Successful Local Transportation Coordination Case Studies

Coordination Strategy: Contract with common carrier; coordinate dispatch
Nobles County Heartland Express/Worthington Taxi: Prairieland Transit System

Background
The Prairieland Transit System involves a partnership between a local private business, Worthington Taxi, and the county’s public transit provider, the Nobles County Heartland Express. The two providers offer subsidized rides to the general public and use a central dispatch operated by the public provider. The dispatch center accepts calls from the public between 7 a.m. and 6 p.m. Monday through Friday and dispatches all rides to the taxi provider and transit buses as needed.

Worthington Taxi provides most of the rides within the City of Worthington. The Heartland Express buses are used mostly for rides in other Nobles County communities, but the buses can be used in the city if they are available or if the individual requesting a ride needs an accessible vehicle. The Heartland Express buses also provide subsidized rides on twenty established routes throughout Nobles County, offering bus access to each of the fourteen Nobles County communities five times per week. Many riders are repeat customers who use the service on a daily or weekly basis. The most common destinations are medical appointments and places of employment.

The regular fare for a taxi ride in the City of Worthington is $4.50. Through Prairieland Transit’s subsidized system, passengers pay $2.50 and the public transit subsidy pays $2. The taxi provider receives the full cost of the fare, and passengers get a lower-cost trip. Passengers receiving a subsidized ride on a Heartland Express bus also pay $2.50 for scheduled rides or route service. If passengers wish to schedule a taxi ride outside of the city, the subsidy will pay for $2 and the passenger is responsible for the remainder of the fee (based on a per-mile charge).

At the end of each month, Prairieland Transit reconciles the rides that were actually given with the calls that came through the dispatch center. Worthington Taxi then receives a subsidy payment based on the reconciliation.

Problem/Opportunity
Worthington Taxi was receiving an annual subsidy to help offset rides it was providing in the City of Worthington to older adults and those with disabilities. The Nobles County Heartland Express provided

Service Area
- Serves all of Nobles County
- 715 square miles
- 21,378 residents
- All county residents are eligible for a subsidized ride

Financial
- 2010 budget: $290,000
- Funding from MnDOT public transit funding
- Fare: $4.50 per ride (passenger pays $2.50, grant covers $2)

Operational Characteristics
- Created in 2002
- Four Worthington Taxi vehicles and two Heartland Express buses
- Two full-time and five part-time drivers (Worthington Taxi) and two full-time-equivalent and three part-time staff (Heartland Express)

Results
- 35,000 subsidized rides per year

Lessons Learned
- Developed a partnership between a public and private agency

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transportation to the same groups outside of the city, and there was no coordination between the two entities. Discounted rides were available to residents only if they qualified for a discounted taxi coupon through senior services or as a person with a disability. Subsidized transportation was not available to people with limited incomes or those who were otherwise unable to drive.

Solution
The Prairieland Transit System allowed the existing private provider to connect with the public transportation provider in a coordinated system. The single system allows all county residents to access transportation in a fair and equitable way. Instead of offering subsidized service only to select groups, Prairieland Transit offers discounted rides to the general public.

Results/Benefits
Prairieland Transit provides an average of 35,000 subsidized rides per year to the residents of Nobles County. In 2010, 5,586 rides were provided with Heartland Express buses, and there were 33,948 subsidized taxi rides. Prior to the system’s formation, only about 15,000 subsidized rides were provided per year.

By creating a public-private hybrid service, Prairieland Transit has been able to provide these rides more cost-efficiently than the public transit provider could have on its own. The taxi vehicles are located in the City of Worthington and can serve city residents more cost-effectively and more quickly than a route-based bus service. Connecting with Worthington Taxi and taking advantage of its existing equipment and service has allowed the Heartland Express to provide more individual rides without hiring additional drivers and purchasing more vehicles.

Challenges/Lessons Learned
Developing a partnership between a private company and the public provider was the greatest challenge faced when forming Prairieland Transit. In the beginning, the taxi company did not want to feel like it was being taken over by a public entity; it wanted to remain a private, for-profit business.

It took years of meetings and communication to develop a partnership that worked well and met the needs of both providers. For example, the taxi company was used to receiving its own calls and dispatching its own rides, and it took a period of adjustment before it was comfortable with another agency handling this portion of the service.

In the end, the two providers were able to work together to create a system that offers the best of both worlds. The taxi company maintains its autonomy, and the public service is able to provide the most cost-effective rides in the most efficient way possible so passengers can access the services they need.

Future Direction
In the future, Prairieland Transit would like to expand the availability of subsidized rides and add more weekend service to better serve the needs of county residents.