed ATCI to improve coordination and collaboration around a transportation-related problem area. The ATCI model has been key to the success of the coalitions that have pioneered it. Its component parts include: the development of a community-wide coalition representing a diverse cross-section of organizations, all of whom are committed to a long-range approach to address area transportation needs; support for the creation and maintenance of strong and equal linkages among the community stakeholders; attracting and sustaining commitment at the highest levels of organizations to work on systems-change solutions; creation of and continued follow-up on action steps to address identified issues; and the

building of and commitment to a sustainability plan long before the initial coalition effort is completed. ESPAC provides ATCI communities with on-site facilitation and targeted technical assistance to hold a two-day community event, develop an action plan for their specific community initiative, and implement the plan developed. In 2016, an independent review committee selected ten communities, and each received \$100,000 over a period of two and a half years to increase and/or improve their local accessible transportation options. The ten communities included coalitions in Dodge County, WI; Door County, WI; Fort Atkinson, WI; Waukesha County, WI; Winnebago County, WI; Mille Lacs County, MN; Pierre, SD; Snoqualmie Valley, WA; Southwest Washington, WA; and Whatcom County, WA.

Who

“Who should be in the room?” This is the question every budding coalition must ask itself, usually more than once. The following are a few of the elements present in successful coalitions:

Diversity of organizational perspective and expertise. ATCI coalition members found that one of the most important contributors to the success of their projects was the diversity of perspectives in their coalitions. In fact, the diversity of the group was the factor that convinced some organizations these efforts would be worthwhile to join in the first place. ATCI coalitions included businesses and transit agencies, human service providers and economic development corporations, schools and mayors, advocacy groups and faith communities and tribal leadership, to name only a few. Each of these partners brought a particular expertise to the table. Some were skilled in marketing, some in event planning. Others had a deep knowledge of grants and brought to the group a savvy in navigating applications. Still others held close ties to communities of color and facilitated the building of trust between the coalition and the communities it hoped to serve. Here are a few other members coalitions found to be instrumental:

A strong academic partner. The ATCI coalition in Dodge County, WI wanted to make a compelling case to local businesses on the need for transportation in the county, but needed someone with sufficient data expertise to do so. University of Wisconsin Population Health played a critical role in establishing the severity of the transportation deficits in Dodge County and how those deficits hurt the local workforce. This piqued the interest of area employers.

Organizations connected to those most needing transportation. Also in Dodge County, The United Way and The Gathering Source (a local food pantry) connected the coalition to people needing transportation to work. Many of these individuals had exhausted their unemployment benefits. They were no longer attending job fairs, and were not included in official unemployment numbers as job-seekers, but wanted to work if they could find transportation. The trusted partners who had existing relationships with those in greatest need helped the coalition find participants for its Getting-to-Work pilot program.

A nontraditional stakeholder. NexGen Door County is an organization dedicated to attracting and retaining young professionals in Door County, WI. NexGen's expertise proved instrumental on the marketing subcommittee of the ATCI coalition in Door County. The coalition's willingness to seek out creative partnerships allowed it to access skillsets and constituencies that might not have been available in the existing network of traditional participants.

Maintaining a broad range of perspectives in a coalition is not without challenges. Friction is bound to arise when each organization has a mission and scope of work distinct from everyone else. However, ATCI coalition members were clear that varying perspectives can spark creativity and honest dialogue. Interviewees said this kind of frustration was necessary and worth working through to build a strong, rich team.

The simple fact of having many voices in a room together can illuminate easy-to-fix problems. The ATCI coalition in Pierre, SD, mentioned to the local transit agency during a meeting that when a customer was on hold waiting to speak to a transit agency representative, she would hear only silence. This silence could be confusing to callers, who would wonder if they were still connected. Upon learning of the issue, River Cities Transit began to use the hold time to play educational messages about its service. This was a very simple fix, but took people external to the organization to make the problem known.



A bus stop improved by members of the coalition in Whatcom County, WA

Diversity of position. Coalitions should consider not just the mix of organizations represented, but also which positions coalition members hold within their organizations. The composition of employment roles in a coalition affects the group's work, and the representative that will be most beneficial to the coalition's work depends on the partner organization in question. Coalitions may not have control over which individual an organization sends as its representative, but to the degree that they do, the question is worth giving thought in advance. A few successful approaches:

The executive. With certain organizations, ATCI coalitions found they needed a high-level decision-maker who did not have to go through multiple levels of superiors to get a ball rolling.

The worker bee. With other organizations, the most effective and motivated representative was one with a keen awareness of the need for transportation derived from seeing it firsthand. These were the frontline social workers, nurses, economic development staffers, and more who were reminded daily of the importance of the coalition's work because of their direct contact with people in need of transportation.

In rural areas, people often "wear many hats" in their positions, and it may be easier to find someone who is familiar with the community's needs *and* holds decision-making power.



A 5310-funded vehicle purchased through the efforts of the coalition in Waukesha County, WI

Diversity of personality. Over and over, interviewees mentioned the benefits of having “the right people” in a coalition – people who are devoted, are proactive, and understand the needs of the community. However, several coalition members mentioned diversity of personality as key to their successes. While coalition participants should be unified in their commitment to the success of the project, having a mix of leadership styles can be helpful. ATCI coalitions thrived on a mix of “doers” and “thinkers.” The “thinkers” slow the group down, make sure it has conscientiously considered all potential issues the project might encounter, and help the coalition employ a patient process in which action is taken the “right way,” not just the fast way. The “doers” make sure the project does not stall. Again, ATCI grantees noted this kind of diversity at times creates friction, but the diversity is productive in the long run.

The right group size. ATCI team members gave mixed reports on the ideal coalition size. Some groups found large teams could be unwieldy and generated “too many cooks in the kitchen;” small groups were more efficient for these projects. For others, having a large coalition was instrumental to the group’s success. One coalition member noted that if the group has a specific scope of work for a project or grant, a bigger group is better. If the project outline is general, however, it is easier to make decisions about what projects to pursue with a smaller, nimbler team. Here are two successful approaches to consider:

Subcommittees. Many coalitions divided work into subcommittees, thus reaping the benefits of all participants’ expertise while focusing on a few specific projects. In subcommittees, people with a particular expertise can focus on the areas in which their skills are needed.

Levels of involvement. Another strategy is to convene a large group for an initial brainstorming meeting, and then allow the group to winnow naturally to include those who can commit significant time to realizing the brainstormed projects. In this way, the coalition can offer differing levels of commitment for partners with varied amounts of discretionary time: the core group plans the initiative, approves decisions, and drives the implementation, while the larger group weighs in periodically as needed, shares its network, or provides the coalition with publicity through social media and newsletters. Each plays an important role. This approach can translate into different frequency of meetings for the core steering committee versus the larger coalition. The key, however, is to keep the larger stakeholder group informed throughout. One interviewee emphasized that if the core group summons the larger group to meet again after years of little contact, it is unlikely anyone will show.

Rural communities often have to fight just to be recognized by decision-makers; growing a large enough coalition to attract attention can feel necessary for the survival of the project. However, there may be times when diversity of perspective is more important than sheer numbers, both in the coalition and among the community residents providing input.

A committed core. It is typically not hard to get people to the table; the challenge is keeping them there. Coalitions must anticipate some attrition due to staff turnover or shifting organizational priorities. The key is to have a handful of individuals and organizations who commit to seeing the project through.

The right project manager. The choice of a project manager is in many cases the most important decision a coalition will make. Who does the group know that is organized and assertive enough to nudge people about tasks they have not completed, but respected and gentle enough not to drive away participants in the process? A determined, optimistic project manager will keep motivation up when challenges arise. Some of the words ATCI coalition members used to describe good project managers were trusted, dynamic, conscientious, passionate, focused, humble, and driven. While this seems a tall order for any one person, interviewees felt that these qualities in their leaders determined much of the success of their efforts. Here are a few successful approaches for choosing a project manager:

A known quantity. Someone the community has seen be successful in other project-management endeavors may be especially important in a rural area in which trust and relationships are paramount.

A people-person. A skilled convener, someone committed to meticulous partnership development who thinks beyond the “usual suspects” will build a strong coalition.

A less powerful partner. When there is one especially powerful organization in the community, it may be best not to have that player lead coalition meetings. Often through no fault of its own, that entity can become the dominant topic of conversation, with others expecting it to make the decisions and take on the labor. Diffusing attention across partners builds buy-in, and distributes responsibility and benefit. The responsibility can overwhelm the representative of the key organization if the group places it at the center of the initiative, while others may leave meetings thinking the project was designed for one partner’s benefit only. The irony is that sometimes only the community’s most powerful entity has the time to manage the project. If this is the case, that player can send fewer or lower-ranking representatives to lead the coalition, stay quieter in meetings, or divide labor among subcommittees that are each led by other organizations. More importantly, the most powerful entity should not unilaterally choose the projects the group will pursue.

Someone with sufficient time. Most important of all, according to interviewees, is that management of the coalition be built into the project manager’s employment responsibilities. The message from ATCI participants was clear – coalitions flounder when the project manager does not have sufficient time to devote to following up on action items, remembering to send out detailed agendas and minutes, recruiting new partners, and all the other tasks that accompany leadership. Building coalition management into a position is critical to sustainability. One interviewee even recommended coalitions outline for themselves in writing: “What does it mean to lead this coalition? What support will the leader provide?”

In Pierre, SD, River Cities Transit is the main transit provider, and community members have often looked to it as the only entity with power to improve transit options in the area. River Cities Transit wisely brought in a trusted facilitator and project manager external to its organization to ensure others besides the transit agency benefitted from the ATCI coalition’s work, and all voices were given equal weight at coalition meetings. Multiple interviewees from Pierre said this was a successful strategy and created goodwill within the coalition.

An external facilitator. ESPAC facilitated the kick-off meeting for each ATCI coalition. A number of coalitions found having an external facilitator so valuable that they subsequently brought in other external facilitators to run meetings. Having the meeting run by someone impartial, who is disengaged from the work of the coalition, put coalition members on more equal footing and meant everyone could participate. One coalition leader said that when small-town politics present a hurdle, or there exists mistrust between partners, an external facilitator may be able to speak more frankly than a long-time community member could.

Political support. Many ATCI coalition members reported a desire for local politicians to have been more involved in the work of the coalition. These interviewees felt political support would have lent their efforts credibility, and would have provided opportunities to educate officeholders on the difficulties of working with scant funding and the policy limits imposed on transit programs. However, it should be noted that several coalitions enjoyed substantial support from local politicians, as detailed in the box below.

Several politicians were heavily involved in the work of the ATCI coalitions. Former City Councilor Beth Gehred of Fort Atkinson, WI served as project manager. Mayors Marge Agnew and Pete Pederson were key coalition players in Mille Lacs County, MN. Mayor Kim Lisk of Car-nation, WA was a regular attendee and contributor of ideas to the coalition in the Snoqualmie Valley. County Councilmember Kathy Lambert was also a consistent advocate for the coalition in the Snoqualmie Valley and helped it engage partners who ultimately provided financial support to its work. These are only a few examples and not a comprehensive list.

Another coalition reported a creative strategy of first developing relationships with city planners, who in turn helped the coalition get the ear of council members.

Businesses. Coalition members found that many in the private sector do not recognize a serious need for transportation exists. This made businesses some of the most difficult organizations to recruit to ATCI coalitions. Employees may take their complaints to a transit agency or assume their own issues getting to work are personal and not systemic, resulting in their employers never hearing a problem exists. Interviewees found that appealing to a business agenda was most effective. It helps to have a “translator” who knows the lingo of industry and can explain to businesses how transportation may boost employee recruitment and retention, contribute to economic development of business sustainability, or expand customer bases. Having a prominent business leader as an advocate also lends a transportation initiative credibility in the private sector. Companies will generally need to see convincing data showing the existence of a substantial population that would work if transportation were provided, and cannot work without it. Housing the management of an employee transportation program within a government agency or nonprofit attracts businesses that do not want the administrative responsibility of managing their own transportation programs.

When starting a transportation-to-work program, interviewees from the ATCI coalition in Dodge County, WI recommend looking for companies that:

- Are experiencing a hiring drought
- Are mid-size (big enough to have some financial flexibility, small enough to be nimble in their internal decision-making)
- Are looking to grow
- Have “third shift” employees who work overnight
- Are located in a geographic cluster with other interested companies, but not in an easily-accessed town center

These businesses are likely to be interested, if they are provided with early success stories demonstrating the model works.



The Catch-a-Ride volunteer driver program, developed by the coalition in Winnebago County, WI

Early contact with hesitant or disinterested partners. In any community transportation effort, a coalition will encounter organizations that do not see the work of the coalition as a priority, or do not see the relevance of transit to their employees or clients. It is critical to have hesitant partners, or ones from whom the coalition expects resistance, at the table from the very beginning. Delivering them an already-made plan to adopt is a recipe for failure. If it is important these entities participate, ATCI coalition members recommended finding out what these organizations' pain points are. What transportation problems do they see? What would they like to see done about those problems? What data would they need to see to be convinced a problem exists? What do they hope to get out of any coalition effort for their operations or the population they serve? A workforce supply? A new dispatch software? A shared-ride program to get patients to medical appointments? Once the partner's needs have been identified, the coalition can reflect on how to deliver on those aims while staying true to the group's mission. Coalitions should communicate why that partner's participation matters and explain how it stands to benefit. Interviewees pointed out, however, that the most passionate participants were usually the most valuable ones, and that concentrating efforts on retaining those members was most fruitful. "You want people to be in the coalition for the right reasons, not just for their own agency's needs," said one participant.

The Human Services Council, which led the ATCI coalition in Southwest Washington State, met in person with over 30 potential partners to discuss what the coalition would be doing and ask for participation. Holding the meetings at the office of each partner showed a willingness to exert real effort to ensure their inclusion. This personal attention became the foundation of a large, diverse coalition and a successful series of projects.

The ATCI coalition in Waukesha County needed a transportation provider to participate in the coalition, and reached out to a local van company that needed additional ridership while it tried to grow its business. The coalition formed a compelling case as to why the partnership would be productive, and it proved to be a perfect match – each partner needed what the other could provide.

End users. One interviewee cautioned against thinking all people with disabilities are represented by organizations that serve people with disabilities. The disability community is immensely diverse and many people with disabilities never enter official support systems. People with disabilities constituted some of the most valuable sources of input on needs and desirable transportation solutions across ATCI coalitions; seeking their direct input was critical. The same was true of older adults in ATCI communities.

Public Involvement. A number of ATCI coalition members reported regret that their groups had not conducted more outreach to the public to talk about the work of the coalition. Hearing about the coalition from multiple sources can build excitement in the community and trust among hesitant partners. "You need people to buy into the system you're building," said one interviewee. "You can build a great system that no one uses." Building buy-in requires understanding the population and getting public involvement from the beginning.

When the coalition in Winnebago County, WI was conducting a needs assessment of transportation barriers, it asked about computer skills and found in its data that a lack of internet access was a substantial obstacle for some residents. The group instituted a phone line so riders could call and book trips through a live person. By seeking public input early, the coalition avoided a situation in which riders could not access the program the coalition had developed.

What

Leading a coalition can be an enormous logistical task, but ATCI participants found a few simple practices helped coalitions and their project managers stay on course. The following are a few commonalities on “what” to do that emerged from interviews.

Selecting effective goals. One perennial challenge coalitions face is defining goals that are narrow enough to be achievable, but broad enough to keep a diverse group energized around them. Interviewees found that choosing several specific projects, each with a different focus, enabled them to strike a balance between ambitious and realistic goals. Choosing projects that benefitted multiple partners also helped.



Cross-walk improvements: one of the projects completed through the work of the coalition in Fort Atkinson, WI

The coalition in Fort Atkinson, WI accomplished six distinct projects with its ATCI grant, each targeting different mobility needs in the city's population. The group found its diversity of goals to be a boon: when it encountered difficulties pursuing one project, it could temporarily turn its efforts to another. The variety of tasks also made division of labor among coalition members feasible. However, the projects were contained and specific enough to be achievable with limited time and money.



Members of the coalition in Southwest Washington State

Keeping busy members involved. Even with supportive leadership, it can be difficult for an employee to add new responsibilities into an already-full workload. An enduring challenge for ATCI coalition members was making space in their “day jobs” for the work of the coalition. Especially in rural communities, employees are already spread thin. A few successful strategies to address this issue include:

- Meeting over lunch hour and providing food
- Meeting at a central location to limit travel time
- Having regularly-scheduled meetings (e.g. the first Wednesday of the month) so members can predict in advance the blocks of time they will need to carve out
- Not requiring every member to attend if only one project involving a specific set of members will be discussed in that session. A coalition structure that includes subcommittee assignments builds this practice into all meetings.
- Enabling members to call in if they are not able to attend in person, or using video-conferencing platforms to meet. Now that the COVID-19 pandemic has shown the utility of the technology, many interviewees, especially those from coalitions in which members were geographically dispersed, wish they had used video calls more. Others felt in-person meetings better allowed leaders to read social cues and gauge members’ satisfaction with the coalition’s progress. In-person meetings are most important early in the coalition-building process.

Cultivating efficiency. A reputation as an inefficient leader drives away potential partners, one interviewee said. The following are a few ways ATCI teams made the most of their members’ time.

- Concise, purposeful emails for updates that do not need to be discussed in person
- Timely distribution of detailed agendas and meeting minutes. Meeting minutes helped coalitions get those who were absent at the prior meeting up to speed, so the next meeting was not spent reviewing what had occurred at the previous one.
- To whatever degree possible, a central, easily-accessed repository of coalition documents – for example, using Dropbox with education on how to use it

- Small deadlines, a detailed project plan, and a clear project timeline. If there is no external grant structure, coalitions can make deadlines for themselves to keep up momentum.
- Defined short- and long-term milestones

Fostering accountability. A thorough project manager and a clear accountability structure are essential ingredients in a successful coalition. ATCI coalition members felt much of their success was attributable to documenting who was responsible for what, and having a “point person” who reliably followed up on action items in meetings, over email, or by phone. Relying on individuals to update their own activities in a project management software tended to work poorly. Interviewees found that a little bit of positive peer pressure went a long way: spending some of the meeting time reviewing outstanding action items from the last meeting created an expectation that everyone would come prepared with an update on the tasks for which they were responsible. “No one likes to say, ‘I didn’t do the thing I was supposed to do,’” observed a coalition member. Accountability strategies are excellent tools for building engagement among coalition members.

Using subcommittees. A number of coalitions benefitted from breaking their groups into subcommittees which met separately. This practice helped distribute leadership responsibilities and focus meeting time, especially when tackling a complex, multi-faceted project. Allowing members to self-select into subcommittees that interested them ensured members were excited about the work they were doing. One critical element of a subcommittee structure is a mechanism by which subcommittees can stay abreast of one another’s work – for example, through a periodic all-coalition meeting or routine email update. Without that mechanism, people may grow to feel disconnected from the other limbs of the project.

Encouraging volunteers. Coalition members consistently felt that having members volunteer for tasks was more successful than assigning tasks. By asking for volunteers, coalitions build a sense of investment and allow people to pursue aspects of the project that are of most interest to them, that help *their* work most. This practice also ensures that whoever ends up with a given responsibility has the time to complete it.

Creating decision-making processes. Establishing explicit decision-making processes facilitates strong intra-group communication. One interviewee recounted an instance in which the coalition discussed a possible course of action, and some members left the meeting thinking a decision had been reached, while others thought the conversation had simply been about weighing the pros and cons of action. Coalitions benefit when they lay out plainly: how will we know when we have made a decision? Will there be a vote, or some other way of reaching a deliberate conclusion? Having a process eliminates misunderstandings and backchannel decisions, even inadvertent ones, made between key players. Plenty of opportunities for group input and group votes also build investment in the coalition’s work.

Orienting newcomers. Multiple interviewees advised sending new members information on the coalition’s progress and asking if they have questions before they attend their first meeting. Also, because transit is full of acronyms, deconstructing the jargon helps new members feel welcome.

Reflecting on progress. At least one ATCI coalition distributed periodic (short) surveys to coalition members to see how they felt the group’s efforts were going and how communications could be improved. Coalition leaders can also ask members in these surveys if there is an organization, skillset, or known individual who is missing from the coalition and should be involved. Making sure members were on the same page about how frequently to meet was also critical. Most coalitions found monthly meetings established the right rhythm.

The common element among all of these practices is simply good communication. The box below illustrates one instance in which good communication kept a coalition's work from stalling.

The coalition in Winnebago County, WI encountered a problem in which a rider was “no-showing” on his rides to work, which were provided through the efforts of coalition members. Rather than letting this drive a wedge between the entity representing the rider and the entity working with his employer, one coalition member simply picked up the phone to ask why this individual was not taking his rides to work. This call reinforced a culture of openness and honesty between partners in the coalition that has kept the group meeting weekly long past the expiration of the ATCI grant.

Where

Providing excellent transportation in a rural area is inevitably challenging – funding is limited, distances are long, population density is low, and those with a passion for transportation are often pulled in too many directions to take on something new. However, rural areas hold certain advantages in building successful transportation coalitions. The present section details two sets of strategies for success in a rural area. The first is making a compelling case to decision-makers about why rural areas are suited for transportation, and the second is finding a leader who has regional fluency.

Making the case to decision-makers. Here are a few reasons rural ATCI communities believe their initiatives thrived, which can be used as talking points with those who believe transportation is too difficult to institute in a rural area:

The unique dynamics of small, rural communities. In small communities, interviewees said, relationships, mutual respect, and trust have often already been built. In this respect, some rural coalitions are already a step ahead – people generally acknowledge the need to work together, and there is often an existing sense of interdependence. Several coalition members described this as simply part of the philosophy of small towns. “Any additional support is needed badly and welcome in our area,” one coalition organizer said. The phenomenon of every employee wearing “multiple hats” and handling many issue areas means professional connections are frequently dense and deep. The funding crises associated with the COVID-19 pandemic will result in an even greater need for collaboration in the future to create economies of scale with scant resources. Rural communities may be uniquely poised to be successful.

An existing awareness of need. According to interviewees, there is often a long-standing awareness of the need for rural transportation among nonprofits and government agencies, and sometimes among businesses and residents. A clear need means less effort must be expended convincing partners to be involved.

Finding a leader who has regional expertise. While some rural coalitions found temporary external facilitators helpful in extricating local tensions from the discussion, it was helpful for the long-term coalition leaders to have “regional fluency.” Rural coalitions are better served when their leaders are integrated in the community, know its dynamics, and have a wide network of contacts simply because they reside there. Having a leader who lives in the area, and has for some time, also means the individual has a personal stake in the community’s quality of transportation. Several coalition members mentioned the importance of having a leader who understands the history of how transportation programs in the area evolved to be as they are now and what the community has tried before. This historical knowledge helped coalitions choose projects that were likely to succeed. At the same time, coalitions must balance the need for historical expertise with the need for new members who bring energy and optimism about the coalition’s possibilities.

A case study on regional fluency: One coalition brought in an outside company as part of its project plan, and encountered a great deal of local skepticism. By placing the project under the name of a trusted community member instead of under the name of the outside partner, the group was able to retain the involvement of the outside company without losing community support for the project.



A coalition meeting in Door County, WI

When

Part of building a successful coalition is seizing a moment in which conditions are ripe for action. Here are several situations that propelled coalitions forward:

An available grant or new funding stream. The ATCI grant provided communities with money to launch transportation projects, but the funding itself was not the only benefit of the grant. Grants also build enthusiasm; they “empower people to think creatively,” one coalition leader said, and remind communities they are capable of making change. Grants get the attention of decision-makers and pique the curiosity of partners who may be wary of collaboration. Project managers are sometimes tempted to downplay the expected time

commitment of coalition involvement, but one coalition leader explained that sometimes organizations are *looking* for a more substantial project, one that will result in action and “not just talk.” Many mentioned they were initially interested in joining an ATCI coalition because the grant conveyed a sense of urgency. It is important to be honest about the time commitment and make sure people understand it, but also make sure they understand the worth of the time commitment.

Several coalitions leveraged their ATCI grants to find other funds to sustain the coalition’s work. For example, the coalition in Pierre, SD leveraged its ATCI grant to fund a joint trip-booking system shared by the transit agency and a local hospital. In other cases, an additional grant was not needed – a key partner simply saw the value of the coalition’s work and committed to sustaining some piece of it. A social service agency called Hopelink now funds staff time to convene the coalition in Snoqualmie Valley, WA; Specialty Cheese in Dodge County, WI funds the employee rideshare program the coalition established; and Jefferson County, WI agreed to fund part of a county Mobility Manager position because of the work of the coalition in Fort Atkinson.

Low unemployment. For projects that seek to transport people to employment, low levels of unemployment may mean local industries are having trouble hiring and will be more willing to consider fresh ideas for worker recruitment and retention, including transportation programs.

A newly-recognized need. Many coalition members cited an obvious or commonly-understood need for transportation services as a factor that motivated them to form or join an ATCI coalition. When a community needs assessment has recently been released, or some other document outlining a clear regional transportation problem, this is a good moment to gather those who share a desire to address it. Coalition members reported that transit agencies and businesses, in particular, often needed convincing data to justify an expansion of service or the creation of a new transportation initiative. Having a compelling reason for the significant time investment required to do coalition work is critical to engaging certain partners.

Why

Coalitions are bound together by a sense of purpose and a common understanding of “why” their work matters. The present section details the benefits ATCI coalition members derived from participation, the reasons they joined in the first place, and strategies for maintaining a group’s orientation toward its original mission.

Benefits of participation. ATCI coalition members cited a wide variety of benefits stemming from participation in a coalition, beyond the implementation of their projects. Below are some of the most commonly mentioned positive outcomes of coalition-building. These may be helpful in building the case for participation to hesitant partners.

New relationships. Interviewees consistently said that one of the greatest benefits of being part of a transit-oriented coalition was developing relationships with partners whom they did not know before, and strengthening relationships with partners they knew only a little. Many felt their ATCI coalitions were strong enough that they were likely to work on other transportation issues together in the future even without the grant. In a few cases, coalition members felt some relationships might even be mobilized to address issues *other* than transportation, as there is a great deal of issue overlap in rural communities.

In Whatcom County, WA, the City of Bellingham and Whatcom Transportation Authority now work more closely on fixing bus stops and the areas surrounding them.

Since the conclusion of their transportation project, partners from the coalition in Dodge County, WI have been working together on a possible childcare center for employees of local businesses.

Connections made in the ATCI coalition facilitated an easier COVID-19 response in Door County, WI, according to interviewees. Door-Tran, a non-profit transportation service provider in Door County, also does “lunch and learns” at hospitals and government centers to spread awareness of its service. These connections emerged directly from the ATCI coalition.

The coalition in Snoqualmie Valley, WA, is composed of a number of small cities, none of which had the capacity to do a full transportation needs assessment independently. By joining forces to do a needs assessment for the entire Valley, each city benefitted from the larger group’s work and gained a fuller understanding of its residents’ needs.

Pooled resources. Interviewees expressed a unanimous opinion that more was accomplished together than would have been accomplished apart. The pooling of resources, ideas, contacts, and labor was critical to advancing ATCI projects.

A chance to demonstrate sincerity. One interviewee pointed out that if a resident of her community called to complain about poor transportation, she could reply: “We’re part of this group; do you want to come with me to the next meeting?”

Mutual education. Another benefit ATCI coalition members consistently cited was the opportunity to learn about one another’s services. For example, traditional transit providers learned about the policies of medical establishments and the reasons for those policies. Medical representatives learned the actual dollars and cents of what it costs to provide transit services, why fares are raised or services cut, and why providers are sometimes unable to be as flexible as other industries want them to be. The mutual education that occurs within a coalition is instrumental in building empathy, resolving myths, alleviating frustration, and setting realistic expectations. ATCI coalition members felt that making opportunities for this kind of discussion was critical. One employer said she felt the discussions that occurred in her ATCI coalition “made [her] a better person,” more sensitive not only to the transportation needs of her employees but other challenges they experience as well. Ironically, though interviewees frequently stated they avoid participating in groups that gravitate to endless discussion without action, the discussion itself proved a truly helpful foundation for project implementation.

Beyond fostering understanding, sometimes this mutual education resulted in direct problem-solving. Some partners may be fearful of change, seeing it as inconvenient at best, and a threat to their operations at worst. Others may feel they are already meeting the community’s needs, perhaps not realizing that it is the ecosystem of transportation options that is deficient and not their service. These concerns are often resolvable through in-person discussion. “We think we know each other’s issues, but we don’t always,” said one coalition member. This individual explained that prior to joining the coalition, he had not fully understood how challenging marketing was for other providers. As a result of learning about the problem, he was able to use his organization’s platform to assist those providers in marketing their services.

Reasons for participation. Members were motivated to join ATCI coalitions for a variety of reasons. In addition to the benefits listed above, the following were motivating factors for interviewees as they considered whether to participate:

Advocacy opportunities. Many coalition members reported joining the group simply to be a voice for those they serve, without specific hopes or expectations. Others wanted to join to be able to share about the work of their organizations with a large audience.

Personal relationships. Other new partners were interested because of a positive existing relationship with someone already involved in the coalition. Leveraging individual contacts was very effective in recruiting participants.

A chance to learn what is possible. One employer who ultimately did not participate in her coalition's employment transportation program reported that she was nonetheless glad she joined the coalition. "Even though we don't have an immediate need for employee transportation right now," she said, "in the future we might, and it was helpful to understand what our options are."



TRY

TRY: TRANSPORTATION RESOURCES FOR YOU - WEDNESDAY, MAY 30, 2018

We are a group of local officials, volunteers, and social concerns activists looking to increase transportation accessibility for the residents of northern Mille Lacs & Kanabec counties. We are seeking volunteer drivers to help our residents gain independence, access necessities, and stay involved in our communities. Do you like driving? Enjoy helping others? Have spare time? Please consider becoming a volunteer driver!

A screenshot of the TRY website, launched by the coalition in Mille Lacs County, MN

The coalition in Winnebago County, WI secured employment transportation for two young refugees who needed work experience. Both initially worked seasonal jobs that started in the early after-noon and ended in the evening, outside of the local bus service's hours of operation. The two employees took the bus to work and the coalition's volunteer program took them home. After a successful season of work, one of the refugees was hired full-time elsewhere because of the seasonal work experience. This early success story showed potential partners both the importance of the coalition's program and that the coalition was willing to work with other providers to avoid duplicating services.

Maintaining participation. With complex projects, it is easy to get derailed from the coalition's original mission. The following are ways ATCI coalitions kept their visions in the foreground throughout the grant process. A suggested model to follow would be:

Writing a mission statement. Articulating a shared goal (or several) at the beginning of the process fostered group cohesion.

Defining the problem. Several interviewees cautioned against "working backwards," beginning with available resources and then trying to find a problem to fix. Ensuring there is a specific problem to be fixed, and the group has a common understanding of what it is, must be the first steps.

Putting the mission statement on every agenda. Stating the greater objective at the top of the document that is passed out at meetings gave groups something to refer to if a particular group member tried to steer the group in a direction inconsistent with the fundamental purpose of the coalition.

Reflecting. Periodic reorientation, through discussion or small surveys, helped coalition leaders remain conscious of the wishes of all members.

How

The logistics of organizing a transportation coalition are often challenging. This section provides best practices from interviewees on “how” to execute effective projects as a coalition.

Conversations to have early. Coalition members often wished they had known about or proactively planned how they would confront certain challenges. When some of the barriers below seemed insurmountable, momentum slowed and motivation suffered.

Liability and insurance. This was a substantial obstacle for multiple coalitions striving to start new transportation programs. If the liability involved in transporting people proves an unsolvable barrier, it is better to know this while the coalition still has time to correct course without losing enthusiasm. Multiple coalition members felt they underestimated the role risk management would play in the unfolding of their projects.

Technology and HIPAA. If planning to use a new software platform, it helps to establish early on which technology will be used, which partners will use it, and how it will be used. This includes determining how the software will be safely integrated between organizations to comply with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA). HIPAA presented a barrier midway through the process for several coalitions that had been excited about trying innovative technologies.

Volunteer drivers. Several coalitions found that while helpful, volunteer drivers were often too few and far between to comprise a panacea for their regions’ transportation problems. Volunteers were frequently difficult to recruit because of their concerns about their own personal safety (especially in the era of COVID-19), the financial costs of gas, and their own risk liability. Integrating volunteer services with paid options was a successful strategy for some projects.

Strategies of sustainable coalitions. Several best practices for coping with the perennial challenges of coalition work are detailed below.

Dividing labor. Coalition leaders often found they had to absorb a great deal of work, but an honest admission of feeling overwhelmed sometimes prompted others to take initiative. While a strong leader is essential, creating a culture of “mutual leadership” ensures the coalition’s success will not depend on a single partner. One group tried to make sure everyone walked away from each meeting with something to do. Subcommittees can also be useful in dividing labor.

Remaining flexible. Coalition members reported that it helped not to be unduly hard on themselves when encountering challenges, and to be open to amending the project plan if necessary. In many rural communities, transportation coalitions are venturing into uncharted territory and need one another’s encouragement and celebration of small victories to avoid growing disillusioned. Talking openly about mistakes when they arise, and approaching the work with humility and a sense of humor were successful strategies. One leader found that a lack of expertise actually led to creativity in her coalition.

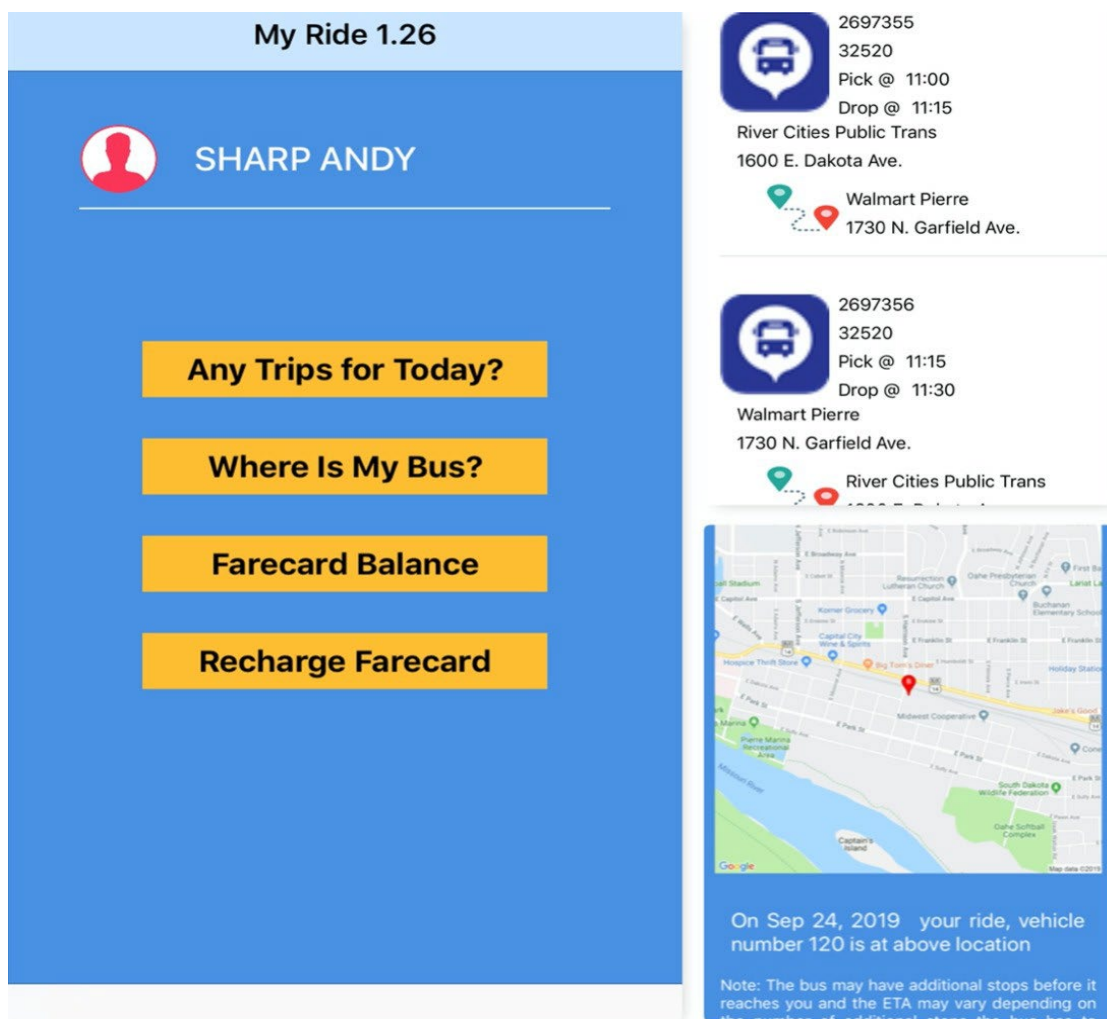
Addressing competition. Multiple coalition members said they encountered partners who were fearful of collaboration with a perceived competitor. Two groups managed this by discussing with the concerned partner what the various funding streams are and the rules attached to each. In both cases, the concerned partner realized the entities actually “drink from different streams,” and collaboration would not hurt their chances of receiving future funding. If working with private-sector businesses on employee transportation, having a non-competitor partner (i.e. a nonprofit or government agency) manage the initiative breeds trust.

Pursuing replacement members. Staff turnover in participating organizations was a consistent challenge for ATCI coalitions, although some acknowledged that there can be silver linings. Getting a replacement up to speed, or trying to secure a replacement in the first place, takes time and energy, but sometimes the new member is able to look at a problem with fresh eyes. Contacting the organization in question and asking directly for a replacement was often a successful strategy.

Dismantling stigma. There are two principle kinds of stigma coalitions faced. The first is one of paternalism for older adults and people with disabilities. One parent said to a coalition leader she would have loved to use the local transit service for her child “but didn’t want to take the bus away from someone who might need it.” There is a mistaken sense that only the most desperate or needy use subsidized transportation. The second type of stigma is directed toward anyone incapable of securing their own transportation. Transit is a new idea in some rural communities, and a few coalitions encountered a mentality of self-reliance in which rural people “take care of themselves” and “don’t ask for anything from anyone.” According to this logic, those needing transportation have poor personal finance and planning skills, as opposed to being disadvantaged by a systemic problem. To be sure, this worldview is not uniformly held by all people in rural communities. Time, patience, and effective marketing allowed coalitions to show all residents that transit services were for them.

Addressing mistrust. Participants may mistrust a business for wanting to join the coalition, assuming it is only trying to increase its profits, or suspect a transit agency just wants funding to improve its own service. The best approach to these challenges was honesty. Coalition members found that distrusted partners bred goodwill by admitting there would be a benefit to their organization, but also explaining the benefit to the community at-large.

A screenshot of the ride-scheduling mobile application developed by the coalition in Pierre, SD



Conclusion

The benefits of forming a rural transportation coalition are evident in the fact that many ATCI coalitions continue to meet, despite the expiration of their shared grant. “Without the coalition, we could have never made the progress we did,” said one coalition member, and many others echoed this sentiment. A coalition is key to sustainability; the priorities or leadership of a single organization can change, which jeopardizes a project if there is no larger team behind it. In a coalition, responsibility and benefits are distributed.

Group efforts also lend credibility and attract attention: “no one would have read a five-year plan written by our organization alone,” said one participant, but a five-year plan written by a coalition was taken seriously. A few coalition members identified heightened focus on transportation in big organizations or government agencies by the end of the grant cycle, a trend which might have occurred eventually, but would not have as soon as it did without coalition pressure. This report showcases the immense diversity of practices rural transportation coalitions use, but the leaders interviewed were adamant on one commonality across initiatives: transportation issues cannot be solved alone.

Door2Door Rides, a shared-ride taxi that provides demand-response public transit services in Door County, WI, was in jeopardy of being dismantled during the ATCI grant cycle. The coalition rallied together and joined voices to advocate for the program. Interviewees from Door County felt that without the force of the coalition, it is probable that Door2Door rides would no longer exist today.



Launch of the Duvall-Monroe Shuttle, developed by the coalition in Snoqualmie Valley, WA