All forms of transportation have always been intrinsic to the health and vitality of America’s rural and tribal communities, from trails to rails to highways to transit. Like their urban counterparts, our nation’s rural and tribal residents need vital transit access to employment, health care, education, social services and everyday quality-of-life destinations.

Since its inception as the Section 18 program in 1979 (currently known as the Section 5311 program), the basic concept of — as well as investment in — rural public transportation has undergone major changes. Investment has dramatically increased and both the types of service as well as the area served have changed, almost as dramatically. Rural America is today a very different place from the one that existed at the outset of the federal rural transportation formula investment program. Population trends, demographics and settlement patterns have forged a new rural America, creating striking new challenges for mobility operators.

What follows is an analysis of the some of the most marked demographic developments and trends in rural America in the past three decades, with an eye toward each’s impact on the provision of community and public transportation. For the purposes of this discussion, we’ll use the U.S. Census Bureau’s designation of under 50,000 population. The 2010 Census is the impetus for much of the data analysis that follows.

The country is urbanizing. Though the overall number of rural residents has grown since the inception of the rural public transportation program, the percentage of Americans living in rural communities is at its lowest in more than a century. In 1980 rural residents accounted for 26 percent of the U.S. population, in 2013 that number had shrunk to 17 percent. By contrast, in 1900 the total population living in rural areas actually exceeded 60 percent. In July 2012, census data indicated that rural counties were losing population for the first time in U.S. history. Americans, by and large, tend to live today in areas of concentrated population, thus creating a population density divide that, too, further exacerbates the rural-urban divide and that further challenges the provi-
sion of rural public transportation. Rural transportation providers cover greater distance that they did two decades ago, largely through either regionally-based services that often connect with urbanized employment and health care centers or simply by virtue of a more dispersed rural population.

Rural America is today, generally, older and more poverty-stricken than it was in 1980 — and the outmigration of younger segments of the rural population continues. Study after study indicate a hollowing out of rural populations, with younger adults leaving in search of increased economic opportunity and leaving behind people over the age of 60 and under the age of 18. Poverty rates in rural America rival those their urban counterparts. However, persistent poverty — poverty rates above 20 percent in 1990, 2000 and 2010 — is prevalent in the country’s more isolated rural areas, some 429 rural counties. Today, more than 16 percent of the nation’s rural population are over the age of 65, and rural areas have a disproportionately high percentage of population over the age of 75. These population and demographic dynamics have had the effect of increasing the rural demand for transit and mobility options even though rural population is a smaller slice of the overall population. It also has the impact of challenging economics for rural communities, making developing local match money more problematic.

Health care transportation in all of its forms is rapidly becoming the primary — and often priority — mode for rural transit operators, with significant impacts. In 2011 the American Hospital Association published a Trendwatch document that concluded: Rural residents are older, have lower incomes, are more apt to be uninsured, and are more likely to suffer from chronic diseases; rural health care workers are aging and are nearer retirement age than their urban counterparts. The growing shortage of health workers may have a greater impact on rural facilities; access issues, such as longer travel distances and lack of reliable transportation, can delay treatment by rural patients, aggravating health problems and leading to more expensive care when received; rural hospitals are smaller — nearly half have 25 or fewer beds — but must still maintain a broad range of basic services to meet the needs of their communities; the shift from inpatient to outpatient care is more pronounced in rural hospitals, and rural hospitals are more likely to offer home health, skilled nursing, and assisted living services; and, 60 percent of gross revenue in rural hospitals comes from Medicare, Medicaid, or other public programs. One of the key contributors to rural residents’ being more likely to suffer from chronic health conditions is obesity. The National Rural Health Association’s Fall 2012 Journal of Rural Health found that two factors — diet and isolation — are the leading contributors to rural residents being more likely to be overweight than their urban counterparts. Lack of access (read: transportation), according to the report, “is often about travel time in a rural area, but it can also be that there’s no place to go — literal physical isolation.”

The very nature of rural areas, too, is rapidly changing. Today, 60 percent of the nation’s rural population resides in areas directly adjacent to urban regions. The notion of idyllic, self-contained small towns that each offered residents the requisite employment, health care and educational opportunities has been replaced by a more regional structure. In rural counties not adjacent to a metropolitan area, the net migration gain was just 0.3 percent between 2000 and 2010. By contrast, rural counties adjacent to metropolitan areas saw a 3 percent gain from migration. The need for regional connectivity and cost-effective partnerships between urban and rural operators is a key response to this population dynamic. The growing population in rural communities abutting urban ones also raises the specter, each decade, of some of these areas shifting over to an urban census designation thus aggravating the trend of an overall urbanizing population shift.

Intercity transportation options in rural America are declining. U.S. Bureau of Transportation Statistics estimates that between 2005 and 2010, 3.5 million rural residents lost access to scheduled intercity transportation. Our nation’s tribal areas, too, are more than ever before seeking to build transit systems and infrastructure to meet their citizen’s growing mobility demands. The impact here is, clearly, diminished options for rural
residents, and thus a more significant reliance on rural public transit operators on the part of more isolated rural residents. An obvious outcome of this trend is the growth of more regional systems throughout the rural public transportation network.

America’s Tribal population is growing. The 2010 census indicated that American Indian and Alaskan native populations grew at twice the rate of the rest of the population between 2000 and 2010. Additionally, a full 40 percent of the nation’s American Indian and Native Alaskan population reside in rural communities, by far the highest rural population percentage for any single ethnic group. With this growth, comes an increased interest in tribal transit programs. In MAP-21, Congress recognized this demand by setting aside $30 million out of the Section 5311 rural public transportation program specifically for tribal areas. However, $25 million of those funds are distributed by formula, so the net effect of this increased funding has been spread across further tribes, leading to actually decreases for some. Demand for tribal public transportation programs has never been higher.

Minorities make up the fastest growing segment of America’s rural population. Between 2000 and 2010, minorities accounted for 82.7 percent of the rural population increase. The driving force behind this growth in rural America is the rapid growth of the rural Hispanic population. Hispanics accounted for 54 percent of the rural population growth between 2000 and 2010, doubling their growth percentage from the previous decade. Increasingly in the past decade, rural public transportation informational and marketing materials have been offered in multiple languages, addressing directly this fastest growing segment of the rural population. Trending tells us that these efforts are only the beginning and will need widespread adoption throughout the rural transit industry in the coming years.

It’s clear that today’s rural America is vastly different than the one designed to be served by the Section 18 program in 1979. Rural transit professionals, officials and advocates have a sterling track record when it comes to adapting services to meet changing population demographics and emerging transportation demands. This adaptability will never be more central to the success of rural public transportation than in the coming years as mobility services are developed to address the trends highlighted in this article. Concepts like mobility management and ride-sharing will have a central role in both creating transportation solutions and responding adroitly to a changing landscape. So, too, will technology that will empower both providers and customers. If history serves as an indicator of the future, than it will be the innovativeness, flexibility and adaptability that will lead rural public transportation through this quickly changing landscape and allow these system to continue to play the key role they play everyday across rural America.

The above data points and analyses help us better understand the demographic trends impacting rural America and rural public transportation. There is another way to leverage this understanding — a more direct route that CTAA took in developing its MAP-21 reauthorization recommendations and that bears mentioning here.

In the past year, Association representatives conducted listening sessions in the field, beginning with the CTAA Board of Directors, followed by a lengthy session with state and tribal delegates and eventually continuing on to direct talks with 15 different state transit associations and their members. Not surprisingly, rural transit issues were central to all of these important discussions.

CTAA’s MAP-21 reauthorization recommendations — presented in full on page 24 of this edition of DigitalCT magazine — are a direct reflection of both the trends discussed in this article and the outputs from those listening sessions. We thought it useful to repeat the rural transit recommendations here:

CTAA and its Members Support:

• A five (5) year minimum Reauthorization with growing, stable investment in the Section 5311 program

• Increasing Section 5311 investments to offset the rise in operating costs due to wage and health care costs
• Increasing investment in the Section 5339 program that not only returns investment to pre-Map-21 levels, but that makes up for past two years of significant bus capital underfunding

• Developing federal government performance measure on transit capital replacement Levels sufficient to maintain current service levels

• Provide additional revenue into Section 5337 State of Good Repair Program to Allow for Bus Capital State of Good Repair Investment for rural transit

• Continuing the land-mass adjusters in the Section 5311 formula

• Developing rural-centric performance measures in cooperation with rural transit operators

• Promoting cooperative arrangements around rural/urban boundary lines that recognize regional operations

• Ensuring that safety regulations for rural transit minimize additional record-keeping, data collection and reporting

• Creating financial incentives for private-sector investment in rural transit

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