LA CROSSE AREA REGIONAL TRANSIT AUTHORITY FEASIBILITY STUDY

Executive Summary

The La Crosse Area Planning Committee (LAPC) is studying the feasibility of establishing a Regional Transit Authority (RTA) as a mechanism to strengthen mobility, coordination, and funding for public transportation across the region. This study is intended to assess the potential for more equitable and sustainable funding, governance, and operational structures that support both urban and rural areas within the region.

Process Overview

The LAPC RTA Feasibility Study process included extensive stakeholder engagement, detailed analysis of current operations, exploration of RTA governance alternatives and financial feasibility, operational alternatives analysis, and analysis of potential associated economic and community benefits. This Executive Summary synthesizes the findings of the study and serves as the plan's final guiding document.

1. Stakeholder Engagement
2. Existing Conditions Analysis
3. Governance Alternatives and Financial Feasibility
4. Operational Alternatives Analysis
5. Economic and Community Benefit

Background

The La Crosse region is home to a diverse set of public transit providers, and serves as a hub for health care, business, and critical community services. These include:

- **La Crosse MTU**, an urban bus system operated by the City of La Crosse
- **DriftLink**, a demand-response shared-ride taxi serving Onalaska, Holmen, and West Salem
- **Scenic Mississippi Regional Transit (SMRT)**, a regional bus service connecting commuters and longer-distance travelers

Benefits of RTA Formation

Currently, each transit system in the region operates separately, which can make regional travel harder for riders and more expensive for local governments. RTAs work in partnership with local transit providers to streamline services, reduce duplication, and improve regional connectivity for riders.

Over the past several years, numerous regions in the State of Wisconsin have pursued the establishment of RTAs. While this is currently prohibited by Wisconsin statute, there is renewed interest in offering local government the ability to fund and manage transit at the regional level. Studying the feasibility of forming an RTA offers local governments and stakeholders a data-driven foundation to evaluate how an RTA could improve planning and system resilience.

Governance Scenarios

Four feasible governance scenarios emerged during the study process, with variations in geographic scope, representation, administrative complexity, and alignment with existing service delivery models. Each scenario reflects a model that could be implemented depending on the final structure of RTA enabling legislation.

Scenario 1: Municipal Partnership RTA

Partners: This RTA would be formed by the City of La Crosse, the City of Onalaska, the Village of West Salem, the Town of Campbell, and the Village of Holmen.
Governance: Participation would likely be formalized through resolutions adopted by each governing body, and would consist of a board with representation from each participating municipality.

Scenario 2: Metropolitan Planning Area RTA

Partners: This RTA would be formed by all municipalities within the Wisconsin portion of the LAPC metropolitan planning area (MPA). Service in La Crescent would be achieved through a separate intergovernmental agreement.
Governance: Participation would reflect member jurisdictions, with authority limited to those legally eligible to participate under potential future RTA enabling legislation.

Scenario 3: Countywide RTA

Partners: This RTA would include the entirety of La Crosse County, including unincorporated areas and municipalities outside the MPA boundary.
Governance: Both incorporated municipalities and the county government would be represented.

Scenario 4: Multi-County RTA

Partners: This RTA would include La Crosse, Vernon, Crawford, Monroe, and Trempealeau counties.
Governance: Both incorporated municipalities and county governments would be represented, similar to the structure of a Multi-County Transit Commission, which is permitted in Wisconsin.

Each of the four structures outlined as part of this RTA Feasibility Study would be a significant improvement over existing conditions in areas such as funding, coordination, and planning. However, each RTA structure also has its own specific benefits and challenges when compared against one another.

	Advantages	Disadvantages
Existing Municipal Partners	• Allows closer coordination among existing urban transit services in the La Crosse region • Limits administrative complexity	• Limited ability to address rural mobility needs outside participating municipal boundaries
Metropolitan Planning Area	• Well-aligned with regional mobility needs	• Would omit some areas of La Crosse County outside the MPA boundary
La Crosse County	• Centralizes allocation of resources across services • Supports integrated urban and rural service markets	• Trade-offs between meeting urban and rural priorities • Equity in governance representation
Multi-County	• Governs across both urban and rural contexts • Potential for Transit Commission as a transitional model	• May not allow taxing authority under future RTA enabling legislation

Financial Feasibility and Operational Alternatives

To assess the feasibility of future RTA scenarios, it is important to understand the funding levels and sources used to operate existing transit service in the La Crosse region. The table below shows the existing funding sources for MTU, SMRT, and DriftLink in 2024. Included are Federal Transit Authority (FTA) assistance, State of Wisconsin operating assistance, local subsidies, and directly generated revenues (fares, contracts, and program revenue).

Jurisdiction	FTA Section 5307 (Urban) & 5311 (Rural)	Wisconsin 85.20 State Operating Assistance	Local Subsidy (General Fund)	Directly Generated (Fares, etc.)	Total Operating Funds
La Crosse MTU	$3,686,649 (51.3%)	$1,470,090 (20.5%)	$1,223,829 (17.0%)	$799,282 (11.1%)	**$7,179,850**
SMRT	$259,522 (46.5%)	$40,419 (7.2%)	$229,863 (41.2%)	$28,676 (5.1%)	**$558,480**
DriftLink	$380,131 (36.2%)	$196,219 (18.7%)	$181,452 (17.3%)	$291,739 (27.8%)	**$1,049,541**
Total	**$4,326,302 (49.2%)**	**$1,706,728 (19.4%)**	**$1,635,144 (18.6%)**	**$1,119,697 (12.7%)**	**$8,787,871**

What Service Improvements Could an RTA Fund?

Recent legislative proposals have included provisions enabling sales tax levies of up to a "half-cent" (0.5%) to support public transit service. This RTA Feasibility Study included an estimation of potential annual sales tax revenues at this half-cent level across each of the four governance scenarios, as shown in the table below.

Different RTA governance structures also affect the types of transit service improvements that are feasible in the region. This study included an Operational Alternatives Analysis which examined how service delivery, mode choice, scale, and flexibility may vary depending on institutional capacity, geographic scope, and funding availability. In other words, this analysis looked at different ways transit service could be improved or expanded in each governance scenario, with a focus on regional transit priorities identified in previous planning efforts. A description of these opportunities and their associated annual operating cost estimates are also shown below.

	Service Improvement Opportunities	RTA Revenue	Additional Annual Operating Cost
Existing Municipal Partners	• New North-South Connector Route in the State Highway 35 corridor • New Onalaska-Holmen Route • Weekend Service on Southside Circulator • Weekday Frequency Improvements • Weekend Span Extensions	$14,945,980	$5,440,100
Metropolitan Planning Area	• Scenario 1 improvements • MPA-wide rural demand-response service	$16,792,712	$8,384,696
La Crosse County	• Scenario 1 improvements • County-wide rural demand-response service	$17,297,675	$8,447,740
Multi-County	• Scenario 1 improvements • Multi-county rural demand-response service	$29,899,843	$13,763,715

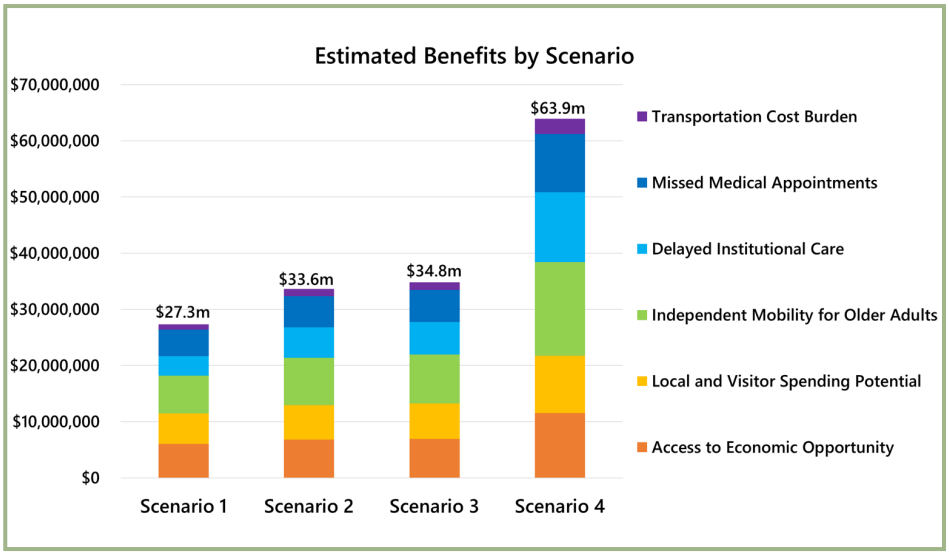
Each RTA scenario has the potential to provide funding exceeding current investment in public transit, while also increasing the potential for increased future matching funds. The values presented can help local partners understand the implications of the different service areas and service types outlined in each scenario. The transit improvements feasible under each governance scenario create additional benefit for the communities they serve.

Economic and Community Benefit

To understand the potential benefits associated with RTA formation, the Economic and Community Benefit analysis quantifies the value of benefits feasibly attributable to public transit across each RTA Scenario geography. These planning-level dollar estimates reflect a variety of regional data inputs, including travel purpose data, individual and household demographic information, employment data, sales tax revenue and spending data, and more. These data inputs were further scaled by applying transit mode share, or the percentage of all trips currently made using public transit, to understand what regional activity can be attributed to transit use, in accordance with industry research and best practices.

These dollar values are order-of-magnitude estimates intended to aid in understanding potential benefits and are not precise forecasts.

More information on this analysis is available in Technical Report 3.



Return on Investment

Comparing these benefits to the level of investment required to provide transit service under each scenario, benefit-cost ratios range from approximately 4 to 5, indicating that each scenario produces several dollars of estimated benefit for every dollar of investment.

RTA Enabling Legislation

Multiple recent proposals in the Wisconsin legislature have aimed to enable RTAs. Recent attempts have included the ability to raise local sales taxes at up to 0.5% (half-cent). Considerations for future legislation may include:

- Desired geography for RTAs in state law (cities, counties, urban areas, etc.)
- Desired local funding sources (sales taxes or other)
- Uses of funding (transit or broader mobility needs)

This legislation would allow the region to better coordinate in the planning and funding of public transit services. LAPC and local partners will proactively engage in these legislative efforts to ensure that the desired structures are permitted in future legislation.

What's Next?

LAPC will continue working with local stakeholders, community organizations, and elected officials to prepare for future RTA legislation and ensure the region's interests are reflected. Local cities and partner agencies can use this study to understand options for improving transit service and to inform future coordination efforts. LAPC will continue sharing information on this topic with boards, councils, and the public.

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LAPC RTA Feasibility Study

Existing Conditions Report

La Crosse Area Planning Committee

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INTRODUCTION

The La Crosse Area Planning Committee (LAPC) is studying the feasibility of establishing a Regional Transit Authority (RTA) as a mechanism to strengthen mobility, coordination, and funding for public transportation across the region. This Existing Conditions Report provides a foundation for that effort by documenting current transit services, governance structures, demographic and travel trends.

The report highlights both the strengths of existing providers and the limitations of the current framework when it comes to meeting existing travel demands. These findings establish a summary needed to explore how an RTA could address regional mobility needs.

Previous Coordination and Planning Efforts

This RTA Feasibility Study builds on existing regional and local plans, including those produced by LAPC and its partner agencies. These include regional plans for transit and transportation, local comprehensive plans, and other projects relevant to transit expansion.

Regional Plans

Regional planning efforts relevant to this study include LAPC's most recent transit development plan (TDP), as well as its two most recent metropolitan transportation plans: Beyond Coulee and the recently adopted Moving Ahead to 2055.

La Crosse Regional Transit Development Plan (2021)

The La Crosse Area Planning Committee (LAPC) recently completed the 2022–2032 La Crosse Regional Transit Development Plan to guide the La Crosse Municipal Transit Utility (MTU), Onalaska Shared Ride (OSR, now DriftLink), and Scenic Mississippi Regional Transit (SMRT). The plan evaluates system performance, identifies community travel needs, and develops phased service and policy recommendations. Key components of the TDP covered system performance, regional travel patterns, public engagement, and a set of service recommendations.

System Performance

The TDP identified challenges with on-time performance, route efficiency, and service productivity. One of the findings was that many MTU routes lack sufficient layover time, while redundant and circuitous segments were reducing reliability. OSR/DriftLink's $4.50 fare limits daily use, and SMRT requires clearer service warrants and stronger intergovernmental agreements. Performance standards including 15 passengers per revenue hour and 85 percent on-time reliability were recommended as system goals.

Travel Patterns

In the TDP there were identified travel demand centers on strong north–south movements, regional commuter flows, and downtown-focused access. Key needs included better connections to Onalaska, Holmen, and West Salem, as well as improved access to Amtrak, the airport, and employment hubs. SMRT riders requested later Green Line service, weekend trips, and expansion to Cashton.

Engagement Themes

Public and stakeholder input emphasized the importance of direct, legible routes, timed transfers, equitable fares, and expanded service hours. Equity, environmental sustainability, and regional coordination emerged as central priorities. Engagement activities included surveys, stakeholder meetings, open houses, and more.

Service Recommendations

The TDP proposed phased and provider-specific improvements:

- **Phase I (Cost Neutral):** Straighten routes, add layover time, and improve reliability.
- **Phase II (Enhancements):** New Bridgeview transfer center, a north–south connector, 20-minute frequencies on core routes, extended evening/weekend service, and expanded Onalaska service.
- **OSR/DriftLink:** Evaluate fixed route/shuttle options to La Crosse, reduce fare burden, and develop coordinated marketing.
- **SMRT:** Add a Grand River Station stop, extend Green Line trips, add Saturday service, and expand to Cashton.

Implications for the Regional Transportation Authority (RTA) Study

The TDP underscored persistent challenges in coordination, funding, and system integration that point directly to the potential role of an RTA. Some specific examples of identified areas where an RTA could play a role include:

- **Coordination:** Formalizing operating agreements, coordinating service planning, and managing shared marketing/technology.
- **Performance Accountability:** Applying consistent benchmarks across providers.
- **Funding & Implementation:** Centralizing pursuit of state/federal resources and managing the phasing of capital/service expansions.
- **Regional Mobility Goals:** Aligning service delivery with equity, workforce mobility, and sustainability priorities voiced by the community.

Overall, the La Crosse TDP provides evidence of a fragmented transit service, unmet regional travel needs, and community demand for integrated, higher-quality transit. These findings support further study of an RTA as a mechanism to unify planning, funding, and service delivery for the region.

Moving Ahead to 2055

Summary of Travel Trends and Transit Needs

The 2055 Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP), *Moving Ahead to 2055*, identifies evolving travel behaviors, demographic shifts, and mobility challenges across the La Crosse–La Crescent metropolitan region. While regional population growth is projected to remain relatively stable through 2055, household formation is increasing due to smaller household sizes, contributing to moderate growth in local travel demand. The aging population, particularly concentrated in La Crosse and surrounding towns, increases the need for accessible transportation options, including transit and demand-response services.

The plan highlights persistent infrastructure maintenance concerns and calls for investments that advance multimodal accessibility, reduce vehicle dependency, and strengthen connections between La Crosse, Onalaska, Holmen, West Salem, and nearby communities in Minnesota and Wisconsin. Coordinated regional transit is discussed as a critical element for meeting future mobility needs and addressing gaps between urban and rural areas. These findings underscore the importance of a regional framework, such as an RTA, to expand transit coverage, enhance coordination among providers, and sustain long-term transportation equity and accessibility throughout the region.

As part of recommendations that emerged from the plan, the MTP outlines a forward-looking framework for transportation investment, coordination, and system improvement in the La Crosse region. One of these goals is to advance multimodal connectivity and accessibility by expanding trails, protected bike routes, and intercity bicycle networks; enhancing transit service through a new Transit Development Plan (TDP) and a regionally integrated system; and developing an action plan for a potential RTA. Improved intercity travel options, such as expanded Amtrak Borealis service and high-speed rail connections, are also highlighted.

Though the plan notes several potential challenges to implementation, including limited transit alternatives in rural areas, inconsistent local design standards, and funding constraints, its overall vision positions the LAPC and its partners to pursue a cohesive, multimodal, and equitable regional transportation future.

Beyond Coulee

The *Beyond Coulee Vision 2040* plan, the predecessor of the current MTP *Moving Ahead to 2055,* provided a long-range framework for transportation and land use in the La Crosse area. The plan focused in part on how demographic changes would influence transportation demand. While the data showed that Minnesota overall continues to grow faster than Wisconsin, within the planning area, La Crosse County was projected to see steady population increases of about 15 percent by 2040, while Houston and Winona Counties in Minnesota were expected to decline. As stated earlier, the current MTP documented continued steady growth through 2055.

The plan also focused on economic indicators that highlighted disparities. Median household incomes are higher in towns compared to incorporated communities, with La Crosse posting the lowest levels and the highest poverty concentration, influenced in part by its large student population. Employment patterns point to ongoing sector change: the region is expected to lose jobs in manufacturing and information, but gain in professional services, finance, education, and health care. Commuting data suggests relative stability in worker flows to and from La Crosse County, reinforcing its role as the area's employment hub. Together, these trends frame transportation challenges and opportunities, from accommodating suburban growth to addressing equity in La Crosse's urban core.

Local Comprehensive Plans

Alongside LAPC's regional planning efforts, local communities within La Crosse County also produce comprehensive plans that speak to the need for regional coordination on transportation and public transit. This section summarizes the findings of the comprehensive plans for the City of La Crosse, City of Onalaska, and Village of Holmen that are relevant to this study.

City of La Crosse Comprehensive Plan

The City of La Crosse 2040 Comprehensive Plan presents a vision for a more connected, livable, and equitable community shaped by sustainable land use, multimodal transportation, and economic resilience.

Population growth within the city is expected to remain relatively stable through 2040, with modest gains driven by smaller household sizes and an increasingly diverse and aging population. These demographic shifts point to the need for a range of housing types and accessible mobility options to support students, young professionals, and older adults alike. Key opportunities lie in revitalizing older commercial corridors, redeveloping underused industrial land, and preserving natural features such as the La Crosse River Marsh and Hixon Forest that define the city's ecological identity. Downtown and key corridors such as South Avenue and Highway 53 are positioned as focal points for mixed-use, transit-supportive investment. The plan also links economic vitality with mobility, calling for enhanced public transit, bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure, and safe multimodal connections to ensure equitable access to jobs and services.

The Plan provides a roadmap for implementation through short-, medium-, and long-term actions. The city intends to prioritize plan elements through annual work programs, align departmental budgets with plan goals, and update progress every five years. A key recommendation is to strengthen intergovernmental cooperation with La Crosse County, the La Crosse Area Planning Committee (LAPC), neighboring towns, and major institutions to coordinate land use and transportation decisions regionally. Future priorities include advancing multimodal connectivity, implementing the city's Transportation Vision and Transit Development Plan, promoting infill and mixed-use redevelopment, and updating zoning to support walkable and transit-ready environments. These steps collectively aim to create a resilient, inclusive urban fabric that supports both economic growth and sustainable regional mobility – reinforcing the need for coordinated transit governance structures such as a Regional Transportation Authority (RTA).

City of Onalaska Comprehensive Plan

Onalaska is experiencing steady growth, with its 2023 population estimated at 19,280, a 23 percent increase since 2000, outpacing La Crosse City and La Crosse County. The city's demographic profile shows a balanced mix of families, working-age adults, and older residents. About 21 percent of residents are under 18, while another 21 percent are over 65, reflecting both a strong base of young families and a significant aging population. Median household income is higher than surrounding areas at $86,167, and residents are relatively well-educated, with 40 percent holding a bachelor's degree or higher. While the community is less racially diverse than nearby La Crosse, diversity is slowly increasing, particularly among Asian residents. These demographic trends indicate both stability and shifting needs in housing, schools, and services.

Regionally, Onalaska is a well-connected hub within the La Crosse area. Located on Interstate 90 and served by U.S. and state highways, it benefits from proximity to La Crosse, Holmen, and the regional airport. The city's transportation planning emphasizes both regional and local connectivity: working with neighboring municipalities to coordinate growth, exploring transit improvements such as expanded service on La Crosse's Route 9 bus line, and updating the Coulee Regional Bicycle Plan. Locally, strategies focus on enhancing bike- and pedestrian-friendly infrastructure, filling sidewalk gaps, and redesigning key corridors like Main Street to better serve all users. Together, these efforts position Onalaska to strengthen its role as a growing suburban center while ensuring that future transportation systems support demographic shifts and regional collaboration.

Village of Holmen Comprehensive Plan

The Village of Holmen's Comprehensive Plan (2025–2045) outlines the community's vision for accommodating rapid population and employment growth while preserving its small-town character and environmental quality. Holmen has been one of the fastest-growing communities in the La Crosse metropolitan area, expanding from 2,400 residents before 1980 to over 10,600 in 2020, with projections

exceeding 17,000 by 2050. This growth has driven increasing travel demand, greater reliance on regional transportation connections, and a need for coordinated land use and infrastructure investment across municipal boundaries.

The plan identifies a need to improve mobility and transportation options beyond single-occupancy vehicle travel. Goals emphasize strengthening connections with Onalaska and La Crosse through shared transit services, expanding sidewalk and bicycle networks, improving traffic safety, and reducing congestion along key corridors such as Holmen Drive and Main Street. The plan also highlights the importance of maintaining efficient local street networks while exploring expanded regional transit options for seniors and commuters.

The plan's Implementation Chapter outlines how Holmen will translate its long-range vision into coordinated annual actions through zoning, budgeting, and intergovernmental cooperation. Key next steps include maintaining consistent communication with neighboring jurisdictions (Onalaska, Holland, La Crosse County) to manage growth boundaries, coordinate transportation projects, and pursue shared infrastructure or service agreements. This emphasis on regional coordination and planning, particularly around public transit feasibility and trail connections, to sustain mobility as the region grows. These priorities reinforce the need for a regional governance framework, such as an RTA, to unify transit planning, funding, and implementation across the expanding La Crosse metropolitan area.

Calls for Regional Coordination in Comprehensive Plans

The comprehensive plans described above outline the opportunities and challenges faced by municipalities and planning bodies. Despite the unique situations for each of the four plans, they all form a cohesive regional vision linking mobility, land use, and economic vitality through coordinated, multimodal planning. Each plan identifies similar priorities: reducing reliance on single-occupancy vehicles, expanding public transit, and promoting compact, mixed-use development that supports active and low-carbon transportation. The MTP emphasizes multimodal investment and regional coordination across municipal boundaries; the City of La Crosse and the Village of Holmen's plans call for further intergovernmental coordination and communication, while the City of Onalaska's plan orients the city as an important hub in the regional network. Collectively, these efforts and findings highlight the need for a unified governance structure, like a Regional Transportation Authority (RTA), to align funding, planning, and service delivery across jurisdictions, ensuring the La Crosse region can achieve its shared goals for sustainable growth, equitable mobility, and climate resilience.

Other Relevant Projects

City of La Crosse Climate Action Plan

The City of La Crosse Climate Action Plan (2022) establishes a framework for reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and creating a more sustainable, equitable, and resilient community. Transportation represents the largest single contributor to local emissions, accounting for over 40 percent of the city's total GHG output, underscoring the need to shift toward more sustainable modes. The plan identifies changing travel behaviors and emerging technologies as key opportunities for progress, highlighting electric vehicle adoption, expansion of public transit, and improved pedestrian and bicycle networks as essential strategies for reducing emissions while maintaining mobility.

The plan lists transit expansion and multimodal investment as integral to both climate and economic goals. Strategies include supporting modernizing MTU, expanding service frequency and coverage of the system,

and developing regional connections that reduce car dependence for commuters and residents across the La Crosse-Onalaska-Holmen community. The plan additionally calls for improved pedestrian and bicycle safety, complete streets design, and integration of land use and transportation planning to enable compact, mixed-use development patterns that reduce vehicle miles traveled (VMT).

Economic development strategies within the Climate Action Plan link sustainability to economic resilience – prioritizing investment in green infrastructure, renewable energy, and climate-friendly transportation projects that attract new industries and workforce talent. The plan encourages local partnerships to leverage clean energy and transportation initiatives for job creation, innovation, and equitable access. By aligning land use, transit, and economic development, the Climate Action Plan reinforces the importance of coordinated regional action, such as through a Regional Transportation Authority (RTA), to achieve long-term emissions reduction, mobility, and economic vitality across the La Crosse region.

Commuter Bus Service Feasibility Study

The 2017 *Commuter Bus Service Feasibility Study* assessed the potential for daily commuter bus routes linking La Crosse with Arcadia and Tomah/Sparta. Surveys of employers and employees indicated strong interest, particularly among long-distance commuters, with up to 72 percent of workers traveling more than 20 miles expressing willingness to use a service if it were convenient and incentivized. Ridership estimates suggested around 48 commuter trips per day—or over 12,000 annually, like early results of the successful Scenic Mississippi Regional Transit (SMRT) Bus system. Importantly, the study noted that additional non-commute trips (medical, educational, shopping) could raise ridership and revenue further, strengthening the case for feasibility.

From a financial standpoint, the proposed $3 fare could cover 13–19 percent of operational costs, consistent with comparable rural bus systems. The greatest challenge identified was securing local matching funds to leverage state and federal transit grants. Approximately $25,000 in local capital match and $106,000 in annual operating match would be needed. The study recommended using existing SMRT Bus administrative structures for efficiency, coordinating with La Crosse MTU and county mini-buses to create a seamless hub-and-spoke regional network, and relying on partnerships with major employers for park-and-ride sites and rider support.

For future regional planning in the La Crosse area, the findings highlight both opportunity and need. A commuter bus system is feasible from a demand and revenue perspective and could significantly reduce single-occupancy vehicle travel, ease congestion and support workforce mobility. However, long-term viability will depend on building stable local funding partnerships, strengthening institutional support beyond Prairie du Chien, and integrating services into a cohesive regional framework. These steps would not only enhance commuter options but also position La Crosse as a central hub in a broader regional transit system, supporting economic growth and accessibility across multiple counties.

OPERATIONAL ANALYSIS

Existing Services

In 2021, DriftLink (then OSR) was one of three transit agencies part of the La Crosse Regional Transit Development Plan, a planning effort sponsored by the La Crosse MPO to develop service and coordination recommendations for OSR, La Crosse MTU and the Scenic Mississippi Regional Transit (SMRT). The plan recommends further study on the transportation needs and goals in Onalaska, and for OSR to consider new service products, such as a shuttle service to Downtown La Crosse. Continuing to engage in the regional transit planning process with the MPO, MTU, SMRT, and the La Crosse County Aging and Disability Resource Center are recommended, including adding a regional mobility manager.

La Crosse Metropolitan Transit Utility

A service of La Crosse, WI, La Crosse Municipal Transit Utility (MTU) provided over 650,000 passenger trips in 2023. MTU provides fixed-route bus service, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) complementary paratransit, and supplemental specialized paratransit demand response services called MTU Mobility Plus. The MTU fleet includes 23 heavy-duty buses, with up to 16 used in maximum service. Two all-electric buses were introduced to the fixed-route fleet in 2022.

Fixed Route Service

MTU operates eight fixed routes focused on the City of La Crosse: two downtown circulators, C1 and C2, and routes 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, and 8. MTU also provides contracted services to other municipalities. Route 10 connects downtown La Crosse with the City of La Crescent, MN. Route 9 serves Onalaska. Route 7 is contracted by the Town of Campbell and operated by MTU for weekday service on French Island.

Paratransit

MTU's paratransit service provides curb-to-curb rides for certified individuals with disabilities using ADA-compliant vans. The paratransit service area includes any area within ¾-mile of any regular bus route. The one-way customer fare for this service is $3.00, twice MTU's regular fixed route fare. As required by the ADA, the paratransit service operates during all fixed route service hours. Paratransit is currently operated under contract with Abby Vans, Inc., a private transportation company.

Figure 1. La Crosse MTU Route Map

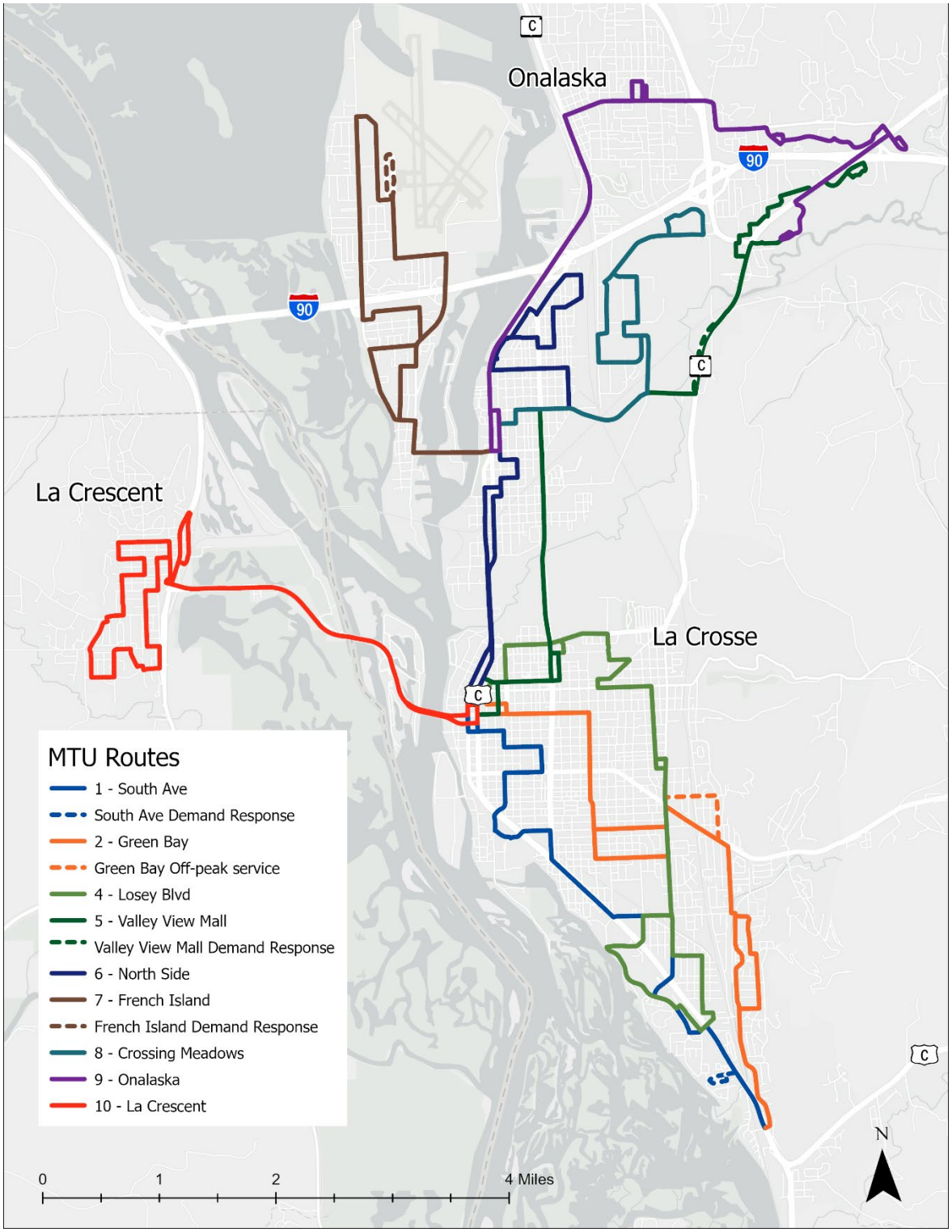


Table 1. La Crosse MTU Fixed-Route Schedule

Service Days	Service Period (Approx.)	Routes	Frequency
Monday-Friday	5:00 a.m. – 10:40 p.m.	1, 2, 4, 5, 6	30-minute
Monday-Friday	5:55 a.m. – 5:55 p.m.	7	60-minute
Monday-Friday	6:25 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.	8	60-minute
Monday-Friday	7:12 a.m. – 5:10 p.m.	C1	30-minute
Monday-Friday	7:12 a.m. – 10:10 p.m.	C2	30-minute
Monday-Friday	6:55 a.m. – 10:20 a.m. & 1:25 p.m. – 6:30 p.m.	9	60-minute
Monday-Friday	5:40 a.m. – 10:30 a.m. & 1:25 p.m. – 7:00 p.m.	10	60-minute
Saturday	7:42 a.m. – 7:40 p.m.	1, 2, 4, 6	60-minute
Saturday	7:42 a.m. – 7:40 p.m.	5	30 (peak); 60 (morning and evening)
Saturday	7:42 a.m. – 3:30 p.m.	10	60-minute
Saturday	7:40 a.m. – 6:40 p.m.	1, 2, 4, 6	60-minute
Saturday	7:40 a.m. – 6:40 p.m.	5	30 (peak); 60 (morning and evening)

System Performance

Between 2019 and 2023, MTU's annual revenue hours remained relatively stable, averaging approximately 60,000 hours per year. Passenger trips, however, show a clear decline in 2020 and 2021 associated with the pandemic, falling from more than 905,000 in 2019 to just over 510,000 in 2021. Ridership has since partially recovered, reaching 667,034 trips in 2023, but remains below pre-pandemic levels. Operating expenses increased steadily during the period, rising from approximately $5.3 million in 2019 to $6.2 million in 2023, reflecting inflationary pressures and higher service costs. Passenger revenues dropped sharply in 2020, recovered gradually through 2023, but have not yet reached 2019 levels

Table 2. La Crosse MTU Five-Year Operating Statistic Trends (2019 – 2023)

Operating Statistic	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Revenue Hours	60,626	59,275	62,356	60,681	60,706
Passenger Trips	905,412	552,719	510,235	587,835	667,034
Operating Expenses	$5,317,615	$5,301,401	$5,408,836	$5,539,828	$6,213,958
Passenger Revenue	$537,194	$170,186	$251,832	$440,101	$470,671
Service Area Population	71,201	71,201	79,727	79,727	79,727

DriftLink Public Transit

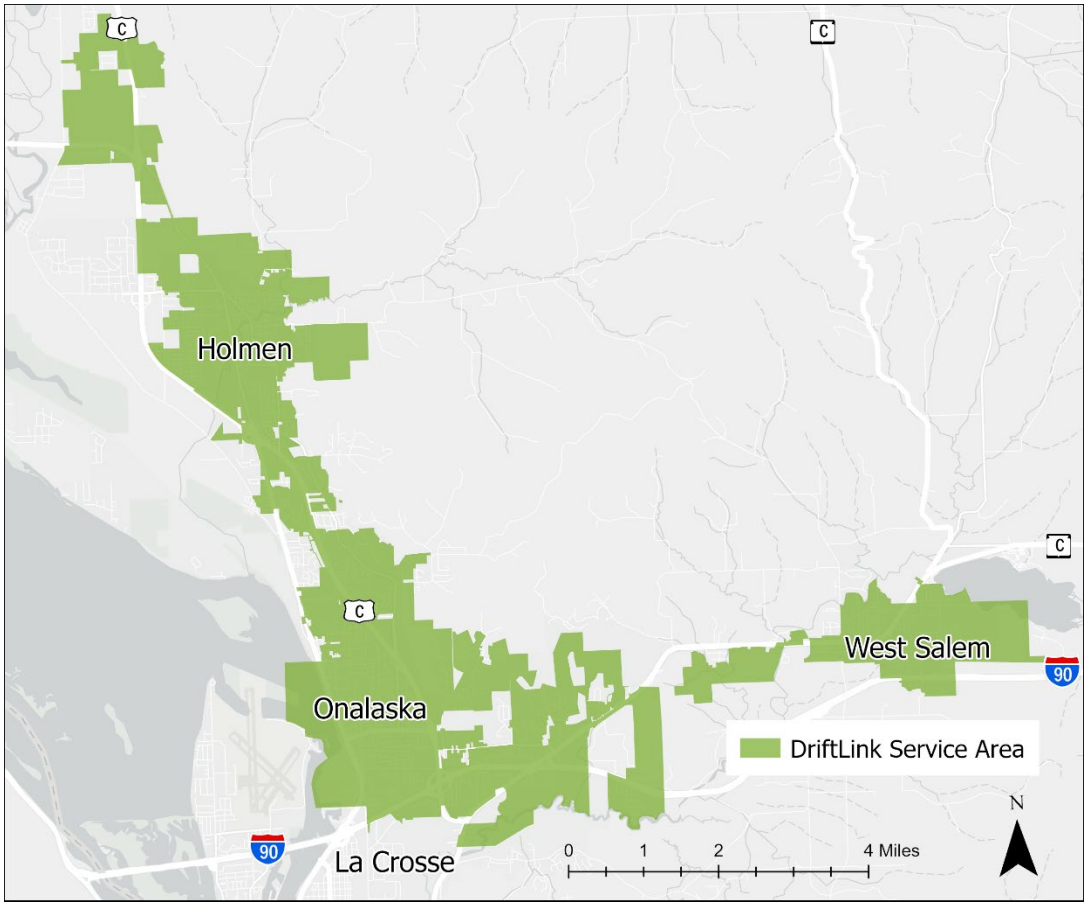
A service provided by the city of Onalaska and the villages of Holmen and West Salem, DriftLink provided more than 59,000 trips in 2023. The service is administered by the City of Onalaska, and the service is currently provided through a contract by Running Inc.

Service Overview

The shared-ride taxi service is available seven days a week between 6:30 AM and 7:00 PM within the jurisdictional limits of the three supporting municipalities. DriftLink provides demand response, curb-to-curb shared-ride taxi service with a fleet of 14 wheelchair accessible vans.

The service is for the general public and reservations can be made by phone or through the Running Inc. website. Riders who wish to transfer between this service and the La Crosse MTU fixed-route system can do so fare-free by connecting either to MTU Route 9 at Center 90 or to MTU routes 5 or 9 at Valley View Mall.

Figure 2. DriftLink Service Area (Cities of Holmen, Onalaska, and West Salem



System Performance

DriftLink experienced a decline in service hours and ridership in 2020 and 2021, followed by a strong recovery in 2022 and 2023. Passenger trips grew from 54,083 in 2019 to 59,071 in 2023, surpassing pre-pandemic levels. Revenue hours increased similarly, peaking at more than 31,000 hours in 2023, the highest in the five-year period. Operating expenses rose moderately, while passenger revenue fell in 2020 and 2021 before recovering in 2022. Data for 2023 passenger revenue is not yet available. The overall trend suggests that demand for shared-ride, demand-response service has not only recovered but exceeded pre-pandemic levels, underscoring the importance of this service for mobility within Onalaska, Holmen, and West Salem.

Table 3. DriftLink Five-Year Operating Statistic Trends (2019 – 2023)

Operating Statistic	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Revenue Hours	30,744	27,278	26,209	27,845	31,487
Passenger Trips	54,083	37,320	42,436	48,562	59,071
Operating Expenses	$857,388	$871,926	$880,803	$979,748	$982,248
Passenger Revenue	$219,108	$153,450	$180,752	$222,740	-
Service area Population	33,521	35,037	35,037	35,037	35,037

Scenic Mississippi Regional Transit (SMRT)

Service Overview

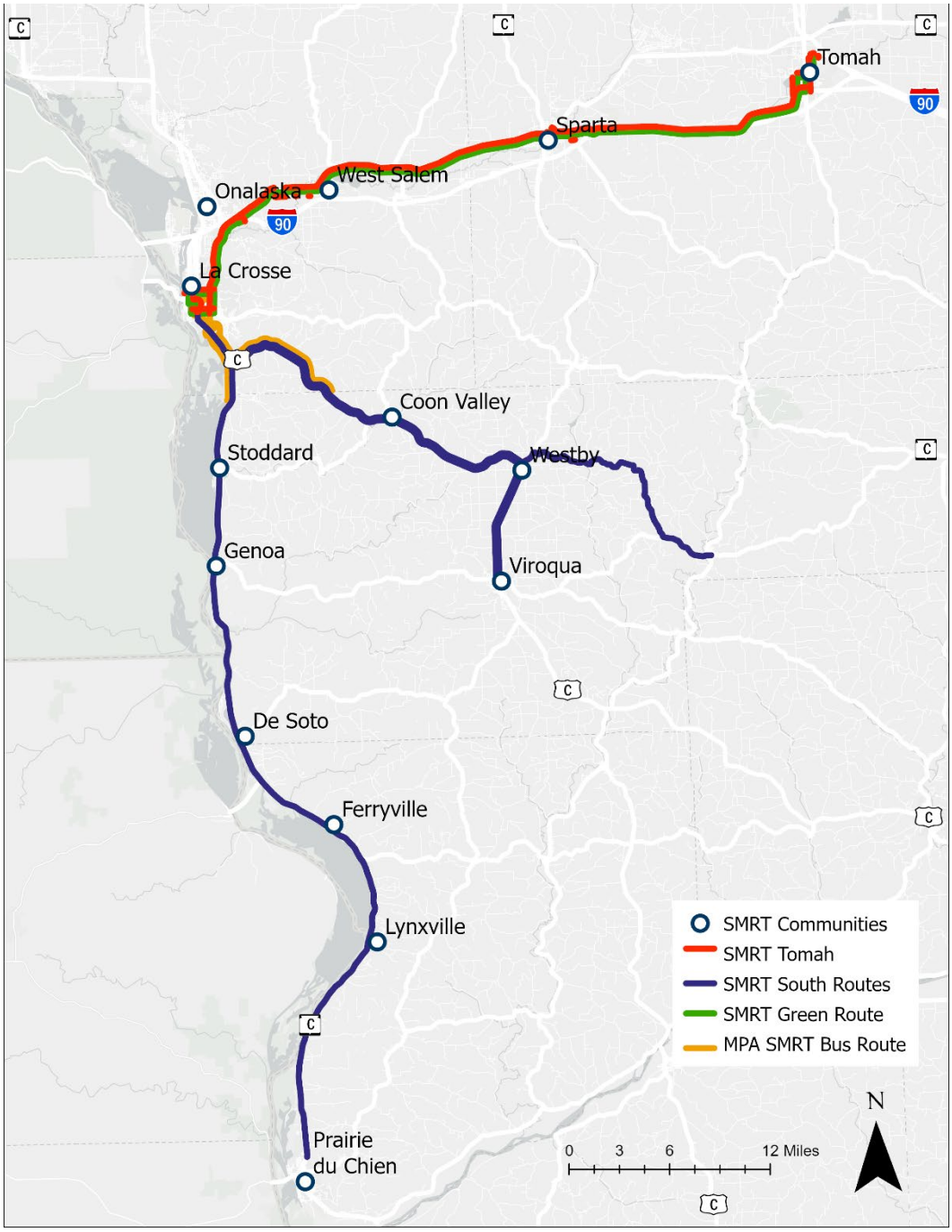
SMRT was created in 2012 and provided more than 14,000 passenger trips in 2020. SMRT provides deviated fixed-route bus service throughout La Crosse County and nearby communities. SMRT was originally administered by the City of Prairie du Chien, but La Crosse County took over in 2019 based on its position as the central hub of the service. It has expanded its service area considerably since 2019, with routes extending into Crawford, Vernon, and Monroe counties.

SMRT operates four routes on a deviated fixed-route basis, shown in Figure 3 and Table 4. It has set stop locations in each community it serves, usually at major employers. In the city of La Crosse, it uses MTU bus stops but does not serve Grand River Station. Along rural parts of the route, flag stops are allowed.

Table 4. SMRT Bus Schedule

Service Days	Service Period (Approx.)	Routes	Frequency
Monday - Friday	5:45 a.m. – 6:15 p.m.	Red,	Three roundtrips per day
Monday – Friday	5:30 a.m. – 7:00 p.m.	Blue	Three roundtrips per day
Monday – Friday	6:30 a.m. – 5:45 p.m.	Yellow	Four roundtrips per day
Monday – Friday	6:00 a.m. – 6:00 p.m.	Green	Three roundtrips per day

Figure 3. SMRT Route map and communities served



System Performance

SMRT revenue hours more than doubled between 2019 and 2020, reflecting expanded service, and remained consistently above 9,000 hours annually through 2023. Passenger trips increased each year, rising from just over 9,300 in 2019 to more than 19,000 in 2023, effectively doubling ridership in five years. Operating expenses also increased with service expansion, growing from $205,000 in 2019 to $522,000 in 2023. Passenger revenues fluctuated, with declines noted in 2021 and 2022, and no data reported for 2023. Overall, SMRT's growth highlights its increasing role in providing regional connectivity across La Crosse County and adjacent areas.

Table 5. SMRT Bus Five-Year Operating Statistic Trends (2019 – 2023)

Operating Statistic	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Revenue Hours	4,073	9,362	9,499	9,727	9,372
Passenger Trips	9,311	14,281	15,694	17,280	19,053
Operating Expenses	$204,780	$467,972	$449,801	$484,999	$521,872
Passenger Revenue	$20,757	$26,700	$16,882	$18,674	-
Service area Population	34,498	34,498	34,498	34,498	34,498

The Future of the SMRT Bus Program

In October 2025 La Crosse County recommended cutting the SMRT bus program from its 2026 budget, citing increasing costs and low ridership. La Crosse County provided an estimated $120,000 to support the service in 2025 and estimates the 2026 cost at $157,000. While the County recognizes the need for regional transportation options, the program has not been seen as an efficient and effective way to meet those needs. Ultimately, the La Crosse County Board voted to continue support for SMRT through 2026, though the future of the SMRT program is uncertain beyond 2026.

Existing Governance and Organizational Structure

Organizational Structure

La Crosse MTU

MTU is a standalone department within the City of La Crosse. It runs day-to-day operations, maintenance, and marketing, while HR, finance, and legal are handled by other City departments. The leadership team includes the Director of Transit, who reports directly to the Mayor along with a Deputy Director, Operations Manager, and Fleet & Maintenance Manager.

Oversight comes from the MTU Board, which approves service agreements and smaller contracts. The Board is made up of both elected officials and community members. Large capital purchases and the annual budget are signed off by the Common Council.

MTU also works closely with:

- La Crosse Area Planning Committee
- Scenic Mississippi Regional Transit
- City of Onalaska

Internally, MTU's Director oversees budgets, handles grievances, and negotiates labor contracts. The Deputy Director oversees buying vehicles. The Operations Manager sets operating policies, while other staff handle discipline, service planning, and fare policy.

DriftLink

DriftLink is run by contractor Running Inc., which has 32 employees serving Onalaska, Holmen, and West Salem. On weekdays, they staff four to six dispatchers, and two or three on weekends. A single mechanic supports all contractor vehicles, including DriftLink vans.

The City of Onalaska provides HR, finance, purchasing, legal, and other administrative support. These functions are managed solely by Onalaska, not the two partner villages. Operations and maintenance remain the contractor's responsibility.

Onalaska also has a public transit committee that meets quarterly to review finances and weigh in on capital purchases. Transit decisions ultimately rest with the city's common council.

SMRT

SMRT is operated by La Crosse County, with funding support from three neighboring counties and 14 cities. Finance, legal, and marketing are mostly handled in-house (with some contractor help for legal needs), while operations and maintenance are contracted to Running Inc. The La Crosse County Board of Supervisors manages SMRT, overseeing routes, policy, budgets, and capital purchases.

The regional Transportation Coordination Committee (TCC) advises the Board of Supervisors on all aspects of SMRT. TCC members also promote the service within their counties and work together on regional outreach. The TCC includes representatives from Crawford, Monroe, Vernon, and La Crosse Counties, meets quarterly (and more if needed), and includes Running Inc. representatives.

The Transit Manager, who reports to the Planning Department Director, handles budgets and labor negotiations. The Planning Director provides input on staffing, discipline, and grievances. The management team meets every two weeks, and the Transit Manager meets weekly with the Planning Director.

As a regional system, SMRT works closely with:

- **Counties**: Crawford, La Crosse, Monroe, Vernon
- **Cities**: La Crosse, Prairie du Chien, Onalaska, Sparta, Tomah, Viroqua, Westby
- **Villages**: Coon Valley, Desoto, Ferryville, Genoa, Lynxville, Stoddard, West Salem

All of these partners contribute funding for SMRT. After completing its Transit Development Plan (TDP) in 2022, SMRT leaders met with counties and cities to secure five-year funding commitments to support goals in the TDP and marketing plan.

External Partnerships and Coordination

MTU, DriftLink, and SMRT all rely on strong partnerships with local governments, schools, and regional organizations to keep service running smoothly. These collaborations provide funding, expand service areas, and ensure the systems are meeting community needs.

La Crosse MTU

- **University Contracts**: UW-La Crosse, Viterbo University, and Western Technical College all take part in MTU's U-Pass program. This program lets students ride the bus for free, with each school paying a set fee to cover the cost. MTU bills the universities once a year, with the fee based on the number of service days each semester and how much service each school receives.
- **Municipal Contracts**: MTU also provides service to nearby communities like Onalaska, Campbell, and La Crescent (MN) through five-year contracts. These agreements are reviewed and adjusted every year. The fee is based on the share of total service hours provided in each community. Following past recommendations, capital costs are now included in these contracts as well.

DriftLink

The City of Onalaska has partnership agreements with the Villages of Holmen and West Salem. Each community helps cover the local funding share using a formula tied to their ridership from the previous year.

SMRT

Since 2015, SMRT has covered most of its operating costs with federal grants (52–55 percent), a small portion from fares (less than 10 percent), and the rest from local partner contributions. For big capital projects, federal funds cover 80 percent while local partners contribute the remaining 20 percent. In recent years, SMRT has received about $95,000 annually in local match funding. By 2025, that number will need to grow to $145,000 to keep service at its current level. SMRT is working with its partner cities and counties to secure longer-term commitments. So far, 14 of 19 partners have increased their budgets to support SMRT, and 9 of them have committed to five years of ongoing support.

Community Profile and Regional Trends

Population Trends

The population projections in Table 6 show uneven growth patterns across the LAPC planning area. Communities such as Holmen, Onalaska, and West Salem are expected to grow steadily through 2050, with Holmen experiencing the largest increase (66 percent between 2020 and 2050). In contrast, the City of La Crosse and several surrounding towns (Campbell, Hamilton, Greenfield, and Shelby) are projected to see notable population declines, in some cases exceeding 10–20 percent over the same period. These shifts suggest that while the regional population overall will remain relatively stable, growth will be concentrated in suburban communities, while the urban core and some rural areas may lose residents. This trend has important implications for future transit demand, as expanding services in growing communities may be necessary to meet ridership needs, while declining populations in other areas could reduce ridership potential.

Table 6. 2020 - 2050 Population Projections for Communities Entirely in the LAPC Planning Area

Planning Area Community	2020 Census	2030 Projection	2050 Projection	% Change 2020 – 2030	% Change 2020 - 2050	% Change 2030 - 2050
Barre (T)	1,267	1,307	1,329	3%	5%	2%
Campbell (T)	4,284	4,028	3,432	-6%	-20%	-15%
Dresbach (T), MN*	402	N/A	N/A	-	-	-
Greenfield (T)	2,187	2,150	2,007	-2%	-8%	-7%
Hamilton (T)	2,428	2,326	2,062	-4%	-15%	-11%
Holland (T)	4,530	4,872	5,294	8%	17%	9%
Holmen (V)	10,661	13,386	17,690	26%	66%	32%
La Crescent (C), MN*	5,037	N/A	N/A	-	-	-
La Crescent (T), MN*	1,102	N/A	N/A	-	-	-
La Crosse (C)	52,680	50,062	43,627	-5%	-17%	-13%
Medary (T)	1,604	1,617	1,581	1%	-1%	-2%
Onalaska (C)	18,803	20,285	22,151	8%	18%	9%
Onalaska (T)	5,835	5,820	5,582	0%	-4%	-4%
Shelby (T)	4,804	4,635	4,170	-4%	-13%	-10%
West Salem (V)	5,277	5,552	5,833	5%	11%	5%
Planning Area	**120,901**	**116,040**	**114,758**	**1%**	**0%**	**-1%**

* The Minnesota State Demographic Center does not produce population or household projections for cities or townships. "NA" is "Not Available." Source for Wisconsin data: Demographic Services Center, Wisconsin Department of Administration; based on the geographic boundaries as of October 2013.

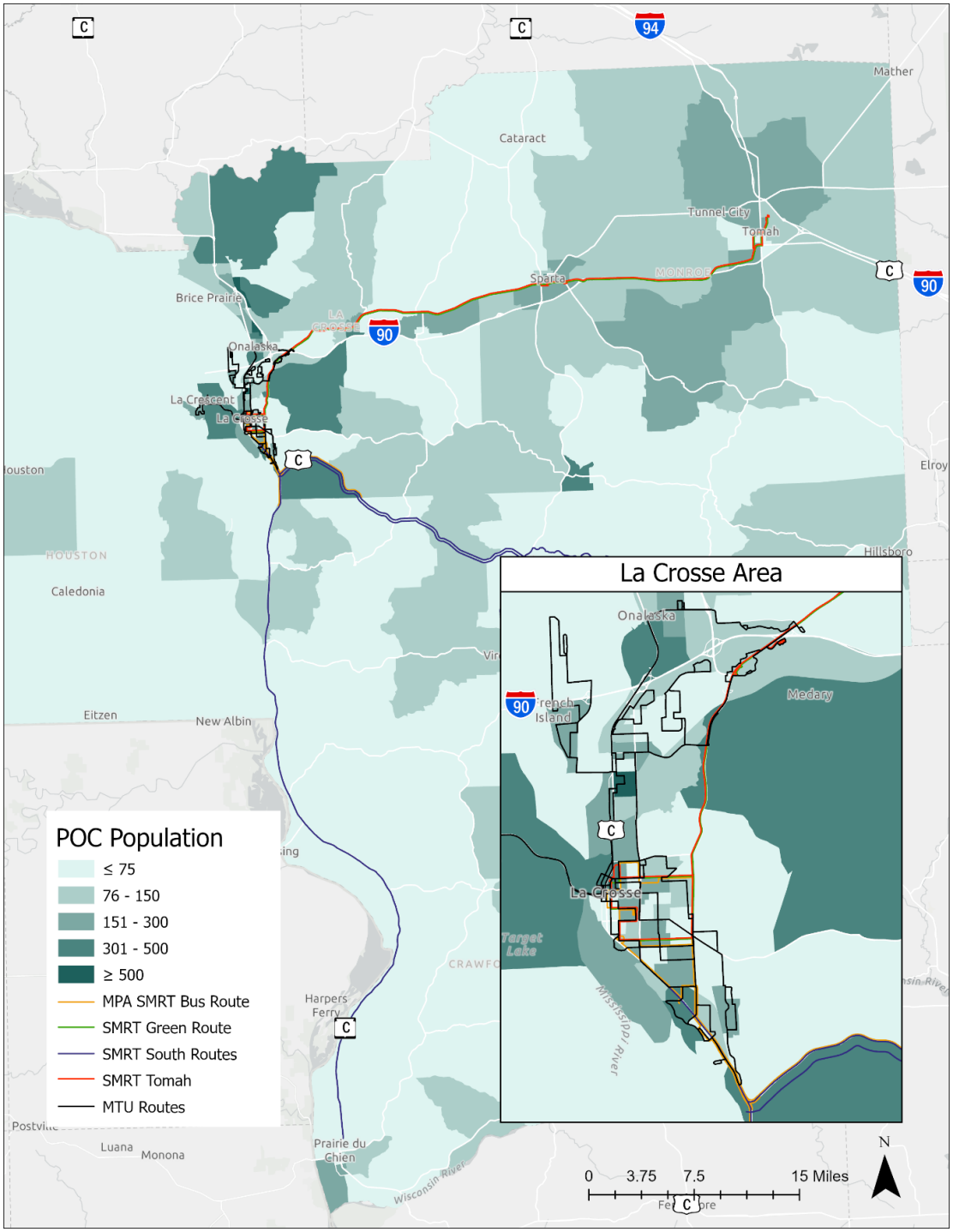
Regional Demographics

In addition to looking at population trends in the region, concentrations of specific demographic groups were mapped as part of this existing conditionals analysis. This included populations of persons of color (POC), low-income populations, and households without access to a private vehicle. The maps include existing MTU and SMRT bus routes for reference, though it should be noted that SMRT bus service is scheduled to be discontinued in January 2026.

Population by Race

Populations of color are geographically concentrated within certain census block groups, most notably in the City of La Crosse and across the border in La Crescent (see Figure 4). Given national trends indicating higher rates of transit reliance among these populations, maintaining equitable service in these areas will remain essential.

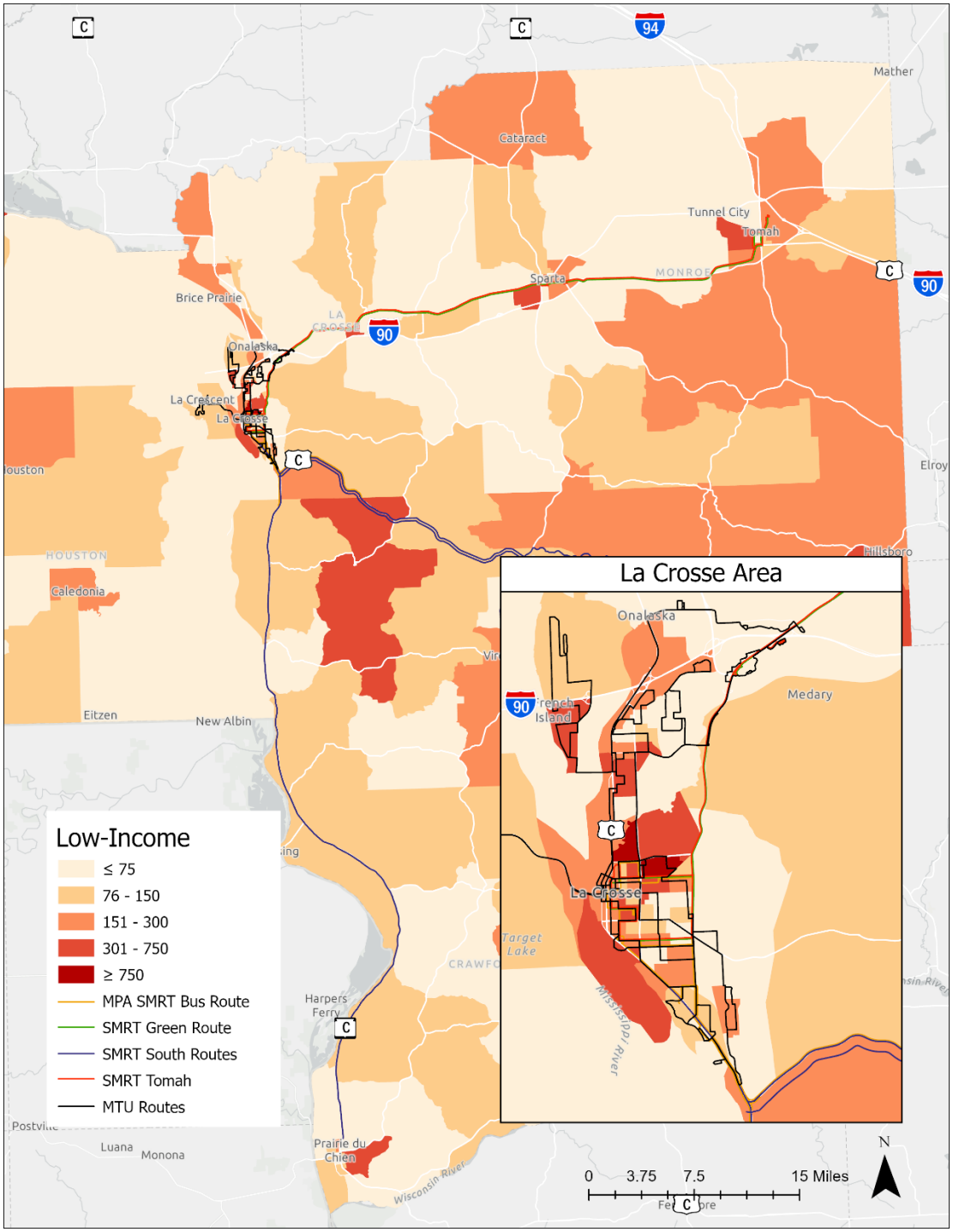
Figure 4. POC Population by Census Block Group



Population by Income

The distribution of low-income households is similarly concentrated in the urban core, particularly within La Crosse and in some neighboring communities currently connected by SMRT bus routes (see Figure 5). These households are more likely to depend on affordable transportation options, reinforcing the importance of maintaining accessible and reliable transit service in these areas.

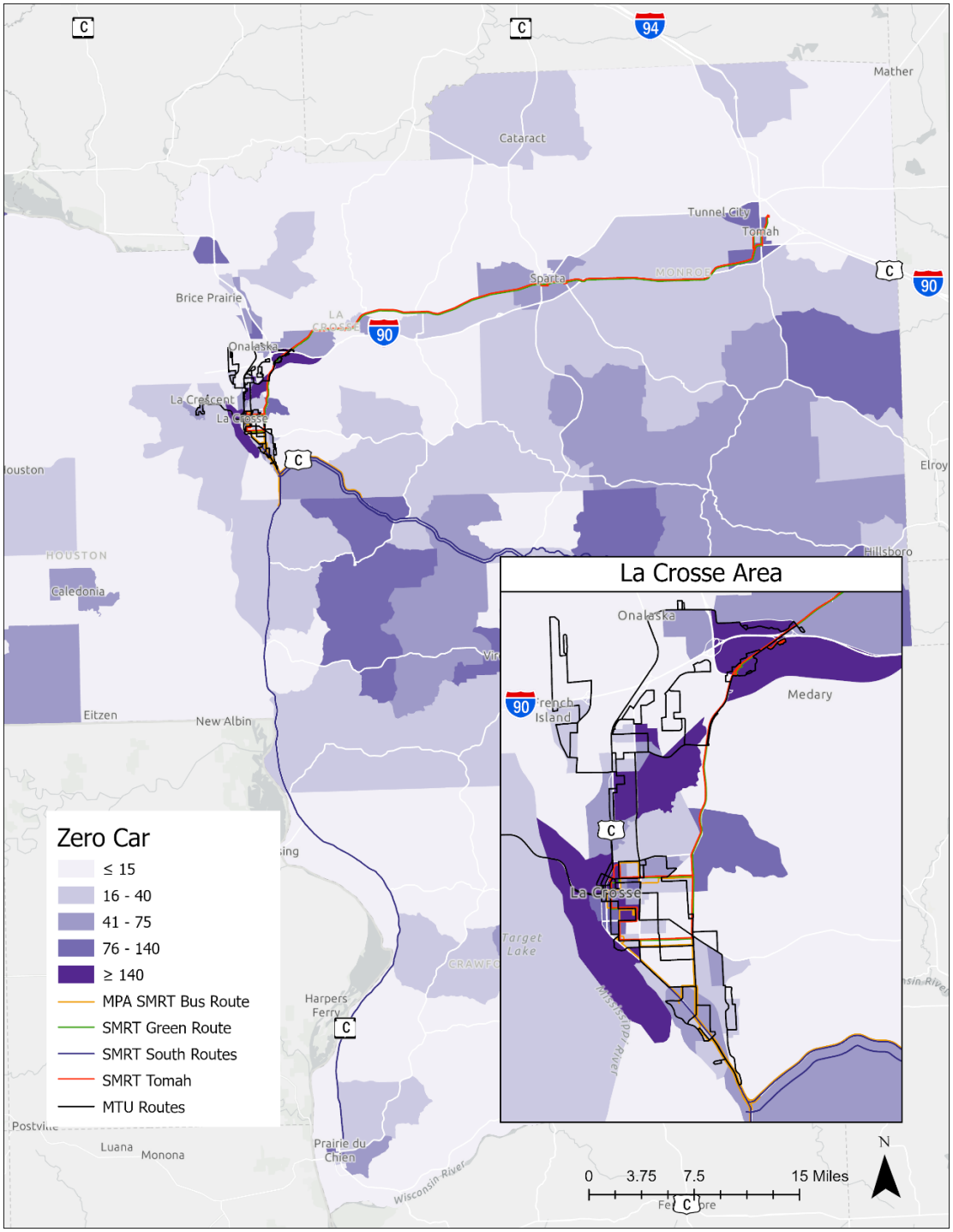
Figure 5. Low-Income Households by Census Block Group



Population by Vehicle Access

Households without access to a personal vehicle are concentrated in specific urban neighborhoods as shown in Figure 6. These households are dependent on alternative modes of transportation which often include transit, and their geographic distribution highlights the necessity of sustaining and improving transit coverage in these locations.

Figure 6. Households with Zero Vehicle Access



Transit User Characteristics

SMRT Rider Survey

The 2024–2025 SMRT rider survey capture rider demographic characteristics and travel behavior. A majority of respondents fell within the 45–64 age range, though younger riders (ages 35–44) make up a growing share of ridership in 2025 compared to 2024 indicating that SMRT continues to serve a predominantly middle-aged to older adult population, while also beginning to attract more working-age riders in younger brackets. Trip purpose was largely work-related, with more than 80 percent of riders in 2024 using SMRT to commute to their jobs, and slightly fewer (73 percent) reporting work trips in 2025. Medical trips are a smaller but increasing share, rising from seven percent in 2024 to nearly 15 percent in 2025. This reflects both the critical role SMRT plays in connecting residents to employment and the increasing reliance of some populations on transit for accessing healthcare.

Satisfaction levels were high, with most respondents reporting that they are satisfied or very satisfied with the service. Most riders are employed at large regional institutions, including Gundersen Health System and Mayo Clinic. Frequency of use also shows a notable shift: in 2024, most riders used the service several times per week, whereas in 2025 more respondents reported riding between 5 and 15 days per month, with a significant portion riding 15 or more days monthly.

Travel Patterns

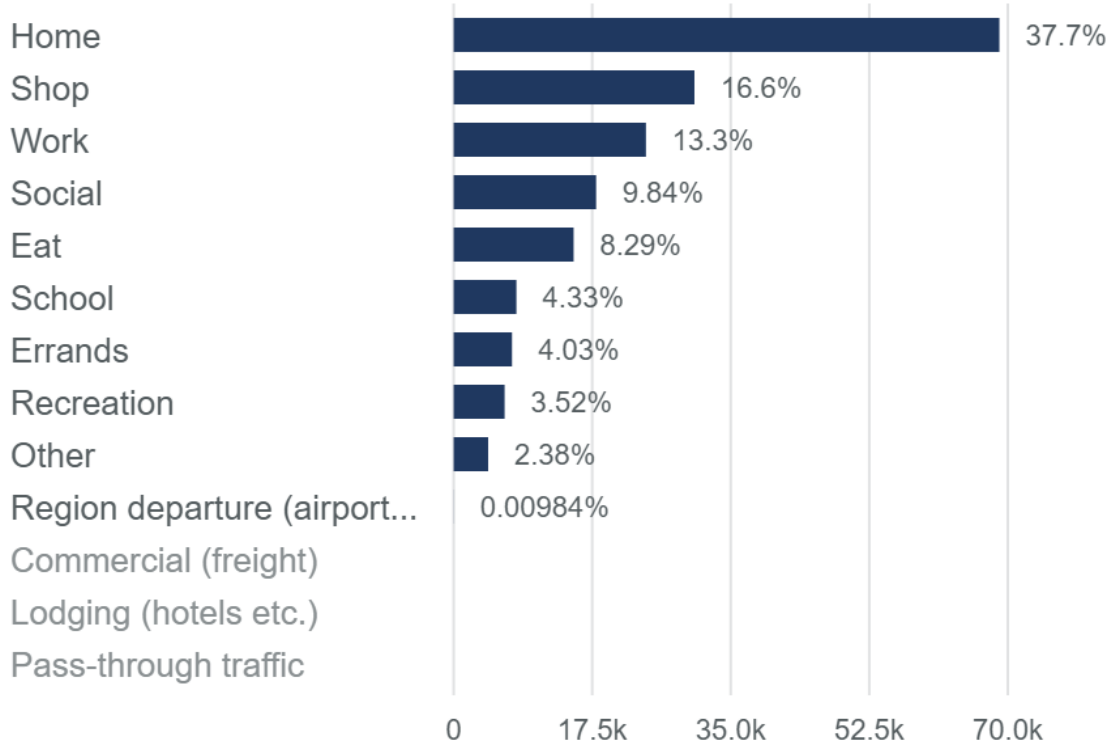
Travel patterns in the four-county La Crosse area was analyzed using data from the job and population travel data from the U.S. Census Bureau[1], using Census bureau software and Replica to process the data. With the exception of trip origin and destinations shown in Figures 8 and 9 show census data in the region including in Minnesota counties. The travel data for trip origins and destinations data for Wisconsin and Minnesota are included in separate datasets in replica therefore county-wide commute flows were also analyzed to get a picture of travel patterns across state lines (Figures 11 and 12). This analysis revealed patterns in recent trip-purpose data and origin/destination mapping indicate that most movements are short-to-medium distance within the region with targeted longer trips along the I-90/I-94 corridor and US-61/14. Job density and commuting patterns emphasize the role of La Crosse as the principal employment and services center for the region.

Trip Purposes

The chart in Figure 7 shows reported trip purposes for trips originating and ending in the four-county study area for households with access to two or fewer vehicles. Home-based trips make up almost half of all trips (about 37 percent). These are followed by “Shop” which make up about 16 percent and “work” at about 13 percent. Altogether, the spread of trip purposes points to a strong base of discretionary, home-based travel that clusters around retail corridors and mixed-use districts in La Crosse and Onalaska.

[1] U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (ACS)/ Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS); Census Transportation Planning Products (CTPP); Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD).

Figure 7. Reported Trip Purpose for trips with origins and destinations within the four-county study area

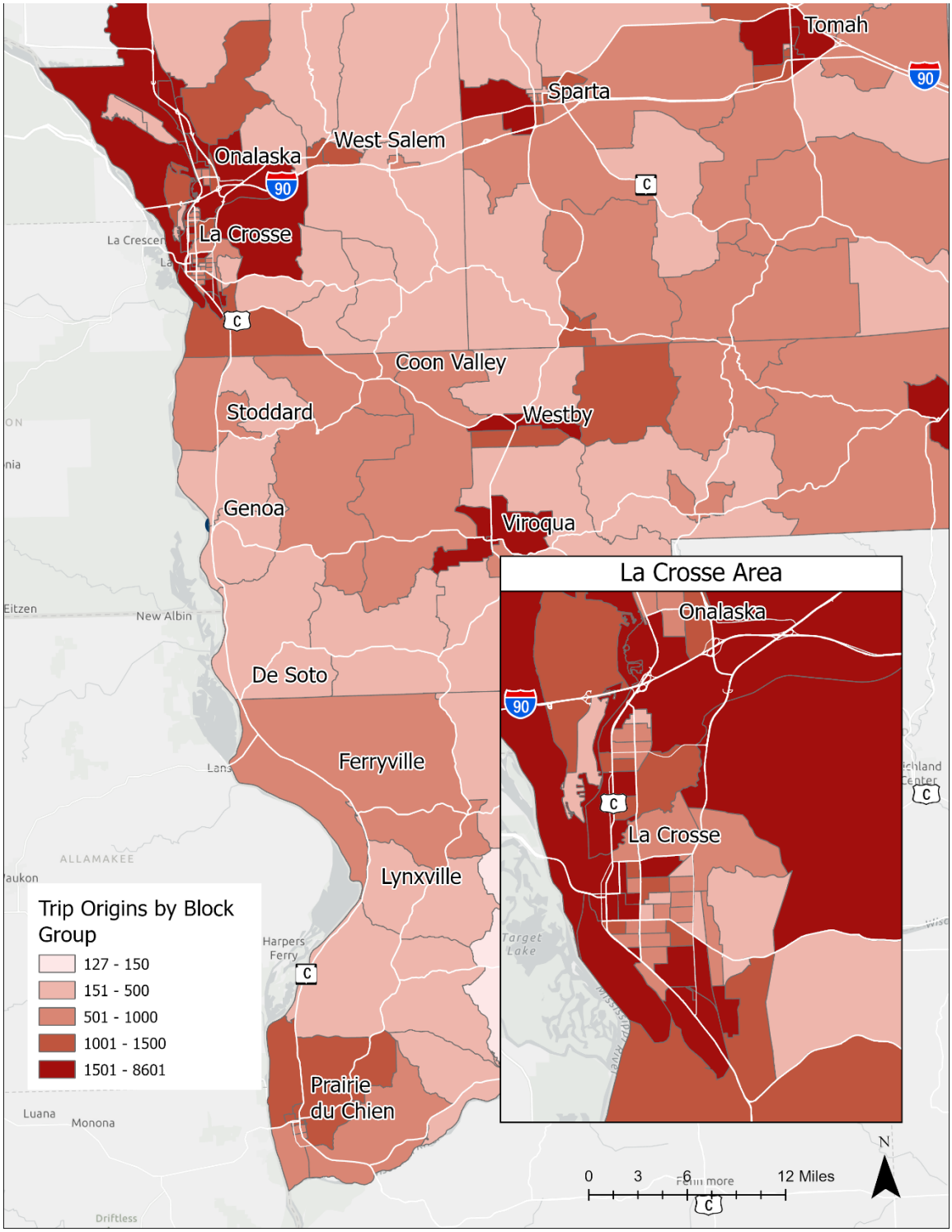


Source: Replica (2025) U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (ACS)/ Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS); Census Transportation Planning Products (CTPP); Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD)

Origins and Destinations

Mapped trip origins, shown in Figure 8, are most concentrated in the City of La Crosse and adjacent communities (Onalaska and Holmen), with additional pockets in Tomah and Prairie du Chien. Rural townships across Vernon, Monroe, and Crawford generate fewer absolute trip starts but still contribute to steady demand along the principal highway corridors, particularly toward the urban core. Within the inset, the highest-intensity origin tracts cluster along the south side of La Crosse and north along the US-53 corridor into Onalaska.

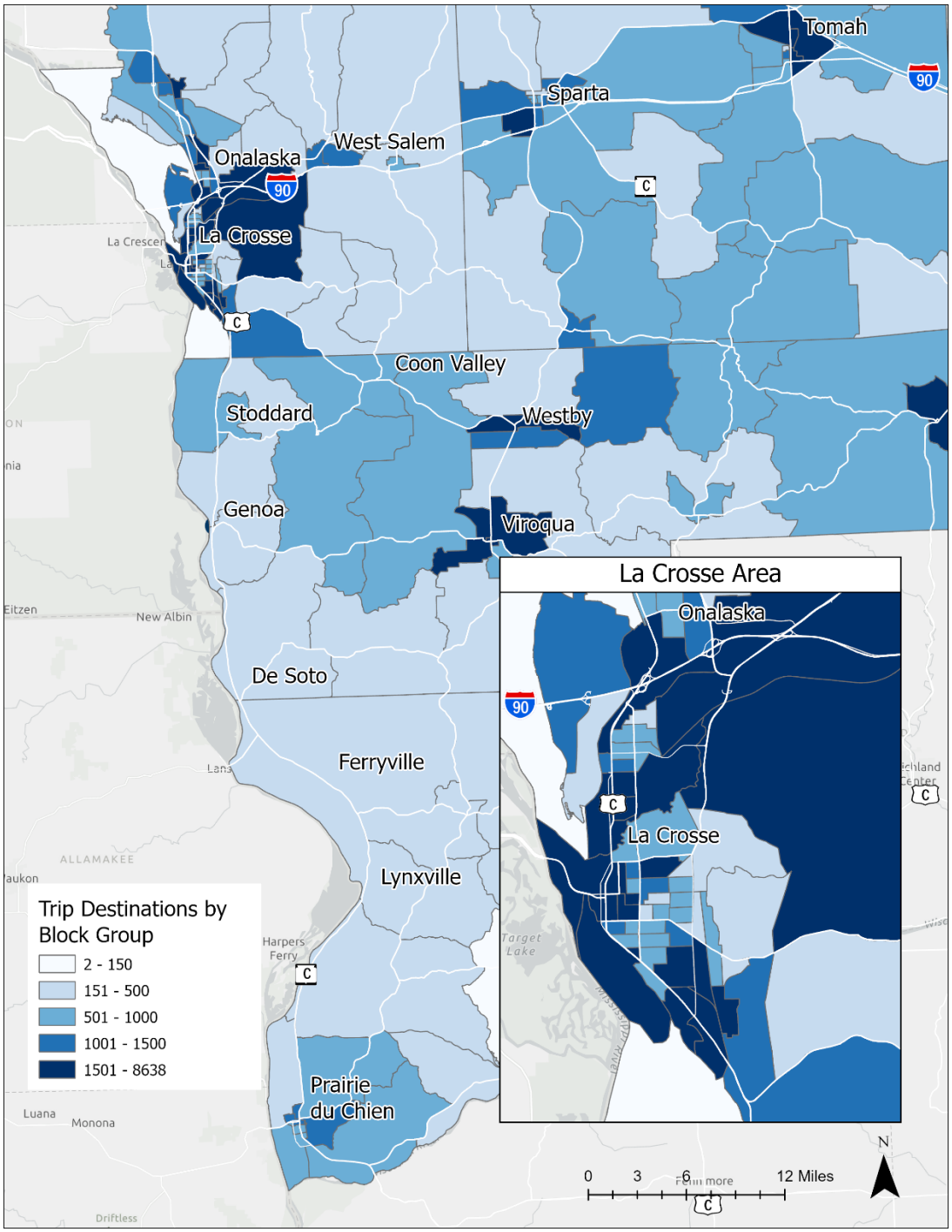
Figure 8. Trip Origins (all purposes) Mapped by Census Block Group



Source: Replica (2025) U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (ACS)/ Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS); Census Transportation Planning Products (CTPP); Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD)

Trip destinations are even more tightly concentrated in the La Crosse–Onalaska area, indicating a pattern in which daily needs and services draw residents from throughout the region shown in Figure 9. Secondary destination clusters appear in Tomah and Prairie du Chien, consistent with their roles as county seats and service nodes.

Figure 9. Trip Destinations (all purposes) Mapped by Census Block Group

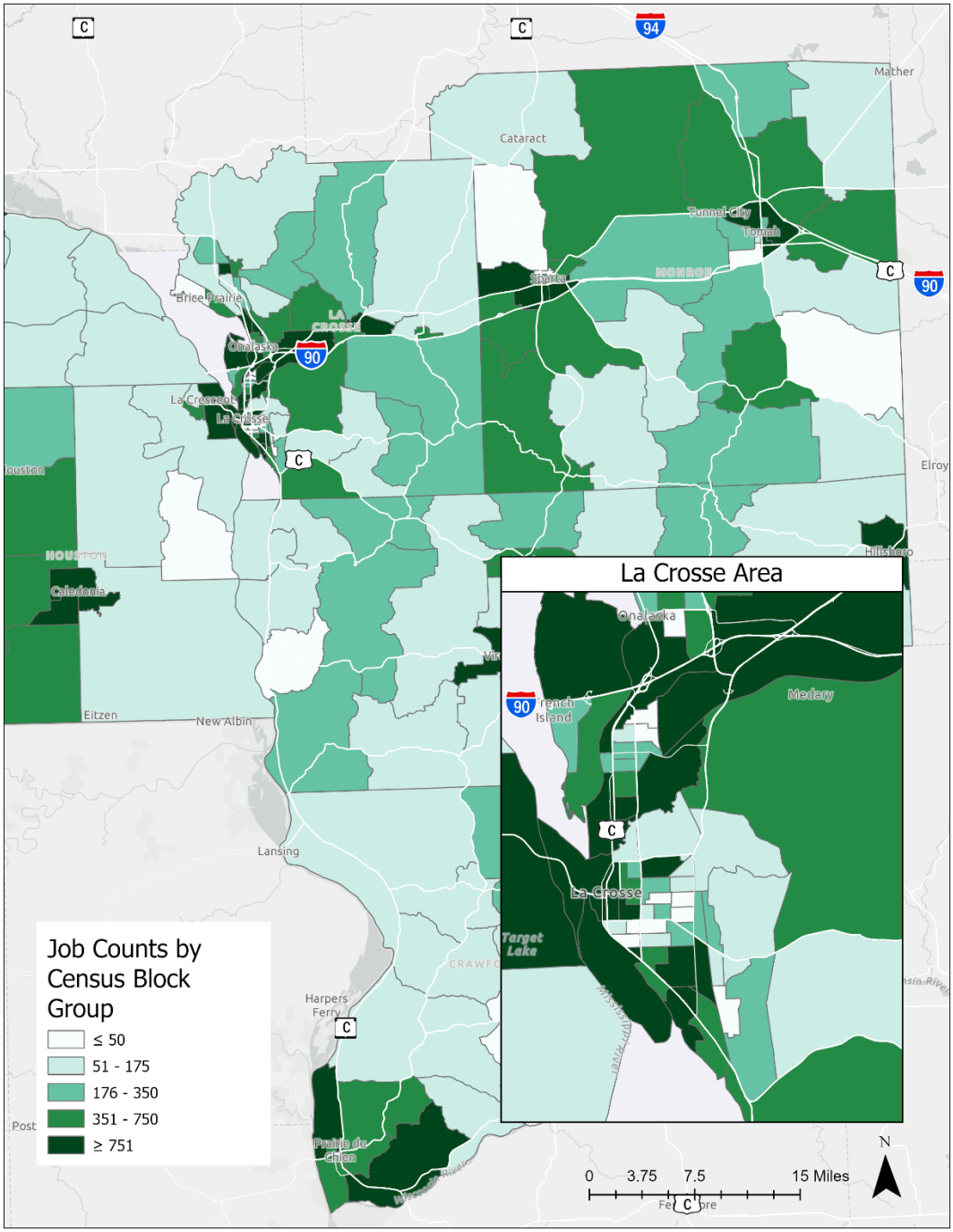


Source: Replica (2025) U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (ACS)/ Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS); Census Transportation Planning Products (CTPP); Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD)

Employment Geography

Employment density is highest in the city of La Crosse and along the I-90/US-53 corridor through Onalaska/Holmen, encompassing major employers. Additional employment clusters occur around Tomah (I-90/94 junction) and in the southern part of Crawford County near Prairie du Chien. The spatial overlap between job centers and the observed destination hot spots underscores the importance of all-day access to medical, retail, and education anchors.

Figure 10. Total jobs by Census Block Group (2022)

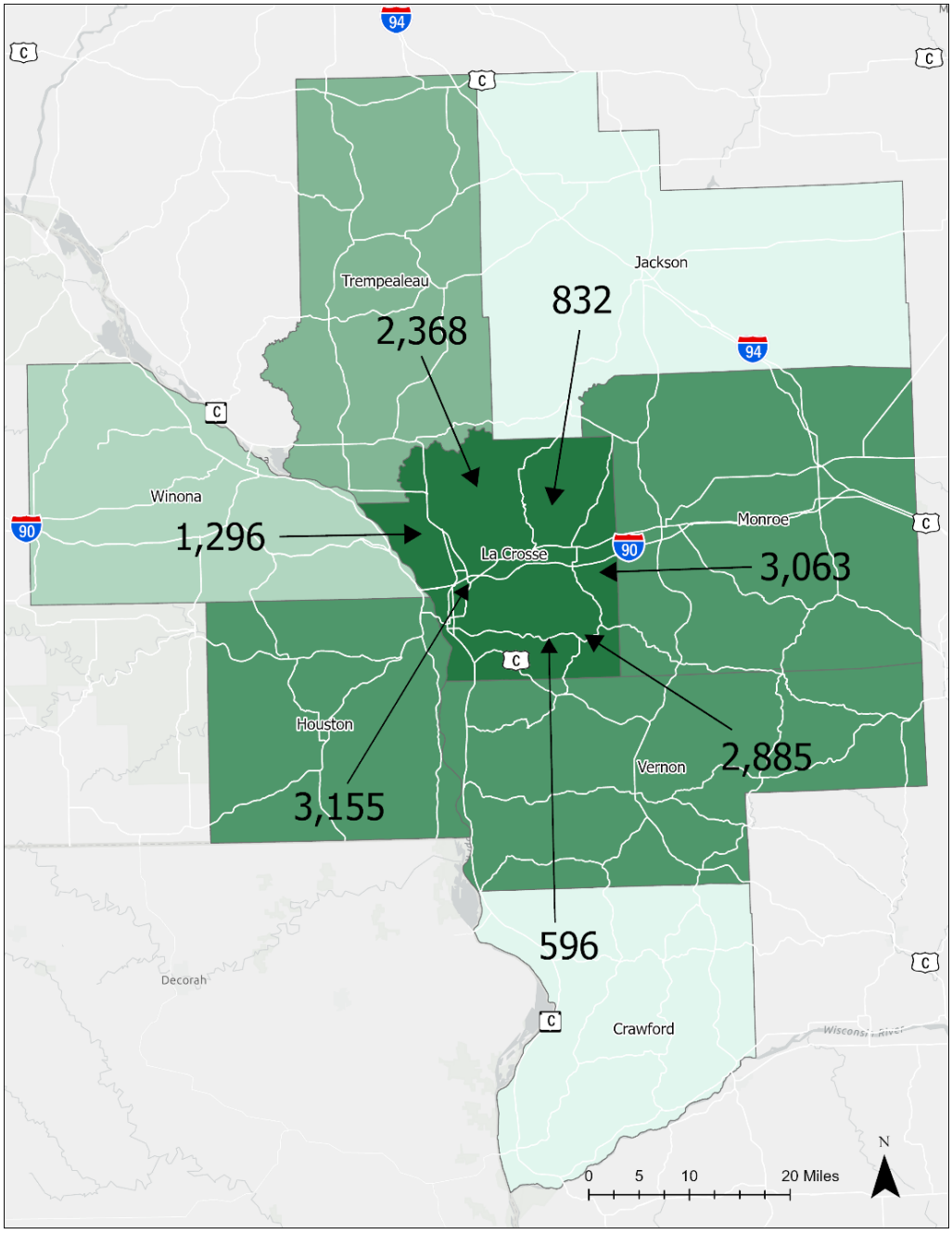


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Center for Economic Studies, LEHD

Commute Patterns

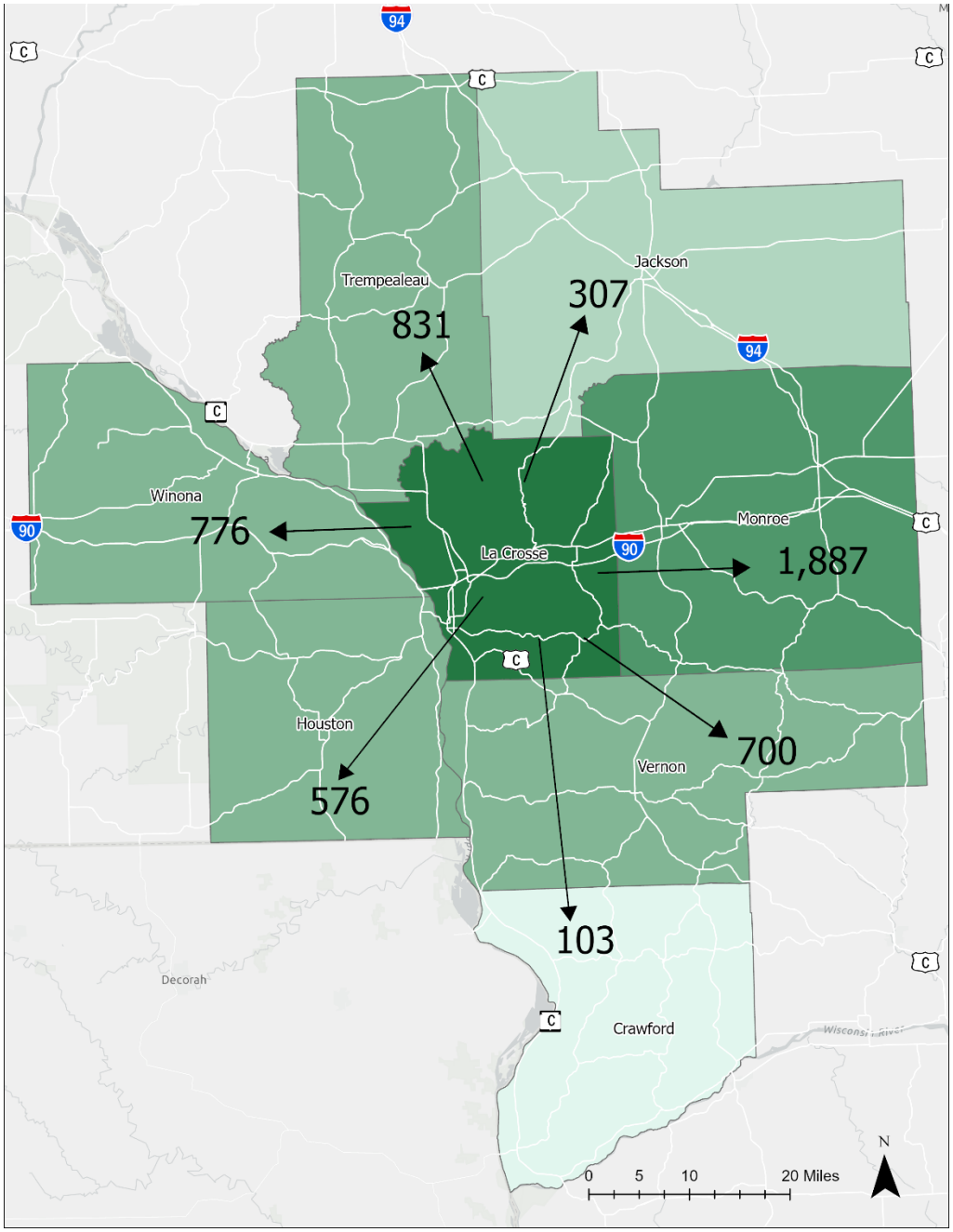
Figure 11 and Figure 12 show the inflow and outflow of daily work trips between La Crosse County and seven surrounding counties (Crawford, Jackson, Monroe, Jackson, and Trempealeau counties in Wisconsin, and Winona and Houston counties in Minnesota). Results show that La Crosse County is a net importer of workers. 78 percent of all workers who reside in La Crosse County also work in La Crosse County, while only 22 percent commute to other locations. Conversely, 43 percent of people who work in La Crosse County commute from other counties. This result reveals a regional labor market that has moderate inter-county connectivity but is ultimately anchored by the La Crosse urban core.

Figure 11. Inflow of Work Trips to La Crosse County



Source: Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD)

Figure 12. Outflow of Work Trips from La Crosse County



Source: Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD)

Themes in Travel Patterns

The four-county La Crosse area exhibits a classic hub-and-spoke travel pattern: origins dispersed across the counties converge on a compact set of employment and service centers, with La Crosse–Onalaska as the dominant node and Tomah and Prairie du Chien as secondary anchors. The region experiences a modest net number of commuters traveling into the study area and substantial all-day, non-work trip activity. Together, these factors are supportive of a transit network that combines a frequent regional service, reliable

intercounty express links, and flexible first/last-mile solutions to connect rural residents with the core destinations they use most. These components are largely reflective of existing service in the region, which requires regional coordination.

LEGAL AND REGULATORY ANALYSIS

Legislative Context

Act 32 – Wisconsin's 2011 biennial budget bill – terminated the ability to form RTAs in Wisconsin through repealing previous legislation enabling their formation and revoking their taxing authority. Prior to the implementation of Act 32, Chapters 59 and 66 of Wisconsin Statutes guided the formation for RTAs in counties and municipalities, respectively; while Chater 77 guided taxation.

- **Chapter 59 --** Wis. Stat. 59.58(6)-(7) established various visions for an RTA for Kenosha, Racine and Milwaukee Counties to coordinate transit and commuter rail planning between the three counties. Its governance structure was to be as follows:
    - Two (2) members from Milwaukee County
    - Two (2) members from the City of Milwaukee
    - One (1) member from Racine County
    - One (1) member from Kenosha County
    - One (1) member from the City of Racine
    - One (1) member from the City of Kenosha
    - One (1) member appointed from the Governor's Office

  This RTA was strictly authorized to apply for federal funds to establish a rail line between the three counties and was empowered to impose vehicle registration fees for funding. The RTA was also authorized to issue up to $50 million in bonds to fund its share of enacting rail and could retain two dollars per transaction for administrative costs.

  While inactive, Chapter 59 provides a functional framework of enabling legislation that could be used to enable other RTAs. Chapter 59 ties SERTA to established funding streams (i.e., vehicle fees), while providing strong state oversight.

- **Chapter 66 –** Wisconsin Statute 66.1039 outlined how three different regional transit authorities could be created and governed in Wisconsin: Dane County, Chippewa Valley, and Chequamegon Bay. To create an RTA, all three entities required a county resolution, and would be governed by a Board of Directors appointed by county executives, mayors, some local associations, and the Governor. RTA would have the following powers:
    - Issuing bonds for financing operations

- Imposing a sales tax within the RTA boundaries (if approved by Resolution)
- Employing Staff and managing revenues independently
- Operating and contracting for public transit

While Chapter 66 similarly provides a detailed framework for future RTA efforts, a new state legislative act would be required to authorize these efforts.

- **Chapter 77 –** This statute defined how a Southeastern RTA (defined in 59.58(7) could collect a few on short-term car rentals to support the RTA
  - A fee of up to $18/transaction on Type 1 passenger vehicle rentals for 30 or fewer days within the RTA boundaries could be used to fund the RTA.
  - The fee can be annually adjusted based on changes to the Consumer Price index, rounded to the nearest $0.25 if not already divisible.

Existing Context of Regional Transit in Wisconsin

Without state legislation authorizing Regional Transit Authorities (RTAs), regional and intermunicipal transit must be managed through individual service contracts between the municipality operating the transit system and each municipality receiving service. For example, the City of Madison currently contracts with nearby communities such as Fitchburg, Monona, Sun Prairie, and Verona. Each agreement must be periodically reviewed and renewed by both parties. Some transit systems – such as the Janesville Transit System – will provide intercity expresses through such a cooperative model, as in the Beloit-Janesville Express. Janesville and Beloit's Transit systems maintain annual contracts with educational and workforce institutions that attract a workforce and student body from both municipalities to provide an express bus between the two cities. While innovative within the existing legal framework, this system is nevertheless a fragile one that is entirely dependent on the budgetary well-being and political will of all contract signatories.

This arrangement places a significant administrative burden on both the transit provider and the municipalities being served. The provider must manage multiple intergovernmental agreements and navigate shifting political landscapes in each community. If even one city council decides to reduce or discontinue service, it can have serious financial repercussions for the regional transit system.

In the absence of enabling legislation for RTAs, the responsibilities of regional transit governance and coordination fall entirely on local governments, rather than being handled by a dedicated regional entity focused solely on transit planning and service delivery.

Proposed RTA Legislation

While unsuccessful, multiple efforts to reenable RTAs in Wisconsin have occurred in the state legislature. In 2013, Senate Bill 259 established an RTA in the Fox Cities (Appleton, Oshkosh, Neenah, Menasha) with taxing authority (contingent on a referendum), though the bill expired before reaching the State Assembly. This represents the closest RTA legislation has come to being enacted since Act 32.

The State 2023-2025 Executive Budget sought to reinstate the 2009 statutory framework described earlier in this chapter to empower Dane County, the Fox Cities, and southeastern Wisconsin to create RTA and provide a framework for the creation of other RTAs if two or more political subdivisions desired to do so. An omnibus motion removed these provisions. A similar effort failed two years later during the State 2025-2027 Executive Budget.

It is important to understand how Wisconsin's current legal frameworks prohibit the establishment of RTAs and the limitations of providing regional services in their absence. While regional services do exist across the state, they rely on locally funded partnerships supported through intergovernmental contracts that each participating city council or other governing body must routinely authorize. Past legislative efforts demonstrate that a legal foundation for RTAs already exists in Wisconsin, and that reestablishing this authority would provide communities options to create a stronger and more stable basis for regional transit with a dedicated and relatively stable funding mechanism.

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

This report documents the La Crosse region's existing transit services, travel patterns, and governance structures, highlighting both the essential role of current providers and the challenges of fragmented coordination and funding. Findings in this report and documented in previous studies show strong demand for expanded and more equitable mobility and point to the potential benefits of a Regional Transit Authority (RTA) to unify planning, funding, and service delivery.

The next steps in this study will take the findings and further evaluate and test if an RTA is an appropriate model to pursue for transportation coordination in the region. Comparable regions with RTAs will be analyzed to understand governance structures, funding mechanisms, and implementation strategies that may be adaptable to the La Crosse context. This review will help identify best practices and lessons learned that can inform decision-making. Scenario models will be applied to the La Crosse region to test how different governance and funding structures could improve coordination, expand service, and meet long-term mobility needs. These steps will build on the existing conditions documented in this report to provide a path forward in evaluating the feasibility of the formation of an RTA for the La Crosse area.

LAPC RTA Feasibility Study

Technical Report #2:
Governance, Financial Feasibility, and Operations

La Crosse Area Planning Committee

Prepared by:

SRF

January 2026

SRF Project No. 19159

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

The La Crosse Area Planning Committee (LAPC) is studying the feasibility of establishing a Regional Transit Authority (RTA) as a mechanism to strengthen mobility, coordination, and funding for public transportation across the region. To date, existing conditions and initial stakeholder needs and interests have been collected and documented. This report builds upon this work to evaluate potential RTA structures through four key scenarios. Each scenario is assessed for its potential governance structure, financial feasibility, and operational alternatives, as well as the relation to current legislative proposals for RTAs in Wisconsin.

This assessment will guide LAPC in determining, along with its local government partners, the desired scope of an RTA for the La Crosse region. The analysis of funding and operational alternatives will ensure that the RTA structure supports sustainable investment in transit services that meaningfully improve access for residents, employees, and visitors.

GOVERNANCE ALTERNATIVES ANALYSIS

This section evaluates potential governance models for regional transit coordination in the La Crosse region, with a particular focus on scenarios enabled by proposed Regional Transit Authority (RTA) legislation as well as a multi-county transit commission alternative currently permitted under Wisconsin law. As background, the analysis includes an overview of the existing transit governance landscape to establish baseline decision-making structures. It then summarizes the governance and statutory framework outlined in Senate Bill 754, followed by comparative case studies from Minnesota, Illinois, and Michigan that illustrate how different enabling legislative environments shape RTA formation, funding, and oversight. Building on this background, this section assesses four potential governance scenarios for the La Crosse region, focusing on tradeoffs related to geographic scope, representation, administrative complexity, and alignment with existing service delivery models.

Existing Transit Governance Landscape

Existing transit services in the La Crosse region are provided by La Crosse Municipal Transit Utility (MTU), Scenic Mississippi Regional Transit (SMRT), and DriftLink. Each service is managed by a lead funding partner, with intergovernmental agreements that facilitate service to nearby communities. These governance structures are described below.

La Crosse MTU

MTU is a department within the City of La Crosse that also operates service via intergovernmental agreements in the City of Onalaska, Town of Campbell, and the City of La Crescent, Minnesota. It handles its own operations, maintenance, and marketing functions, while human resources, finance, and legal functions are handled by other City departments. The management team includes the Director of Transit, who reports directly to the Mayor of La Crosse, and a Deputy Director, Operations Manager, and Fleet and Maintenance Manager.

Oversight of MTU is provided by the MTU Board, which approves service agreements and minor contracts. The Board includes both elected officials and members of the general public. The Common Council approves large capital purchases and the annual budget.

Within MTU, the Director is responsible for preparing budgets, hearing grievances, and negotiating labor contracts. The Deputy Director is responsible for vehicle procurement. The Operations Manager sets operating policies. Discipline, route/service planning, and fare policies are handled by multiple staff members. Management holds weekly staff meetings, with the Transit Director meeting monthly with the mayor. Staff receive training courses that vary by the year; recent and planned training subjects include workplace sensitivity and security. The Board holds quarterly meetings open to the public, with staff providing regular updates.

MTU's current organizational structure requires periodic negotiations with neighboring municipalities, and in the case of La Crescent, a community in a neighboring state with different transit funding policies. RTA legislation could enable MTU to more formally incorporate existing partners into planning and decision-making functions, as well as providing more stable funding over time.

Scenic Mississippi Regional Transit (SMRT)

SMRT is managed by La Crosse County, with additional funding participation from three nearby counties, as well as local municipalities and businesses.

At the county level, transit governance is supported by a regional Transportation Coordination Committee (TCC), which serves in an advisory role to the La Crosse County Board of Supervisors. The committee meets quarterly, or more frequently as needed, with participation from the system operator, Running Inc., to support coordinated decision-making across the region.

SMRT has faced falling ridership in recent years, presenting challenges for La Crosse County and other government partners in justifying continued investment in its current service model. Administrative burdens are currently borne by La Crosse County, which has indicated it would appreciate stronger participation from other funding partners. If implemented at the multi-county scale, RTA legislation could enable formal regional collaboration that includes sustainable funding and staffing levels for SMRT or similar multi-county services.

DriftLink

DriftLink, formerly known as the Onalaska-Holmen-West Salem Shared-Ride Taxi, is managed by the City of Onalaska, with funding participation from the Village of Holmen and Village of West Salem. The City of Onalaska's financial services director serves as the transit grant administrator and oversees the transit contractor, Running Inc. The contractor employs over 20 drivers for the DriftLink service, as well as dispatchers and maintenance staff.

The City of Onalaska is responsible for human resources, finance, purchasing, legal and other administrative support. These functions are the responsibility of the City of Onalaska without assistance from the two village governmental units. Operations and maintenance are the responsibility of the contractor.

The City of Onalaska has a public transit committee which meets quarterly to review financials and advise capital purchases. Transit policy and budgetary decisions are the responsibility of the City of Onalaska Common Council.

In addition to DriftLink, the City of Onalaska provides financial support to La Crosse MTU in exchange for MTU's Route 9, which serves Onalaska. RTA legislation could enable more efficient coordination between

funding partners for DriftLink, reduce the administrative burden on the City of Onalaska, and enhance coordination with fixed-route transit in the La Crosse region.

Current Legislative Proposal for RTAs in Wisconsin

The history of RTA legislation in Wisconsin is documented in Technical Report #1. In December 2025, a new bill was introduced in the Wisconsin state senate to facilitate the creation of RTAs in regions throughout the state.

Wisconsin Senate Bill 754 (SB 754) would create RTAs as distinct governmental entities with defined governance, finance, and operational responsibilities. Additionally, unlike previous legislative efforts to permit RTAs in Wisconsin, SB 754 does not just *enable* RTA formation. Rather, it *creates* an RTA in each metropolitan planning area in the state. This would, by default, result in RTA formation in every region with an urban population of 50,000 or greater, including the following:

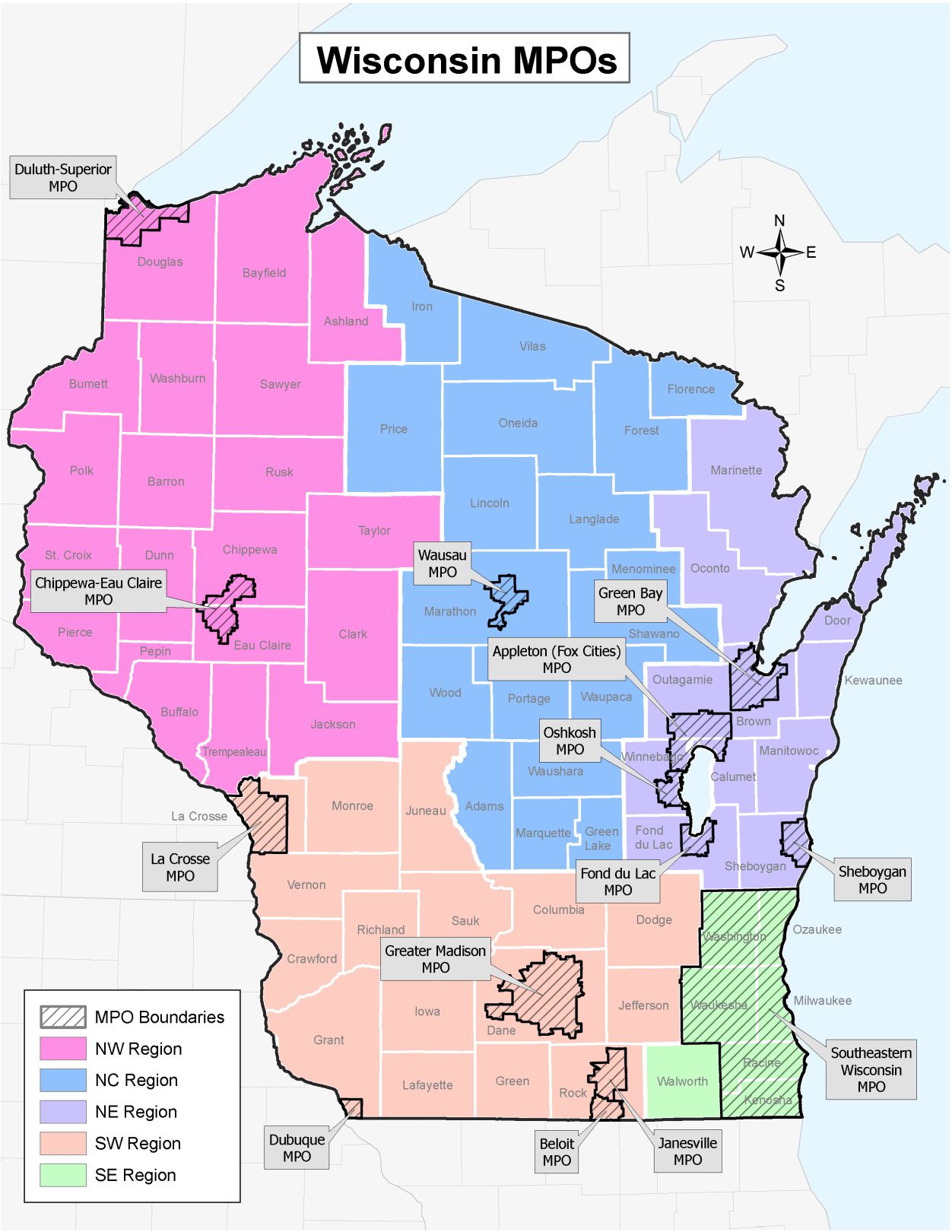
- Milwaukee-Racine-Kenosha
- Madison
- Green Bay
- Duluth-Superior (MN-WI)
- Appleton (Fox Cities)
- Eau Claire
- Oshkosh
- Wausau
- Janesville
- Beloit
- La Crosse (WI-MN)
- Sheboygan
- Fond du Lac
- Dubuque (IA-WI)

Under SB 754, any municipality with a border adjacent to an existing member of a metropolitan planning area may opt to join an RTA. There appears to be no provision for RTAs to be implemented at geographies smaller than a metropolitan planning area (such as one or more municipalities), or larger than a metropolitan planning area (such as one or more counties). These scenarios have been addressed in previous legislation and are discussed in the later sections of this report. It is possible that the final version of SB 754, were it to pass, may be amended to include additional governance structures.

Funding options for RTAs in SB 754 include the same 0.5-cent sales tax proposed in previous legislation. RTAs would be authorized to levy *up to* this amount but could implement lower sales taxes if desired. This discretion would allow each RTA to match the level of funding requested to the level of transit need in their community.

Figure 1 shows a map of metropolitan planning area boundaries for each metropolitan planning organization (MPO) in Wisconsin. For urban areas that cross state boundaries, only the Wisconsin portion is shown. It is assumed that only the Wisconsin portion of each metropolitan planning area would be incorporated in an RTA.

Figure 1. Map of Metropolitan Planning Boundaries in Wisconsin



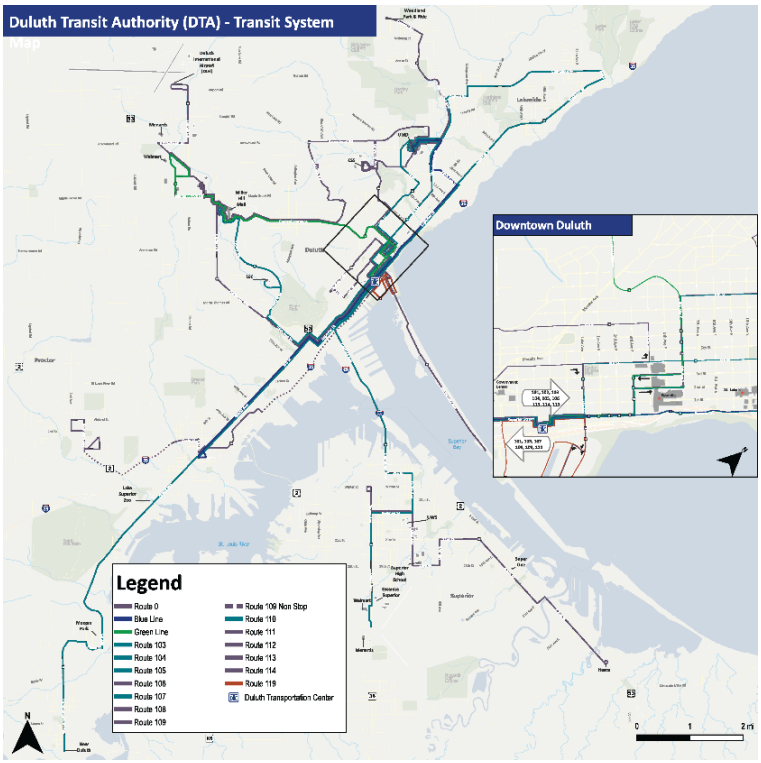
Case Studies

The following case studies explore RTA examples in neighboring Midwest states that have RTA enabling legislation. Depending on the state, RTAs may be created individually by state statute or enabled across the state and formed at the discretion of local governments. Case studies include peer transit systems in communities similar to the La Crosse region: Duluth Transit Authority (Minnesota), CONNECT Transit (Illinois), and Kalamazoo Metro (Michigan).

Minnesota – Duluth Transit Authority

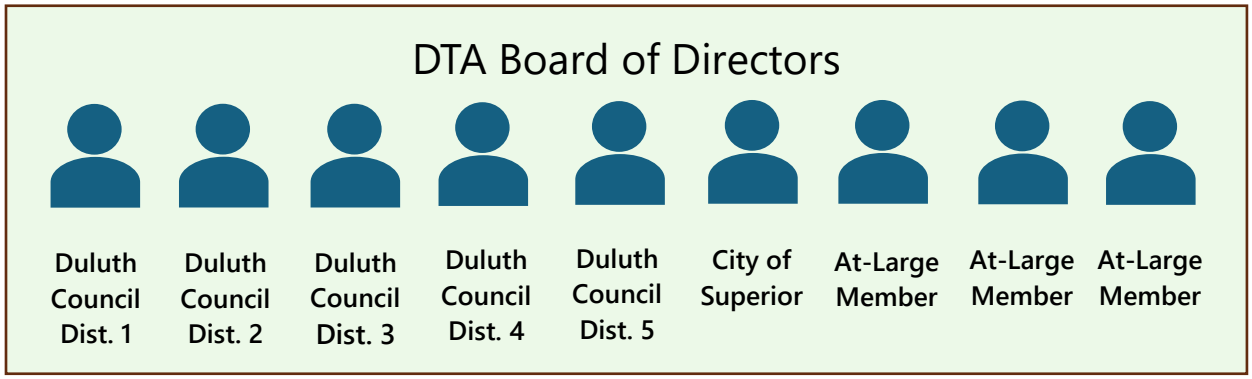
Duluth Transit Authority (DTA) is a public mass-transit authority created by the Minnesota Legislature and operated as a unit of the City of Duluth. DTA's statutory framework provides the authority with independent powers, including taxation. DTA currently receives funding through a property tax levy, assessed at 0.03123% throughout the Minnesota portion of its service area.

Figure 2. DTA System Map



DTA provides fixed-route bus service, paratransit, and regional connections. Its service area, shown in Figure 2, includes the City of Duluth and neighboring Minnesota communities. Service extends into the City of Superior via intergovernmental agreement. DTA's Board of Directors is composed primarily of Duluth City Council representatives from multiple districts, along with representatives from the City of Superior and several at-large members, as illustrated in Figure 3. This structure balances representation from core service areas with broader regional oversight.

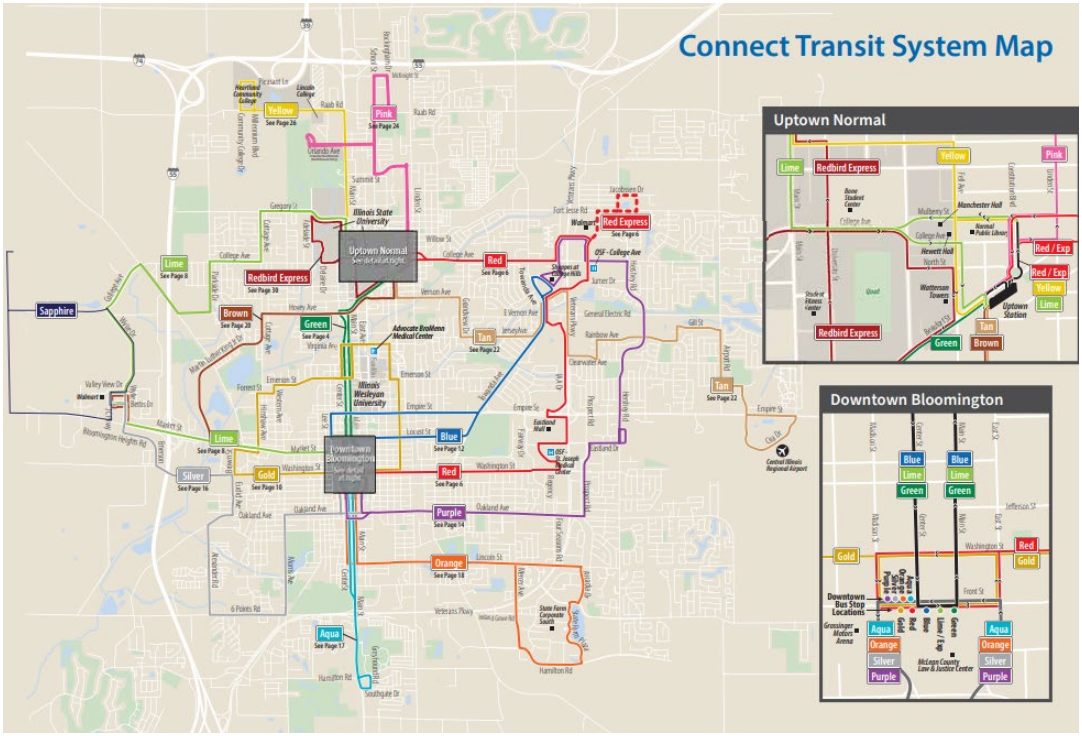
Figure 3. DTA Board of Directors



Illinois – CONNECT Transit

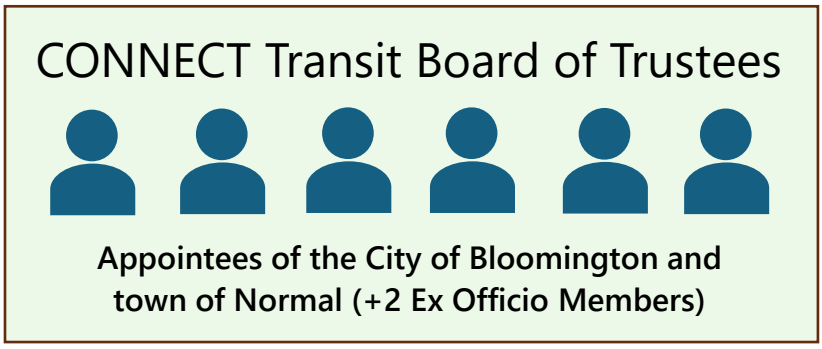
CONNECT Transit was established in 1972 as an intergovernmental transit agency by the City of Bloomington and the Town of Normal, Illinois, which is home to Illinois State University. Under the Illinois Mass Transit District Act, CONNECT Transit is now structured as a Mass Transit District (the State of Illinois term for small urban or rural RTAs). The agency's fixed-route map is shown below in Figure 4. In 2024, the agency expanded to provide rural demand-response service throughout McLean County.

Figure 4. CONNECT Transit Fixed-Route System Map



Under Illinois state law, locally formed RTAs have the authority to levy taxes, subject to a local referendum. However, not every urban RTA utilizes this authority, and no rural agency has enacted a levy. CONNECT Transit has not utilized its taxation authority. Instead, local funding is primarily provided through general fund contributions from Bloomington and Normal, totaling approximately $1.5 million in 2024. Like most transit agencies, CONNECT Transit also receives significant state and federal funding support.

Governance is provided by a Board of Trustees made up of appointees from the City of Bloomington and the Town of Normal, along with ex officio members. This governance structure reflects its intergovernmental origins and maintains a strong connection to the municipalities that created and fund the system.

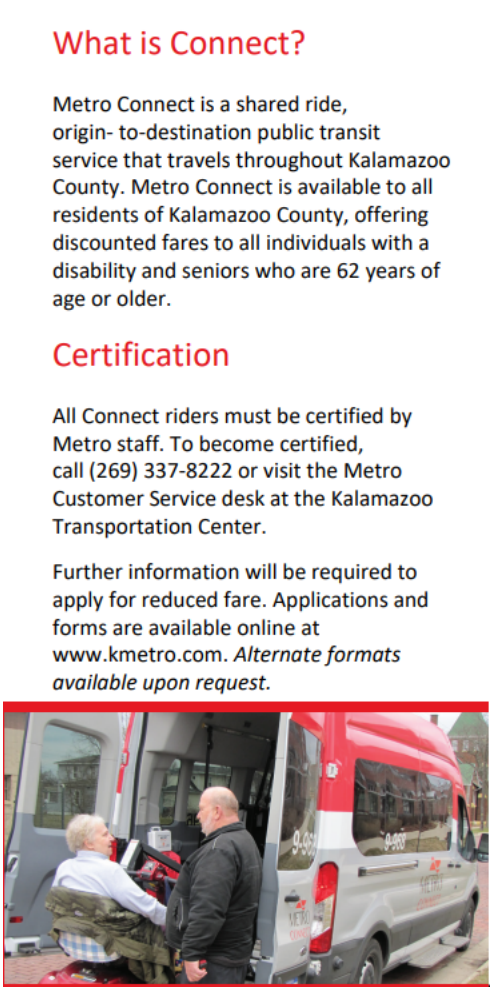


Michigan – Kalamazoo Metro

Kalamazoo Metro provides urban and rural services to the City of Kalamazoo, Michigan, and surrounding communities. Founded in 1900, Kalamazoo Metro has undergone several governance transitions. Its services are currently provided by the Central County Transit Authority (CCTA), a public transportation authority formed under Michigan's Act 196. In 2016, CCTA assumed operation of the City of Kalamazoo's "Metro" fixed-route system (map shown in Figure 5), transitioning service delivery from a municipal department to an independent authority. CCTA coordinates closely with the Kalamazoo County Transportation Authority (KCTA), which funds Kalamazoo Metro's countywide demand-response service, branded as Metro Connect (Figure 6).

Figure 6. CCTA Fixed-Route Map

Figure 5. KCTA Metro Connect Brochure



What is Connect?

Metro Connect is a shared ride, origin- to-destination public transit service that travels throughout Kalamazoo County. Metro Connect is available to all residents of Kalamazoo County, offering discounted fares to all individuals with a disability and seniors who are 62 years of age or older.

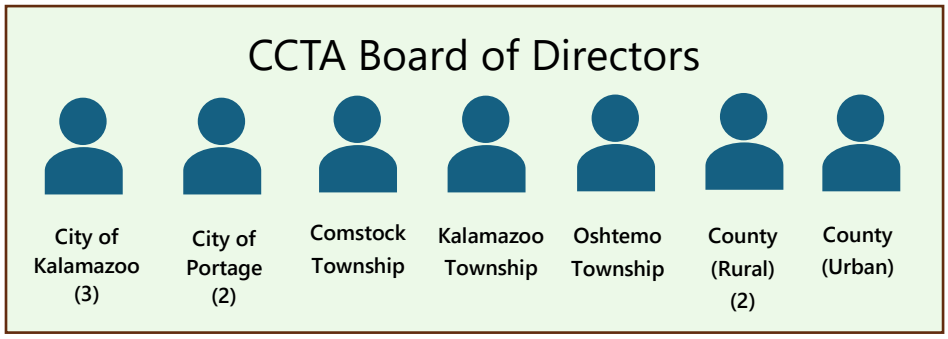
Certification

All Connect riders must be certified by Metro staff. To become certified, call (269) 337-8222 or visit the Metro Customer Service desk at the Kalamazoo Transportation Center.

Further information will be required to apply for reduced fare. Applications and forms are available online at www.kmetro.com. *Alternate formats available upon request.*

CCTA is funded in part by a dedicated 0.896 property tax millage levied within the service area. In parallel, KCTA levies a separate, lower countywide 0.315 millage to support demand-response service through Metro Connect, creating a funding and service structure that is appropriate for the differing urban and countywide transit needs. Governance for CCTA is provided by a board that includes representatives from participating jurisdictions, as shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7. CCTA Board of Directors



Peer State Policy Comparison

Minnesota, Illinois, and Michigan permit RTA creation through varying processes depending on their enabling legislation, as well as local decisions. Key features of each state's enabling legislation are shown in Figure 8.

Figure 8. Key Features of Peer State RTA Legislation

Minnesota	Illinois	Michigan
• Authorities formed individually in state statute – with some exceptions • DTA formed by MN legislature in 1969 • St. Cloud Metropolitan Transit Commission established by MN Legislature in late 1960s • Minnesota Valley Transit Authority (MVTA) formed under enabling legislation through the Replacement Service Program, allowing it to opt out of Metropolitan Council/Metro Transit services. • Local tax levy permitted	• Mass Transit Districts formed at local level authorized by the Local Mass Transit Districts Act. • Exception: the Regional Transportation Authority (soon to be Northern Illinois Transit Authority) is established specifically in state statute to proivide transit in the Chicago region. • Participation approved by township or municipality Boards of Trustees or County Boards of Commissioners • City or County clerk reports the formation to the State of Illinois • Local tax levy permitted; referendum required.	• Enabling legislation, as well as some authorities formed in state statute. • Public Transportation Authority Act of 1986 • Metropolitan Transportation Authorities Act of 1967 (SMART) & Regional Transportation Authority Act of 2012 (RTA)

Existing Wisconsin Governance Structures

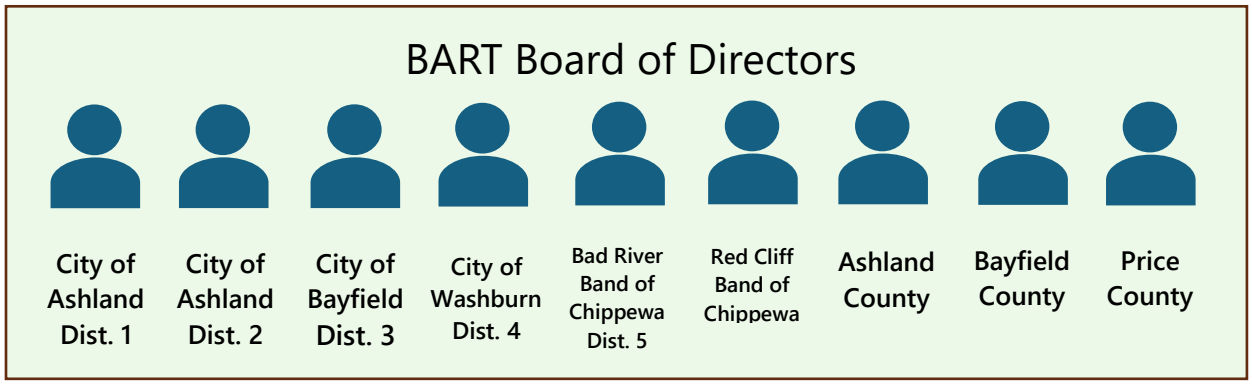
Multi-County Transit Commissions

Though RTA formation is not currently permitted in Wisconsin, Multi-County Transit Commissions are a mechanism in Wisconsin for coordinating and delivering public transportation services across jurisdictional boundaries. Authorized under Wis. Stat. §66.1021, these commissions are formed through intergovernmental agreements among participating counties, municipalities, and tribal governments. Participating entities appoint representatives to a governing board, consisting of a minimum of three members. Board appointments must be approved by the governing bodies of each participating jurisdiction. Once

established, a Multi-County Transit Commission may hire staff, adopt policies and procedures, enter contracts, and procure goods and services. The commission does not create a new, independent taxing authority; local funding continues to come from individual county and municipal contributions.

Multi-County Example: Bay Area Rural Transit

An example of this structure is Bay Area Rural Transit (BART), which operates fixed-route, flex-route, and demand-response services across Ashland County, Bayfield County, northern Price County and surrounding areas. In addition to service operations, BART provides centralized administrative functions. Its governing board includes representatives from participating counties, cities, and tribal nations, allowing Multi-County Transit Commissions to support regional service delivered under a single framework. Figure 10 and Figure 9 show DCT's Community Bus routes and Stout Express bus service maps, respectively.



Single-County Example: Dunn County Transit Commission

Despite their title, Multi-County Transit Commissions can exist among partners in a single county. One example is Dunn County Transit (DCT). DCT operates fixed-route bus service, as well as complementary paratransit. DCT has a nine-member board comprised of elected County Supervisors and resident representatives (including from UW-Stout). Transit Commission members provide an advisory role overseeing system policies and major service changes and collect public comments. The Transit Commission is overseen by the Dunn County Public Infrastructure Committee, which reports to the County Board.

Figure 10. Dunn County Transit Route Map

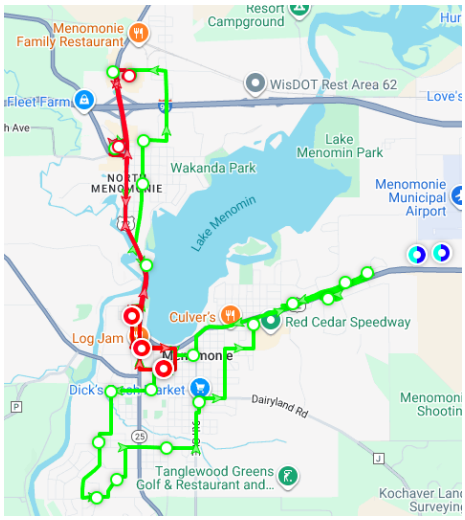


Figure 9. UW Stout Service Map

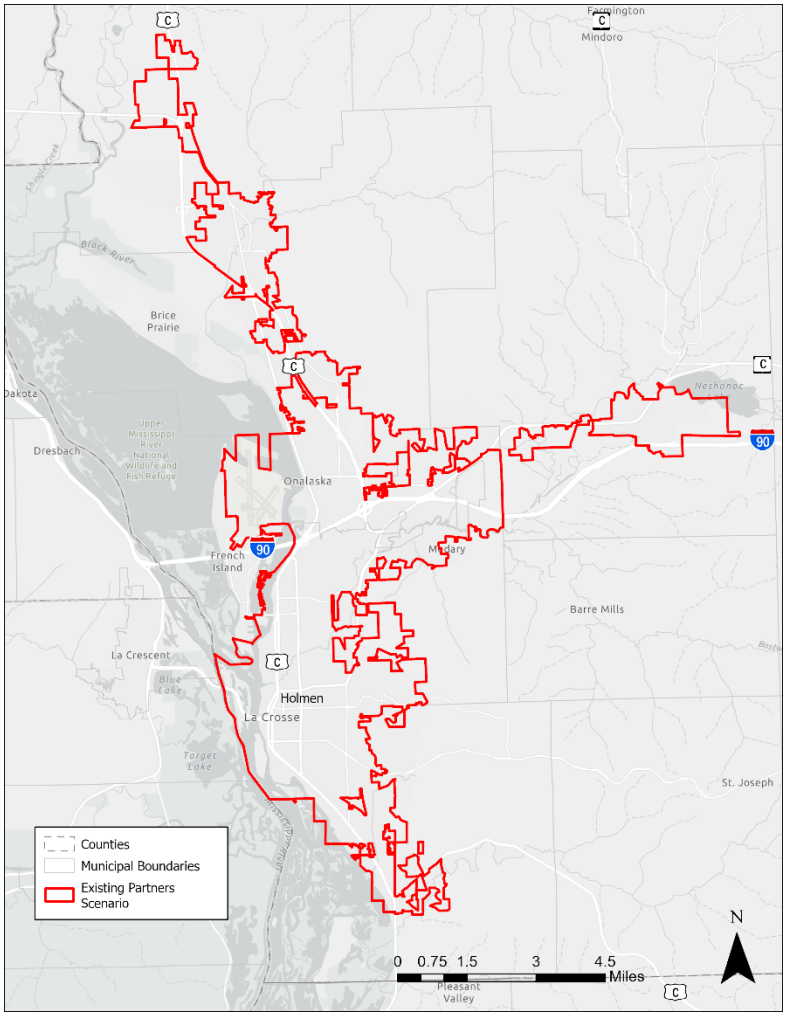
Potential Governance Scenarios

Four possible governance scenarios covered in this document vary in geographic scope, representation, administrative complexity, and alignment with existing service delivery models. The four potential governance scenarios reflect different scales and partnership models that could be implemented depending on the final structure of RTA enabling legislation in Wisconsin.

Scenario 1: Existing Municipal Partners

Under this scenario, an RTA would be formed by the municipalities that currently coordinate or have the greatest potential to coordinate fixed-route and demand-response transit services: the City of La Crosse, the City of Onalaska, the Village of West Salem, and the Village of Holmen, shown in Figure 11.

Figure 11. Existing Partners Scenario Boundary



RTAs formed by municipalities have been allowed in previous legislative proposals but are not currently included in SB 754.

Participation in an RTA would depend on the structure of enabling legislation, but would most likely be voluntary and formalized through resolutions adopted by each governing body.

Governance would consist of a board with representation from each participating municipality. Under SB 754, the RTA would assume operation of all existing transit service within the RTA boundary, with assets transferred from MTU and DriftLink, though in some cases, RTAs in other states exist as financial entities who pass through funding to existing providers.

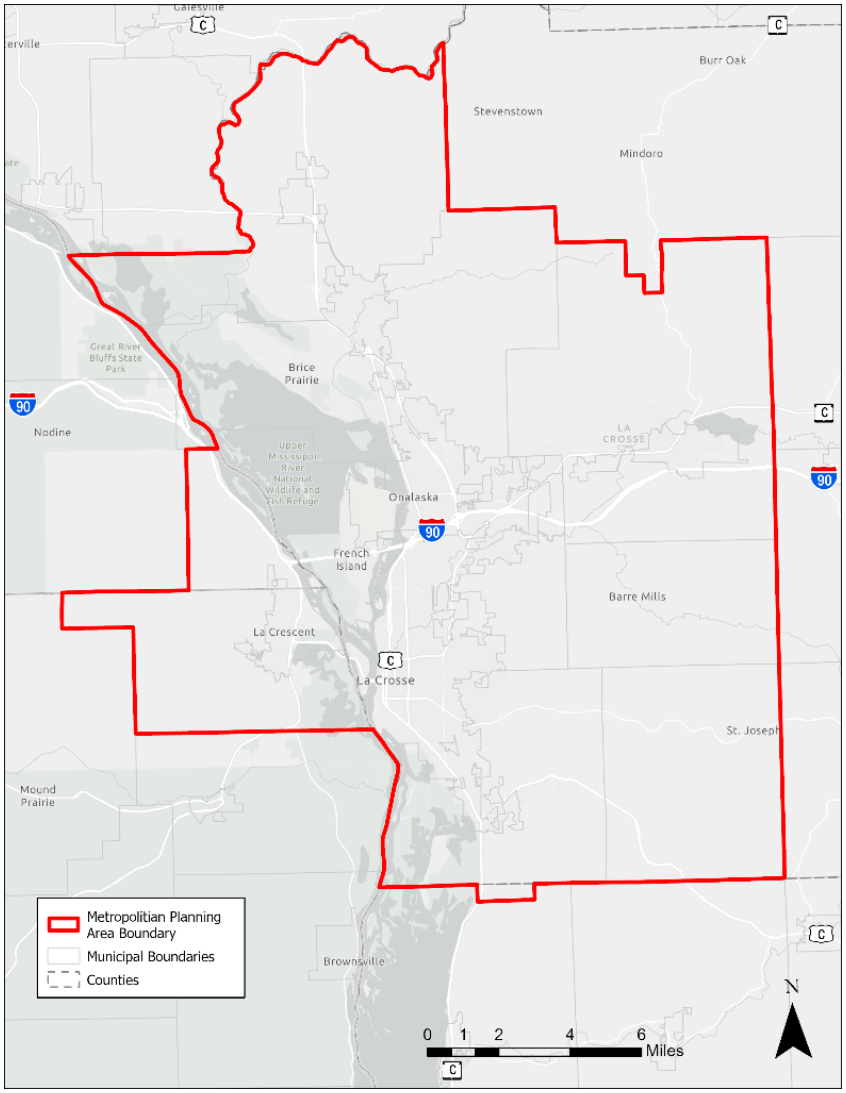
An RTA at this scale would allow closer coordination among existing urban transit services in the La Crosse region, while limiting geographic scope and administrative complexity. However, it would also limit the RTA's ability to address broader rural mobility needs outside participating municipal boundaries.

Scenario 2: Metropolitan Planning Area

This scenario would establish an RTA covering all municipalities within the LAPC metropolitan planning area. While it is uncertain how RTA legislation would approach RTA formation for metropolitan planning areas that cross state borders, this scenario assumes that the RTA would form only in the Wisconsin portion of the metropolitan planning area. As in the existing condition, service La Crescent could be achieved through a separate intergovernmental agreement rather than direct RTA membership. Governance would reflect the Wisconsin-based member jurisdictions, with authority limited to those entities legally eligible to participate. Interstate service would be addressed through contractual agreement, allowing the RTA to plan and operate cross-border service without extending governance authority beyond Wisconsin.

This scenario is consistent with the current structure of SB 754, which would create RTAs for metropolitan planning areas only. While the structure is well aligned with regional mobility needs, it would omit some areas of La Crosse County.

Figure 12. MPA Scenario Boundary

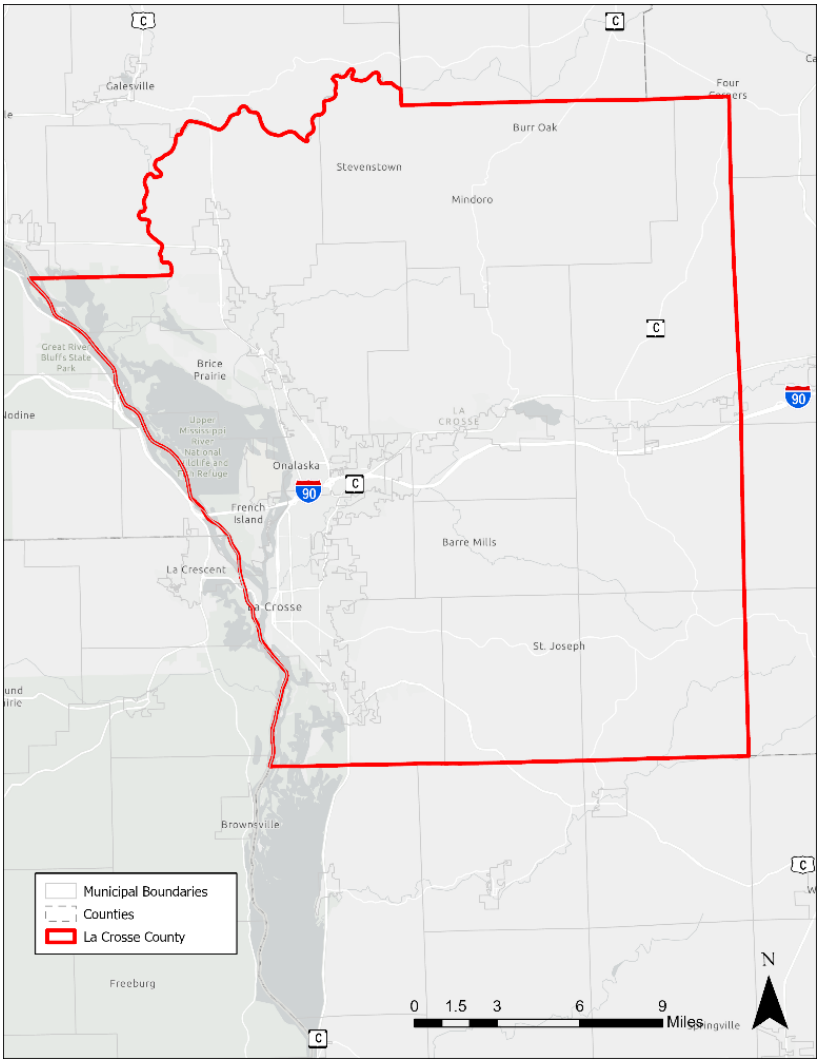


Scenario 3: La Crosse County

The third option could be the formation of an RTA encompassing all of La Crosse County, as shown in Figure 13. As the bill is currently written, this scenario would not be possible if SB 754 were to be enacted since it includes municipalities that do not border the MPA. In this scenario, both incorporated municipalities and the county government would participate in establishing the RTA, creating a single countywide transit governance entity. The RTA board would include representatives from the County and selected municipalities.

A countywide structure could streamline decision-making and create a centralized mechanism for allocating resources among fixed-route, deviated-route, and demand-response services. This model would support stronger integration between urban and rural service markets, particularly for employment, medical, and educational trips that cross municipal boundaries. Potential challenges include meeting both urban and rural priorities and ensuring that governance structures equitably represent jurisdictions with differing service needs and financial capacity.

Figure 13. La Crosse County Scenario Boundary



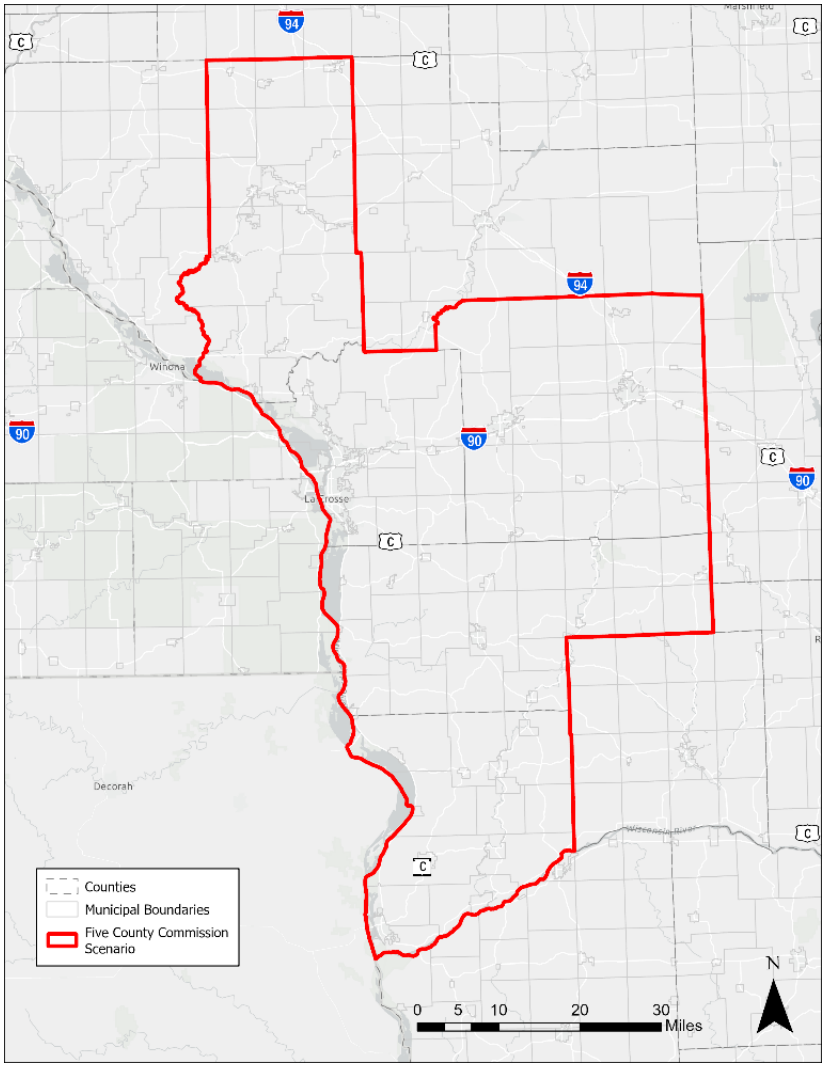
Scenario 4: Multi-County RTA

The fourth scenario involves the creation of a multi-county RTA to govern transit services across both rural and urban contexts. While not permitted under SB 754, this scenario would create an RTA comprised of La Crosse County, Vernon County, Crawford County, Monroe County, and Trempealeau County.

Transit service at this scale could currently be governed using Wisconsin's enabling legislation for Multi-County Transit Commissions. Under this structure, the commission would function as a coordinating and planning body rather than a taxing authority. Governance would be defined entirely through intergovernmental agreements, with representation from each county and potentially from municipalities, universities, and other partners. Responsibilities could include planning, administration, procurement, and operations, while financial contributions would continue to be allocated by separate county boards.

A Multi-County Transit Commission could serve as a transitional governance model, laying the groundwork for future RTA formation if eventually permitted by state law.

Figure 14. Multi-County Commission Scenario Boundary



FINANCIAL FEASIBILITY

This section explores the financial feasibility of each governance scenario, including potential sales tax revenues that could be used to fund regional transit service.

Existing Funding Landscape

In order to assess the feasibility of future RTA scenarios, it is important to understand the funding levels and funding sources used to operate existing transit service in the La Crosse region. Table 1 shows the existing funding sources for MTU, SMRT, and DriftLink in 2024. Included are federal assistance (FTA Section 5307/5311), State of Wisconsin (85.20) operating assistance, local subsidies, and directly generated revenues (fares, contracts, and program revenue).

Table 1. Existing Funding by Transit System (2024)

Jurisdiction	FTA Section 5307 (Urban) & 5311 (Rural)	Wisconsin 85.20 State Operating Assistance	Local Subsidy (General Fund)	Directly Generated (Fares, etc.)	Total Operating Funds
La Crosse MTU	$3,686,649 (51.3%)	$1,470,090 (20.5%)	$1,223,829 (17.0%)	$799,282 (11.1%)	**$7,179,850**
SMRT	$259,522 (46.5%)	$40,419 (7.2%)	$229,863 (41.2%)	$28,676 (5.1%)	**$558,480**
DriftLink	$380,131 (36.2%)	$196,219 (18.7%)	$181,452 (17.3%)	$291,739 (27.8%)	**$1,049,541**
Total	**$4,326,302 (49.2%)**	**$1,706,728 (19.4%)**	**$1,635,144 (18.6%)**	**$1,119,697 (12.7%)**	**$8,787,871**

Over two-thirds (68.6 percent) of total funding for transit in the La Crosse region comes from federal or state operating assistance. Locally, just over $1.6 million was spent by the City of La Crosse and other municipal funding partners to support public transportation in 2024. In total, $8,787,871 was spent on operating public transportation across all three providers.

Sales Tax Methodology

Given the structure of SB 754, it is possible that an eventual RTA will resemble the La Crosse metropolitan planning area. SB 754 proposes that an RTA be established for every urban area over 50,000 in population and incorporate every municipality entirely or partially located in the Census-defined urban area. These include the following municipalities which are all located in La Crosse County (the Town of Bergen in Vernon County is excluded due to being the only municipality not wholly included in the La Crosse MPA).

- City of La Crosse
- City of Onalaska
- Village of Holmen
- Village of West Salem
- Town of Barre
- Town of Campbell
- Town of Greenfield
- Town of Hamilton
- Town of Holland
- Town of Medary
- Town of Onalaska
- Town of Shelby

Funding Share by Municipality

SB 754 specifies that funding for an RTA be levied via a sales tax, not to exceed a "half-cent" (i.e., 0.5 percent). While a half-cent sales tax is reported monthly by 71 of 72 Wisconsin counties, these figures are not reported at the municipal level, necessitating the need for estimation. For the purposes of this feasibility study, estimates for sales tax per municipality rely on an average of the following four measures:

1. **Population Estimates:** Population Estimates rely on the Wisconsin Department of Administration's (WDOA) official estimates for 2025. A percentage is generated for each municipality as a proportion of the county's total.
2. **Adjusted Gross Income (AGI):** AGI – the total sum of taxable income reported to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) – is reported by the Wisconsin Department of Revenue (WDOR) at the county and municipal levels. A percentage is generated for each municipality as a proportion of the county's total AGI.
3. **Equalized Values of Commercial Properties:** The WDOR develops standardized (i.e., equalized) taxable values of commercial properties across Wisconsin at the municipal and county levels, and serves as a relatively dependable proxy for the sales tax. A percentage is generated for each municipality as a proportion of the county's total equalized value of commercial properties.
4. **Job Counts from Core NAICS Sectors:** WDOR advises that the following NAICS categories in aggregate are a dependable proxy for sales tax: Retail Trade; Accommodation and Food Services; and Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation. While overall income per NAICS sector is not reported for every municipality, job counts per NAICS category are reported in the U.S. Census Bureau's Longitudinal Employment-Household Data (LEHD). A percentage is generated for each municipality's job counts across the three NAICS categories as a proportion of those job counts across the entire county.

These percentages are derived below in Table 2 for the municipalities within the RTA as specified in SB 754.

Table 2. Estimated Sales Tax Share by Municipality

Municipality	2025 Population (WDOA)	2024 AGI (WDOR)	2025 EQV (WDOR)	2022 Job Counts (LEHD)	AVERAGE
Town of Barre	1.0%	0.8%	0.2%	0.6%	**0.7%**
Town of Campbell	3.4%	1.9%	2.2%	1.9%	**2.3%**
Town of Greenfield	1.8%	1.4%	0.2%	0.5%	**1.0%**
Town of Hamilton	1.9%	1.6%	0.7%	0.1%	**1.1%**
Town of Holland	3.7%	2.6%	0.4%	0.5%	**1.8%**
Town of Medary	1.3%	1.1%	0.3%	0.1%	**0.7%**
Town of Onalaska	4.8%	4.6%	1.8%	1.2%	**3.1%**
Town of Shelby	3.8%	3.3%	0.9%	1.3%	**2.3%**
Village of Holmen	9.9%	12.4%	8.6%	5.0%	**9.0%**
Village of West Salem	4.4%	5.6%	5.8%	3.6%	**4.9%**

Municipality	2025 Population (WDOA)	2024 AGI (WDOR)	2025 EQV (WDOR)	2022 Job Counts (LEHD)	AVERAGE
City of La Crosse	42.2%	38.6%	49.4%	55.6%	**46.4%**
City of Onalaska	16.4%	22.0%	28.3%	28.4%	**23.8%**

Table 3 shows the estimated sales tax revenue by municipality for the communities in LAPC metropolitan planning area based on 2024 sales tax revenue of $17,297,675 in La Crosse County. Revenue amounts are calculated for the maximum levy permitted in SB 754 (a half-cent, or 0.5%) as well as a reasonable minimum levy of a tenth-cent (0.1%). The table also includes an annual maximum tax per capita based on the half-cent levy and the 2025 population of each community.

Table 3. Estimated Annual Sales Tax Revenue by Municipality

Municipality	Est. Share of County Sales Tax	Half-Cent Sales Tax Allocation (0.5%)	"Tenth-Cent" Sales Tax (0.1%)	2025 Population (WDOA)	Annual Tax Per Capita (0.5%)
Town of Barre	0.7%	$115,948	$23,190	1,306	$89
Town of Campbell	2.3%	$404,825	$80,965	4,205	$96
Town of Greenfield	1.0%	$164,886	$32,977	2,187	$75
Town of Hamilton	1.1%	$192,885	$38,577	2,416	$80
Town of Holland	1.8%	$312, 295	$62,459	4,658	$67
Town of Medary	0.7%	$123,675	$24,735	1,612	$77
Town of Onalaska	3.1%	$534,593	$106,919	5,935	$90
Town of Shelby	2.3%	$402,450	$80,490	4,777	$84
Village of Holmen	9.0%	$1,550,516	$310,103	12,358	$125
Village of West Salem	4.9%	$844,579	$168,916	5,422	$156
City of La Crosse	46.4%	$8,033,913	$1,606,783	52,542	$153
City of Onalaska	23.8%	$4,112,147	$822,429	20,475	$201
Metropolitan Planning Area Total	--	**$16,792,712**	**$3,358,542**	**117,893**	**$142**

Based on the language in SB 754, any other municipality bordering the metropolitan planning area would also have the option to "opt in" to an RTA. Funding from these RTA-eligible municipalities (within La Crosse County unless otherwise noted) is shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Estimated Annual Sales Tax Revenue by Eligible Municipality

Municipality	Proportion of County Sales Tax	Half-Cent Sales Tax Allocation (0.5%)	"Tenth-Cent" Sales Tax (0.1%)	2025 Population (WDOA)	Annual Tax Per Capita (0.5%)
Village of Bangor	0.9%	$154,836	$30,967	1,651	$94
Village of Rockland *(La Crosse County portion only)*	0.3%	$60,207	$12,041	785	$77
Village of Trempealeau *(Trempealeau County)*	5.4%	$151,059	$30,212	1,900	$80
Village of Stoddard *(Vernon County)*	3.7%	$98,330	$19,666	911	$108
Town of Bangor	0.3%	$51,460	$10,292	628	$82
Town of Bergen (Vernon County)	2.3%	$62,021	$12,404	1,359	$46
Town of Burns	0.3%	$54,861	$10,972	956	$57
Town of Caledonia *(Trempealeau County)*	1.6%	$43,117	$8,623	932	$46
Town of Farmington	0.8%	$146,534	$29,307	2,162	$68
Town of Gale *(Trempealeau County)*	3.8%	$104,416	$20,883	1,726	$60
Town of Genoa *(Vernon County)*	1.2%	$32,915	$6,583	762	$43
Town of Hamburg *(Vernon County)*	1.7%	$44,265	$8,853	949	$47
Town of Harmony *(Vernon County)*	1.2%	$32,383	$6,477	933	$35
Town of Trempealeau *(Trempealeau County)*	5.4%	$150,898	$30,180	1,993	$76
Town of Washington	0.2%	$37,063	$7,413	515	$72
RTA-Eligible Total	--	**$1,224,365**	**$244,873**	**18,162**	**$67**

Estimated Revenue by Scenario

The following section summarizes the total RTA funding that could be collected in each scenario based on 2024 sales tax receipts by county, as well as the municipal estimates shown above.

Scenario 1: Existing Municipal Partners

In Scenario 1, sales tax funding would be collected only in communities that currently participate in MTU or DriftLink: the City of La Crosse, City of Onalaska, Town of Campbell, Village of Holmen, and Village of West Salem. Estimated sales tax revenue from these municipalities is shown below in Table 5. In this scenario, the La Crosse RTA would collect over $14.9 million from a half-cent (0.5%) sales tax, or nearly $3.0 million from a tenth-cent (0.1%) sales tax. The half-cent sales tax represents a 70% increase relative to the region's total 2024 federal, state, and local funding, while the tenth-cent sales tax would represent an increase of 83% compared to the current local share. Either level could enable the region to significantly expand transit service.

Table 5. Estimated Sales Tax Revenue: Scenario 1

Municipality	Est. Share of County Sales Tax	Half-Cent Sales Tax (0.5%)	"Tenth-Cent" Sales Tax (0.1%)	2025 Population (WDOA)	Annual Tax Per Capita (0.5%)
City of La Crosse	46.4%	$8,033,913	$1,606,783	52,542	$153
City of Onalaska	23.8%	$4,112,147	$822,429	20,475	$201
Town of Campbell	2.3%	$404,825	$80,965	4,205	$96
Village of Holmen	9.0%	$1,550,516	$310,103	12,358	$125
Village of West Salem	4.9%	$844,579	$168,916	5,422	$156
Scenario 1 Total	--	**$14,945,980**	**$2,989,196**	**95,002**	**$157**
Comparison to Existing	--	**+70% Total Revenue**	**+83% Local Share**	--	--

Scenario 2: Metropolitan Planning Area

In Scenario 2, the RTA would be composed of all Wisconsin municipalities currently included within LAPC's metropolitan planning area, consistent with SB 754. Table 3 shows the estimated sales tax revenue by municipality for the communities in the metropolitan planning area in 2024. A half-cent sales tax would generate a total of $16,792712, or over 91 percent more than the total federal, state, and local funding currently collected by MTU, SMRT, and DriftLink. Even a tenth-cent sales tax would raise $3,358,542, or more than double the current local share invested in the three transit services. As in Scenario 1, a sales tax at either level could enable an RTA to significantly expand service relative to existing conditions.

Table 6. Estimated Sales Tax Revenue: Scenario 2

Municipality	Est. Share of County Sales Tax	Half-Cent Sales Tax (0.5%)	"Tenth-Cent" Sales Tax (0.1%)	2025 Population (WDOA)	Annual Tax Per Capita (0.5%)
Town of Barre	0.7%	$115,948	$23,190	1,306	$89
Town of Campbell	2.3%	$404,825	$80,965	4,205	$96
Town of Greenfield	1.0%	$164,886	$32,977	2,187	$75

Municipality	Est. Share of County Sales Tax	Half-Cent Sales Tax (0.5%)	"Tenth-Cent" Sales Tax (0.1%)	2025 Population (WDOA)	Annual Tax Per Capita (0.5%)
Town of Hamilton	1.1%	$192,885	$38,577	2,416	$80
Town of Holland	1.8%	$312, 295	$62,459	4,658	$67
Town of Medary	0.7%	$123,675	$24,735	1,612	$77
Town of Onalaska	3.1%	$534,593	$106,919	5,935	$90
Town of Shelby	2.3%	$402,450	$80,490	4,777	$84
Village of Holmen	9.0%	$1,550,516	$310,103	12,358	$125
Village of West Salem	4.9%	$844,579	$168,916	5,422	$156
City of La Crosse	46.4%	$8,033,913	$1,606,783	52,542	$153
City of Onalaska	23.8%	$4,112,147	$822,429	20,475	$201
Scenario 2 Total	--	**$16,792,712**	**$3,358,542**	**117,893**	**$142**
Comparison to Existing	--	**+91% Total Revenue**	**+105% Local Share**	--	--

Scenario 3: La Crosse County

In Scenario 3, the La Crosse RTA would cover the entirety of La Crosse County. This boundary would result in sales tax revenue equal to the existing half-cent sales tax already collected by the County, which totaled $17,297,675 in 2024. This would result in an increase of 95% compared to existing total revenue for MTU, SMRT, and DriftLink. A tenth-cent sales tax would collect $3,459,535, or 112% of existing local funding for transit. This broader geography results in both higher total revenue and a lower maximum tax per capita of $139, enabling broader service with a lower overall tax burden.

Table 7. Estimated Sales Tax Revenue: Scenario 3

County	Est. Share of County Sales Tax	Half-Cent Sales Tax (0.5%)	"Tenth-Cent" Sales Tax (0.1%)	2025 Population (WDOA)	Annual Tax Per Capita (0.5%)
La Crosse County	100%	$17,297,675	$3,459,535	124,590	$139
Scenario 3 Total	100%	$17,297,675	$3,459,535	124,590	$139
Comparison to Existing	--	**+97% Total Revenue**	**+112% Local Share**	--	--

Scenario 4: Multi-County Transit Commission

Under current Wisconsin statutes, counties may enter into agreements with other jurisdictions including municipalities, tribes, and other counties to form Multi-County Transit Commissions. Multi-County Transit Commissions present an opportunity to enact a more immediate solution to regional transit issues, as they are enabled by state statute. However, state legislation grants no taxing authority to these commissions, meaning that funding would be entirely dependent on intergovernmental agreements. Depending on eventual enabling legislation, a Multi-County Transit Commission could be the basis for a future RTA.

In Scenario 4, a multi-county RTA would be comprised of La Crosse, Monroe, Trempealeau, Vernon, and Crawford counties. Table 4 shows the 2024 half-cent sales tax revenue for each county, as well as a sensitivity analysis to examine a tenth-cent sales tax. A half-cent sales tax could raise up to $29.9 million, an increase of 240% compared to existing total revenue for MTU, SMRT, and DriftLink. A tenth-cent sales tax at this geography would raise nearly $6.0 million, an increase of 266% compared to existing local share invested in each service. As in Scenario 3, the broader geography of this RTA would enable significant increases to service at a lower maximum tax burden: in this case, $120 per capita.

Table 8. Estimated Sales Tax Revenue: Scenario 4

County	Est. Share of County Sales Tax	Half-Cent Sales Tax (0.5%)	"Tenth-Cent" Sales Tax (0.1%)	2025 Population (WDOA)	Annual Tax Per Capita (0.5%)
La Crosse County	100%	$17,297,675	$3,459,535	124,590	$139
Monroe County	100%	$5,027,940	$1,005,588	46,836	$107
Trempealeau County	100%	$2,788,022	$557,604	31,010	$90
Vernon County	100%	$2,681,132	$536,226	31,388	$85
Crawford County	100%	$2,105,074	$421,015	16,243	$130
Scenario 4 Total	100%	$29,899,843	$5,979,969	250,067	$120
Comparison to Existing	--	**+240% Total Revenue**	**+266% Local Share**	--	--

Summary of Revenue by Scenario

Table 9 summarizes the estimated sales tax revenue by scenario. As described in the previous sections, the potential revenue increases with the geographic area and population included in the RTA boundary, while the maximum tax per capita tends to decrease. Every scenario could result in major increases to transit funding in the La Crosse region. A half-cent sales tax at any scale would exceed all current federal, state, and local investment in MTU, SMRT, and DriftLink, while a tenth-cent sales tax would more than replace all current local funding. If an RTA were to be formed in the La Crosse region, tax rates could be set between 0.1% and 0.5% based on the level of service desired, the level of public support for taxation, and the level of state and federal investment received. It should be noted that if RTAs are permitted in Wisconsin, state support could be reduced as a share of overall transit investment, so local partners should be prepared and incorporate this into their budgetary plans.

Table 9. Estimated Sales Tax Revenue by Scenario

Scenario	Half-Cent Sales Tax (0.5%)	"Tenth-Cent" Sales Tax (0.1%)
Scenario 1: Existing Municipal Partners	$14,945,980	$2,989,196
Scenario 2: Metropolitan Planning Area	$16,792,712	$3,358,542
Scenario 3: La Crosse County	$17,297,675	$3,459,535
Scenario 4: Multi-County Transit Commission	$29,899,843	$5,979,969

OPERATIONAL ALTERNATIVES ANALYSIS

This section evaluates how different RTA governance structures could influence the types of transit services that are operationally feasible in the La Crosse region. This Operational Alternatives Analysis examines how service delivery, mode choice, scale, and flexibility may vary depending on institutional capacity, geographic scope, and funding ability. The scenarios presented in the following sections are intended to show how governance structure and financial capacity can shape service plans, as well as how an RTA structure could enable the region to achieve priorities expressed in previous planning efforts.

Currently, LAPC is conducting an updated Regional Transit Development Plan (TDP) which may reveal updates to regional transit priorities. These potential updates or findings in the updated TDP and other future plans are not reflected in this analysis. Any updates to stated regional priorities not reflected in the scenarios should be taken into consideration at the time that any of them could be realistically implemented.

Operational Alternatives by Scenario

Scenario 1: Existing Municipal Partners

This scenario assumes an RTA formed by municipal partners that already coordinate or contract for transit service, including the City of La Crosse, City of Onalaska, Town of Campbell, Village of Holmen, Village of West Salem, building on existing services provided by MTU and DriftLink.

As discussed in the Governance Alternatives Analysis, this structure would focus on urban service, with tax revenue collected only in municipalities that currently invest in transit. Tax revenue could be set at a level between 0.1% and 0.5%, depending on the desire for service in contributing communities. Transit service planning would take place at a regional level, with service allocated based on need and utilization, rather than the willingness of municipal governments to supply local match funding. The RTA would be charged with ensuring that service is equitably distributed across the service area.

Under this operating scenario, an RTA could enable service expansion to new areas, particularly for fixed-route service, which is currently provided only in the City of La Crosse, City of Onalaska, and Town of Campbell. Just as impactfully, the increased revenue achieved through an RTA sales tax could fund significant improvements to frequency and service hours within existing communities.

Table 10 shows service expansion opportunities recommended in the 2021 La Crosse Regional TDP that could be facilitated by RTA formation. These improvements were not previously implemented due to funding constraints, including lack of local match funds. A sales tax across contributing municipalities could fund some or all of these service improvements, depending on the level of revenue collected.

The table shows the total estimated cost of each service change, as well as minimum sales tax levy required to fund these improvements. The sales tax rate required to fund all improvements in Scenario 1 is 0.182%, assuming no federal or state funding increases beyond current levels. This total levy requirement is below SB 754's maximum sales tax of 0.5%.

Table 10. Potential Service Improvements, Costs, and Levy Requirements: Scenario 1

Service Improvement	Annual Cost (2024)	Minimum Levy Required (Scenario 1)
New North-South Connector Route ("Route 11") in the State Highway 35 corridor	$848,300	0.028%
New Onalaska-Holmen Route ("Route 9")	$848,300	0.028%
Weekend Service on Southside Circulator (Route 3)	$130,100	0.004%
Weekday Frequency Improvements (Routes 1, 2, 4, 5, and 6)	$3,507,000	0.117%
Weekend Span Extensions (Routes 1, 2, 4, 5, and 6)	$115,400	0.004%
Total Needed to Implement All Improvements:	**$5,449,100**	**0.182%**

Scenario 2: Metropolitan Planning Area

Under this scenario, service planning and funding would be structured around the Wisconsin portion of the LAPC metropolitan planning area, with service to the City of La Crescent, Minnesota, continuing through an intergovernmental agreement.

Operationally, this scenario would support a combination of urban fixed-route service within the metropolitan core and flexible service models in outlying areas of the LAPC planning area. Geographic coverage would be broader than the municipalities included in Scenario 1, which would help the RTA address the need for transit access in lower-density communities.

For rural areas within the LAPC jurisdiction, including areas currently served by SMRT, an RTA formed at this scale could play a role in stabilizing or reconfiguring long-standing regional service challenges identified in prior planning efforts. The previous TDP underscored both the importance of SMRT in providing essential trips and the ongoing challenges associated with service structure, cost efficiency, and coordination with urban transit services. In this context, RTA funding could support either the continuation of regional bus service within the metropolitan area, or the introduction of new service models.

The 2021 TDP identified opportunities to reassess whether existing regional service models remain the best fit for current and future demand. In Scenario 2, regional service could be refined or reconfigured to better align with observed travel patterns, or it could be replaced by a new, broader demand-response service that would emphasize service coverage and access rather than commute trips. The TDP emphasized the need for stronger coordination between regional services and MTU, including schedule alignment and transfer opportunities. In these areas, an RTA could add value regardless of service levels.

In Scenario 2, the RTA would collect additional tax revenue from outlying portions of the service area, adding to the funding available in Scenario 1. Depending on desired service levels, the RTA could implement some or all of the enhancements identified in Scenario 1 while investing additional resources in rural demand-response service. Table 11 explores the potential cost of rural demand-response service within the metropolitan planning area, using per-capita costs from KCTA in Kalamazoo County, Michigan.

Table 11. Estimated Annual Operating Expenses: Demand-Response Service (Scenario 2)

Geography	Service Area Population	Rural Population	Operating Expense	Estimated Cost per Capita
Kalamazoo County	264,780	60,218	$6,776,343	$112.53
LAPC Metropolitan Planning Area	120,982	22,110	$2,488,038	$112.53

Source: National Transit Database (2024); U.S. Census (2020, 2024); LAPC Moving Ahead to 2055 Metropolitan Transportation Plan (2025).

Table 12 shows the potential service improvements that could be implemented in Scenario 2, as well as the expected cost for each. The minimum levy required to fund Scenario 2, assuming no increases to state or federal funding, is 0.27%. This is less than the 0.5% maximum sales tax proposed in SB 754.

Table 12. Potential Service Improvements, Costs, and Levy Requirements Scenario 2

Service Improvement	Annual Cost (2024)	Minimum Levy Required (Scenario 2)
Scenario 1 Improvements	$5,449,100	0.175%
Scenario 2 Rural Demand-Response Service	$2,935,596	0.094%
Total Needed to Implement All Improvements:	**$8,384,696**	**0.270%**

Note: Annual tax levy required for Scenario 1 improvements is lower in this scenario due to the broader geographic area covered and higher total tax revenue collected from the metropolitan planning area in Scenario 2.

Scenario 3: La Crosse County

In Scenario 3, the RTA's service area would extend beyond the metropolitan planning area to include the entirety of La Crosse County, including urban and rural areas. It should be noted that the current SB 754 language would not enable the enaction of this scenario, as La Crosse County includes municipalities that do not border the MPA.

While all improvements from Scenario 1 and Scenario 2 remain feasible, this structure would create even greater flexibility to allocate service across the county. As in Scenario 2, transit needs could be addressed by implementing some or all of the urban service improvements identified in Scenario 1, as well as a broader demand-response service in the rest of the RTA boundary. This approach could reduce barriers to travel between urban and rural communities and significantly expand access in rural areas and across municipal boundaries.

Table 13 explores the potential cost of rural demand-response service within the metropolitan planning area, using per-capita costs from KCTA in Kalamazoo County, Michigan. Overall costs are only marginally higher than Scenario 2, since most residents of La Crosse County reside within the metropolitan planning area.

Table 13. Estimated Annual Operating Expenses: Demand-Response Service (Scenario 3)

Geography	Service Area Population	Rural Population	Operating Expense	Estimated Cost per Capita
Kalamazoo County	264,780	60,218	$6,776,343	$112.53
La Crosse County	124,590	22,562	$2,538,928	$112.53

Source: National Transit Database (2024); U.S. Census (2020, 2024); Wisconsin DOA (2025).

A key consideration when addressing service needs in rural areas under this countywide RTA scenario is understanding the role of general public demand-response service in relation to DriftLink, which currently serves trip types that overlap with those typically addressed by county-administered demand-response systems. A countywide RTA would create an opportunity to evaluate how these overlapping service models function together, including whether efficiencies could be achieved through coordinated eligibility, dispatch, service standards, or funding structures. Countywide governance could enable more deliberate decisions about the appropriate scale, geography, and role of demand-response service, whether through parallel services, partial integration, or clearer differentiation between local and countywide mobility functions.

Table 14 shows the potential service improvements that could be implemented in Scenario 3, as well as the expected cost for each. The minimum levy required to fund Scenario 3, assuming no state or federal funding increases, is 0.244%. This is less than the 0.5% maximum sales tax proposed in SB 754.

Table 14. Potential Service Improvements, Costs, and Levy Requirements: Scenario 3

Service Improvement	Annual Cost (2024)	Minimum Levy Required (Scenario 3)
Scenario 1 Improvements	$5,449,100	0.158%
Scenario 3 Rural Demand-Response Service	$2,995,640	0.087%
Total Needed to Implement All Improvements:	**$8,447,740**	**0.244%**

Note: Annual tax levy required for Scenario 1 improvements is lower in this scenario due to the broader geographic area covered and higher total tax revenue collected from the entirety of La Crosse County in Scenario 3.

Scenario 4: Multi-County RTA

This scenario would establish a multi-county RTA serving La Crosse, Monroe, Trempealeau, Vernon, and Crawford counties. While such a structure is not enabled by SB 754, previous RTA proposals in Wisconsin have allowed for the formation of multi-county RTAs, which would have the powers of existing Multi-County Transit Commissions, with the added taxation authority afforded to an RTA. Scenario 4 explores the appropriate service type and potential costs for a five-county RTA in the greater La Crosse region.

Given that most of the service area in Scenario 4 would be rural, demand-response service may provide the best balance of transit access and operating costs. The counties and RTA could work together to determine the types of trips that could be allowed, including customized service for older adults and people with disabilities, medical or employment trips, or service to the general public. For the purpose of cost estimation, it is assumed that the RTA would implement service open to all populations and trip types, as is the case for rural demand-response services in Scenarios 2 and 3.

Peer multi-county systems could include Reagan Mass Transit District (MTD), which serves Lee, Ogle, and rural Winnebago counties in northern Illinois. Reagan MTD began as a multi-county service established through intergovernmental agreement but became a mass transit district to improve coordination and facilitate expansion. Reagan MTD has since assumed operations for demand-response service in rural Winnebago County, which surrounds the city of Rockford, Illinois. Given its broader geography, Reagan MTD serves a more rural setting with lower transit demand than Kalamazoo County, so Reagan MTD is used here for cost comparison for Monroe, Trempealeau, Vernon, and Crawford counties.

Table 15 shows the estimated operating expenses for peer services and the five counties that would be included in Scenario 4.

Table 15. Estimated Annual Operating Expenses: Demand-Response Service (Scenario 4)

Geography	Service Area Population	Rural Population	Operating Expense	Estimated Cost per Capita
Kalamazoo County	264,780	60,218	$6,776,343	$112.53
Reagan MTD	84,889	84,889	$3,049,832	$35.93
La Crosse County	124,590	22,562	$2,538,928	$112.53
Monroe County	46,836	46,836	$1,682,691	$35.93
Trempealeau County	31,010	31,010	$1,114,105	$35.93
Vernon County	31,388	31,388	$1,127,686	$35.93
Crawford County	16,243	16,243	$583,567	$35.93
Service Area Total	**250,067**	**148,039**	**$7,046,977**	**$47.60**

Source: National Transit Database (2024); U.S. Census (2020, 2024); Wisconsin DOA (2025). 2024 data for Reagan MTD includes only Lee and Ogle counties, since service did not expand to rural Winnebago County until 2025.

Table 16 shows the potential service improvements that could be implemented in Scenario 4, as well as the expected cost for each. The minimum levy required to fund Scenario 3, assuming no state or federal funding increases, is 0.23%. This is less than the 0.5% maximum sales tax proposed in SB 754.

Table 16. Potential Service Improvements, Costs, and Levy Requirements: Scenario 4

Service Improvement	Annual Cost (2024)	Tax Levy Required (Scenario 4)
Scenario 1 Improvements	$5,449,100	0.091%
Scenario 4 Rural Demand-Response Service	$8,314,615	0.139%
Total Needed to Implement All Improvements:	**$13,763,715**	**0.230%**

Note: Annual tax levy required for Scenario 1 improvements is lower in this scenario due to the broader geographic area covered and higher total tax revenue collected from the five-county service area in Scenario 4.

Summary of Costs by Scenario

Table 17 summarizes the estimated annual operating costs by scenario, as well as the estimated minimum sales tax levy needed to fund the identified service improvements. As described in the previous sections, as sales tax revenue increases with the geographic area and population included in the RTA boundary, the minimum levy needed for an individual service improvement decreases. Scenario 1, which does not expand the current urban service area, has the lowest overall levy requirement, while Scenario 2 has the highest.

The estimated annual costs of each scenario are below the half-cent maximum sales tax currently envisioned in SB 754. Final costs would depend on the year of implementation, RTA structure and staffing, and policy decisions, including fares and customer eligibility, but the values presented here can help local partners understand the implications of the different service areas and service types outlined in each scenario.

Table 17. Summary of Costs and Levy Requirements by Scenario

Scenario	Estimated Annual Operating Expenses	Minimum Levy Required
Scenario 1: Existing Municipal Partners	$5,440,100	0.182%
Scenario 2: Metropolitan Planning Area	$8,384,696	0.270%
Scenario 3: La Crosse County	$8,447,740	0.244%
Scenario 4: Multi-County Transit Commission	$13,763,715	0.230%

LAPC RTA Feasibility Study

Technical Report #3:
Economic and Community Benefit

La Crosse Area Planning Committee

Prepared by:

SRF

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INTRODUCTION

As part of the La Crosse Area Planning Committee (LAPC) Regional Transit Authority (RTA) Feasibility Study, this technical report builds on previous work evaluating potential governance and funding scenarios for expanded public transit in the region. Work to date has included examining various RTA structures that vary in terms of geographic coverage, funding capacity, and the overall scale of service that could be supported. The four potential scenarios evaluated include:

1. Existing Municipal Partners
2. Metropolitan Planning Area (MPA) within Wisconsin
3. La Crosse County
4. Multi-County RTA (La Crosse, Vernon, Crawford, Monroe, and Trempealeau counties)

As discussions around RTA enabling legislation continue at the state level, there is a need to better understand how each of these scenarios may benefit the La Crosse region beyond transit service alone. In particular, it is important to understand how transit investments may translate into broader economic and community outcomes.

This Economic and Community Benefit analysis builds on work completed to date by estimating the potential benefits associated with each of the four defined scenarios, providing a clear assessment of economic and community impacts associated with potential RTA formation. This analysis aims to quantify benefits that are not typically expressed in dollar terms. To support comparison across each of the four governance and funding scenarios, benefits are translated into planning-level annual dollar estimates. This process allows for a clearer understanding of how the scope of potential benefits changes as geographic coverage and investment levels increase.

This analysis is intended as a high-level decision support tool. It is not a service plan or detailed economic impact study. Instead, it is intended to support communication with elected officials and the public by illustrating the types of benefits (and their relative magnitudes) that transit investment can enable in terms that are more directly applicable to community outcomes, informed by existing research and a variety of data sources.

METHODOLOGY

In discussions of specific benefit categories to track, the project management team emphasized the importance of capturing impacts across the following broad categories:

- Economic development
- Aging in place
- Health
- Household cost

These benefit categories reflect key ways in which transit investment can influence broader economic activity and quality of life within the region and are able to be quantified in accordance with existing industry

research and best practices. Each selected metric is intended to reflect benefits that are both meaningful to local stakeholders and supported by available data and research. Metrics are defined in Table 1.

Table 1. Benefit Metrics

Category	Metric	Description
Economic Development	**Access to Economic Opportunity**	Wages associated with jobs plausibly supported by transit access
Economic Development	**Local and Visitor Spending Potential**	Economic activity, in the form of taxable sales, plausibly supported by transit access
Aging in Place	**Independent Mobility for Older Adults**	Transportation cost savings for transit-supported adults age 65+
Aging in Place	**Delayed Institutional Care**	Avoided institutional care costs attributable to transit-supported adults age 65+
Health	**Missed Medical Appointments**	Value associated with forgone medical trips that would be supported by new transit access
Household Cost	**Transportation Cost Burden**	Transportation cost exposure avoided by zero-vehicle households due to transit access

Each metric is calculated using the formulas and data sources in Table 2 by applying **transit mode share**, or the percentage of all trips made using public transit, to make determinations on which of the trips relevant to each metric can be attributed to transit. In addition, relevant trip purpose shares (such as medical trips, shopping trips, and work trips) are also included as needed to further scale the total number of trips to those that are both taken using public transit *and* taken for each specific purpose noted. These shares may also be tied to a specific regional base count or measure associated with each metric, such as total jobs, total spending, or demographic information.

Taken together, applying these scaling factors (among others) across each scenario geography yields an estimate of each activity that is plausibly supported by transit access, and translates it into annualized dollar values for comparison across benefit types and scenarios.

Table 2. Metric Formulas and Data Sources

Metric	Calculation	Key Data Sources
Access to Economic Opportunity	Total jobs × average annual income × work-trip share × transit mode share	LEHD, Federal Reserve, Replica, ACS
Local and Visitor Spending Potential	Annual taxable sales × shopping-trip share × transit mode share	Sales tax revenue, Replica, ACS
Independent Mobility for Older Adults	65+ population × transit mode share × chauffeuring cost savings per trip	ACS, MnDOT
Delayed Institutional Care	65+ population × transit mode share × relocation share × annual care cost	ACS, MnDOT, CareScout Cost of Care Survey

Metric	Calculation	Key Data Sources
Missed Medical Appointments	Annual trips × medical trip share × transit mode share × medical trip transportation insecurity share × cost per forgone trip	Replica, National Household Travel Survey, ACS, MnDOT, American Journal of Epidemiology
Transportation Cost Burden	Households × transit mode share × share of transit trips by zero-vehicle households × annual vehicle cost	ACS, Replica, APTA

These measures do not assume that transit directly generates the underlying economic or community activity. However, the measures estimate the portion of activity that is credibly supported by transit access by applying transit mode share and trip purpose assumptions to existing regional conditions. As such, results of these calculations should be interpreted as order-of-magnitude estimates of benefits attributable to transit-supported trips under each scenario, rather than as forecasts of any new or induced activity.

RESULTS

The results of this analysis are outlined below in terms of total annual benefits, distribution of benefits by category, and comparisons to estimated investment levels. Table 3 shows the estimated annual economic and community benefits associated with each scenario. Total benefits range from approximately $27.3 million under Scenario 1 to approximately $63.9 million under Scenario 4.

Table 3. Results Summary

Metric	Scenario 1	Scenario 2	Scenario 3	Scenario 4
Access to Economic Opportunity	$6,062,278	$6,822,027	$6,955,596	$11,525,200
Local and Visitor Spending Potential	$5,392,510	$6,132,698	$6,279,056	$10,195,846
Independent Mobility for Older Adults	$6,733,631	$8,414,728	$8,701,246	$16,697,951
Delayed Institutional Care	$3,452,082	$5,422,256	$5,787,420	$12,448,693
Missed Medical Appointments	$4,772,641	$5,559,215	$5,727,322	$10,375,913
Transportation Cost Burden	$897,022	$1,285,994	$1,358,515	$2,691,199
Total Annual Benefit	**$27,310,163**	**$33,636,919**	**$34,809,153**	**$63,934,803**

Across all scenarios, increases in total benefits are primarily driven by expansion in population, travel activity, and the scale of economic activity within each scenario geography. Scenario 4 captures a significantly larger share of regional activity, resulting in more than double the estimated benefits of Scenario 1 due to the larger share of regional population and activity captured.

While total benefits increase with scenario size, the relationship is not strictly linear. Differences between Scenarios 2 and 3 are relatively modest, reflecting the two scenarios' similar geographic boundaries and demographic characteristics, while Scenario 4 represents a large change in both scale and the anticipated resulting benefits.

Benefits by Category

As shown in Table 4, economic development impacts and aging-related benefits represent the largest shares of total estimated benefits across all scenarios, with each category accounting for approximately 37 to 45 percent of total benefits. This reflects the number of jobs available in the region that would be realistically accessible by transit, as well as increased sales tax-generating spending attributable to transit. Additionally, aging-related benefits reflect the high economic value of aging in place, independent mobility, and foregone institutional care costs, particularly in larger geographies which tend to have higher populations of older adults. Health benefits also have significant benefits, and household transportation cost impacts represent a relatively small but consistent portion of total benefits.

Table 4. Distribution of Benefits by Metric

Metric	Scenario 1	Scenario 2	Scenario 3	Scenario 4
Access to economic opportunity	22.2%	20.3%	20.0%	18.0%
Local and visitor spending potential	19.7%	18.2%	18.0%	15.9%
Independent mobility for older adults	24.7%	25.0%	25.0%	26.1%
Delayed institutional care	12.6%	16.1%	16.6%	19.5%
Missed medical appointments	17.5%	16.5%	16.5%	16.2%
Transportation cost burden	3.3%	3.8%	3.9%	4.2%
Total Annual Benefit	**100.0%**	**100.0%**	**100.0%**	**100.0%**

Return on Investment

Table 5 compares total estimated benefits to the required annual investment for each scenario. Across all scenarios, estimated benefits substantially exceed the costs of service improvements. **Net annual benefits range from approximately $21.8 million to $50.1 million. Benefit-cost ratios range from 4.01 to 5.02, indicating that each scenario produces several dollars of estimated benefit for every dollar of investment.**

While Scenario 1 produces the highest benefit-cost ratio, all scenarios demonstrate strong returns under the assumptions used in this analysis. These results suggest that the scale of transit-supported activity remains high relative to investment levels across a range of governance and funding approaches.

Table 5. Return on Investment

ROI Metric	Scenario 1	Scenario 2	Scenario 3	Scenario 4
Required Annual Investment	$5,440,100	$8,384,696	$8,447,740	$13,763,715
Total Annual Benefits	$27,310,163	$33,636,919	$34,809,153	$63,934,803
Net Benefit	$21,870,063	$25,252,223	$26,361,413	$50,171,088
Benefit-Cost Ratio	5.02	4.01	4.12	4.65
Benefit per Capita	$353.58	$297.45	$289.46	$261.82
Investment per Capita	$70.43	$74.15	$70.25	$56.36

On a per capita basis, estimated annual benefits range from approximately $261 to $354 per resident, while annual investment ranges from approximately $56 to $74 per resident. Per capita benefits are somewhat higher in smaller scenario geographies, reflecting higher relative concentrations of activity and population density when compared to the estimated costs of providing transit service. Larger scenarios distribute benefits across a broader population base, resulting in lower per capita values but higher total benefits.

Taken together, these results demonstrate that transit-supported activity represents a consistent component of regional economic and community outcomes across all scenarios.

CONCLUSIONS

This Economic and Community Benefit Analysis demonstrates that, across all scenarios considered, transit investment is associated with substantial economic and community benefits relative to the level of investment required. While total benefits increase with expanded geographic coverage and population, all scenarios evaluated produce strong returns.

Key findings include:

- Total annual benefits range from $27.3 million to $63.9 million in the categories explored
- Benefit-cost ratios range from 4.01 to 5.02 across all scenarios
- Aging-related benefits represent a 37 to 45 percent share of total impacts across scenarios
- Approximately 38 to 42 percent of total benefits are economic development-related
- Health and household cost impacts provide additional, consistent contributions

These findings highlight and quantify the scale and types of benefits that transit can support, illustrating that beyond providing day-to-day mobility benefits in the traditional sense, public transit investment is a contributor to broader community wellbeing and quality of life.