

Lessons Learned from Coordinated Transportation Series: The MinuteVan Team

Six Massachusetts towns (Acton, Boxborough, Concord, Littleton, Maynard and Stow) that came together to establish the MinuteVan Transportation Team in 2009¹ are suburban communities located approximately 20 miles northwest of Boston and en route to several major employment hubs. The six-town area is within ten miles of several regional transportation corridors including I-495, I-90, and I-95/Route 128, but is sparsely served by public transportation with the exception of the Boston-Fitchburg commuter rail line. Local roadways such as Routes 2, 2A, 27, 111, and 117 provide connections to neighboring communities and to major transportation corridors but some of these routes are congested. Public transit services are limited to ADA-mandated paratransit transportation for individuals with disabilities and Dial-A-Ride service for elderly citizens. This brief describes MinuteVan's projects, partners, outcomes and lessons learned.

Workforce Profile

The MinuteVan communities are located at the northwestern edge of the Metro South/West workforce area (MSW WA), the largest of the state's sixteen labor market areas both in terms of workers and population, encompassing 43 cities and towns.² (See map) The area has a well-educated populous with a median household income that exceeds state averages and below-average unemployment. The workforce area is also home to 18,000 businesses with a diverse industrial base which is heavily concentrated in the Marlborough, Framingham and Natick area. Its workforce has a high concentration in professional services, information technology, manufacturing, and arts and entertainment sectors.³ The six towns supplied just 7.6% of the Metro South/West WA's total employed (452,920) in the first quarter of 2010.⁴ The economic importance of the MSW WA is highlighted by the net inflow of workers who work but do not reside in this area. Census figures from 2000 show that over 187,000 workers who lived here commuted to work elsewhere. Two-thirds of them worked in Boston and in Metro North. More than half of reverse commuters lived

in the Boston, Central Massachusetts, Greater Lowell and Metro North Workforce Areas.⁵

Transportation Profile

The MinuteVan area is located between large employment centers in Lowell, Fitchburg-Leominster, and Framingham-Marlborough-Natick. Local roadways that provide connections to neighboring communities and interstate highways are congested.

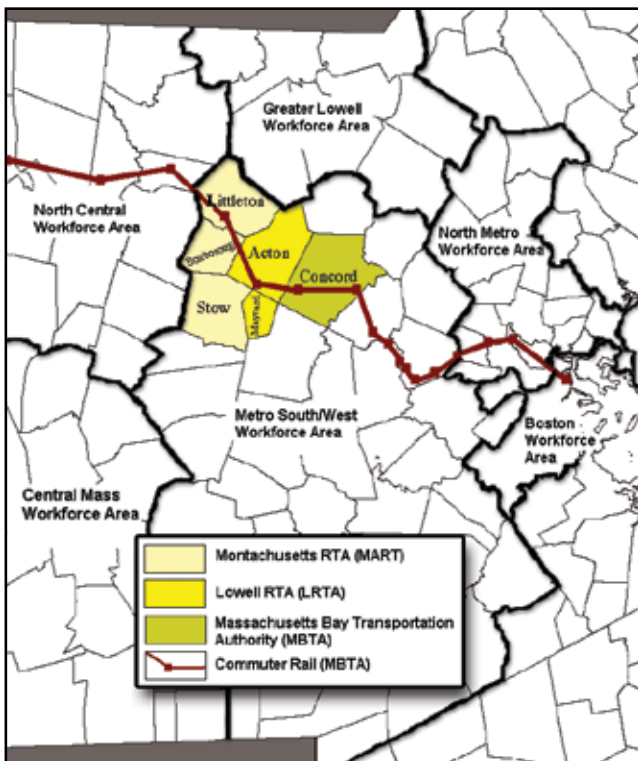
Commuter Rail Service: The area's major asset is the Boston – Fitchburg commuter rail line. The line also provides connections to MBTA's bus and subway systems. There are four train stations that residents of the six-town area can access, but all have limited parking availability. South Acton is the busiest station on the Fitchburg line, with 834 week day inbound boarding, and is served by all trains.⁶

Bus Service: The area is split between the jurisdictions of three transit authorities (see map). Boxborough, Littleton and Stow are in the coverage area of the Montachusett RTA (MART), Acton and Maynard are covered by the Lowell RTA (LRTA)

and Concord is served by the MBTA. There is no fixed-route bus service in any of the communities. Daily commuter bus service between Acton and Boston and Concord and Boston is provided by a private bus company. LRTA provides service from Lowell to IBM in Littleton. Demand response services for seniors and paratransit services under the ADA for disabled members are provided by the three transit authorities and dispatched from either the RTA or the Council on Aging.

MinuteVan Coordination Project

In response to chronic parking problems at the South Acton train station and input from local transportation forums, the Town of Acton's Transportation Advisory Committee worked from 2005-2009 to assess commuter needs,



plan a service, and apply for startup funding for a local bus line. The MinuteVan project began in September, 2010 and includes a rail shuttle to the Fitchburg-Boston commuter rail line during rush hour, and a general public dial-a-ride

service. The vision is that both services would be combined into a fixed-route service in the future. Recently, the team has discussed the need for a north-south bus line connecting large employment centers (Lowell and Framingham) with the Acton area communities. LRTA fixed-route bus service from Lowell to IBM in Littleton does not continue through Acton and Maynard. If this route could reach Sudbury via Acton and Maynard, a seamless link could be established to the Metrowest RTA (MWRT) to connect with employment centers in Framingham.

Rail Shuttle: Creation of a rail shuttle service allowed satellite parking opportunities for commuters.

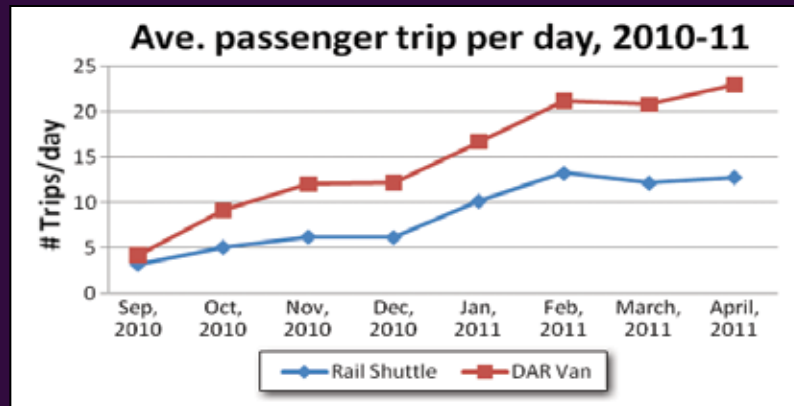
- Park-n-ride lots were identified and the Town of Acton contracted for 22 parking spaces. Parking passes can be purchased for an annual fee, which includes reserved parking and use of the shuttle. Daily shuttle ride with parking is also available for \$3 or \$1 per ride without parking. Monthly passes are also available.
- A private company was hired to operate the new rail shuttle from the parking lot to the train station during rush hour, and to provide transportation coordination.

Dial-A-Ride (DAR): The dial-a-ride service offers alternative transportation to and from destinations within Acton and some locations in neighboring towns, such as Emerson Hospital, West Concord Center, Maynard Center, and Boxborough Library. All rides within a 3.5 mile radius of Acton Town Hall are accommodated.

- Vans operate in the morning and evening on weekdays. The cost of the ride is \$2 within Acton and \$4 to and from other towns. Youth ages 12-18 can ride alone with parental consent.
- DAR service vans also back up the rail shuttle during evening hours.
- Dispatcher-assisted or on-line booking options are available to schedule a ride 24 hours in advance. (www.minutevan.net or 978-844-6809)

Service Outcome

Since their inception, both services have shown increasing ridership. In April, 2011 there were about 270 trips for the rail shuttle and 150 trips for the DAR van. Both projects are funded in part by the Clean Air and Mobility Program. Unfortunately, funding for the DAR van was withdrawn for the second year, citing low ridership.



Partnerships in Transportation Coordination

Team partners are Municipalities (Acton, Boxborough, Littleton, Maynard, Stow & Concord), Transportation providers (Montachusett RTA, Lowell RTA, Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority), Regional Planning Agencies (Metropolitan Area Planning Council's Minuteman Advisory Group on Interlocal Coordination and Montachusett Regional Planning Commission) and Employers and advocacy organizations (495 Metro West Partnership, Metro West Chamber of Commerce, Clock Tower Place, Emerson Hospital, IBM, and Cisco).

Reasons for collaboration include:

- Providing services to local shopping centers, medical facilities, civic centers and other destinations across towns,
- Coordinating COA van pools, creating a single dispatch system, synchronizing fare schedules,
- Creating a north-south bus route that runs from Lowell to Framingham via MinuteVan communities,
- Providing feeder service to the Fitchburg-Boston commuter rail line in member communities,
- Promoting growth and regional collaboration via planning and technical assistance to communities,
- Acquiring information from localities for suburban mobility study and ideas for subsequent local projects,

- Strengthening the region's economic vitality by purposeful infrastructure design and smarter land use and attracting more customers for businesses via transportation solutions

Lessons Learned from Coordinated Transportation

Institutional boundaries impose barriers in service provision, money allocation, and collaboration.

- MinuteVan towns are located in the confluence of three labor market areas and three regional planning agencies, and are divided among three transit authorities. Although it might seem that these communities would benefit from the stewardship of multiple organizations, the reality is that legal, geographic, and financial boundaries governing these institutions, and lack of regional oversight create barriers to service provision and dampen collaboration efforts.

Municipalities are reluctant to share their transportation resources with each other.

- Each town owns Council on Aging (COA) vans operated by the respective RTAs. To take advantage of the time of day when COA vans are idle and could be utilized for inter-local transportation services, towns should agree to share vans, coordinate fare structures, and use the same dispatch system. This is not the norm today.

Grant funding can be a multi-faceted barrier.

- Municipalities do not have dedicated office staff to apply for and administer a variety of grants. Each grant is complex and comes with unique requirements for such things as populations served and local financial match. Lacking expertise in grant writing and administration leaves money unclaimed.
- Finding financial match at the local level is difficult, especially during hard economic times. Because of budget constraints, municipalities do not have the resources to provide matching funds for “large” grants.
- It requires the same amount of administrative support to apply for and administer a “small” grant as it does for a “large” grant.

Incomplete inventory of local resources is a barrier for coordination.

- An inventory of local rolling stock could become the basis for a common dispatch system that would coordinate public and private transportation resources in the region. However, significant barriers to coordination exist, such as not knowing the full extent of local resources including rolling stocks, services, fare schedules, time of day when resources

are available to share, and reimbursement for the use of another community’s vehicles.

Educating residents about what public transportation can do for them, and advertising new services are essential for the success of any initiative.

- Many people do not take advantage of existing transportation resources in their communities because of prevailing negative attitude towards public transportation and/or lack of knowledge about its availability. Public education campaigns are needed.

We found that many legal, institutional, and financial disincentives as well as negative perceptions have to be removed before coordinated transportation becomes a reality. If transportation policy is going to achieve critical national objectives with respect to economic competitiveness, environmental sustainability, and access for all in an era of fiscal constraint, it will require a new vision at the federal level and empowerment of states and metropolitan areas to grow in competitive and inclusive ways. This will take time and much effort at every level of government, but barriers and lessons learned by stakeholders at local levels will offer a unique insight for shaping the future.

¹ Founding members of the MinuteVan team are Acton, Buxborough, Maynard and Littleton. Concord and Stow joined in 2010.

² Regional LMI Profile, Annual Profile for Metro South/West Workforce Area. Massachusetts Department of Workforce Development May 2010. http://lmi2.detma.org/lmi/pdf/profiles/Metro_SoWest_Regional_Profile.pdf

³ Renski, H., McKee, K., 2010 Economic, Demographic and Housing Trends in 495/MetroWest Region, University of Massachusetts Amherst, Center for Economic Development, available at <http://www.495partnership.org/assets/EconomicIndicators/economic%20report%20on%20495mw%20region.pdf>

⁴ Regional LMI Profile, Annual Profile for Metro South/West Workforce Area. Massachusetts Department of Workforce Development May 2010. http://lmi2.detma.org/lmi/pdf/profiles/Metro_SoWest_Regional_Profile.pdf

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Suburban Mobility Grant Application, Town of Acton, April 2, 1009

⁷ The level of involvement of the Lowell RTA and MBTA with the MinuteVan team is low.

Aniko Laszlo. 2011. Lessons Learned from Coordinated Transportation Series: The MinuteVan Team. Shrewsbury, MA: Center for Health Policy and Research, University of Massachusetts Medical School.



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Work Without Limits, a Massachusetts Disability Employment Initiative, is made possible by a federal grant to UMass Medical School, funded by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CFDA No. 93.768).