

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.



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 Crosse 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allows closer coordination among existing urban transit services in the La Crosse region Limits administrative complexity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited ability to address rural mobility needs outside participating municipal boundaries
Metropolitan Planning Area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Well-aligned with regional mobility needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Would omit some areas of La Crosse County outside the MPA boundary
La Crosse County	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Centralizes allocation of resources across services Supports integrated urban and rural service markets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trade-offs between meeting urban and rural priorities Equity in governance representation
Multi-County	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Governs across both urban and rural contexts Potential for Transit Commission as a transitional model 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scenario 1 improvements MPA-wide rural demand-response service 	\$16,792,712	\$8,384,696
La Crosse County	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scenario 1 improvements County-wide rural demand-response service 	\$17,297,675	\$8,447,740
Multi-County	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scenario 1 improvements Multi-county rural demand-response service 	\$29,899,843	\$13,763,715

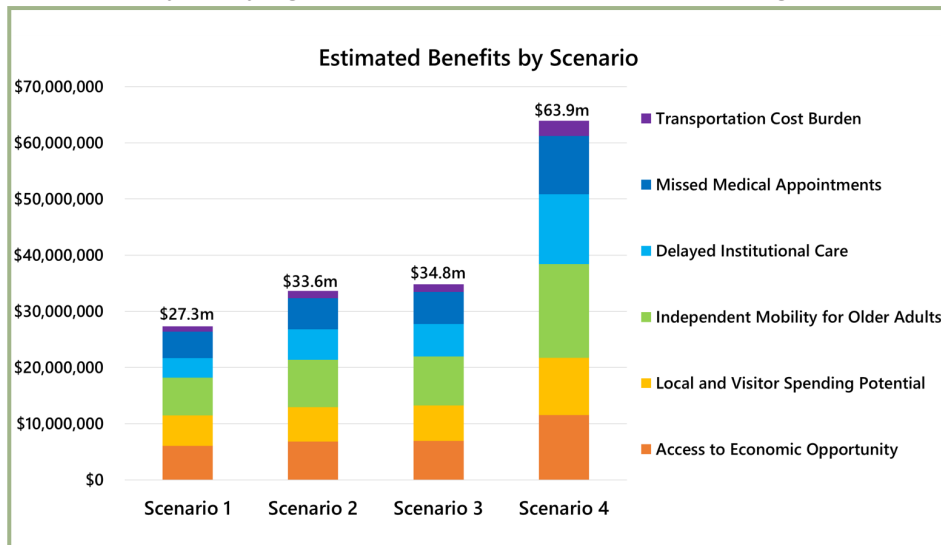
Each RTA scenario has the potential to provide funding exceeding current investment in public transit, while also increasing the potential for increased future matching funds. The values presented can help local partners understand the implications of the different service areas and service types outlined 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.

Contact

Bob Gollnik
 La Crosse Area Planning Committee
 Phone: 608-785-5977
 Email: rgollnik@lacrossecounty.org
 W: lacrossecounty.org/mpo

