Fixed-Route Services and the Trip to Work

There are two main types of transportation services that characterize community and public transportation: fixed-route and flexible transportation services. Here we address fixed-route services and how they may be initiated, enhanced or modified to serve job access commutes.

**Defining Fixed-Route Service and Its Variations**

**Fixed-route** services include any transit service in which vehicles run along an established path at preset times. Trains, subways and buses are the most common examples of this type of service.

Typically, fixed-route service is characterized by printed schedules or timetables, and designated bus or rail stops where passengers board and deboard. Most cities and some rural areas operate buses along fixed routes because their communities have high population densities, as well as frequently used origins and destinations that are concentrated along main arteries.

Many transit services offer **express fixed-route** services, typically designed with fewer stops so that commuters can reach employment sites quickly.

Because fixed-route bus and rail services do not extend to all neighborhoods or employment sites, employers, transit providers or other community members sometimes operate **feeder routes**, also known as **circulator routes**. Feeder services are designed to feed into existing transit routes by picking up passengers from locations in a neighborhood or at a job site and dropping them off at a stop along the bus and rail line. Feeder routes add another link in the community transportation network and help create a seamless system of transportation services. Of course, feeder routes often also necessitate a transfer (the switching of a passenger from one vehicle to another, typically to change routes), too many of which can render a transit service less useful to riders.

When planning transportation options for job seekers wishing to reach destinations located “off” the fixed-route line, variations on fixed-route services may be an attractive alternative. Here are three examples of hybrid services that combine elements of both fixed-route and demand-response services:

1) **A deviated-fixed route** service operates a bus or van along a fixed route and keeps to a timetable, but the bus or van can deviate from the route to go to a specific location, such as a house, child care center or employment site. Once the pick-up or drop-off is made, the vehicle goes back to the place along the route that it left.

2) **Point-deviation** services also keep to a timetable; however, vehicles do not follow a specific route. Rather, vehicles will stop at designated bus stops at scheduled times, but during the time between two scheduled stops drivers will pick up and drop off passengers with advanced reservations over a dispersed area.
Deviated-fixed route and point-deviation services accommodate spontaneous unscheduled rides at designated bus stops, as well as provide scheduled demand-responsive rides over a larger area. Operating one deviated service rather than two separate services (fixed route and demand response) is a cost-effective transportation alternative.

3) Service routes are characterized by deviated times, rather than deviated routes. Service routes allow riders to hail a vehicle and request a drop-off anywhere along the route. Jitney services, which operate along a fixed route but without fixed stops, provide this type of flexibility. So do partnerships that permit job seekers and employees to flag down school buses to help them reach destinations.

Considerations for Decision-Making

Many communities have been able to deliver responsive job access services by modifying an established fixed-route service to meet employment times and locations. Others have initiated new fixed-route services to serve employment trips. In other cases, communities have decided to incorporate some degree of flexibility into their services, offering services that extend the reach of existing fixed-route transportation. What a community chooses to pursue is based on local needs, available resources, and community priorities.

Many communities first look to modify existing routes, perhaps by adding additional hours to meet late-night trip needs or extending service to a new employer or geographic service area. Changes like these can be integrated into an available service network and are frequently a cost-effective strategy for addressing job access needs.

- In Rhode Island, a local employment and training agency collaborated with the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority (RIPTA) to bring a late-night shuttle to low-wage job seekers and employees. RIPTA also extended fixed-route service to serve an industrial park and adjacent commercial area.
- In Laughlin, Nevada, the Southern Nevada Transit Coalition extended late-night hours on one of the two routes serving the community’s casino industry.
- In New Jersey, Job Access and Reverse Commute (JARC) funds enabled Monmouth County to extend service from 5:30 p.m. until midnight on a major bus route, add weekend and holiday service, and to extend coverage to employment sites.
- In Essex County, New Jersey, Night Owl service provides connections between a transit hub in downtown Newark and employees’ homes between 1:00 a.m. and 5:00 a.m.
- In Portland, Oregon, employment transportation funding supports nighttime service on the Swan Island Evening Shuttle. While bus service to this area previously ended at 6:00 p.m., JARC funding allowed the service to continue until midnight.
- In Santa Fe, New Mexico JARC funds have been used to support Sunday fixed-route service to major employment centers.
- In Akron, METRO provides expanded fixed-route services to Special Pack, a light bulb repackaging facility located 15 miles outside the city, well beyond the edge of its normal service area.
Other localities may decide to introduce new routes as a means to provide additional transportation for jobs. Frequently, these services are designed to serve specific employment centers, to meet work shifts, or to minimize transfers. These approaches might include: new routes targeted to specific markets, subscription routes designed to serve a single employer, shuttles and circulators that provide connections with the local transit system, and more flexible routes.

- With local business and workforce development support, Waco Transit established a new transit route to serve rural workers and businesses.
- Together, Ozark Regional Transit and the NorthWest Arkansas Community College co-fund three public transportation routes that have improved mobility for the college’s students, faculty and staff.
- In Ocean County, New Jersey, employment transportation funding supported a route known as the Toms River Connection. This route enabled low-income workers to access seasonal jobs in the county’s waterfront communities and provided year-round access to goods and services for local seniors.
- In Kansas City, Missouri, reverse commute routes were developed to provide connections between a downtown transit center and employers along the I-29 corridor and at the Kansas City International Airport.

**Factors to consider**

Because of the wide variation among fixed-route enhancements, service planners and operators have many options for applying fixed-route services for job access purposes. Below are some factors to consider when tailoring fixed-route services to job access needs.

**Match the service to density:**

Fixed-route service can take multiple forms. In some communities, traditional service with a defined route and stops works best. In other localities, more flexible services are may be needed. As examples:

- A fixed-route bus best met the needs of the workers at the Swan Island Industrial Park in Portland, Oregon. According to the TMA Director Lenny Anderson, “Riders don’t have to make a phone call and they don’t have to make a reservation. All they have to do is go to the bus stop and wait.” A traditional service structure works well for this route, where employees are clustered in a small area and riders can access regional services at a transit center.

- Conditions are different in Franklin County (NY), and for the transportation coordinator, deviated fixed-route was the obvious solution for her community. In this rural county near the Canadian border, very few people live along the main roads. For them, waiting at the bus stop was not favorable. As a result, the service design included a fixed-route service that deviated to pick up riders at their homes.

**Pick an operator:**

Another consideration is whether or not a contractor should operate the service. Contracting may be a good alternative for agencies that do not have the resources – vehicles or drivers – to provide the services in-house. This approach may also offer organizations more flexibility to make service modifications in response to changing conditions. This flexibility has been helpful for Franklin County (NY), which contracts with a local social services agency to provide its transportation service. The
arrangement has enhanced the County’s ability to add service incrementally and leverage costs. Agencies that choose to select a contractor to operate services must ensure that they comply with local and federal procurement requirements, from preparing a Request for Proposals to drawing up a contract. In the case of Ocean County (NJ), for example, procurement rules required all transportation contractors to have a maintenance facility within the county. To encourage a competitive procurement process, the County also limited the length of time any one operator could hold a contract.

**Ensure compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA):**
According to U.S. Department of Transportation regulations, public transit operators providing fixed-route transportation for the general public are required to provide ADA complementary paratransit for people who cannot use the fixed-route services because of their disability. The minimum required service area for complementary paratransit is a corridor extending three-quarters of a mile on either side of the fixed-route alignment. Creating a new fixed route will require transit providers to offer ADA complementary paratransit service during the same days and hours of service. Extending a route or adding hours to a schedule may require similar adjustments to the availability of ADA complementary paratransit. Flexible routing – such as route deviation or point deviation – may eliminate the requirement for ADA complementary paratransit services. However, it is important to be sure that the flexible service design meets the requirements for accessible services under the ADA regulations.

**Determine fare requirements:**
Some communities collect fares on job access services, others do not. The Essex County (NJ) Night Owl does not collect fares, in accordance with County policy, nor does Swan Island Evening Shuttle. Because the service is coordinated with the regional TriMet network, passengers simply pay their usual bus or light-rail fare when they enter the system and ride the shuttle for free.

When communities make modifications to fixed-route services, passengers usually pay a fare. Laughlin’s Silver Rider charges a fare, as does the Toms River Connection. Both services are open to the general public and do not differentiate clients based on their income or participation in the TANF program. Some systems have made special arrangements to facilitate transfers among each other. The Toms River Connection, for example, charges a base fare of $1.00, but for $1.40, passengers may transfer to any NJ TRANSIT route.

**Questions to consider when developing a fare policy**
- Do local policies regulate fare collection?
- Is it necessary or desirable to facilitate transfers with other services?
- Does the operator already have fare collection equipment in place?
- Are fare media (such as passes, tickets, or tokens) already available?
- Will the potential revenues outweigh the costs of collecting fares?

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