CLIMATE CABINET EDUCATION

Transportation 101: Rural and Small Town Transit

Transit is essential for rural communities and small towns – just like in large cities. Rural transit systems connect people to jobs, essential services, and community and family events. Transit in rural communities also improves safety and health by lowering car crash rates and reducing air and noise pollution. Effective connections between rural and urban transit hubs support the transition to a carbon-free transportation system by allowing people to freely travel to all corners of a state without being required to drive.

One-in-five Americans, or 60 million people, live in rural America. Rural transit systems remain underfunded and underdeveloped, however. This leaves rural residents disproportionately dependent on cars for travel and isolates residents who do not drive or have access to a reliable vehicle. Because rural communities are disproportionately older and less affluent than urban counterparts, the number of residents who do not have access to a reliable vehicle is higher than the absence of appropriate transit funding would make it seem. In fact, over one million rural households do not own a car and a majority of counties nationwide with the highest density of car-free households are in rural areas. Many car-free rural households include older residents, people with disabilities, and low-income families.

That is why it should be no surprise that polling has found rural residents value transit at similar levels to urban ones, and the demand for rural transit is high. Ridership on rural transit systems has also remained stable in recent years despite falling rural populations and decreasing investment, showing how important these systems are to the communities they serve and the need for resources. Successful rural transit requires a different set of tools from urban transit, although the best rural and urban transit overlaps. Fully funding rural transit ensures rural communities and small towns remain vibrant and connected by providing economic, social, and climate benefits.

WHAT DOES RURAL TRANSIT LOOK LIKE

- Good rural and small town transit systems consist of a mix of services to best fit the needs of communities, just like in urban areas.
- Fixed-route transit operates on a planned route on a fixed schedule like local and intercity buses and long-distance passenger rail. This is the most common type of transit found across all community types – urban or rural.
- Flexible-route transit is a variation of fixed-route transit where buses may deviate from routes as needed but within a designated service area. This option is more common in rural and exurban communities where passengers' final destination may be situated a great distance from main roads.
- The most flexible transit service models available are "demand response." These include options like dial-a-ride, subsidized taxi services, and paratransit. These models are all characterized by riders requesting services as needed. Some transit agencies will use small vans or buses to service multiple riders simultaneously, while others will simply subsidize the cost of a taxi or ride-hail service.

- Rural communities can benefit from states investing more in intercity transit options like passenger bus and rail services. Washington state expanded intercity coach bus routes to serve more rural communities. These routes double as local transit between small towns and regional connections between small towns and larger cities. The expanded network succeeded in connecting rural residents to neighboring communities and major hubs. Similarly, Amtrak's long-distance train routes serve rural residents in towns too small for an airport. These services also increase travel choices for people in urban areas by connecting them to large and small, urban and rural destinations.

RURAL TRANSIT CAN IMPROVE FAMILIES' QUALITY OF LIFE , BUT NEEDS SUPPORT

- Rural transit remains severely underfunded and underinvested in. This is a struggle rural and urban transit systems nationally share. The federal government invests next to nothing in transit operations and underinvests in transit capital projects. This is particularly burdensome on rural transit agencies that have more specialized planning, capital, and workforce training needs compared to urban counterparts.
- Rural transit agencies also suffer from a deeply engrained cultural belief that transit is only for cities. This false belief feeds a negative feedback loop, where regions most in need of transit are least likely to receive support for policy or budget support for transit.
- Rural land-use policy should support walkable communities focused on traditional development patterns found in small towns across the United States. Similarly, local and state transportation decision makers should protect the main street cores of small towns and rural communities by stopping the expansion of highways that can decimate small towns by having cars speed through or around them rather than stopping to patronize local businesses.
- Rural transit improves economic development outcomes. Rural counties with a transit system had 11% higher net earnings among residents compared to those without one.

Across the United States, rural communities are facing unprecedented challenges in the face of the economic disinvestment, an aging population, and facing an increasing amount of damage from climate change fueled disasters such as tornadoes, floods, and fires. Developing sustainable transit options in rural America is critical both for local economic success and to reduce pollution from transportation. Likewise, guaranteeing accessible transit even in remote areas ensures people can travel freely everywhere even if they are unable to afford or safely operate a vehicle.