

**COMMUNITY TRANSIT IN THE GREATER
WABASH REGION OF ILLINOIS**

An Abstract of
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by
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ABSTRACT

Public transportation is the unsung hero of community development. Many rural communities do not realize its value potential for spurring economic development or enhancing the mobility of the low-income, elderly or handicapped individuals. As rural areas lose their downtown retail core to car-dependent shopping areas on the edge of town, many residents are left with no way to get to these needed services. By providing public transit, many residents can remain independent. This, in turn, increases the quality of life for the entire area. Indeed, with revisions in Welfare to Work laws, as well as an aging population, public transit is an issue that can no longer be ignored.

Governments and municipalities across the country are beginning to implement rural public transit. This thesis examines many of these systems. Ingenuity and creativity in transit is used to help people get to job retraining, job interviews, and finally, to new jobs. In addition, senior citizens are able to take care of themselves longer if they can stay mobile. This will become increasingly important as the "baby boomer" generation reaches retirement age.

In nine-counties in southern Illinois, the RIDES Mass Transit District provides rural public transit. This system is examined extensively because it is a good example of what works in the southern Illinois region. RIDES has dealt with many of the issues specific to rural transit, such as low-density population and long distance between stops. The discussion of the RIDES program also provides background for the focus of this thesis, which documents efforts to implement a public transit system in Lawrence County, Illinois.

Community leaders in this southern Illinois county recognized the need for a public transit system, but were not sure how to proceed. The purpose of this thesis is to show how one Peace Corps Fellow, serving as community developer and transportation planner, attempted to help Lawrence County implement a rural transit system. Specific emphases will be placed on efforts to learn from existing rural transit systems, ways to generate community support for the project, the planning and research involved in coordinating a rural transit system, the process involved in writing a Federal grant to secure 5311 for transit funds, and an analysis of how Lawrence County's unsuccessful grant application could be improved.

The broader lessons learned include the important role played by rural transit in community development, and the resistance many small communities have to large infrastructure investments such as a transit system, despite the proven economic and social benefits to the community at large.