

# Public Feedback Report

September 2019



ROCKFORD MASS  
TRANSIT DISTRICT



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# Comprehensive Mobility Analysis

In November 2018, Rockford Mass Transit District (RMTD) and Region 1 Planning Council (RPC) officially began work on the *Comprehensive Mobility Analysis* for RMTD's service area. The four-step analysis emphasizes community input, builds an extensive tool-box of strategies to prepare for cultural shifts in transportation and technology, and creates an implementation plan that can move the community's goals for public transit into a reality. The steps included and descriptions are detailed below. This *Public Feedback Report* highlights work performed during the **Service Evaluation** step, and will play an integral role in the development of short and long-term service recommendations.

## Step 1: Market Analysis

The first step includes documenting population characteristics and transportation infrastructure pertinent to an efficient and equitable transit system in the Rockford urbanized area (UA). A socioeconomic travel demand index will be used in concert with commuter and pedestrian-accessibility data to identify opportunities for populations served.

## Step 2: Service Evaluation

An internal and external evaluation of service will provide valuable perspective into current operations. A two-pronged service evaluation will include quantitative views of user boarding and alighting, statistical trend analysis, and peer-agency comparisons, along with qualitative data collected through multiple series of public input sessions, internal staff surveys and interviews, and stakeholder workshops.

## Step 3: Alternatives Analysis

Combined with complementary needs identified in related regional guidance, gaps and opportunities identified will be converted into short and long-term recommendations to prepare for service demand alternatives. Concurrent efforts to guide future recommendations include the maintenance of current transit-accessibility parameters and periodic performance measurements.

## Step 4: Implementation Plan

Based on guidance received from performed data analyses, the public, and key officials, the last step within this analysis includes using internal or consultant services to bring identified operating recommendations to fruition. Considerations for an implementation plan include priority capital investments route-realignment and scheduling, operational adjustments, and service structure enhancements.

## Analysis Overview

This report is a compilation of the quantitative and qualitative public feedback received during the public engagement period lasting from November 2018 until August 2019. Quantitative data points in the form of answered survey questions helped define basic priorities and challenges that shape the five feedback themes used in this report: Service Recommendations, Operational Adjustments, Rider Resources, Public Transit Infrastructure, and Fare Payment Options.

Concurrent qualitative feedback in the form of comments included on surveys, feedback collected through forums, and feedback solicited from identified stakeholders and bus operators provided the specific suggested items for each theme. Over 400 comments were tagged by topic and ranked by how often they were identified within their peer theme group. These tagged responses were further compiled with like-comments into the suggested items presented within the report.

## Public Feedback Activities

Four public feedback activities were used within the public engagement period to take advantage of a wide array preferences for providing feedback. In order to maintain a fair balance between feedback obtained from the general public and feedback obtained from RMTD's ridership base, additional survey and forum opportunities were provided. In total, 642 survey responses were collected, and over 50 individuals participated in the forum events.

### General Public Survey

This survey was available to all residents and employees within Boone and Winnebago counties both online and in paper format at RMTD's transfer centers, the Boone County Health Department, and other interested human service agencies. The survey was open from November 19th, 2018 to February 1st, 2019. A total of 407 surveys were completed. In April 2019, the collected survey data was compiled into a General Transit Survey Report. The report provides a basic overview of responses per survey question, and compiles all comments received.

### General Forums

RMTD and the Rockford Register Star co-hosted two community forums to obtain qualitative comments and answers questions from the general public. The community meetings were advertised regionally, and hosted at multiple police districts headquarters.

### Rider Survey

Administered in December 2018, 235 total rider surveys were completed, encompassing every fixed-route currently operated by RMTD. This user-specific feedback was collected from RMTD riders to help understand their specific travel movements and behaviors, explore user abilities and preferences, and generally determine the most pressing issues they face when using the service. Similar to the General Transit User survey, results were compiled into a Rider Survey Report, providing a basic overview of responses per survey question and compiles all comments received.

### Rider Forum

Three rider forums were administered to collect rider-specific feedback and promote completion of the General Transit User Survey. Qualitative data in the form of comments and answered questions were compiled and used alongside other feedback responses from the surveys. In total, 30 individuals attended the forums.

### Sample Questions

What should the top three (3) priorities be for public transportation in the Rockford Region?

What keeps you from using public transportation more often?

How important do you think it is for the Rockford Region to support and fund public transportation?

How would you prefer to receive bus service, bus scheduling, and promotional updates from RMTD?

Are there places in the Rockford Region that public transportation should serve?

Are there any times within the week that RMTD service is not available when you need it?

How would you have made this trip if RMTD service were not available?

## Direct Feedback Activities

Another round of feedback activities included sit-down meetings with stakeholders and employees to obtain feedback regarding the current system. As individuals and organizations with a direct impact on the services provided, this feedback was essential to understand the services and systems both inside and outside of RMTD's direct control, discover avenues for collaboration and potential improvement, and prepare for planned regional infrastructure and service improvements.

### Stakeholder Meetings

Stakeholder meetings were set up with multiple government partners, human service agencies, local interest groups, and major employers within the region to capture feedback from many of RMTD's day-to-day business partners. These meetings consisted of a prepared Stakeholder Questionnaire, reviewing initial survey results, and discovering informal opportunities for future collaboration. Multiple rounds of meetings were held from April to August 2019. In total, feedback was obtained from 26 organizations. Adjacent is list of organizations that participated in the stakeholder meetings.

### Bus Operator Feedback

Along with public, rider, and stakeholder feedback, this study emphasized the operational knowledge of RMTD's bus operators and associated staff. As the everyday face of the organization, bus operators are actively engaged with riders as they navigate the system. During February and March 2019, nine meetings were held with fixed-route and paratransit bus operators and associated operational staff to evaluate the current system and discover opportunities for improvement. Drivers present were able to provide both organization-wide feedback and route-specific feedback.

### Stakeholder Organizations

Boone County  
Boone County Council on Aging  
City of Belvidere  
City of Loves Park  
City of Rockford  
Collier Gardens Resident Council  
IDOT HSTP Region 1  
Lee-Ogle Transportation Systems  
Mercyhealth  
NAACP  
RACVB  
RAMP  
Rockford Chamber of Commerce  
Rockford Community Services Div.  
Rockford Park District  
Rock Valley College  
RPS 205  
Transition Planning Committee  
Van Galder/Coach U.S.A.  
Village of Machesney Park  
Winnebago County  
Winnebago County Housing Authority  
Woodward  
Workforce Connection

## Service Recommendations

*“I really feel that the buses should run all night because it’s hard to find rides home from work if we get off work late or if we get off work before buses run. We all need jobs!!”*

*“People should also be able to access the grocery store, friends and relatives, immediate care, entertainment, parades, fireworks, festivals, etc... even if these events are on a holiday or on a weekend after 5:00 PM”*

*“The bus system to and from Belvidere does not have hours that would provide individuals to get to and from work. The hours are too short.”*

*“There needs to be faster routes. My commute to work from central Rockford to the southeast side would be 2 hours”*

### **1. Lower Service Headways**

Outside of a general service increase, the specific feedback item most-quoted was decreasing service headways, or increasing how often a bus comes to a specific stop. All but two routes in RMTD’s system run at most once per hour. User feedback identifies week-days and peak-commute periods as times with the highest amount of service frequency needs.

### **2. Add Overnight Service**

The addition of late PM and early AM services to meet the needs of second and third shift workers was identified as a need throughout all feedback activities, including employers involved in stakeholder meetings. Specific areas for improvement include extending service to accommodate midnight shifts, and starting service earlier throughout the week, including Saturday and Sunday.

### **3. Add Weekend Night Service**

A new service request frequently cited during feedback activities is service on weekend nights. Specific feedback received identified a transportation gap experienced by many service, retail, and recreation based employees. Respondents also identified weekend nights as their preferred time for personal trips.

### **4. Expand Reduced Service Options**

This instance refers to service gaps for adjacent cities and reduced operations during low-demand periods. Survey respondents identified needing more service options for Belvidere during all operating periods and to Loves Park and Machesney Park on week-nights and Sundays. Also identified is a need for more routes on off-peak periods and for service on holidays.

### **5. Decrease Travel Times**

Many potential choice riders identified long travel times and a resulting preference to drive as the biggest barriers to using RMTD. Feedback received includes making travel times more competitive to other modes of travel, such as adding express services, reducing deviations, and increasing transfer opportunities.



## Operational Adjustments

*“If the pickup time on the web site says 25 after, then the buses should wait until said time to depart. I've missed a few buses because it came early. I have to wait in whatever type of weather if they're running late. “*

*“Make sure we keep safety front of mind with everything. Safety for people riding public transportation and those around the area near public transit stops and routes.”*

*“Upgrade the buses and PLEASE have them cleaned thoroughly weekly.”*

*“At times on the East State route the bus is overcrowded. They should have two buses running at the busy times of the day.”*

### 1. Improve System Performance

Respondents identified multiple gaps to efficiency in their current interactions with the service. The most tagged response was a needed improvement for bus schedule adherence. Other responses include streamlining the wheelchair boarding and alight process, the provision of same-day paratransit service for unplanned trips and an online scheduling tool, and re-incorporating the flagged-stop system to alight at destinations instead of designated stops.

### 2. Prioritize Aesthetics

Enhancing the attractiveness and comfort while using the system was identified as a priority to overcome a potential barrier to use. Many respondents feel that the buses could be cleaned more thoroughly, would like their sense of safety to be improved at stops, and would prefer that bus wraps not impair their ability to see their upcoming destinations.

### 3. Increase Bus Capacity

Due to the hub-and-spoke nature of the current route design, many riders are experiencing overcrowded buses when departing the Downtown Transfer Center. Specific solutions requested are more mid-route transfer points, including potential route changes for a more grid-like system. One respondent identified creating a local taxing district to operate additional buses.

### 4. Enhance Driver Training

As a rider's main contact to RMTD, bus operators play an integral role in shaping their service experience and perceptions. Respondents identified a need to continually train drivers on their customer service, conflict resolution, and defense driving skills, and to increase each fixed-route operator's familiarization with the stops along their route.

# Rider Resources

*“Within the transit and on the buses if there could be tutorials playing of real RMTD bus routes and instances previewing how to ride a bus and utilize transfers.”*

*“Make it more accessible. An app that is readily available and easy to use for scheduling is great. I live right next to a stop and have often wondered if I should take it to work, but I am unsure of times and where the bus goes!”*

*“Get technology involved so that people can be picked up faster and dropped off at their destination quicker. Especially during the winter months.”*

*“Make the website more intuitive as it is hard to figure out what route goes where and when”*

## 1. Improve Access to “How to” Materials

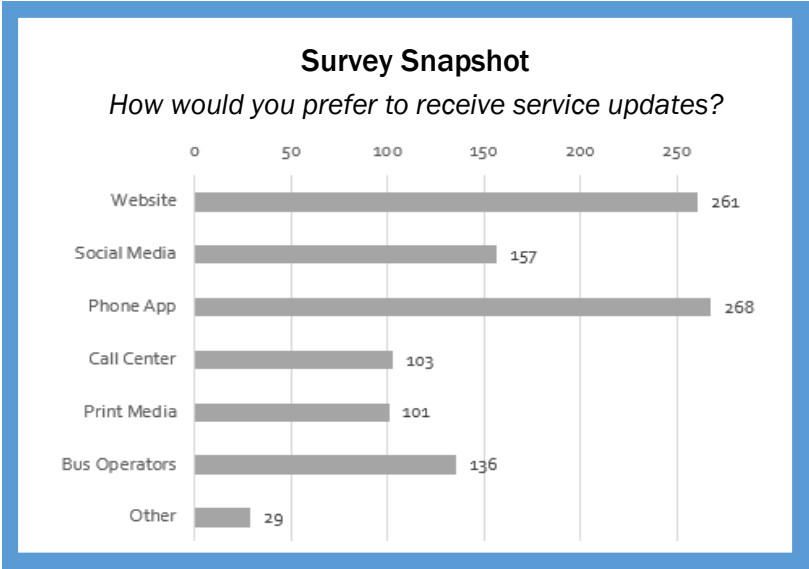
Many non-riders responded that the system is hard to use and understand. A simple solution identified was to make new and existing “how to ride” materials freely available online and available at local destinations. Many respondents also identified needing clarification on how to access other transit systems (SMTD, Boone County) within the region, and to provide bus training programs to schools.

## 2. Simplify Trip Planning

Similar to learning how to use the system, many respondents requested more trip planning resources, including launching the once-released mobile trip planning application, developing an online paratransit scheduling tool, providing a list of available stops, transfer points, and major destinations online and with the schedule books, and implementing a service alert system when fixed-route and paratransit schedules are interrupted.

## 3. Increase Wayfinding Resources

Respondents identified a need for more wayfinding resources for navigation while using the system. Solutions proposed include releasing a subscription-based service change alert system and having more on-board bus stop and potential transfer announcements.





# Public Transit Infrastructure

*“The bus stops are sometimes hard to reach when you need to go home. Specifically the inability to cross E State Street.”*

*“A written schedule at each bus stop that identifies the hours of operation and expected bus stop times”*

*“All weather bus stops solar powered and with heat, walkways and sidewalks surrounding especially down busy roads where folks have to walk in the street because of snow and ice on walkways.”*

*“Infrastructure improvements to the stops. At many stops there is not even a bench to sit on”*

## 1. Upgrade Bus Stops

Similar to prioritizing aesthetics, specific requests were made to expand and improve the infrastructure available at bus stops. Respondents specifically requested more shelters and benches be made available for high-volume stops and that the stops be better maintained, including regular trash pickup and snow removal. Along with other improvements for wayfinding, respondents also request that schedules and/or a listing of routes that serve a stop be made available at each bus stop, and that the bus stop locations be placed in high-visibility locations.

## 2. Improve System Access

Although not specifically under the jurisdiction of RMTD, multiple respondents mentioned that it can often be difficult to access bus stops and destinations due to a lack of sidewalks and crosswalks. Along with working with each municipality to solve this issue, respondents would also like RMTD to work with employers to create Park & Ride locations for long-distance commuters.

## 3. Invest in Clean Fuel Buses

As RMTD begins to replace their aging fleet, respondents request that they invest in clean fuel buses, including hybrid and battery-electric technologies. This request is exacerbated by RMTD's current fleet nearing the end of its useful life and exhibiting signs of long-term use. Other considerations proposed are to use smaller buses for low-volume routes, and to color code new buses to represent the route they are serving.

## Fare Payment Options

*“Have an app where you can pay for services when you use the bus. Another option from cash.”*

*“Make it timely, make it convenient, show the public features and benefits, offer day passes for people who want to go from one attraction to the next on the weekend, on their day off, or during their visit to Rockford”*

*“You cover adults with disabilities but what about the families with disabled children?”*

### 1. Offer “All Day” Passes

An option frequently mentioned by bus operators and riders alike is the need for an All Day pass. While free transfers cover the cost of long distance trips, many reliant or recreational users make multiple separate trips within a day. Participants in a Rider Forum mentioned a willingness to pay \$4-\$5 for an All Day pass. This option would also require the ability to purchase the All Day passes on the bus.

### 2. Provide More Payment Options

A growing barrier to ridership, discussed in multiple engagement activities, is the cash requirement for fare payment. Survey respondents would like RMTD to provide more cashless options, including mobile fare payment and the ability to use a debit/credit card on the bus, matching other venues who have moved to similar cashless systems.

### 3. Expand Reduced/Free Fare Program

Many respondents and interest groups would like to see an expansion of RMTD’s reduced and free fare programs. Specific requests for free fare options are for students and veterans, and a reduced fare option is requested for caretakers accompanying a person with a disability on the fixed-route bus. There was a specific request from bus operators and the public to remove the zone fare attributes to the CherryVale bus service. Some respondents also volunteered to pay higher fares for certain off-peak services.

## Specific Service Requests

A public transportation agency's program of services is their unique answer for users' core questions concerning mobility: (1) where can I go, (2) when can I make the trip, and dependent upon circumstance, (3) How does this compare to my other options? Therefore, it is no surprise that a large amount of feedback received throughout all activities included specific locations and areas to extend service.

The following lists detail the local, regional, and specific stop requests received. Local refers to locations that fall within RMTD's current service area, while regional refers to the inverse. Locations included in each list are ranked by the frequency of their request.

### Local Service Needs

1. Provide more services in rural Boone County.
2. Target service to low-income job locations.
3. Expand service to businesses surrounding the airport.
4. Deviate more routes through residential areas.
5. Provide service for more special events.
6. Stop at all Walmarts on nights and weekends.
7. Create a downtown circulator service.
8. Expand the paratransit service area.
9. Add fixed-route service to Poplar Grove.
10. Add more night routes.
11. Improve access to local Colleges and Universities.
12. Expand Loves and Machesney Park service.
13. Provide a demand-response option for Rockford.
14. Add service in Belvidere south of US 20.

### Regional Service Requests

1. Provide a connection to Chicago.
2. Add service to rural Winnebago County communities.
3. Provide a connection to Beloit.
4. Extend service to downtown Cherry Valley
5. Improve connection with SMTD for Roscoe/Rockton service.
6. Provide a connection to Freeport.
7. Provide a connection to New Milford.
8. Provide a connection to NIU DeKalb.
9. Extend service throughout Rockford Township.
10. Provide connection to Davis Junction and LOTS.

### New Stop Location Requests

1. Mercyhealth Riverside
2. AMC Rockford 16
3. Beacon Hill Apartments
4. Chrysler Plant
5. Van Galder O'Hare Station
6. Lowes Distribution Center
7. Rosecrance Berry Center
8. Mercyhealth Sportscore 2
9. Anderson Gardens
10. Nicholas Conservatory
11. Winnebago Co Fairgrounds
12. Rock Cut State Park
13. Valli Produce Rockford
14. Rockford University
15. Belvidere Walmart
16. Washington Park

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