

# Transportation Subcommittee Interim Report



Prepared by the Kent County Administrator's Office

December 2007

*The mission of Kent County government is to be an effective and efficient steward in delivering quality services for our diverse community. Our priority is to provide mandated services, which may be enhanced and supplemented by additional services to improve the quality of life for all our citizens within the constraints of sound fiscal policy.*

## **BACKGROUND**

In late 2006 Roger Morgan, Chair of the Kent County Board of Commissioners, established a subcommittee to review the status of public transportation within Kent County, and to determine whether a role existed for the County within this system.

Members of the Subcommittee are as follows:

Vice-Chair Dick Vander Molen, Chair  
Commissioner Dean Agee  
Commissioner Dick Bulkowski  
Commissioner David Morren  
Commissioner Gary Rolls  
Commissioner Art Tanis

The Subcommittee was staffed by Matthew VanZetten, Management Analyst.

During the past year, the Subcommittee reviewed several issues surrounding the public transportation system in Kent County, including, but not limited to the following:

- The various services provided in the County
- The demand for services within the County
- The funding of existing services

As part of the review, County staff and/or Commissioners interviewed representatives from a wide variety of stakeholders, including but not limited to, the following: local township officials, local city officials, ITP staff, North Kent Transit staff, local transit advocates, local employers, economic development staff, Kalamazoo County Public Transit officials, and Capitol Area Transit Authority officials.

## **HISTORY**

In 1996, with the support of the Grand Rapids Area Transit Authority (GRATA) and Grand Valley Metropolitan Council (GVMC), the Mobile Metro 2020 Task Force proposed that a transportation authority be established under PA 196 of 1986 to fund and operate a countywide public transportation system. The proposed system contained the following key points:

- Changing and expanding existing urban line haul services
- Gradually building a suburban/rural line haul service
- Enhancing paratransit services
- Establishing limited new services such as express and cross-town routes
- Creating a permanent downtown transfer station with four outlying transfer centers

Another key recommendation was the establishment of a countywide dedicated millage for public transit. Based on the Mobile Metro 2020 projections and recommendations, a 0.9 to 1.0 mill levy would have been required to fund the plan.

In October 1996, a resolution was placed before the Kent County Board of Commissioners to establish the proposed public transportation authority to implement the Mobile 2020 recommendations. Moreover, it was recognized that after the authority was established the voters would be asked to fund a public transit millage in the range of 0.9 to 1.0 mills. Ultimately, the resolution was defeated with eight yea votes and nine nay votes.

Between 1996 and 2006, many changes occurred within public transportation that services the citizens of Kent County. In 2000, the cities of East Grand Rapids, Grand Rapids, Grandville, Kentwood, Walker, and Wyoming established the Interurban Transit Partnership (ITP) – a PA 196 authority – as a replacement for GRATA. It was believed that the ITP would provide an enhanced and stable source of funding for public transportation while providing better services within the core-six cities of Kent County.

Additionally, various townships within the County began to contract for limited ITP services using various sources of funds such as community development block grants (CDBG) as well as local general funds. Furthermore, Grand Valley State University began to contract with the ITP for significant line haul services between its campuses in Allendale and downtown Grand Rapids.

Separately, several northern Kent County townships and cities partnered with Hope Network to operate the North Kent Transit Service using CDBG funds. The Red Cross continued its volunteer based transportation system for medical appointments, while Senior Neighbors continued to provide limited services for seniors needing transportation.

## EXISTING SERVICES

A chart identifying various services, eligibility and fares is included in Appendix A of the Interim Report. The following is a synopsis of the services provided within Kent County:

1. **ITP Services** – The ITP (or The Rapid) provides a variety of services within its core six communities. These include the following:
  - Fixed Routes/Line Haul – The Rapid provides 24 fixed routes within the core six communities. Several townships contract for services that expand these fixed routes and provide limited services to their citizens. Current townships that purchase limited service are as follows: Alpine Township, Byron Township, Cascade Township, and Gaines Township.
  - Go!Bus Service – The Rapid provides a shared ride service for citizens with a disability that are unable to ride a fixed route. Go!Bus also services non-disabled senior citizens. The service area for Go!Bus is within the core six communities as

well as within  $\frac{3}{4}$  miles of the fixed route services purchased by townships. Ada Township also has limited Go!Bus service.

- **PASS** – The Rapid provides a demand route service that is curb to curb in nature within its core six communities. It is primarily used for origins and destinations off the fixed route lines using a combination of busses and vans.
- **Campus Connector** – The Rapid provides dedicated fixed route services for Grand Valley State University between its campuses in Allendale and downtown Grand Rapids.
- **County Connection** – Recently, the Rapid in partnership with Michigan Works! established a curb to curb service within Kent County. The service is open to anyone, but is primarily designed to serve those with employment transportation needs due to its cost structure.
- **DASH** – The Rapid provides shuttle services for the City of Grand Rapids from parking areas to downtown buildings.
- **Carpool/Vanpool Program** – The Rapid works with local citizens and businesses seeking to establish carpools or vanpools.

Ridership among ITP services has grown significantly over the past eight years. According to ITP documents, ridership has more than doubled since 2000 with over 8.1 million rides provided in FY 2007. In May 2007, a millage renewal and expansion was approved by voters within the ITPs core six communities. The existing millage rate for ITP services stands at 1.12 mills.

2. **North Kent Transit Services** – North Kent Transit System (NKTS) provides door to door service within participating local units of government through a contract with Hope Network. Current participating local unites of government are as follows: Algoma Township, Cannon Township, Courtland Township, Grattan Township, Lowell Township, Nelson Township, Plainfield Township, Solon Township, Spencer Township, Tyrone Township, Vergennes Township, and the cities of Lowell and Rockford as well as the village of Sand Lake and Sparta.

The NKTS is funded by CDBG dollars and fares. The average subsidy per ride by CDBG dollars is between \$15 -\$18 per ride depending on other available funding and the fare paid. Over the past few years, CDBG funds available for public transit services have been reduced, which has resulted in fewer rides being provided. Recently, to maintain the current year budget, NKTS limited the number of rides an individual can take on the system in spite of the fact that NKTS services are not advertised based on the fear that the potential use/need will overwhelm the system.

3. **Other Services** – There are three other smaller systems available in the County. They are as follows:

- Hope Network – Hope Network provides transportation for consumers of the community mental health system. It leverages this service with its NKTS contract to maximize the efficiency of its services.
- Red Cross Services – Red Cross volunteers provide limited transportation services for individuals to medical appointments throughout Kent County.
- Senior Neighbors – Senior Neighbors provides vans to transport clients to programs at area senior centers.

One other key development in the past two years is the establishment of *RideLink*. Recognizing that there may be efficiencies to gain by coordinating and streamlining rides, the Emergency Needs Task Force (ENTF) and Senior Millage Review Committee worked with the ITP, NKTS, Hope Network, Red Cross and Senior Neighbors to develop a protocol and purchase necessary software to coordinate and schedule rides to maximize efficiency. The program began operation in the Spring of 2007 and has allowed agencies to more effectively deliver services.

At this time, there are no systematic public transportation services available within the following local units of government in Kent County: Bowne Township, Caledonia Township, Grand Rapids Township, Oakfield Township, Sparta Township, the City of Cedar Springs and the villages of Caledonia, Casnovia and Kent City. A map identifying the various services available within the County is located in Appendix B.

## **SUBCOMMITTEE FINDINGS**

Throughout the research and review regarding public transportation services in Kent County three themes emerged:

1. **Service Gaps** – It is clear that there are service gaps within Kent County. Certain local units of government do not have any service at all. Some local units of government have limited ITP services while other local units of government provide certain ITP services only within its township. Other local units of government have partnered together to use CDBG funds to contract with a non-profit provider to provide limited services outside of the ITP jurisdiction. Because of this patchwork of services (see Appendix B), County residents who desire public transportation services need to be well aware of where they live in order to have access to the public transportation services they desire.
2. **Service Level Payment** – Throughout the community conversations and interviews, it became apparent that the service gaps which exist within the County result from the desired level of service local units of governments are willing to fund. Hope Network has worked diligently with NKTS local units of government in crafting a system that works to maximize efficiency within the constraints of local budgets. Likewise, ITP officials have worked with communities to determine solutions that meet their needs within the existing budgets. And based on citizen response, some local units of

government have determined that they do not wish to offer access to public transportation at this time.

3. **Data Gaps** – Many of the subcommittee discussions throughout 2007 focused on identifying the need for services throughout the County, including urban, suburban and rural areas. Data was culled from township, city and village officials, representatives from NKTS, supplemental social security (SSI) databases, and the Community Research Institutes community survey. Based on this review, it is clear that there is not a reliable data set that identifies community need for public transit services.

The most recent election for public transit services showed an interesting result. In May 2007, the voters within the core six communities renewed the ITP millage and passed a small increase by a 58% to 42% margin. However, voters within Grandville, Walker and Wyoming each had more no votes than yes votes. (Grandville – 43% yes; 57% no. Walker – 45% yes; 55% no. Wyoming – 47.7% yes; 53.3% no.) Ultimately, these no votes were overridden by a larger passage in the other ITP communities. In the end, this election showed that public transit is supported, but by not as wide a margin as was previously experienced in 2000 (64.9% yes) and 2003 (66% yes).

After this election, a meeting was held with representatives from the NKTS and ITP to determine if there were further ways they could work together to improve service in light of increasing budget constraints within the NKTS area. It became evident that before this could occur, better data was needed. To that point, the ITP has committed up to \$100,000 to conduct a latent demand study of the unmet need for public transit service within the county. The ITP estimated that the Study would cost approximately \$200,000. The NKTS representatives stated that they would seek funding commitments from their local units of government toward meeting the remaining \$100,000.

To discuss this, the NKTS representatives asked GVMC to facilitate a meeting of its members. As the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) for Kent County and eastern Ottawa County, the GVMC has an interest in public transportation since one of its responsibilities is to establish the region's long-term transportation plan. It has a staff of dedicated transportation planners and receives federal funds to conduct necessary studies.

In November 2007, the GVMC called a meeting of various interested parties. During this meeting, GVMC representatives requested that its member organizations consider providing funding toward this latent demand study. Further, GVMC suggested that it would consider programming FY2009 funds toward the study and seek state or private grant funds in the meantime. During the first quarter of 2008, a follow up meeting is expected to occur to determine the funding status.

At this time, it is the Kent County Transportation Subcommittee's recommendation that the GVMC continue to lead the dialogue regarding necessary latent demand study as a result of its role in transportation planning. Similarly, the dialogue should reflect the fact that service gaps exist within the county, there is not good data regarding the need for services, but that

communities currently have the ability to determine the level of desired service through partnerships and local voter initiatives.

## **CONCLUSION**

Much has changed since 1996 when a resolution to create a countywide public transportation authority was not passed. The ITP was created and won an award as one of America's best transportation systems for its size. Ridership is growing in the urban area, but funding for public transit services in rural areas is decreasing and stretching the system like never before. Further, there is not existing data to describe the latent need for services in the County. Clearly, a thorough dialogue regarding public transportation is needed. It is the belief of the Subcommittee that the best vehicle for this to occur is through the GVMC. Moreover, it is the Subcommittee's belief that the County needs to be represented in whatever forum the GVMC may create for this dialogue.

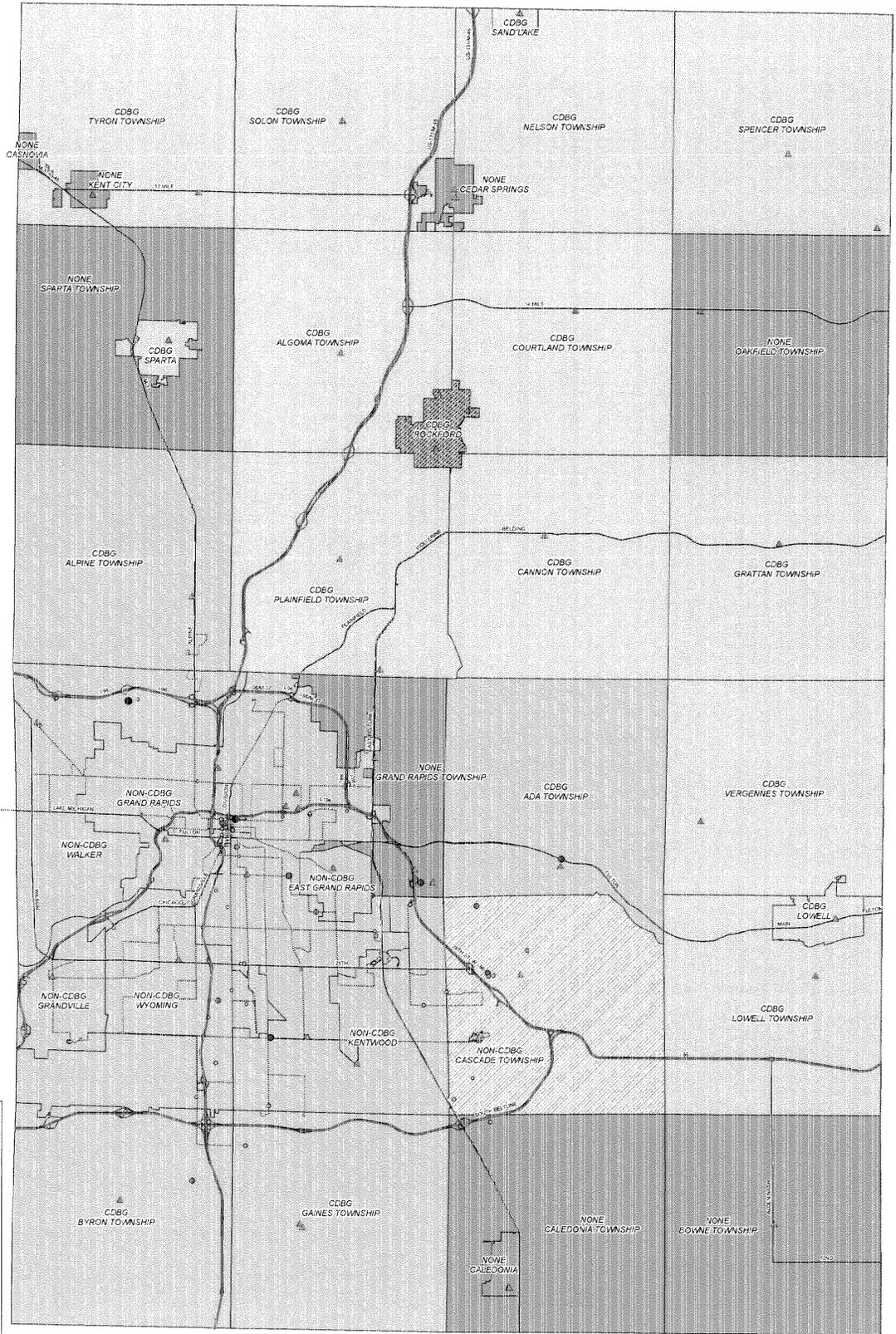
**APPENDIX A**  
**TRANSPORTATION OPTIONS IN KENT COUNTY**

Service	Description	Availability	Cost
The Rapid – Fixed Route	Fixed Routes within Core Six Cities, plus townships that contract for services	Fixed Timetable Weekdays: 5:15 AM – 11:15 PM Saturday: 6:30 AM – 9:30 PM Sunday: 8 AM – 7 PM	\$1.30 one way
The Rapid – PASS	Curb-to-curb service within the Six Cities for origins and destinations off the bus line	Based on vehicle availability Weekdays: 5:15 AM – 11:15 PM Saturday: 6:30 AM – 9:30 PM Sunday: 8 AM – 7 PM	\$2.60 + a free transfer
The Rapid – GO Bus	GO!Bus offers disabled and senior persons a door to door service within Core Six Cities and townships that contract for services.**	Guaranteed availability Weekdays: 5:15 AM – 11:15 PM Saturday: 6:30 AM – 9:30 PM Sunday: 8 AM – 7 PM	\$2.60 Disabled \$7.00 Non-disabled Senior
The Rapid – County Connection	Curb-to-curb Service Anywhere in Kent County!	Based on vehicle availability Hours: 24/7	\$14.00 one way \$19.00 same day
The Rapid – DASH	Shuttles between City Parking Lots and Downtown Locations	Fixed Timetable Weekdays: 7:30 AM – 5:30 PM	No charge
The Rapid – Campus Connector	Fixed Route Between GVSU Campuses	Fixed Timetable Mon-Thu: 6:40 AM – 12:00 AM Friday: 6:40 AM – 3:00 AM Saturday: 7:40 AM – 3:00 AM Sunday: 11:40 AM – 6:30 PM	None to GVSU Students
North Kent Transit System <i>(via contract with Hope Network and Kent County)</i>	Door-to-door Service with Participating Local Government Units	Based on vehicle availability Weekdays: 8 AM – 4:30 PM	\$3.00 one-way within System \$6.00 one-way outside System
Hope Network <i>(via contract with network 180 and The Rapid)</i>	Transportation for consumers of the Community Mental Health System	Transportation schedule dictated by agency	None
Red Cross Transportation	Volunteer transportation service throughout Kent County for medical trips	Based on vehicle availability Weekdays: 7:00 AM – 4 PM	None – donations accepted
Senior Neighbors	Vans located at the Grandville, Sparta and Lowell Senior Centers that provide some transportation for seniors around the Centers	Based on vehicle availability Weekdays: 8 AM – 5 PM	None – donations accepted



# Public Transportation Analysis Kent County, MI

09/25/2006



▲ Government Facilities  
 - - - ITP The Rapid - Bus Routes

**Public Transportation Coverage**

**Transportation Name**

- NONE
- ITP
- ITP-GENERAL FUND
- NORTH KENT TRANSIT SERVICES
- NORTH KENT TRANSIT SERVICES (REDUCED)

**Kent County Large Employers**

**Number of Employees**

- 500 - 900
- 901 - 1500
- 1501 - 3040
- 3041 - 5000
- 5001 - 12000

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