



## **2** Public and Stakeholder Engagement

The OPTPP reflects extensive input collected through an online survey, stakeholder engagement, agency site visits, and regional meetings. These efforts were conducted between December 2019 and October 2020. Beginning in March, in-person meetings were shifted to virtual platforms due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The project team also sought input from a Stakeholder Advisory Group (SAG) of more than 100 members and a Steering Committee at key points throughout the planning process. The Steering Committee consisted of representatives from urban and tribal transit

providers, as well as leaders from ODOT and OTA. The project team held monthly meetings with the Steering Committee to discuss methodology and deliverables.

In August 2020, the SAG convened for a full-day workshop to craft 10 strategies that will help achieve the Plan's goals (discussed in Chapter 6). Approximately 20 participants attended in person and more than 30 joined online using the Zoom platform. All public and stakeholder engagement materials are included in Appendix B.

### **OUTREACH**

#### **MetroQuest Survey**

The project team administered a survey from January 20 through March 4, 2020, to gather information on Oklahomans' transit needs and challenges. A total of 2,460 people took the survey, a much larger response than prior surveys conducted by ODOT. Respondents answered questions related to priorities for transit access, existing and desired transit use, preferred regional destinations, transit tradeoffs, and various socioeconomic characteristics.

The survey was hosted by MetroQuest and was translated in multiple languages. In addition to posting the survey on the project website ([OKTransitPlan.Org](http://OKTransitPlan.Org)), the project

team relied heavily on transit agencies and the SAG to promote the survey.

Several themes emerged:

- Job access is a high priority for rural and urban respondents. Many respondents shared their experiences with using transit to travel to work and emphasized its importance for those who are looking for work (e.g., using transit to travel to interviews).
- Access to medical services was the second highest priority for all respondents, particularly for those living in rural areas.
- Transit is the only transportation option available for many respondents in rural

Oklahoma Public Transit Policy Plan Survey

Progress

WRAP UP

What to do

**Final Questions**

Please enter your ZIP Code:  
Type...

What is your age?  
Select...

What is your employment status?  
Select...

What is your race?  
Select...

Do you receive any government assistance?  
Select...

Is there anything else you'd like us to know?  
Type...

Submit Final Questions Skip

**Thank You**

Thank you for participating in this survey! Your answers will be used to inform the future of transit in Oklahoma.

<http://www.OKTransitPlan.org>

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- areas. Many more rural respondents would use transit if services were available near their homes.
- Urban respondents would use transit more often if services were expanded to their desired destinations.
- Thirty-eight percent of respondents in urban areas would use transit five to seven times a week if it were frequent and reliable.
- For some, personal vehicles are a financial burden.



## Stakeholder Engagement

Representatives from transit agencies, human service organizations, and state agencies participated in stakeholder interviews and attended regional meetings which were held across the state.

The purpose of the stakeholder interviews and regional meetings, in regard to the development of the Plan, was to:

- Identify transit needs, including needs related to transit services.
- Identify structural needs, such as organization, management, and resources.
- Collect different perspectives on interests, needs, and expectations for transit in Oklahoma.
- Ensure as many groups and organizations as possible had an opportunity to provide feedback to maintain a broad range of perspectives.

At the onset of each meeting and interview, the project team encouraged stakeholders to speak freely and assured them that any comments or ideas expressed would be anonymous. Thus, the findings presented in the following sections are not attributable to an individual or organization. This chapter summarizes the transit needs and challenges identified by stakeholders across Oklahoma.

## KEY FINDINGS

Findings are organized by the following topics:



Funding



FTA Section 5310 Program



Public Transit Coordination



Succession Planning and Professional Development



Driver Recruitment and Retention



Service Improvements



Technology



Feedback for ODOT



## Funding

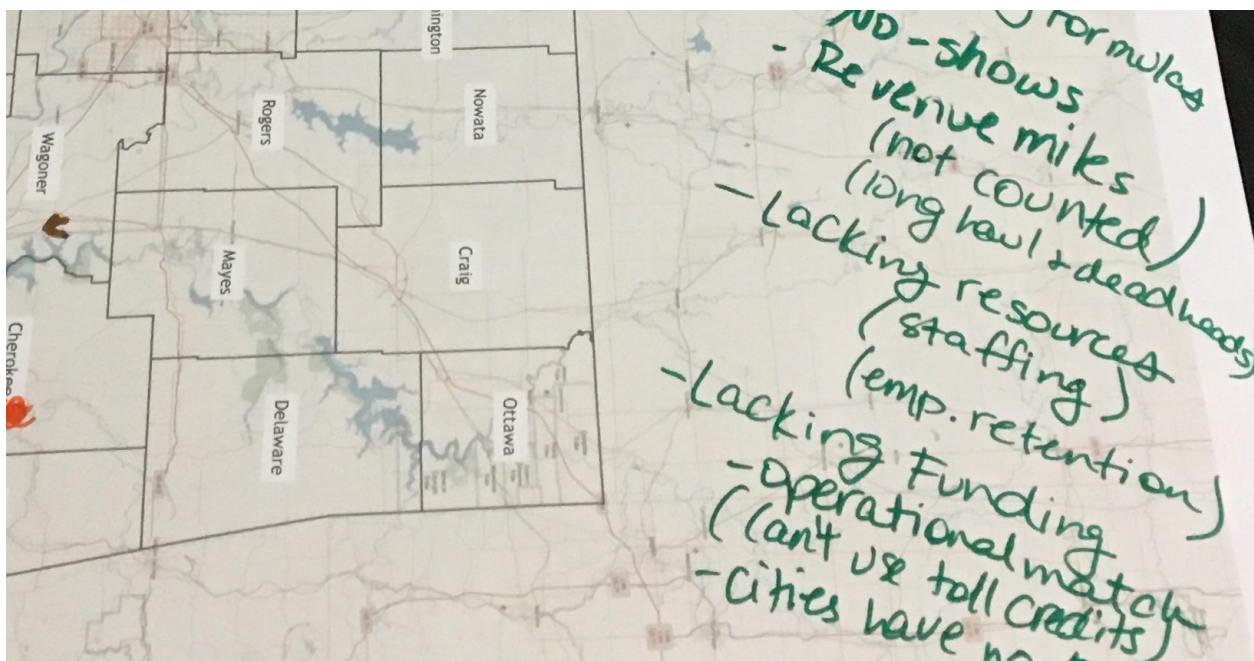
Nearly every stakeholder noted that the lack of funding is a perennial problem. Almost all stakeholders agreed that public transit systems across the state need more funding to be successful. Stakeholders felt additional funding is necessary to maintain existing service levels and support existing investments in capital resources, such as vehicles.

Though funding is an issue across the state, the specific needs vary between agencies. Some agencies need additional funds to purchase new vehicles as the vehicles age beyond their useful life, while others are looking for funding to hire and retain drivers and expand their service. In rural towns, some agencies with smaller service areas cannot reach the miles threshold needed to replace aging vehicles. On the contrary, rural agencies that serve large areas have vehicles that are driven over very long distances. The stakeholders from these agencies voiced their concern over the way their revenue

miles are calculated, stating that funding sources do not cover the extremely long deadhead miles that accrue when beginning or ending a passenger trip.

Additionally, many stakeholders expressed difficulty in finding local funds to match federal funds. Most rural systems do not receive local financial support and are forced to use other grants and contracts as their local match. Most of these contracts are with LogistiCare to provide Medicaid travel. However, LogistiCare is starting to expand beyond contracting with transit agencies, and instead, with private transit providers who may or may not meet federal regulations. Stakeholders expressed concerns over losing LogistiCare contracts, since they otherwise do not have enough funds for a local match.

Lastly, transit agencies sometimes find themselves with funding that cannot be spent on their actual needs. Many grants are often tied to specific purposes.







## FTA

### FTA Section 5310 Program

The transition of the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) section 5310 program<sup>1</sup> from the Oklahoma Department of Human Services (DHS) to ODOT has been frustrating for some stakeholders who are not also 5307/5311 transit agencies. Some stakeholders expressed past frustrations with the 5310 program, stating that data tracking was too onerous and that they could not keep up with reporting requirements due to staff shortages.

Other agencies stated that the application process was too cumbersome. For some agencies, the inability or unwillingness to apply for funds has resulted in aging fleets in disrepair.

Given the distances many of these transit agencies are traveling, transportation services become extremely costly to provide. Some stakeholders stated that the flexibility to fund vehicle maintenance, fuel, and drivers would help lower costs.

<sup>1</sup> FTA section 5310 declares as national policy that seniors (65 and older) and individuals with disabilities have the same right to access transportation as other persons. FTA section 5310 authorizes Federal Capital Assistance grants to meet the special needs of seniors and individuals with disabilities where public mass transportation is unavailable or insufficient. Beginning in 2020, the FTA section 5310 program in Oklahoma will fund mobility management and capital assistance. Prior to this, 5310 funds were only permitted for capital assistance. The FTA section 5310 program funds capital and “nontraditional” projects, some of which include travel training, volunteer driver programs, and mobility management.



## Public Transit Coordination

### ***Non-Emergency Medical Transportation***

The need for transit trips to serve non-emergency medical transportation (NEMT) was a common theme among many stakeholders, especially in rural communities. Many medical facilities are located in urban areas, but many transit agencies lack resources to provide adequate services to these medical facilities. Providers who schedule trips into larger cities run the risk of using a vehicle that would otherwise be available for a full-day of local service. Many transit agencies contract service through LogistiCare. In most cases, contracts with LogistiCare are the only option rural transit agencies have for local match for federal funding. Agencies rely on NEMT service provision so they can continue receiving federal funds. While this structure works well for private contractors like LogistiCare, it does not favor the

transit agencies, service coordination, the passengers, or Oklahomans as a whole.

Some stakeholders also expressed the need for better coordination between medical transportation services and Veterans Affairs' (VA) facilities. Traveling to these facilities can sometimes be further than 120 miles for a one-way trip. These rides are costly for the customer and the transit provider.

### ***Service Area Coordination***

Some stakeholders noted the existence of formal or informal partnerships that allow one provider to pick-up or drop-off passengers in another provider's service area. These partnerships seemed to be working well and they help transit agencies meet the needs of customers who may be traveling long distances. On the contrary, some transit agencies expressed that there are no incentives from ODOT to coordinate with other transit agencies across service areas.





## Succession Planning and Professional Development

Many stakeholders expressed interest in improving succession planning and professional development. Many directors of smaller agencies are reaching retirement age, and some have been in the position since the beginning of the agency.

Stakeholders also voiced the need for more grant writers or technical assistance with grant writing. Grant writing requires time and training, and many agencies only have a few non-driver staff. Agencies tend to rely on municipal staff or whomever has time at that moment to write grants.

In addition to increased training and aid with grant writing, stakeholders would like to see more training opportunities and overall improved access to training. Since many trainings are held in-person, agencies can often only send one or two people, and they must drive long distances to attend the trainings. Stakeholders, especially those far from Oklahoma City or Tulsa, expressed an interest in more regional, in-person trainings and webinars on a broad range of topics, including software support.

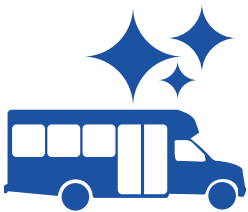


## Driver Recruitment and Retention

Many stakeholders noted that driver recruitment and retention is a major issue. Due to lack of funding, many agencies cannot afford to pay wages that are competitive to other jobs in the area. Once drivers are hired, many leave for a better-paying job soon after they have been trained. At some agencies, administrative staff fill in as drivers on days when there are not enough available drivers.

In rural areas, the potential driver hiring pool is extremely limited. Of those who apply to drive, many cannot pass drug and alcohol testing; some existing drivers also lose their jobs due to drug and alcohol testing. The legalization of cannabidiol (CBD) oil and medical marijuana has also conflicted with these drug tests in that even small traces of these drugs lead to failed tests. Agencies who pay their drivers above minimum wage tend to see much better driver recruitment and retention.





## Service Improvements

All stakeholders expressed a desire for more service improvements to meet the needs of their clients or customers. Many stakeholders stated that transit services in Oklahoma do not currently align with residents' travel needs. This was noted repeatedly, especially among services receiving 5310 funds who expressed difficulty being able to transport clients to job opportunities. In general, transit access to employment was a major gap that many stakeholders identified, particularly expressing the need for more transit service to large employers and job centers.

Stakeholders noted the need for specific service improvements, such as more frequent service, longer service spans, and more weekend service. Some noted the desire for more off-peak service to serve second- and third-shift workers. Many stakeholders voiced the need for transit to serve trips between counties and in some cases, across state lines. They stated that existing bus services are not well-coordinated and traveling by transit across jurisdictional boundaries can be very difficult, expensive, or impossible.

Additionally, many stakeholders expressed the need for more vehicle types. Nearly all 5310 agencies interviewed stated the need for more vehicles, particularly wheelchair-accessible vehicles. They also expressed the need for rear-entry vehicles that allow two wheelchairs at a time. Some agencies also stated that more 12- to 15-seater vehicles would be helpful.

Particularly in urban areas, some stakeholders face the challenge of determining how to grow and manage service developments in a sustainable way. One stakeholder mentioned that when transit agencies improve services, riders respond favorably but also demand those improvements on additional routes.

Lastly, many stakeholders expressed the increasing need to consider transit's role in allowing older adults to "age in place." As many older adults return to areas with lower costs of living, transit will be an essential resource for those needing to travel without a personal vehicle.





## Technology

Several stakeholders expressed a strong desire for more technology integrated into transit. Inconsistent use of technology for trip scheduling and dispatching was observed during agency site visits. Providers noted the need for integration among the many trip scheduling and dispatching tools.

Some systems use ODOT-sponsored software (TransitAssistant) or other third-party software, while others manually enter trips either on a computer or by hand. Several stakeholders noted that TransitAssistant could be improved by expanding capabilities to allow the tracking of vehicles on a live map. Others requested that TransitAssistant allow for easier communication between dispatchers and drivers (e.g., the ability to send messages). Some drivers have access to computer tablets with their schedules loaded, while others use smart phones for directions. Transit technology was cited as a potential strategy to help make transit easier

to use, especially in places where service is less frequent. Examples include real-time bus information systems, mobile applications and payment options, and more interactive websites.

Many stakeholders suggested that investments be made in systems such as one-call/one-click systems as well as mobility management, either statewide or regionally, to help consolidate or coordinate services. The inability to easily understand where services operate, how much they cost, and when they operate was noted as a barrier for using transit.

Several stakeholders cited Oklahoma's infrastructure as a barrier to transit improvements, specifically noting the poor broadband network across the state. Many expressed that state infrastructure is not ready to support new technology improvements.



## Feedback for ODOT

Stakeholders were asked what ODOT could do to help the transit agencies improve their services and programs.

Some stakeholders offered specific feedback for ODOT:

- Continue advocating for more federal and state funding.
  - More flexibility with funding and reporting requirements.
  - More grant writing support.
  - More assistance for transit agencies with the Office of Management and Enterprise Services (OMES) procurement process.
  - Clearer communication about funding opportunities and deadlines.
  - More trainings across different topic areas (e.g., drug and alcohol training, grant writing, and procurement training).
  - More regionally-based, in-person trainings and webinars, since traveling long distances can be burdensome.
  - Streamline processes across different state agencies, when possible.
- Stakeholders expressed that there is redundancy between rules and inspections from ODOT, health agencies, and others, and the regulations are often inconsistent.

