

SOUTHSTRONG CITIES

PEOPLE FIRST. EQUITY CENTERED

TRANSPORTATION INITIATIVES

SouthStrong Cities Grab-N-Go Policies

Transportation Initiatives

JUNE 2021

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What's the issue?

In its *Bridging the Transportation Gap* [policy brief](#), SEAP highlights the significance of mobility challenges for rural communities. Because public transit in rural areas is more limited or non-existent, low-income residents have less access to jobs, training, essential services, health care, and even routine needs like grocery shopping. In more urban communities, ridesharing services like Uber or Lyft can help to address transit gaps. But these options are scarce in rural areas, where longer distances and lower density make ridesharing businesses less workable.

The SEAP published the data below: [Bridging the Transportation Gap](#)

“

Transportation challenges are both a symptom of and a perpetuation of income inequality—as financial barriers and housing segregation restrict access to transportation and securing employment is difficult without reliable transportation.

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Why does it matter?

Cities can improve residents' access to essential services and employment opportunities by investing in a range of local scale transit policies. These initiatives are increasingly spreading to smaller, more rural communities. Better access to jobs and services for residents in need results in better economic outcomes for the larger community. When successful, local transit initiatives can also help attract new residents and employers, helping to create longer-term success and sustainable development.

Transportation Initiatives

JUNE 2021

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Policy Options: What Cities Can Control

1. City funding to launch local-scale transportation programs.

There is increasing interest in how cities can support transportation solutions that strengthen communities through smaller-scale programs. These microtransit initiatives differ from traditional public transit in important ways. Some critical aspects of microtransit focus on solving shorter “first and last mile” service gaps, addressing “transit deserts” in rural communities and replacing or complementing traditional fixed-route systems.

Third-party Microtransit Programs

Cities can partner with for-profit, third-party companies to provide a range of services. Companies like [Via Mobility](#) and [ShareMobility](#) can provide cities with customized, turnkey transit programs funded by the city. This model is referred to as “Transit as a Service” or “TaaS.” Alternatively, private companies can provide transit software for cities to use to schedule their own vehicles and drivers or provide a managed fleet of vehicles for a city to operate.

These smaller-scale programs lend themselves to beginning with a pilot project with service provided within a limited area. The service area can then expand or adjust once feasibility and ridership trends are assessed. Fees are typically subsidized through the cities’ financial participation. The rider fees can be structured as a small flat fee per trip or a variable fee based on mileage depending on the program. Some programs are fully subsidized and no fee is charged.

[Via Mobility](#) (Via) is a micro-transit vendor now operating in partnership with dozens of US cities. Via works with cities to customize their ride-sharing program. The city then contracts with Via, who provides the vehicles and manages all operations (including the scheduling process).

[ShareMobility](#) is a vendor that provides cities with scheduling and mobility software to enable city micro-transit programs using the city’s fleet and drivers.

Examples of microtransit programs in several cities are on page 3. Some are designed to serve particular, high-need service areas within a community. Others are designed to serve specific populations, like seniors, for example.

Transportation Initiatives

JUNE 2021

www.southstrong.org

Policy Options: What Cities Can Control

Cont. 1. City funding to launch local-scale transportation programs.

Birmingham On-Demand (Birmingham, AL)

In December 2019, Birmingham, AL started Birmingham On-Demand, a point-to-point micro-transit program providing shared rides within a 6.7 square mile zone. The City uses a third-party vendor (Via) and subsidizes fares, set between \$1.50 and \$0.75 per trip, with weekly and monthly passes available. The service area covers the downtown municipal center and several neighborhoods.

Following a successful first year despite COVID-19, the City recently extended funding for the program through 2021. Ridership information indicates that many users are low-income, and many riders use the service to connect with key service resources, health care, grocery stores, and employment. The Via program seeks to hire local drivers.

- Birmingham On-Demand
- Birmingham On-Demand Transforms Transit in the Magic City

RIDE (Wilson, NC)

The “RIDE” program in Wilson, NC was launched in September 2020 and has attracted a great deal of attention since the city is smaller and more rural than other communities investing in micro-transit. City leadership sought micro-transit solutions to enhance the community’s economic prospects and address equity issues for lower-income residents, who frequently relied on public transit to access jobs, health care, and other essential services.

- The city that brought microtransit to rural America
- Wilson microtransit program recognized nationally as a focus technology

Hilliard Express (Hilliard, OH)

In late 2020, Hilliard, OH worked with a local microtransit company to develop Hilliard Express, a free, on-demand transit program for seniors. The initial pilot program is supported by CARES funding, and the feasibility of a permanent program will be evaluated.

Transportation Initiatives

JUNE 2021

www.southstrong.org

Policy Options: What Cities Can Control

Cont. 1. City funding to launch local-scale transportation programs.

Rideshare (Arlington, TX)

Arlington, TX has been running an on-demand transit program using Via since 2017. In January 2021, the program expanded the service area to cover the entire city limits.

The program website provides detailed information about operations and common user questions:

WeGo (Gainesville, GA)

Gainesville, GA launched its WeGo microtransit program in December 2020, in partnership with Via. The new program replaces some traditional bus routes, and the remaining bus routes are transitioning to smaller vehicles.

City funding to subsidize ride-share services (Uber, Lyft)

Another option for cities to access on-demand transit is for the city to work directly with a private ride-sharing company – like Uber or Lyft – to support expanded access for some residents. In less dense communities, the city's participation can increase demand for these services, creating better access than in the absence of a city partnership.

In Monrovia, CA the city launched a GoMonrovia program using Lyft as their ride-sharing operator. The City's partnership with Lyft includes subsidized rides for a \$3.00 flat rate.

Kyle, TX partnered with Uber to launch Uber Kyle in October 2020. The program provides subsidized rides within the city limits and replaces previous traditional regional bus services. To date, ridership has increased and the total cost to the city is reduced.

Transportation Initiatives

JUNE 2021

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Policy Options: What Cities Can Control

Cont. 1. City funding to launch local-scale transportation programs.

City funding and staff for City's own microtransit program

Troy, AL operates an on-demand transit fleet of six vans to assist with access to groceries and healthcare. Fixed fares range from \$1.00 to \$4.00 depending on mileage.

- [PATs Brochure](#)

Gwinnett County, GA launched a pilot microtransit program for Snellville, GA, in 2019.

The program helps improve access for this underserved community, where lower density meant a fixed route bus was not workable—the program used smaller, 12-passenger buses and TransLoc software to route buses to respond to on-demand scheduling.

Wake County, NC is studying microtransit options for three towns with lower density and few mobility options. The program seeks to provide residents with greater access to jobs, schools, healthcare and other essential services.

Transportation Initiatives

JUNE 2021

www.southstrong.org

Policy Options: What Cities Can Control

2. City funding or staff to support volunteer-based transportation programs

Another approach to small-scale transit initiatives is to leverage the use of volunteers for local programs. Ride services for seniors or veterans are common in many communities and are often provided by local nonprofits or faith organizations.

However, cities can also play a role, either through financial support for these programs or through the development of city-led initiatives.

This model for volunteer ridesharing can also expand to include other categories of community residents. For example, volunteer driver programs could provide rides for families seeking services, participants in job training, or other groups with mobility challenges.

Across Tennessee, multiple cities and counties participate in a state program ([MyRideTN](#)) to connect volunteer drivers with older residents needing rides to grocery shops or access healthcare and other essential services.

Healdsburg, CA offers a [DASH Volunteer program](#) using volunteer drivers in city-owned vehicles to provide rides to seniors,

Policy Options: What Cities Can Control

3. City funding to support programs that subsidize car ownership for eligible residents

For some rural communities, another effective policy tool could be to support local car ownership programs. These initiatives can connect low-income residents with donated vehicles or with low-interest auto loans.

This 2020 SEAP [Bridging the Transportation Gap report](#) includes several examples of car ownership programs across the US. In these examples, a nonprofit partner helps to identify eligible recipients and to provide case management. Cities could partner in projects like these through direct funding to assist program operations or support vehicle purchases.

The SEAP report includes this [National Consumer Law Center guide](#) for creating a car ownership program.

Transportation Initiatives

JUNE 2021

www.southstrong.org

Policy Options: What Cities Can Control

4. Intersection with green technologies (electric vehicles, autonomous vehicles)

Cities that pursue microtransit programs can also integrate green technologies within their transit policies. This forward-looking approach can expand the impact of transit initiatives and underscore a commitment to sustainable economic policies and green economy investments.

Electric Vehicles (EV):

San Diego, CA is one of several cities partnering with Circuit, an electric vehicle shuttle service that provides free rides.

- Free Ride Everywhere Downtown Shuttle Program

This University of South Florida paper includes information on several companies operating electric vehicle fleets for on-demand microtransit in South Florida.

This Smart Cities Dives article discusses a range of initiatives launched in Houston, TX to encourage the shift to electric vehicles among residents generally and ridesharing drivers specifically. One aspect is the need to equitably locate infrastructure for vehicle charging in locations across the city. The city can support this by hosting charging stations at public facilities, parks, and other city-controlled properties.

Autonomous Vehicles (AV):

Arlington, TX, plans to expand its existing Via transit program to include a one-year pilot RAPID program using autonomous vehicles.

Peoria, AZ conducted a pilot ROBO Ride program in early 2020 using autonomous vehicles in a specific entertainment district.

This article, *Weaving a Microtransit Mesh*, discusses policy options for cities to coordinate with private operators as they increasingly move to autonomous vehicles for corporate shuttles.

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Additional Resources

- This [paper](#), *Opportunities for State DOTs to Encourage Shared-Use Mobility Practices in Rural Areas*, encourages shared-use mobility practices in rural areas and examines several case studies to assess microtransit's applicability in rural communities:
- This feasibility [Microtransit Study](#) for Fuquay-Varina, NC illustrates how Via can assess potential ridership scenarios for a community and develop corresponding cost estimates.