

Franklin County Alternative Transportation Plan



September 2009
Franklin Regional Council of Governments
425 Main Street, Greenfield, MA 01301
www.frcog.org

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Franklin County Alternative Transportation Plan

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Franklin County Alternative Transportation Plan

Executive Summary

The rural nature of Franklin County presents many challenges to transportation planning. Its sparse population and large geographical area naturally limits the possibility of many modes of travel beyond that of the private automobile. However, with the rising cost of fuel prices, it has become much more important for residents of Franklin County to be provided with alternatives to the private vehicle. The goal of this report is to build on past transportation studies; review the current transportation resources of the county; and finally, to examine alternative forms of transportation that could most likely be implemented under the geographic, population, and financial constraints of the area. This report will also outline strategies that can be used to execute the recommendations suggested here.

Findings

Overall, this report finds that large strides are already being taken to bring alternative forms of transportation to Franklin County. The soon-to-be completed multi-modal Franklin County Regional Transit Center is a pivotal and symbolic action of this effort. In addition, the continuing implementation of the Franklin County Bikeway and the future MassHighway Park and Ride Lot in Whatley will make traveling within the county and outside of it much easier without having to rely on the singly-occupied vehicle. While there is currently progress being made, there is still more that can be done. The recommendations of previous studies and reports should be re-examined and action should be taken to implement them. In addition, new forms of potential transportation, such as Zipcar, should be looked into much more intensively as these are forms of travel that could be realistically implemented within Franklin County.

Recommendations

The recommendations that are made in this report are summarized here.

- Continue implementation of the 2008 “Franklin County Bikeway Plan”;
- Continue implementation of the 2008 “Franklin County Park and Ride Study”;
- Establish a Zipcar within Franklin County;
- Support the current efforts underway to bring passenger rail back to the county and be ready to capitalize on it when rail is restored;

- Promote ridesharing efforts that are occurring within the region;
- Continue implementation of the 2008 “Transit Services and Needs in Western Franklin County”;
- Improve bus transit to attract residents wishing to park and ride, and increase the level of service for lower-income people and the elderly.

Introduction

The private automobile is by far the most important means of transportation for Franklin County residents. In fact, according to the U.S. Census, 90% of Franklin County residents relied on private automobiles for transportation in 2000. This statistic makes sense in light of the fact that Franklin County has only 71,602 people spread out over a large area of 724 square miles, resulting in less than 100 people per square mile.¹ This low density, compared to the state average of 796 people per square mile, makes it logistically and financially difficult for a public transit system to efficiently serve all of the county’s population. The private automobile offers the flexibility needed for residents to perform daily errands and trips.

While the private vehicle makes sense based on present conditions, the dominance of this form of transportation may not be sustainable in the long term. Fuel costs have currently leveled off at relatively low prices, but this is not expected to last as global oil supplies continue to dwindle and demand increases. The Summer of 2008 provided a preview of the potential effects of high prices when the cost of gasoline peaked at \$4.08 per gallon in the Springfield region, which is a good indicator for costs throughout western Massachusetts including Franklin County.² During this time, people were faced with the very real decision of having to either change their driving habits or bear the much higher costs of fuel. The price of fuel is a very important consideration for the average household’s budget. According to *MassRIDES*, the average Massachusetts household spends more on transportation than it does on food. In fact, it spends an approximate 15% of its income on transportation-related costs, and as a result, rising gas prices can dramatically affect a family’s finances – particularly for lower income households.³ In fact, it is estimated that low-income households spend as much as 21% of their income on fuel.⁴ See Figure 1 below to observe how gas prices have changed from 2007 to 2009 for the Springfield region.

¹ U.S. Census, 2007 American Community Survey. www.census.gov.

² AAA’s Daily Fuel Gauge Report. <http://www.fuelgagereport.com/MAmetro.asp>.

³ *MassRIDES*, Massachusetts Executive Office of Transportation. <http://www.commute.com/>.

⁴ Cooper, Mark N. “Rising Energy Prices Strain Household Budgets and the Economy, For Most Americans,” *Consumers Union*. September 2004.

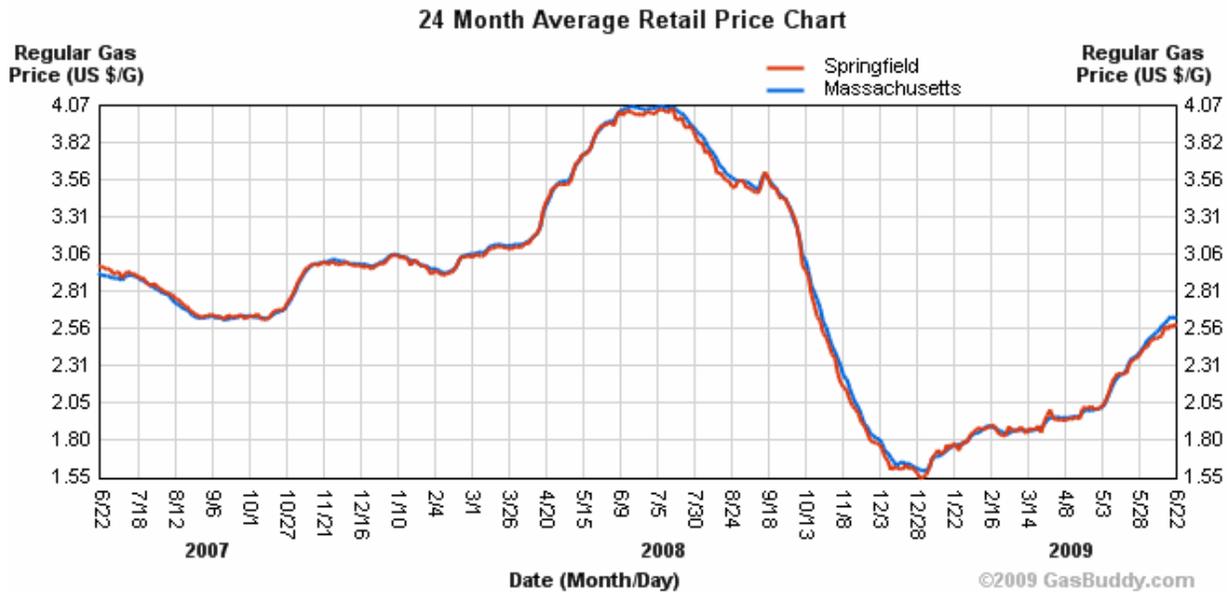


Figure 1. Changes in Gas Prices from 2007 to 2009 for Springfield, MA.⁵

While the very high rise in fuel prices during 2008, fortunately, lasted for only a short time, it highlighted the need to explore alternative forms of transportation so that Franklin County residents would not be severely burdened as prices continue to climb in the future, as they are beginning to do once again. Lessening the need for singly-occupied vehicles in the county will also provide environmental benefits to the area in terms of air and water quality. This is especially important to Franklin County because of its rich natural resources that draw tourists from all over to enjoy its beautiful landscapes. Decreasing dependence on cars will also have side benefits of promoting better health of residents as they exercise more and providing more choices for residents, such as the elderly and children, when driving may not be an option for them.

The timing of this plan is also appropriate because of a series of studies that the Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG) has recently completed and projects that have begun in the region that focus on alternative transportation, including bicycling and passenger rail. In addition, construction has begun towards building a multi-modal Franklin County Regional Transit Center located in downtown Greenfield. This plan provides the opportunity to step back and comprehensively look at what research has already been done on this topic and what progress, if any, has been made towards bringing other forms of transportation to the county. Past studies/reports that the FRCOG has completed or participated in that contribute to alternative transportation in the county include:

⁵ http://www.massachusettsgasprices.com/retail_price_chart.aspx.

- Franklin County Park and Ride Study
- Franklin County Bikeway Plan
- Transit Services and Needs in Western Franklin County
- Connecticut River Crossing Transportation Study
- I-91 Rail Corridor Feasibility Study
- Franklin County Pedestrian Assessment
- FRTA's 2009 Study of Fixed Route Services

The findings from these studies will be summarized and incorporated into this plan in order to build on past work and ensure that any recommendations made here will be grounded in reality for Franklin County.

Users of Alternative Transportation in Franklin County

Potential Target Population for Alternative Transportation

While providing transportation choices for all residents is vital, it is more important for certain segments of the population than others. The elderly, children, low-income households, and renter households are more likely to be impacted by the lack of transportation choices due to financial and physical constraints. As the elderly age, they increasingly are no longer able to drive due to physical handicaps or impaired vision and are often dependent on relatives for rides or what public transit is available to them. Similarly, children under the driving age of 16 are also entirely dependent on relatives or public transit for transportation. Low-income households are also more in need of alternative transportation than others because they do not have the financial resources to cope with rising fuel costs. Renter households are statistically more likely to be composed of low-income households and therefore are also more likely to need public transit. As fuel prices increase, low-income and renter households often do not have the resources to remedy their situation, such as moving closer to work or purchasing a more fuel-saving vehicle.⁶

As elsewhere, these target populations are also in need of transportation choices in Franklin County. The 2007 American Community Survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau provides a good picture of how these population segments in Franklin County are more dependent on transportation modes other than the singly-occupied vehicle.

The elderly and the young in Franklin County tend to be the age groups that most frequently use transportation modes other than the singly-occupied vehicle. Table 1 shows, using highlighted percentages, that the young and old are the least likely to drive a vehicle alone, but instead use

⁶ Cooper, Mark N. "Rising Energy Prices Strain Household Budgets and the Economy, For Most Americans," *Consumers Union*. September 2004.

other transportation modes much more. For example, the young are almost twice as likely to use carpools.

Table 1. Means of Transportation to Work by Age (American Community Survey, 2007)

Age Group	Car, truck, or van - drove alone:	Car, truck, or van - carpooled:	Public transportation (excluding taxicab):	Walked:	Taxicab, motorcycle, bicycle, or other means:	Worked at home:
Total:	80.1%	9.8%	1.0%	3.8%	0.9%	4.4%
16 to 19 years	66.4%	20.2%	0.0%	10.6%	2.1%	0.8%
20 to 24 years	82.0%	10.0%	1.6%	4.3%	1.3%	0.8%
25 to 44 years	78.2%	12.1%	1.3%	3.5%	1.3%	3.6%
45 to 54 years	82.6%	8.1%	0.8%	2.8%	0.5%	5.3%
55 to 59 years	82.6%	6.0%	0.8%	2.8%	0.5%	7.3%
60 to 64 years	83.6%	5.7%	0.2%	1.5%	0.0%	8.9%
65 years and over	78.7%	3.7%	0.6%	10.0%	0.9%	5.9%

In 2007, the number of elderly residents (defined as being age 65 and older) in Franklin County was estimated at 10,057 or 14% of the total population. Between 2007 and 2030, the number of elderly residents in the region is projected to almost double to 19,000 people. This increase would represent a much larger 21% of the total population. This growing population of elderly is important to consider as future regional transit needs are assessed, since elderly populations typically depend more on alternative forms of transportation and paratransit than the population as a whole.

Another population group that tends to rely more on transportation modes other than the singly-occupied vehicle are low-income people. The following chart shows how at lower income levels, other modes of transportation play a much more significant role than those people with higher incomes. In fact, people whose incomes fall below the traditional low-income definition for Franklin County of \$25,000⁷ are 26% less likely to drive alone than those with higher incomes. Conversely, they carpool, walk, and use public transportation at higher rates. For example, 12% of low-income persons use public transportation for commuting compared to only 8% of persons with higher incomes.

⁷ According to Massachusetts Executive Order 418 guidelines, low income households are defined as earning 50% or less of the area-wide median income. For Fiscal Year 2003, the area-wide median income for Franklin County was \$48,400, meaning that low-income households earn \$24,200 or less. Because of limits in the U.S. Census data categories, \$25,000 is used here as a close approximation.

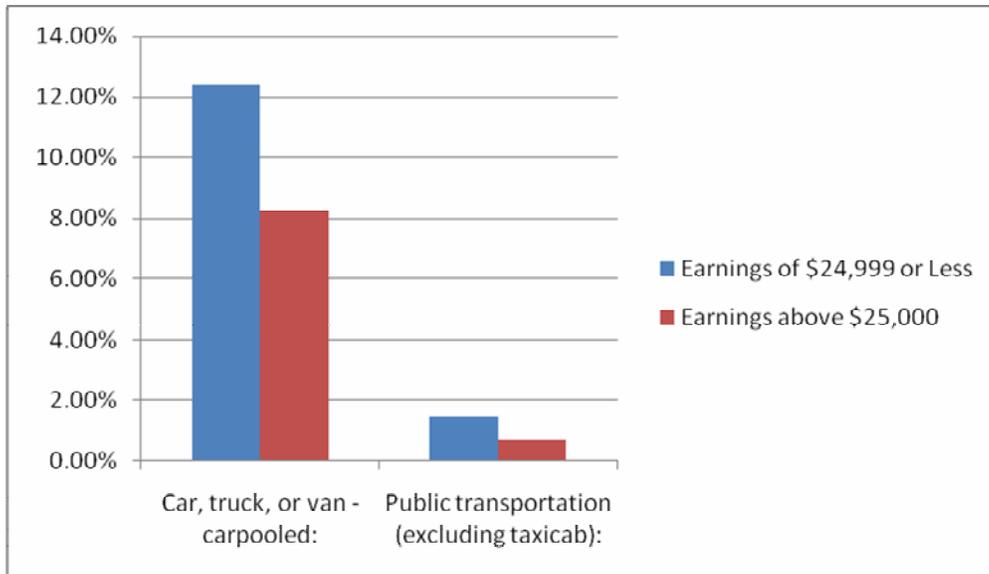


Figure 2. Means of Transportation to Work by Earnings (American Community Survey, 2007)

The commuting trends of low-income persons are even more obvious when transportation choice is examined by comparing individuals above and below the poverty level. Only 63% of persons below the poverty line in Franklin County drove alone in 2007, compared with the 82% of people at or above 150% of the poverty line. Instead, people below the poverty line are much more likely to carpool, walk, or take public transit. The two charts below compare the share of transportation modes between people above and below the poverty levels.

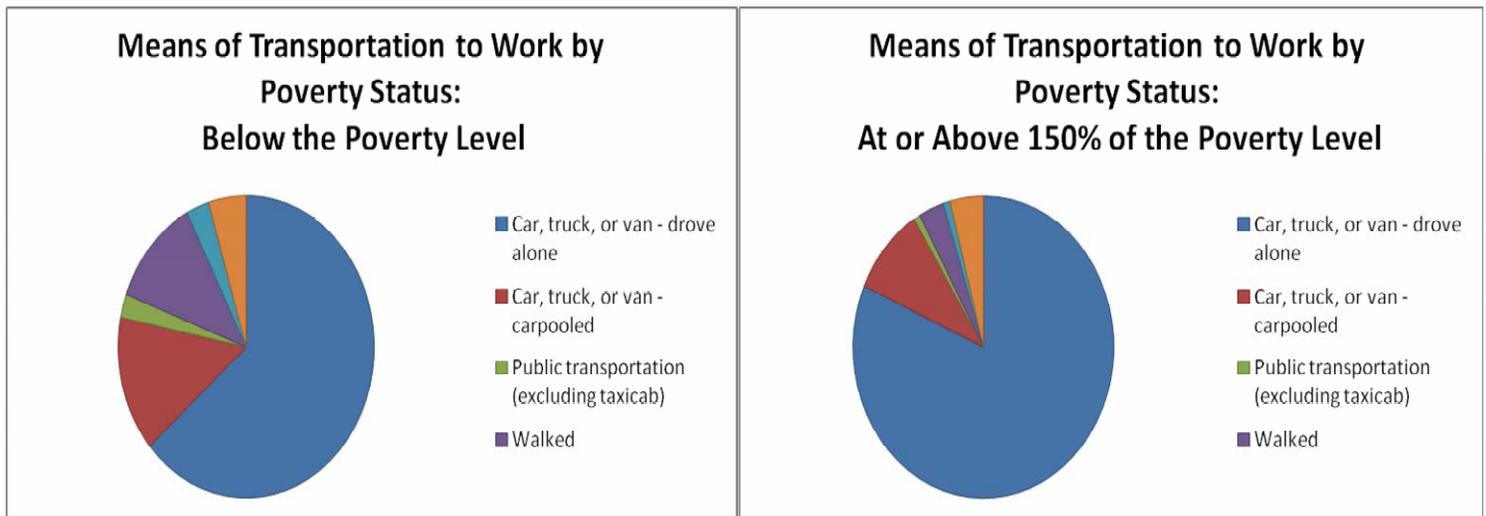


Figure 3. Means of Transportation to Work by Poverty Status (American Community Survey, 2007)

Finally, renters in Franklin County are also more likely to use alternative means of transportation other than the singly-occupied vehicle. Table 2 below shows commuting choices between renters and home-owners in Franklin County for 2007.

Table 2. Means of Transportation to Work by Ownership Status (American Community Survey, 2007)

Ownership Status	Car, truck, or van - drove alone	Car, truck, or van - carpooled	Public transportation (excluding taxicab)	Walked	Taxicab, motorcycle, bicycle, or other means	Worked at home
Total	80.1%	9.8%	1.0%	3.8%	0.9%	4.4%
Owner	81.5%	9.5%	0.5%	2.6%	0.6%	5.3%
Renter	75.9%	10.7%	2.4%	7.3%	1.8%	2.0%

A Presidential Executive Order, in 1994, directed every federal agency to make Environmental Justice part of its mission by identifying and addressing the effects of all programs, policies, and activities on “minority populations and low-income populations.” As part of this effort, the FRCOG planning staff has examined the 2000 U.S. Census data and identified those areas in Franklin County that have the greatest concentrations of low-income and/or minority populations. These target areas were identified based on a threshold that required a minimum of 5% minority populations or 12% of the population living below the poverty level. The identified Environmental Justice target areas that met this criteria are: Greenfield Town Center, Greenfield (Leyden Road and Plain Road areas), Greenfield (area south of Main Street), Montague (Millers Falls), Montague (downtown Turners Falls), Orange Town Center, Orange (area west of Route 122 and near the airport), Shelburne Falls (Shelburne side), Sunderland (entire town), and Wendell (entire town). It is important that these areas be served by various modes of transportation in order to provide these residents options for travel.

Based on the census data presented above, it is clear that most users of alternative transportation tend to both be young or old, and have constrained financial situations. The Census data also shows where in Franklin County there are higher concentrations of people more dependent on alternative forms of transportation. Knowing this, it is important that any alternative transportation modes recommended in this report be both: 1) accessible for people who may have physical mobility issues, especially the elderly; and 2) affordable for low-income households within the County.

Commuting Patterns of Potential Users of Alternative Transportation

The section above outlines *who* potential users of alternative transportation are within Franklin County. But it is also important to understand *where* potential users are traveling – both within and outside of the county. Knowing current commuting patterns provides a clearer picture of which types of transportation may be better suited to the county and particular routes.

Using the 2000 U.S. Census Journey to Work data, it is apparent that there are several major travel destinations for Franklin County residents. Within the county, the City of Greenfield is by far the most common destination for Franklin County workers, followed by the Towns of Montague, Deerfield, and Orange. Top destinations located outside the county include Northampton, Amherst, Springfield, Hadley, Athol, and North Adams. The following map shows where most workers are commuting to from their residences within Franklin County.

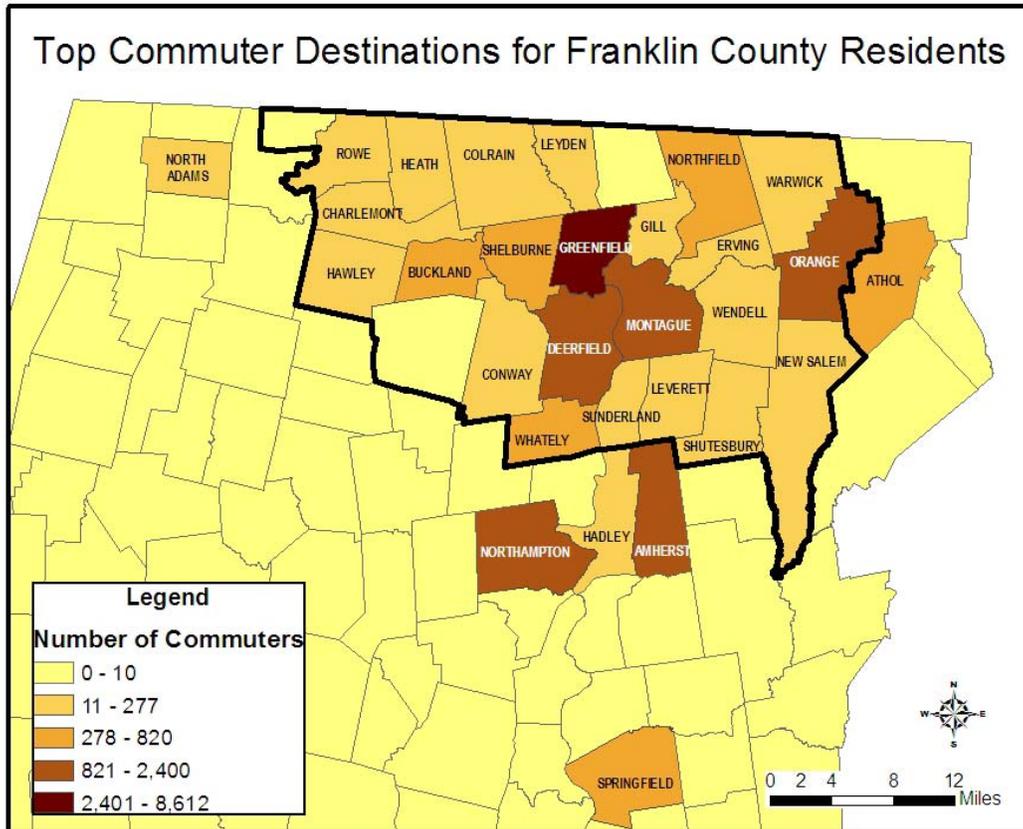


Figure 4. Top Commuter Destinations for Franklin County Residents (2000 U.S. Census Journey to Work)

To reach these destinations, most commuters are traveling along several main corridors. (See Appendix for a map of major roads in Franklin County.) Interstate 91 and Route 2 are the most heavily traveled routes within the county, closely followed by Route 116 and Route 5/10. Traffic counts in 2007 show that an average 24,000 vehicles drive through the Deerfield section of I-91 per day. The majority of these travelers are most likely heading to points south such as Springfield and Northampton. Route 116 is most likely used by commuters to travel to Hadley and Amherst. This road averaged 13,400 vehicles per day in 2007. Route 2 is the main east-west corridor in the county and as a result has a high number of vehicles that travel along it every

day. In 2007, it averaged 8,100 vehicles per day on the eastern section between the Towns of Orange and Greenfield.

According to the same 2000 Journey to Work census data, most Franklin County workers' commutes were of moderate length. Twenty percent of workers experienced a commute of 20 to 29 minutes. The next largest group of commuters (19%) had longer travels of 30 to 44 minutes; followed by 16% of workers whose travel times only lasted between 15 to 19 minutes. These average travel times indicate that most people within Franklin County are traveling within or to just outside the county borders.

These main commuter routes are already served to some extent by public transit. The Franklin Regional Transit Authority (FRTA) has bus routes along Routes 2, 116, and 5/10. In addition, the Pioneer Valley Transit Authority (PVRTA), which services primarily Hampshire and Hampden Counties, also has a bus route along Route 116 in Sunderland. Over the last several years, both the FRTA and PVRTA have seen increases in ridership. In particular, the FRTA has seen an increase of 32% between 2002 and 2008. During the summer of 2008, when the spike in oil prices occurred, ridership on FRTA buses also increased. Ridership increased from 126,000 trips during FY2008 to 140,000 during FY2009 – an increase of 11.1%. This response to the jump in gas prices show that Franklin County residents are willing to change their way of traveling when prices become too high.

Forms of Transportation Currently Available in Franklin County

Besides the private vehicle and the bus routes mentioned above, there are several other forms of transportation that are currently available to Franklin County residents. They include paratransit vans, park and ride facilities, bicycle and pedestrian facilities, and several others. While these different modes provide travel options to county residents, they may not be available to all segments of the population and may not be easily accessible due to location, timing, and/or frequency. The sections below provide an inventory of current transportation resources available within Franklin County.

Transit

The Franklin Regional Transit Authority (FRTA) is the primary transit authority serving Franklin County. The FRTA serves forty towns in Franklin, Hampshire, Hampden and Worcester Counties. Twenty-three of the twenty-six towns in Franklin County (all except Monroe, Sunderland, and Leverett) are members of the FRTA. The FRTA also serves seventeen towns in Worcester, Hampshire and Hampden Counties. The FRTA serves the most rural and geographically largest area of all the Regional Transit Authorities in Massachusetts. The area encompasses 1,121 square miles with an estimated population of 110,000 in forty towns. The FRTA administers and coordinates the transit services. Eleven of the twenty-six towns in

Franklin County have some level of fixed-route service for their communities. All of the service is for weekdays only.

A second transit authority operating in the Franklin County region is the Pioneer Valley Transit Authority (PVTA). The PVTA is based in Springfield, Massachusetts and principally serves communities in Hampshire and Hampden Counties. The PVTA has two member towns in Franklin County: Sunderland and Leverett. The PVTA provides weekend bus service to Sunderland and South Deerfield, and evening bus service to Sunderland.

The FRTA presently has 42 transit vehicles in total, including 35 vans and minibuses and seven larger buses, all of which are wheelchair accessible. All of the buses used for fixed route service have bike racks on the front of the buses. The bike racks hold up to two bikes each and are on the buses year-round. Between July 2007 and June 2008 (Fiscal Year 2008), the FRTA fixed routes transported a total of 126,585 passengers, an average of 10,549 per month. This is an 8% increase from Fiscal Year 2007. Regular fares for the FRTA bus routes presently range from \$1 to \$3 each way, depending on the route. Reduced fares are available to riders age 60 and older, disabled riders with Statewide access passes or ADA cards. Children under the age of 5 accompanied by a fare paying adult, ride free. Massachusetts Commission for the Blind card holders and veterans with a Department of Veterans Affairs identification card ride free as well.

In January 2008, the FRCOG released the study, “Transit Services and Needs in Western Franklin County.” This study examined current transit service in the western region of the county and recommended ways to expand services. Through surveys, FRCOG staff found that there was considerable interest by residents to having more frequent and longer service for transit along Route 2 west from Greenfield to Charlemont. In early 2009, the FRTA conducted an analysis of their fixed route services. This review was the first time an in-depth analysis had been conducted since the FRTA consolidated with the GMTA (Greenfield Montague Transportation Area) in 2006. The review resulted in a number of changes to almost all of FRTA’s fixed route services.

Paratransit/ADA Transit, Dial-A-Ride Van and Other Services

Because of the rural nature of Franklin County and the limited fixed route transit services available in the region there are no requirements to provide ADA transportation for at least half of Franklin County towns. Much of the van service which is provided in Franklin County is therefore demand responsive service, which is optional and offered at the regional transit authorities’ discretion. For the towns with fixed-route transit services, ADA van service is available to qualifying residents during the regular route’s hours of operation. Van transportation is also offered to qualifying Franklin County residents through the Massachusetts Division of Medical Assistance (DMA), the Massachusetts Department of Mental Retardation (DMR), the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH) and other various state-level human service agencies. The service through these human service agencies is often limited to a few specific types of trips, such as medical trips or transportation to job training.

Another program is the Job Access and Reverse Commute Program (JARC). The focus of the JARC program is to improve the transportation mobility for low-income individuals to help them access and retain employment, as a means to assist people in moving off of public assistance. The JARC program recognizes that the transportation challenges faced by low-income workers, including the need for transportation services for second and third shift jobs, and the need to be able to use public transportation for multiple linked trips, for example to childcare, school, or shopping as well as jobs.

Community Transit Services (CTS) is a major private transportation provider in the Athol-Orange area. CTS provides transportation for work commutes to help improve access to jobs for low-income individuals. CTS is run through the Community Transportation Association of America, a national professional membership association of organizations and individuals committed to removing the barriers of isolation and improving the mobility for all residents in rural communities.

Transportation for medical appointments is available to Franklin County seniors through the Med-Ride program. The Med-Ride program is sponsored by Franklin County Home Care and the FRTA. This program provides transportation through volunteer drivers using private automobiles.

Park and Ride

There is currently one formal MassHighway Park and Ride Facility within Franklin County. It is located on Route 2 in Charlemont and has the capacity for approximately forty-five vehicles. This facility can accommodate public transit and has a bus shelter for waiting commuters. It is currently served by FRTA's Route 41. The Route 41's primary purpose is to provide transit to the Academy at Charlemont and only operates during the school year with two round trips per day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. This park and ride facility mainly serves the western portion of Franklin County. Surveys show that while commuters use the lot to carpool to destinations in the east, such as Greenfield, they largely use the facility to commute to destinations west of the county, such as North Adams and Williamstown. Because of the limitations of the bus service to this site, the majority of the commuters use the lot to carpool.

The FRCOG recently completed a "Franklin County Park and Ride Study," which documented that there are many sites throughout the county that are currently acting as informal park and ride lots. These sites are locations in which there is no formal designation by a government or transportation authority. Commuters simply leave their vehicles on a regular basis either in on-street parking or on surrounding properties without formal permission by property owners in order to either carpool or use public transit. The presence of these lots signifies a need for more formal lots in the area.

Related to this demand, MassHighway is currently designing a formal park and ride lot to be located in Whatley on Route 5/10 at the intersection of Route 116 and near Exit 24 of Interstate

91. This facility is planned to be served by buses, possibly both FRTA and PVTA, and will contain several bus bays and bus shelters. In addition to this site, the FRCOG “Franklin County Park and Ride Study” recommends several other locations for shared park and ride lots throughout the county along major transportation corridors to help satisfy the clear demand that currently exists for more park and ride facilities.

Another study, completed in 2004, also recommends the construction of park and ride lots in Franklin County. The MassHighway “Connecticut River Crossing Transportation Study” conducted by the consultant, Vanasse Hangen Brustlin, recommended park and ride lots in several locations along the Connecticut River between Sunderland and Holyoke as a way to decrease traffic volumes on the Connecticut River bridge crossings within the study area. They found that a park and ride lot in Sunderland Center would be the most cost-effective location for trips from the north into Amherst, a major commuting destination for Franklin County residents. Using the methodology presented in the “Connecticut River Study,” but utilizing more current data – a park and ride lot in Sunderland with transit availability could increase daily transit ridership by 80 people one way (see appendix for description of methodology and assumptions used).

Bikeway Facilities

The Franklin County Bikeway is also a transportation option for Franklin County residents. The Franklin County Bikeway is a network of on and off-road bicycle routes that is centered along the Connecticut River. The Bikeway includes facilities that travel through eight Franklin County communities: Deerfield, Erving, Gill, Greenfield, Leverett, Montague, Northfield and Sunderland. It is approximately 40 miles of signed shared roadway and 5 miles of dedicated bicycling and pedestrian off-road paths. The Bikeway includes both off-road and shared roadway facilities and provides access to employment, educational, cultural and recreational sites. It is also a scenic ride along the banks of the Connecticut, Deerfield and Green Rivers. Both the FRTA and PVTA buses are equipped to carry bicycles, allowing cyclists to travel via both bus and bicycle for portions of their trips.

The Franklin County Bikeway is fully constructed and operational. The FRCOG, working in conjunction with the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission (PVPC) are currently working to have the Share the Road signs along the designated shared roadway routes of the Bikeway purchased, distributed and installed under the Transportation Demand Management Program (TDM) for *Share the Road in the Connecticut River Valley: An Infrastructure Improvement Project and Campaign to Promote Traveling by Bicycle*. This will fully complete the designed portion of the Franklin County Bikeway. The FRCOG recently developed and widely distributed a Franklin County Bikeway map which serves as a resource guide for bicycling in Franklin County.

FRCOG has also recently completed an update of the Franklin County Bikeway Plan, which recommends new bikeway routes that will connect the Bikeway with other towns in the region

and with bicycle facilities in Hampshire County. It also recommends routes that connect with facilities in Vermont and New Hampshire, providing broader bicycling transportation options throughout the region. The FRCOG is currently working to finalize and distribute maps that identify the new cycling routes and the next phases of the Franklin County Bikeway.

Pedestrian Facilities

Walking as a main mode of transportation greatly influenced the development pattern of traditional New England villages. In many cases, the sidewalks and streets that exist in the communities of Franklin County were laid out hundreds of years ago. Downtown Greenfield, Orange, Millers Falls, Turners Falls, Shelburne Falls, Northfield, the Sunderland Village Center, and Montague Center are all examples of historic town centers that are pedestrian friendly.

In some cases, these downtowns have required some updating to adjust to modern transportation demands. With the advent of trucking to deliver goods, towns made improvements to roadways in order to accommodate increased trucking and driving. However, in many cases these improvements were not accompanied by activities to maintain or reestablish pedestrian connections. Therefore, walking as a viable mode of transportation diminished due to the difficulty and/or lack of infrastructure that provides a safe place to walk. In other instances, activity centers that could support a great deal of pedestrian activity have sprung up in areas that are not currently conducive to walking. An example of this is the Yankee Candle Store and other heavily visited tourist destinations in the South Deerfield area. Although the shops are located in easily walk-able proximity to each other, the lack of sidewalks along Route 5/10/116, the width of this heavily traveled road, poor pedestrian connections and lack of a human scale development pattern encourages driving to each stop.

Initiatives recommended to make communities more pedestrian friendly include: building and widening sidewalks, developing a network of footpaths, slowing vehicle traffic, narrowing the streets and making intersections safe for walkers. These are all actions that the FRCOG has included as appropriate when working with towns to encourage walking as a viable mode of transportation. Creating and improving pedestrian facilities within the region is a goal of the Regional Transportation Plan and the FRCOG. Opportunities to provide sidewalks, pedestrian level lighting, safe crosswalks and connections to shops, services and residences are pursued whenever possible and appropriate.

Funding for the Massachusetts Transportation Enhancement Program has been used to design and construct sidewalk and streetscape improvements in many towns in Franklin County. The following sidewalk and streetscape projects have been completed in the last ten years: Greenfield Streetscape Enhancement Project, Greenfield Energy Park, Town of Ashfield Main Street Pedestrian Improvements, Downtown Shelburne Falls Streetscape, Sunderland Route 47/116 Intersection Improvements, Sunderland Route 116 Sidewalk and Crosswalk Improvements, Conway Streetscape Improvement, and the Millers Falls Streetscape. The Northfield Main Street Historic Restoration project is currently under construction.

In addition to traditional pedestrian facilities, Franklin County also has the Mahican-Mohawk Trail. This facility is a completed walking trail project that follows the route along the Deerfield River corridor.

Ridesharing

In addition to actual “brick-and-mortar” transportation facilities within the county, there are also several programs and Internet-based resources that promote carpooling or “ridesharing” in Franklin County and the wider region. The major program to promote ridesharing both in Franklin County and Massachusetts is *MassRIDES*. *MassRIDES* provides travel assistance to commuters, employers, students and other travelers. The program offers information about transportation alternatives, including transit, biking and walking and helps employers to establish a vanpool and carpool options for employee commutes. Another large rideshare program in Franklin County is run through UMASS Amherst, which is a major employer for country residents.

An example of a recently created website which attempts to connect ride-seekers with drivers offering rides within the region is called Zipride (www.zipride.com). Other similar locally-based websites include Craigslist.org and RideBuzz.org, whose mission is to promote ride-sharing within the Pioneer Valley region.

Private Carriers

Peter Pan Bus Lines and Vermont Transit of Greyhound offer bus service to Franklin County. There are two cab services based in Franklin County, About Town Taxi and Ace Cab, both located in Greenfield.

Passenger Rail

North – South Rail Service

There is currently no passenger rail service in Franklin County. Amtrak operates “The Vermonter” service between Washington, D.C. and St. Albans, VT, however the train has no stops in Franklin County. The closest stations are in Amherst, MA and Brattleboro, VT. The current route generally follows the Connecticut River along tracks known as the Connecticut River line. However, due to the degradation of track in parts of Hampshire and Franklin County, the service was detoured in the 1980s away from the Connecticut River Line, to Palmer and Amherst, and on to East Northfield where it rejoins the Connecticut River Line into Vermont. This detour adds a minimum of 45 minutes to the trip.

There is an effort underway to reroute The Vermonter back to the Connecticut River Line for its entirety. A study is currently in progress looking at the feasibility and options for providing improved passenger rail service, including potential commuter rail service, along the north-south spine of Western Massachusetts, the Connecticut River and I-91 corridor. Commuter rail service is being implemented between New Haven, CT and Springfield, MA, and the study expands the effort to examine opportunities between Springfield and White River Junction, VT. The study is

collecting information on travel patterns, potential demand, economic conditions and economic development opportunities, and possible station locations. It will conclude with the development of an implementation and financing plan. The work is being overseen by the Pioneer Valley Transit Authority and the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, guided by an advisory committee of stakeholders including the Franklin Regional Council of Governments.

Funding for improvement to the tracks that will allow the Connecticut River Line to be restored is being sought from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the economic stimulus package passed by Congress in February, 2009. The expectation is that the project stands an excellent chance of being selected, and will allow the re-routing of the Vermonter sometime in the next few years.

East-West Passenger Rail

Establishing an east-west passenger rail connection is important to the transportation network of Franklin County and western Massachusetts. While it is acknowledged by local, regional, and state officials as an important goal, there are not currently any projects being actively pursued in our region to study or expand east-west passenger rail service. However, there is regular commuter rail service (13 trips inbound and 12 trips outbound each weekday) between the Fitchburg Intermodal Center and North Station in Boston. The Commuter Rail line is operated by the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA).

One option for traveling to Fitchburg is the current G-Link bus route run by the Franklin Regional Transit Authority (FRTA) and the Montachusett Transit Authority (MART) which provides weekday bus service between Greenfield and Athol (through FRTA), with connecting service from Orange to Gardner and the Fitchburg Intermodal Center (through MART). For commuters traveling from Greenfield (Court Square), the trip to Fitchburg is a long one, involving transfers between three different bus routes, and having a total estimated travel time of at least two hours given current bus schedules. After arriving in Fitchburg, commuters still need to take the train and then commute from their train stop to their final destination.

The MBTA completed a Fitchburg Commuter Rail Service Expansion Study in February 2005 to examine the conditions along the route and make recommendations for potential service improvements. A number of the proposed improvements, if completed, would have positive impacts for the residents of Franklin County who currently ride, or who would like to ride, this commuter rail service to Boston.

The recommendations included a number of station improvement projects and other changes aimed at reducing travel times, and increasing passenger comfort, service reliability, and the overall quality of the service to better meet ridership demands. A new van/bus shuttle service from Gardner to the Fitchburg Station was recommended. In addition a recommendation was included to initiate reverse commute service which would provide additional transportation opportunities to the Fitchburg area and beyond. The study also included a long-range

recommendation to extend the commuter rail service along the Fitchburg Rail line beyond the current Fitchburg terminus to either Gardner and/or Wachusett. The Gardner option includes a possible extension to Athol.

Multi-Modal Transit

Franklin County is currently taking a large step forward towards highlighting alternative forms of transportation to the area through the construction of the Franklin Regional Transit Center. This Transit Center will be located in downtown Greenfield and will function as a hub for regional transit services and provide connections to other transportation modes such as intercity bus carriers, demand response services, local taxis, and bicycling and walking. The facility will sell tickets, provide restrooms and waiting areas sheltered from the weather, and will provide office space for the FRTA, the FRCOG, and transit operators. The site is also adjacent to rail lines, and should future passenger rail possibilities result from transportation planning work that is currently underway, the site would provide excellent and centralized passenger rail access. The Regional Transit Center is expected to be completed in December 2010.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Existing Alternative Transportation Options

As described in the section above, Franklin County residents currently have several choices of transportation other than their private vehicle for traveling around the region. These modes of travel have both advantages and disadvantages for residents in terms of timing, location, and cost. This section analyzes the current transportation environment in Franklin County, specifically pointing out areas of strength and weaknesses in terms of alternative transportation.

Strengths

- Most of the major commuting routes within Franklin County are currently being served by public transit.
- The Franklin Regional Transit Center is a major strength for the county in terms of promoting alternative forms of transportation. Not only does it make public transit via several modes more easily accessible, but it also provides a central location where the public can obtain information on other forms of travel. Further, it is valuably located along a railroad line that would allow the Transit Center to take advantage of passenger rail if/when it comes to the region.
- The recently completed Franklin County Park and Ride Study shows that there is currently a high demand for park and ride facilities throughout the county. The presence of so many informal park and ride lots that have sprung up in parking lots,

vacant lots, and along the side of roads show that this demand is currently unmet and exists in all areas of the county.

- Students/young people are better served by public transit than most of the county's population due to the FRTA's fixed transit route that specifically serve the Academy at Charlemont and most Franklin County public schools.
- Many low-income households are also better served than most residents as a whole. This was determined through a FRCOG study completed in 2002 in which Environmental Justice target areas were compared with current transit services in the region. Most of these target areas have some of the best transit access in the county.

Weaknesses

- Franklin County is not served by passenger rail. There are currently efforts being made to bring passenger rail back to the Connecticut River Valley. Thus far, the results of these efforts look promising at bringing north-south rail back to Franklin County during the next few years. While north-south rail may indeed become a reality, there are currently no steps being taken to create a vital east-west passenger rail connecting Western Massachusetts with Boston. Until either of these lines occur, the lack of rail is a major weakness in the region's ability to provide alternative transportation options to residents.
- The greatest challenge to providing more transit service in Franklin County is the limited funding available. One of the most popular bus routes in the region is the Greenfield/Athol Route 32, which runs between Greenfield and Athol. Route 32 has no secure long-term funding despite the fact that ridership continues to increase every year on this route. In addition, the limited availability of funding means that most of the public transit service in Franklin County is available only on weekdays during the daytime hours.
- The MassHighway Park and Ride Facility located on Route 2 in Charlemont does not have regular fixed route transit service. It is currently being served by the Route 41, which only operates when the Academy at Charlemont is in session and only during school hours. This schedule greatly limits the use of this facility as a multi-modal transfer location and forces users of the facility to only be able to carpool with other drivers, rather than rely on public transit.
- Currently, there is no evening or weekend public transit service offered by FRTA due to the lack of available funding. This greatly limits the ability of residents to use transit. It especially constricts county residents that rely on public transit, such as the low-income or elderly.

- Studies have shown that the county’s Environmental Justice target areas are better served than the rest of the county population by public transit. However, the level of service is not sufficient for their needs. For example, Wendell has no fixed route transit services at all and Shelburne Falls is served by FRTA’s Route 41, which is scheduled around the Academy at Charlemont when the school is in session.
- While the Franklin County Bikeway network thoroughly covers the central portion of the county, it does not currently extend to the eastern or western regions. This limits residents’ ability to access destinations, such as Greenfield, via bicycle from outside the Connecticut River Valley. In addition, most of the Franklin County Bikeway is in the form of shared roadway, which may not be suitable for cyclists of all experience levels.

Alternative Transportation Recommendations

The sections above describe the current status of transportation options in Franklin County. While there currently are alternatives to the singly-occupied vehicle for travel, these choices are limited in terms of both serviced area and schedule. However, there are several ways to improve this situation – listed below are recommendations to advance alternative transportation within the county. Two types of recommendations are provided: the first type includes either new modes of travel or new transportation facilities for Franklin County; the second type includes suggested changes to current forms of transportation for enhanced service to county residents.

New Forms of Alternative Transportation

Zipcar

One potential new form of transportation that could be very effective for Franklin County is a car-sharing service, such as Zipcar. These services allow users to pay a fixed rate for the use of a vehicle that they are able to reserve when they need it. The advantage of this type of service is that it allows users the flexibility of not having to own a vehicle, but have access to one when it is required. Because of this flexibility, the Zipcar website states that “each Zipcar takes 15-20 personally owned vehicles off the road.”⁸

Zipcar, in particular, allows members to reserve cars for time periods ranging from just hours to many days. These reservations include the cost of fuel, insurance, and reserved parking. Rates typically range between \$7/hour and \$66/day, depending on which of the driving plans members choose. Each member is issued a “Zipcard,” which allows them to access the vehicle and pay for

⁸ www.zipcar.com

fuel at gas stations. Presently, the closest Zipcar location can be found on the campus of Amherst College in the Town of Amherst.

Having a Zipcar in a centrally-located site in Franklin County would allow residents to perform basic errands or travel out of the region for a long weekend without having to own a car. It would greatly supplement the current limited service of public transit and widen the options for people without their own personal vehicle.

Passenger Rail

The provision of passenger rail to Franklin County would greatly impact the state of alternative transportation within the region. As mentioned above, studies and funding efforts are underway to make rail a possibility for the Connecticut River Valley. Currently, the prospect of a north-south rail service within the next few years appears to be very good. Franklin County should not only continue to support this effort, but more importantly, be ready to capitalize on this when it does happen. Fortunately, the Franklin Regional Transit Center, which is located on the Connecticut River Rail Line, should be completed by that time. However, the plans for the Transit Center currently do not include a rail station platform to be built due to costs and uncertainty of the passenger rail funding. To ensure that the Transit Center will be able to capitalize on the new passenger rail service from the beginning, steps should be taken now that explore the costs of building such a platform so that it may be ready for rail when it comes. Advertising the new passenger rail service to county residents will also be important, and as a result, a marketing program should be developed beforehand to be used to educate residents when it is confirmed that north-south passenger rail line will be restored.

The likelihood of an east-west passenger rail service within Franklin County appears not to be feasible in the foreseeable future. However, both county residents and the greater region would greatly benefit from this service. Therefore, the recommendations from the MBTA “Fitchburg Commuter Rail Service Expansion Study,” should be fully supported by Franklin County as a means to working towards the final goal of passenger rail connecting the eastern and western portions of the state.

Park and Ride Facilities

The FRCOG “Franklin County Park and Ride Study” shows that there is a potentially strong demand for formal park and ride facilities throughout the county through surveys and the presence of so many informal lots. Because of the unmet demand and potential benefits of the park and ride lots, the recommendations from the FRCOG “Franklin County Park and Ride Study,” should be implemented in order to further alternative transportation in the county. The study suggests potential locations that could function well as a park and ride facility. This list should be examined, prioritized, and implemented as funding and situations present themselves. The park and ride facility in Sunderland should be among the first to be implemented based on the ability of this location to also benefit public transit.

The future MassHighway Park and Ride Lot located at Route 5/10 and Route 116 is being designed to accommodate public transit. Not only should this site be served by FRTA, but also PVRTA. By having both transit authorities serve this facility, the travel options for park and ride users are greatly expanded. The FRCOG should work closely with MassHighway, FRTA, and PVRTA to ensure that this park and ride lot is served by both transit services.

Changes to Current Forms of Alternative Transportation

Increased Bus Service

As described above, a major weakness with the current status of transportation options within Franklin County is the limited service of public transit. One of these weaknesses is the fact that one of the routes – Route 41 – is matched to the academic schedule of schools, which means that it only runs during the school day and not at all during the summer. This schedule makes this option of travel very difficult for potential users, who most likely would use transit to commute to work and would need greater flexibility that these routes are able to offer presently. By switching Route 41 to an all-year long schedule, more residents would be able to use the buses. The schedule change would also make the Charlemont Route 2 Park and Ride lot more viable for commuters who would like to park there and pick up a bus for the remainder of their commute. The FRCOG study, “Transit Services and Needs in Western Franklin County,” also makes the above recommendation for the Campus West Route. The study goes on to make other longer-term recommendations, which should be continued to be implemented as funding becomes available.

To facilitate travel for low-income transit-dependent residents, weekend and evening service should be explored for Routes 21, 22, 31, and 32, which serve the Northampton, Athol, Montague, and Greenfield areas. This increase in service will provide this population segment with better access to jobs and school and training opportunities. Along the same lines, the expansion of paratransit/van services for elderly residents and residents with disabilities should also be explored. This will become especially important as the elderly population of Franklin County residents continues to grow.

A relatively low cost recommendation that the FRTA has already been doing is to better coordinate the schedules of the various bus routes in the county, so that commuters do not have long waits between transfers. Just minor time changes to the schedules could improve connectivity between routes and as a result promote increased ridership. The current fixed route services should be continually monitored for improvement opportunities and the FRTA and PVRTA should continue coordinating for the Sunderland, Northampton, and Amherst routes..

Promote Ridesharing Sites

Ridesharing is a very effective and affordable way to promote alternative forms of transportation. As described in the sections above, there are many ridesharing programs that serve the region.

Unfortunately, there is no one central location in which information on these programs can be found. The FRCOG could provide space on their website promoting the many different programs available to county residents, but not necessarily act as a rideshare coordinator, since there are already several programs that already provide this function. Instead, it would act as a central “clearinghouse” pointing residents to locations where they can find additional information about ridesharing. The FRTA website does already have a fairly comprehensive listing of alternative modes of transportation that are available in Franklin County. An option is to have FRTA’s website be the central clearinghouse and ensure that this is kept up-to-date with ridesharing programs and resources.

The FRCOG should also organize community meetings with *MassRIDES* representatives to explore ridesharing options and opportunities in the region.

Implement Bikeway Plan Recommendations

The recently updated Franklin County Bikeway Plan recommends new bikeway routes for the eastern and western portions of the county. The recommended routes attempt to connect the much more hilly eastern and western sections of the county with the central portion, in which the Bikeway has already been established. These routes should be implemented as a way to begin incorporating additional communities into the bikeway network.

Improve Pedestrian Facilities

Due to the rural and hilly nature of Franklin County, it is not practical to have pedestrian facilities throughout much of the county. However, a 2004 FRCOG “Pedestrian Facilities Survey” showed that there are a few steps that could be taken to improve the safety and ease of walking in the county. They include: improving the pedestrian network by filling in gaps and connecting critical public facilities, such as libraries and elementary schools; addressing barriers for compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act; and increasing pedestrian safety, such as safe crosswalk locations and separations of walkers and vehicle traffic where possible. The Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG) currently provides technical assistance to towns interested in implementing bicycle and pedestrian facilities. The FRCOG should continue to provide technical information about design standards or funding opportunities that allow towns to secure money to plan and construct projects.

While formal pedestrian facilities may not be practical throughout the county, walking should be promoted and encouraged as a viable activity and mode of transportation. FRCOG has been recently working with other community non-profit organizations to develop and launch “Walk Franklin County – for the health of it.” This program brings together a partnership of people working together to promote walking for transportation, reduction of air pollution, and physical fitness and health. This effort should be supported and continued to promote walking in Franklin County.

Update Demographic Data

When the U.S. Census Bureau publishes the results of the 2010 Census, the FRCOG staff should compare the locations of the target populations discussed in the beginning of this report to the locations of alternative transportation. For example, if there is a large population of low-income households living in a certain area – evaluate whether this area is easily accessible to public transit, park and ride facilities, or the Franklin County Bikeway.

Implementation and Funding

The greatest obstacle to the implementation of almost all of the above recommendations is the limited amount of funding that is available. In these times of tightening budgets, seeking funding is an even more difficult task, which makes prioritization of projects an important undertaking. The recommendations from this report should be prioritized in terms of cost and the ability to improve transportation options for those target populations most in need. While funding is limited, there are some funding sources that are available. Some of these sources include:

- Congestion Mitigation Air Quality (CMAQ) Program (Federal Highway Administration and Federal Transit Administration)⁹
- Job Access and Reverse Commute (JARC) Program (Federal Transit Administration)
- New Freedom Program (Federal Transit Administration)
- Safe Routes to School (Massachusetts Executive Office of Transportation)
- Private grants
- Public/Private partnerships
- Corporate donations

There are also ways to implement some of these recommendations without having to search for funding. For example, the proposed Zipcar does not require any funding by Franklin County, but instead requires residents to notify Zipcar of their interest in having a vehicle in their community by formally recording their interest on the company's webpage: <http://www.zipcar.com/notify-me>. The amount of interest the company receives serves as a guide of where to place their next fleet of cars. To promote interest in a Zipcar in the county, FRCOG could organize a “ZipCar Drive” or “Rally” to encourage residents to notify Zipcar of their interest. This could involve a booth at the county fair, advertising at the libraries and town halls, and notices about the drive in town newsletters.

Other ways to implement the recommendations mentioned here could be through the use of UMass Amherst Urban Planning students in a studio project. They could assist with planning studies, such as: examining ways to better improve the bus routes and timing for increased

⁹ Note: this funding is currently not available from the state for FY2010 and FY2011.

efficiency; plan an outreach program to advertize the future passenger rail on the Connecticut River Rail Line; or perform a study that would determine the market area for a potential park and ride facility. These projects would provide the students with applicable real world knowledge, while also allowing Franklin County to benefit from quality work at low cost. Creative thinking, such as student assistance and a Zipcar Drive, can help in little ways to surmount the huge obstacle of securing financing.

Conclusion

As gasoline prices begin to climb yet again, it is more imperative than ever that Franklin County residents have transportation alternatives to their singly-occupied private vehicle. The construction of the Franklin County Regional Transit Center and the very real possibility of passenger rail being restored to the region are two huge steps in this direction. To further this momentum, it is important that the recommendations in this report and from other reports mentioned here are prioritized and implemented.

Appendix A

Methodology Used to Calculate Changes in Daily Transit Ridership

The 2000 U.S. Census Journey to Work Data shows that there are approximately 3,631 vehicles traveling to Amherst daily from Franklin County. Assuming a Vehicle Occupancy Ratio of 1.1 based on Journey to Work data, there are approximately 3,994 persons making this same trip. Assuming a 2% capture rate¹⁰, there would be 80 additional people who may travel to a park and ride lot in Sunderland and use public transit.

¹⁰ MassHighway “Connecticut River Crossing Study,” pg. 142, which references: Online TDM Encyclopedia produced by the Victoria Transport Policy Institute (www.vtpi.org\tdm).