

LAPC RTA Feasibility Study

Existing Conditions Report



La Crosse Area Planning Committee

Prepared by:



October 2025

Table of Contents

- Introduction 3
 - Previous Coordination and Planning Efforts3
 - Regional Plans3
 - Local Comprehensive Plans.....5
 - Other Relevant Projects7
- Operational Analysis 9
 - Existing Services9
 - La Crosse Metropolitan Transit Utility9
 - DriftLink Public Transit..... 12
 - Scenic Mississippi Regional Transit (SMRT)..... 13
 - Existing Governance and Organizational Structure..... 15
 - Organizational Structure 15
 - External Partnerships and Coordination..... 17
- Community Profile and Regional Trends 17
 - Population Trends 17
 - Regional Demographics 18
 - Transit User Characteristics..... 22
 - Travel Patterns 22
- Legal and Regulatory Analysis 29
 - Legislative Context 29
 - Existing Context of Regional Transit in Wisconsin 30
 - Proposed RTA Legislation 30
- Conclusion and Next Steps 31

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 $\frac{3}{4}$ -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

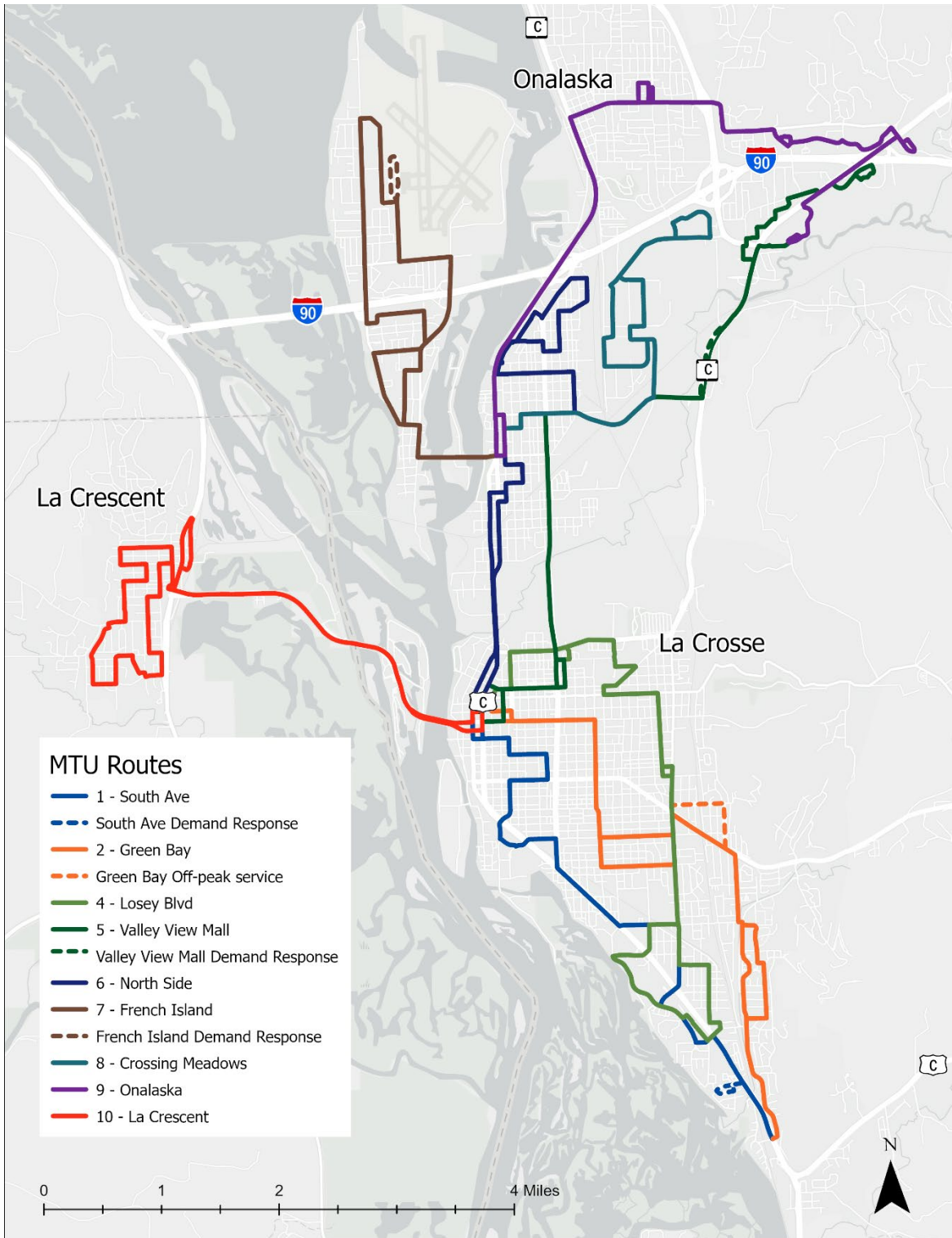


Table 1. La Crosse MTU Fixed-Route Schedule

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

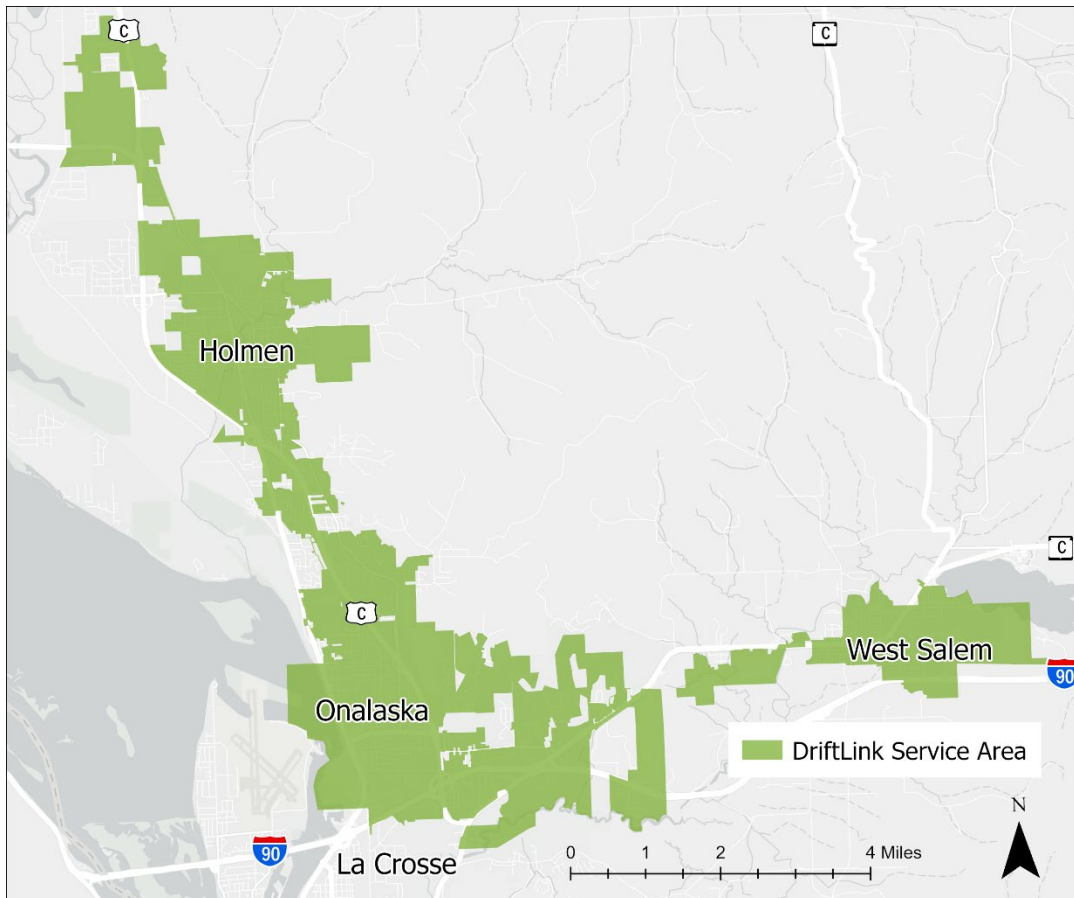
A service provided by the city of Onalaska and the villages of Holmen and West Salem, DriftLink provided more than 59,000 trips in 2023. The service is administered by the City of Onalaska, and the service is currently provided through a contract by Running Inc.

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

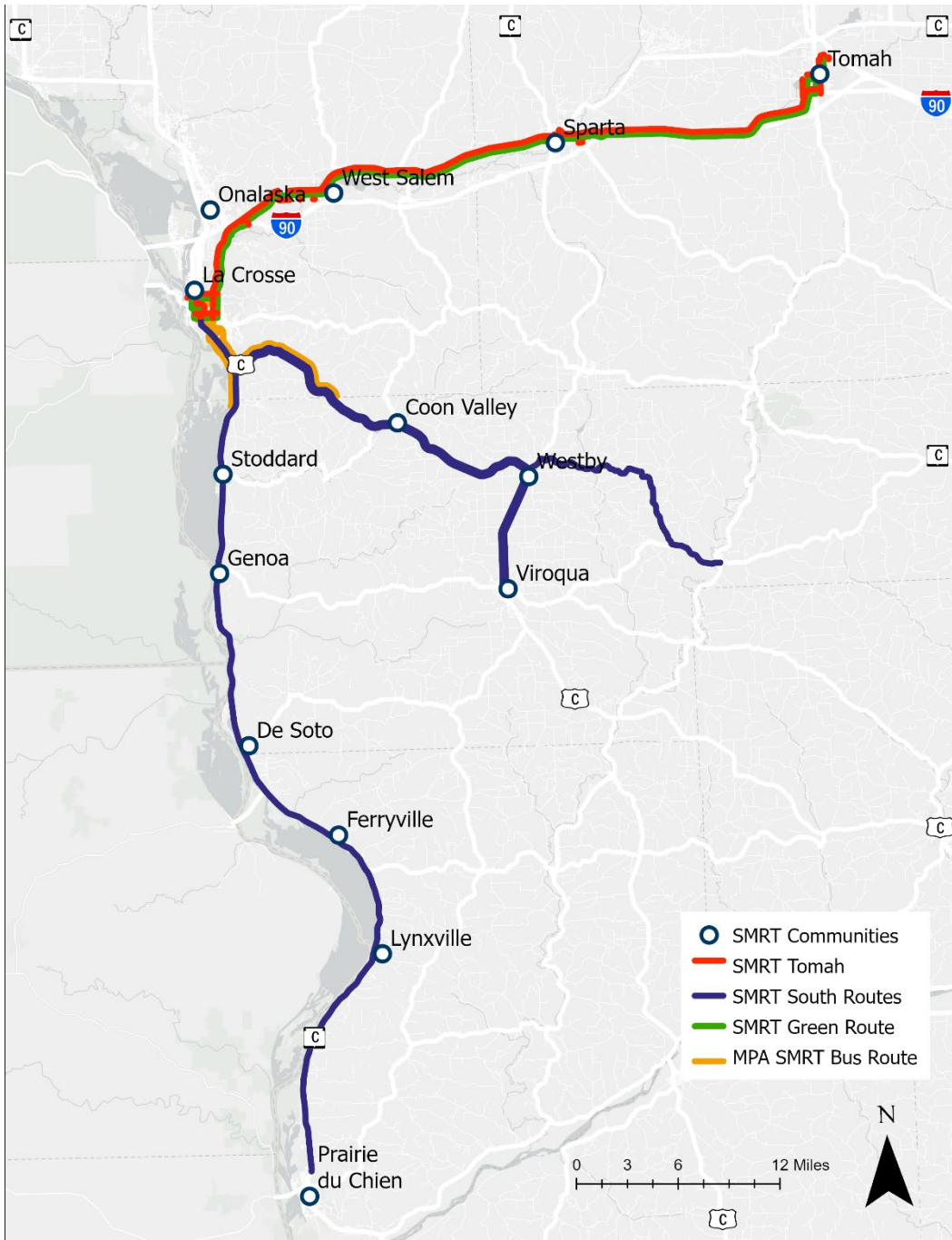
SMRT was created in 2012 and provided more than 14,000 passenger trips in 2020. SMRT provides deviated fixed-route bus service throughout La Crosse County and nearby communities. SMRT was originally administered by the City of Prairie du Chien, but La Crosse County took over in 2019 based on its position 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.

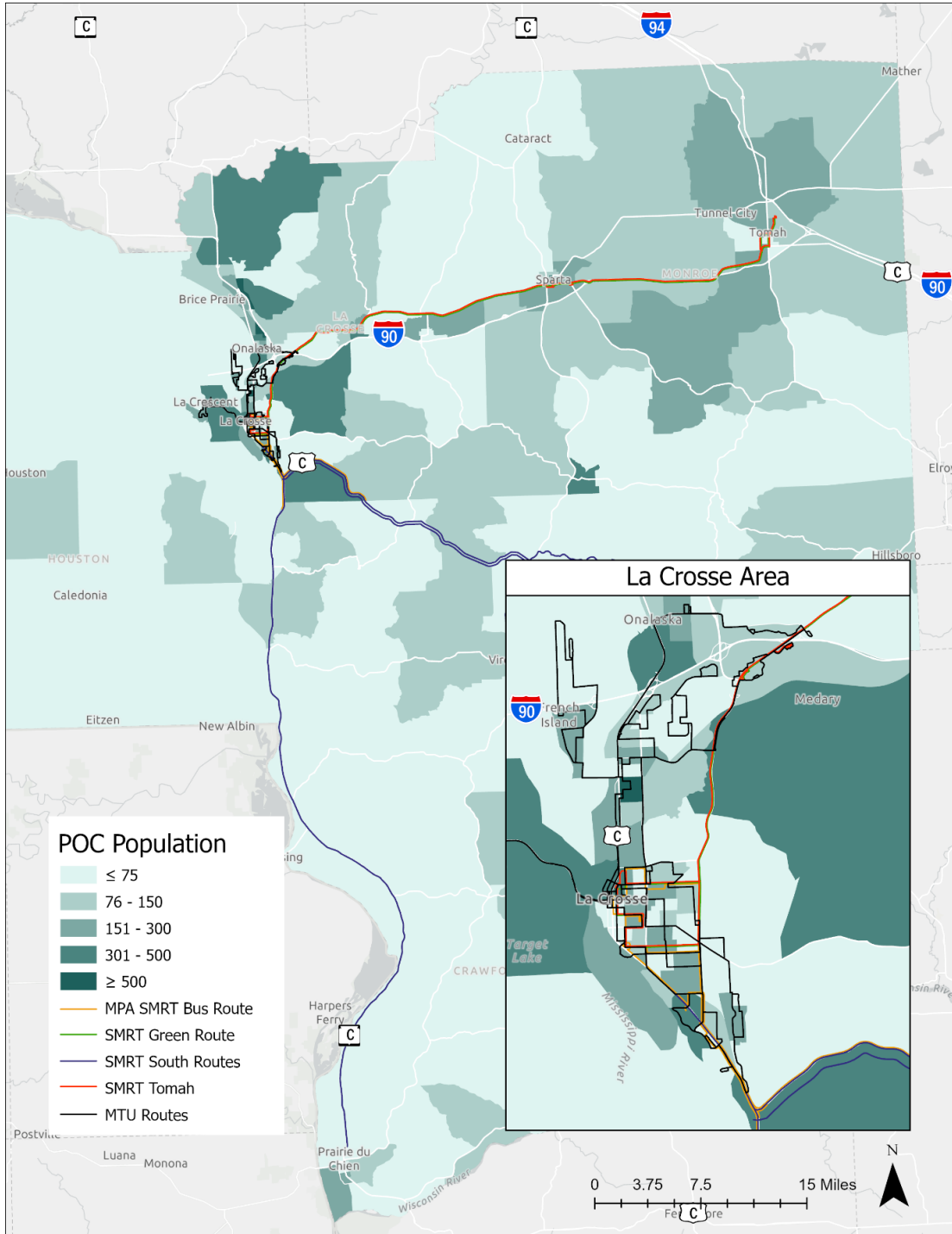
Regional Demographics

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.

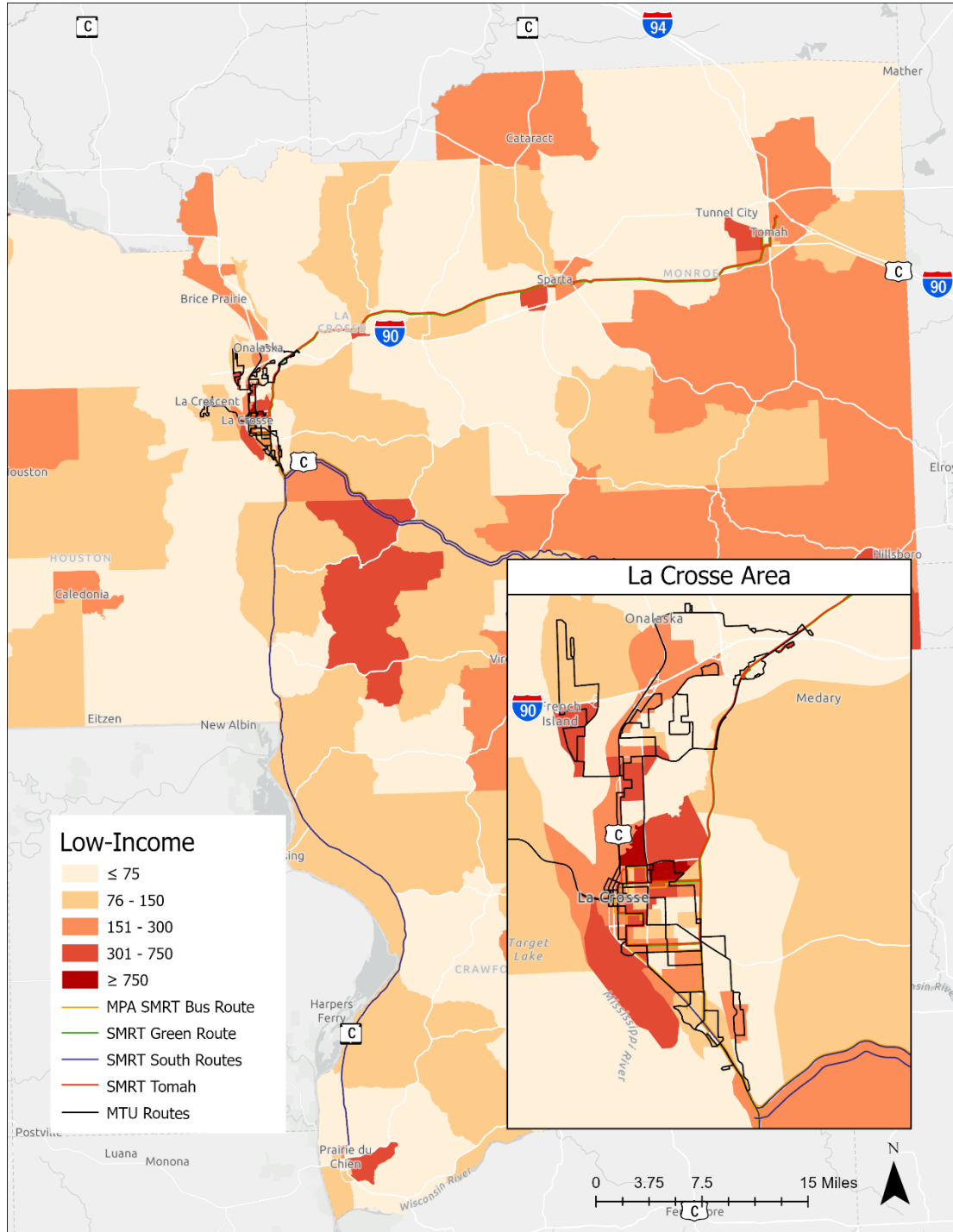
Figure 4. POC Population by Census Block Group



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.

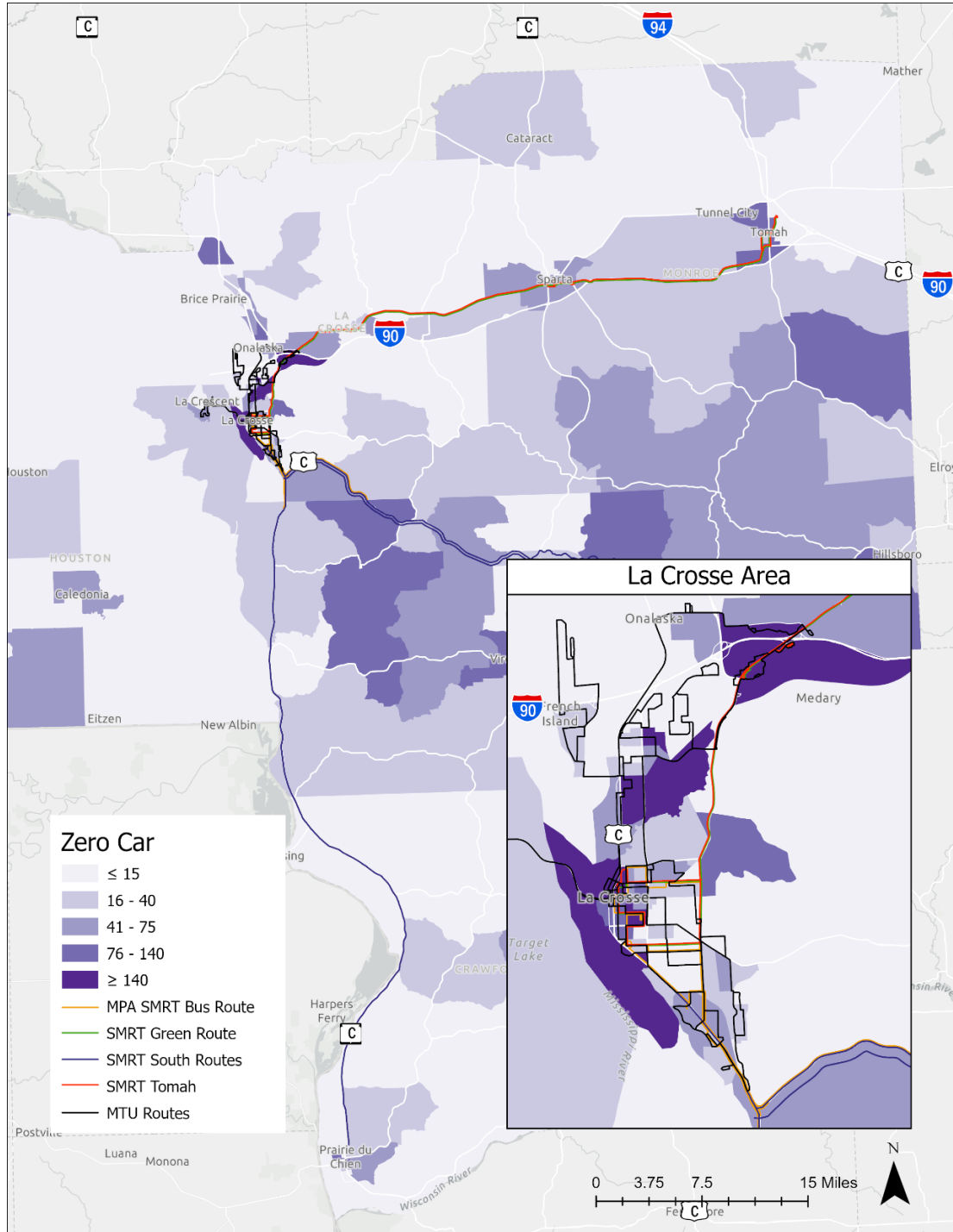
Figure 5. Low-Income Households by Census Block Group



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

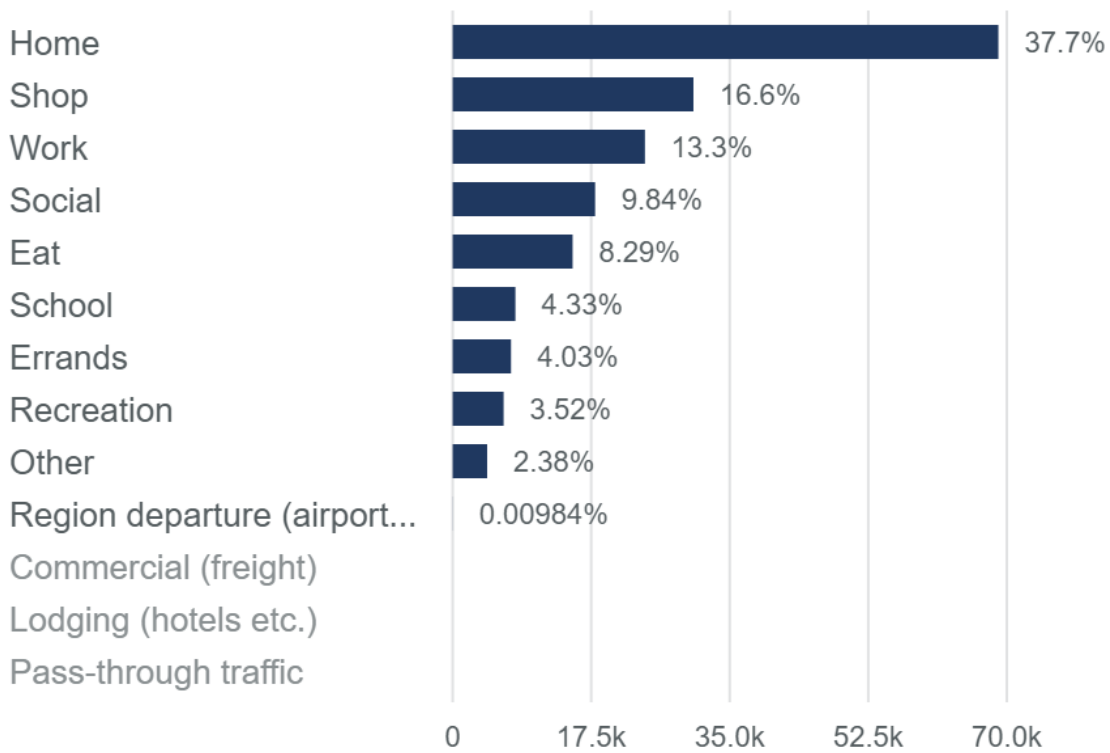
Travel patterns in the four-county La Crosse area was analyzed using data from the job and population travel data from the U.S. Census Bureau¹, using Census bureau software and Replica to process the data. With the exception of trip origin and destinations shown in Figures 8 and 9 show census data in 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

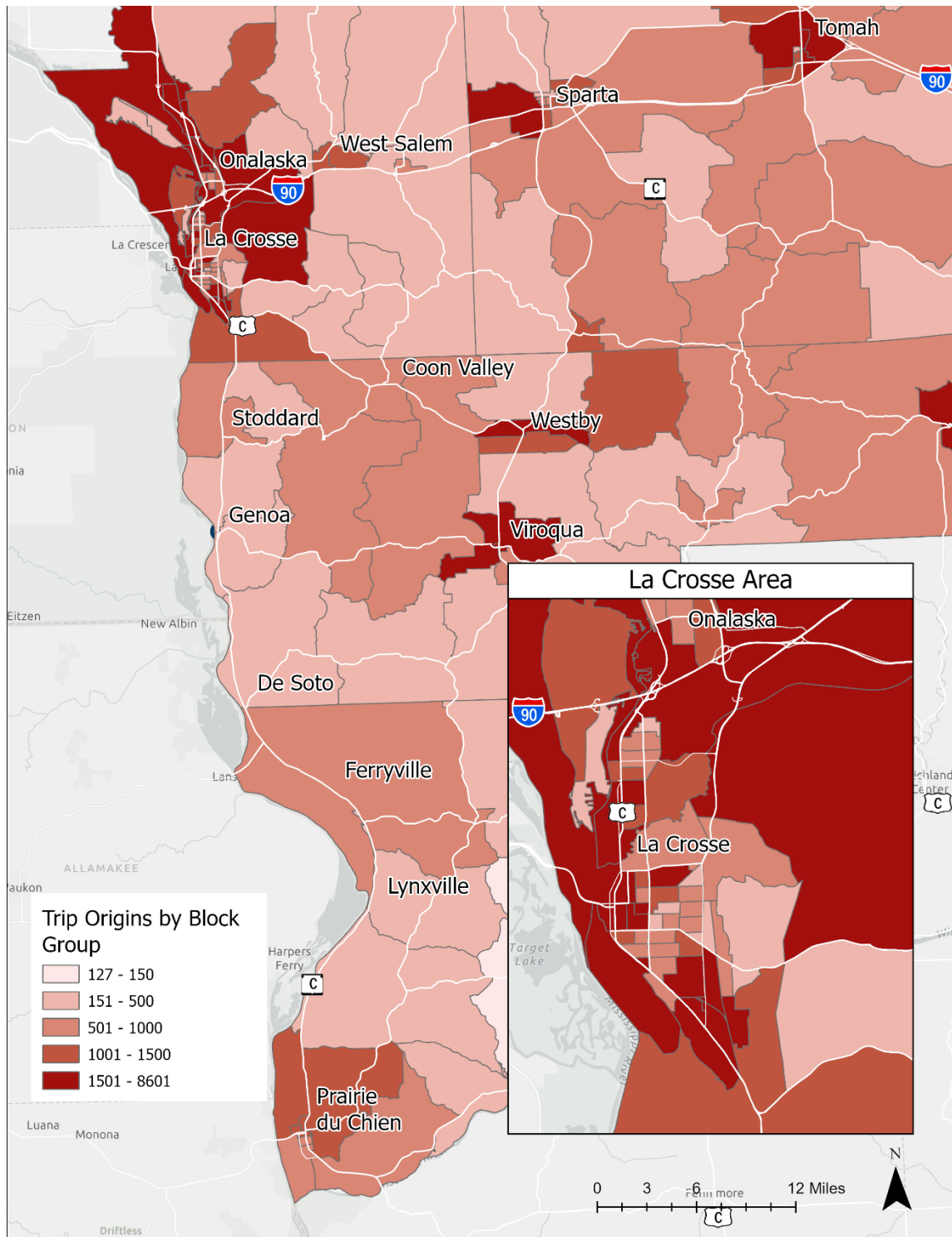


Source: Replica (2025) U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (ACS)/ Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS); Census Transportation Planning Products (CTPP); Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD)

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.

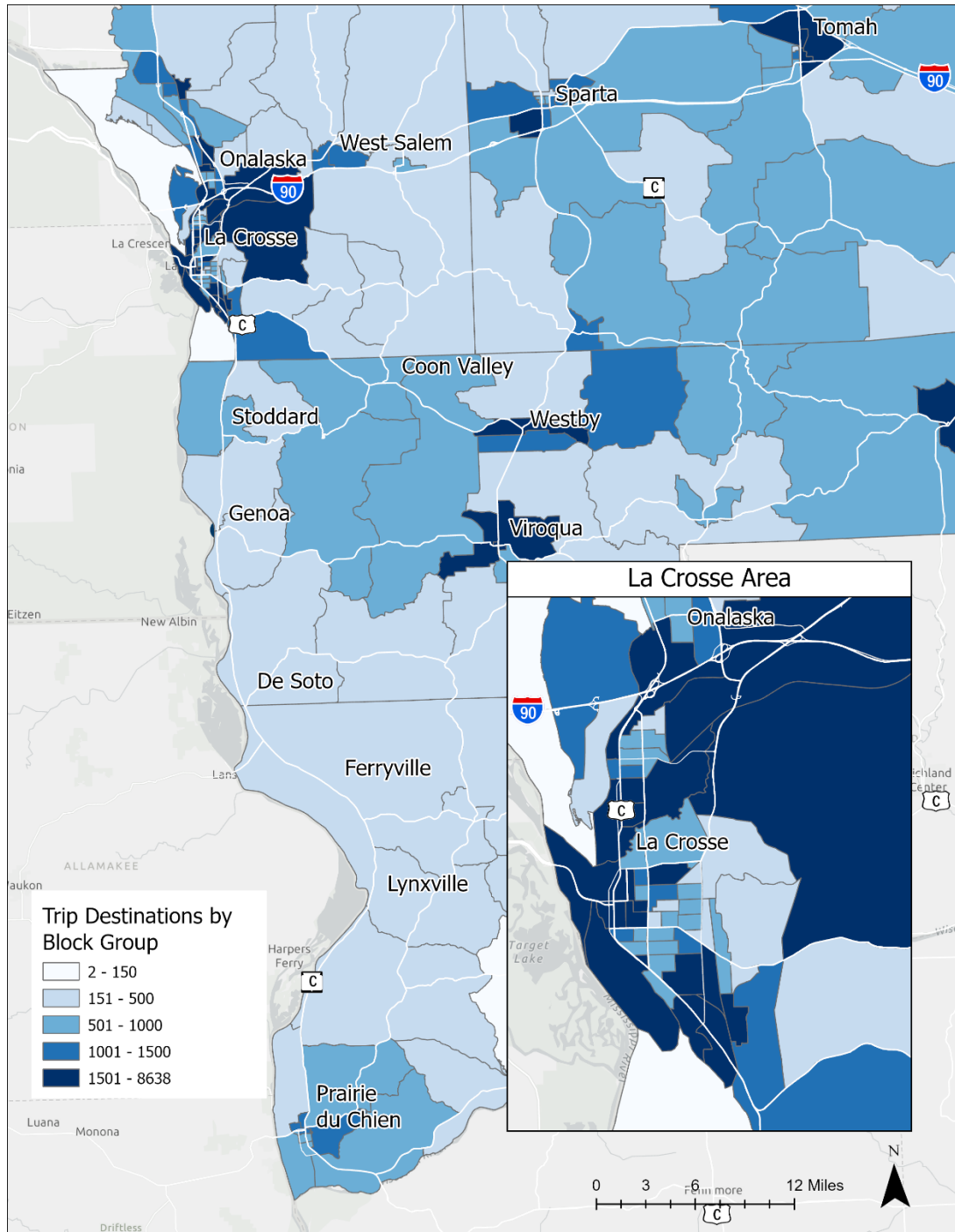
Figure 8. Trip Origins (all purposes) Mapped by Census Block Group



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

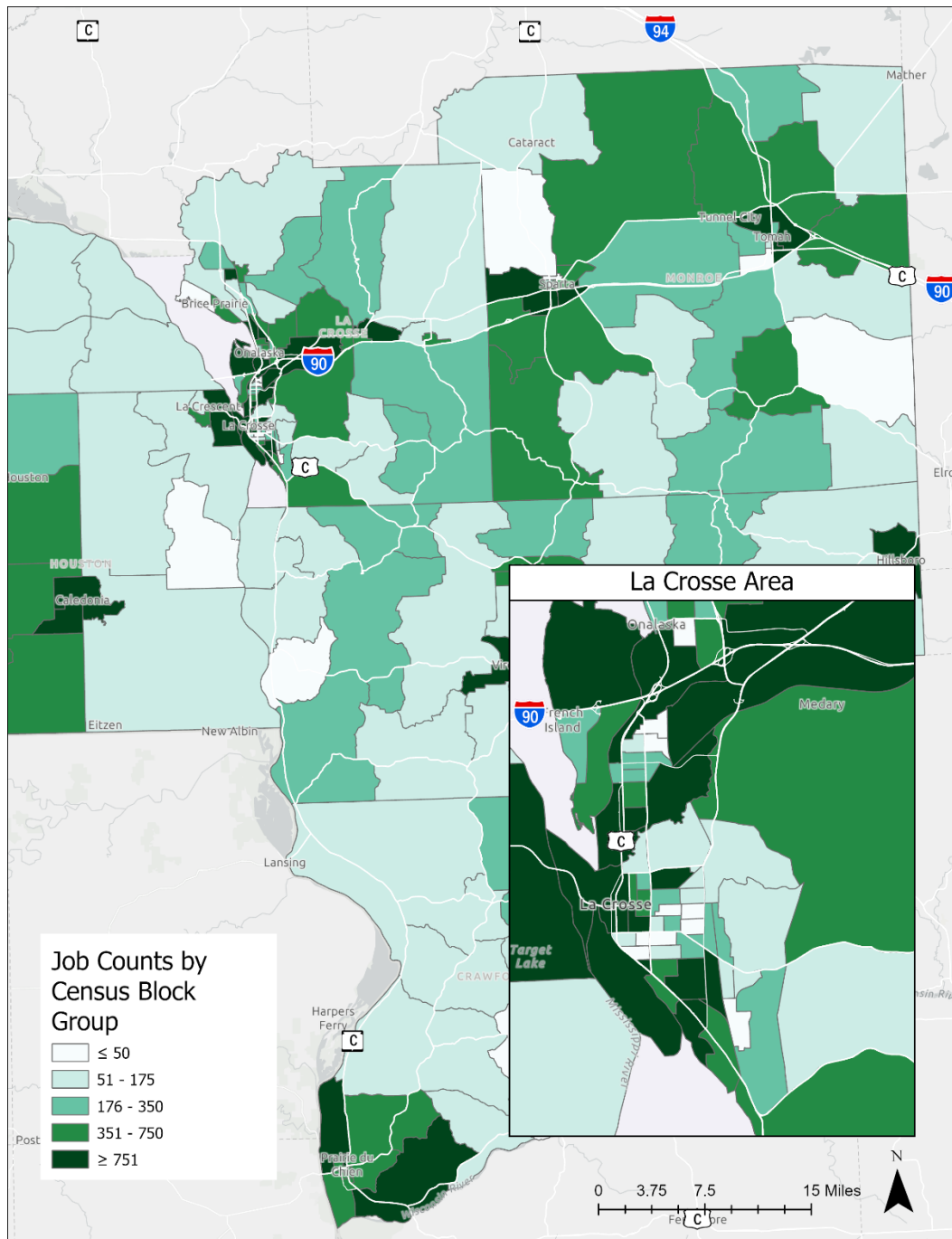


Source: Replica (2025) U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (ACS)/ Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS); Census Transportation Planning Products (CTPP); Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD)

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)

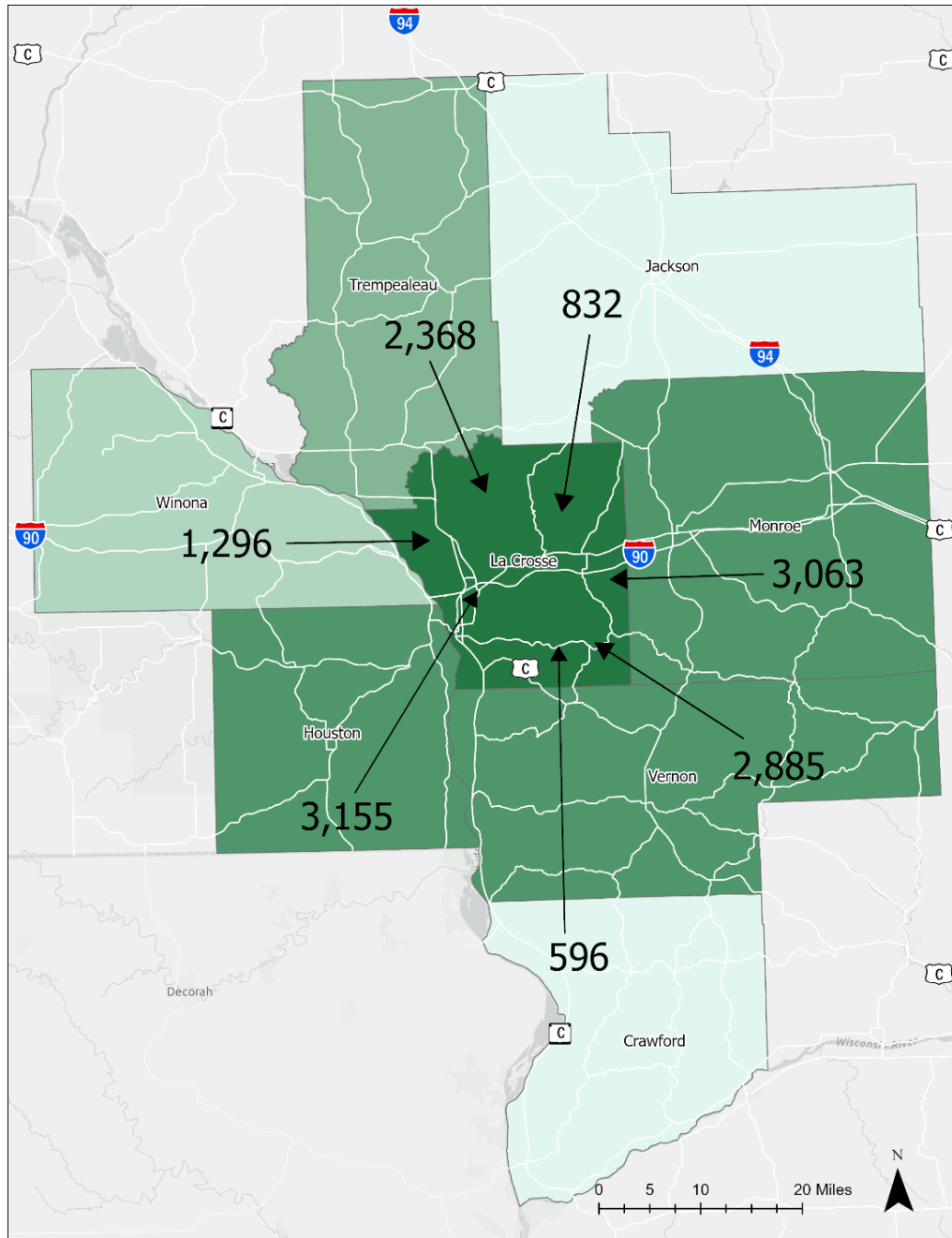


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Center for Economic Studies, LEHD

Commute Patterns

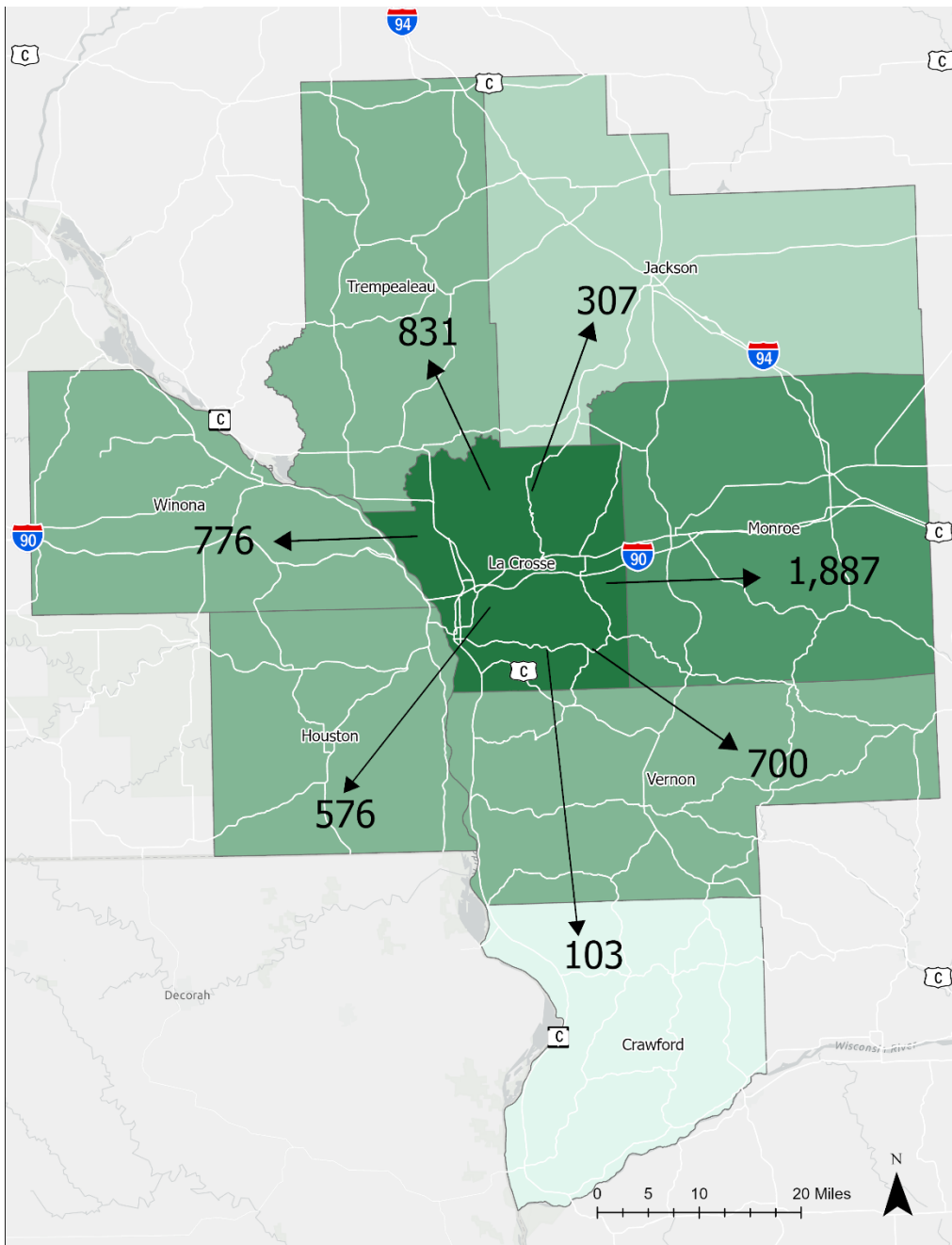
Figure 11 and Figure 12 show the inflow and outflow of daily work trips between La Crosse County and seven surrounding counties (Crawford, Jackson, Monroe, Jackson, and Trempealeau counties in Wisconsin, and Winona and Houston counties in Minnesota). Results show that La Crosse County is a net importer 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 Chapter 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 fee 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 reenact 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.