



UTC Spotlight

University Transportation Centers Program

This month: Montana State University | June 2017

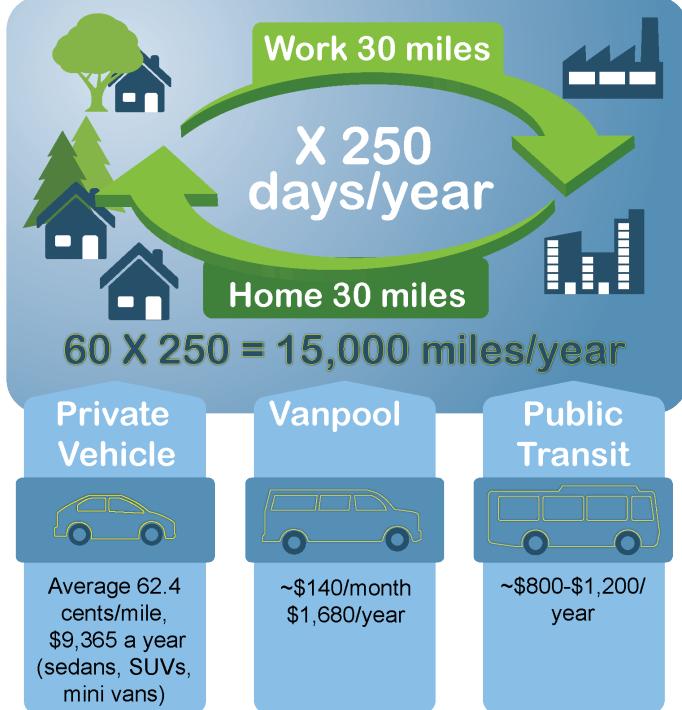
No. 111

Livability and Transportation Choices – Not Just For Urban Areas Anymore

Promoting livability in local planning is a relatively new concept that incorporates principles such as expanded transportation choices, affordable housing, economic opportunities, and revitalized communities. While early research and initiatives focused on urban areas, the same principles are now being adapted and applied to improve the quality of life in rural areas.

"Obviously, livability projects are not going to look the same in a small town as they look in a big city," said SURLC Director David Kack. "You're not going to build a mixed use apartment building with a multimodal transit hub in a town of 5,000 people. But that doesn't mean that rural residents don't want more transportation choices than they currently have, either."

Comparing the Cost of Commute Options



Neil Hetherington (SURLC)

The Small Urban and Rural Livability Center (SURLC) is a University Transportation Center, formed in 2013, that advances transportation-related livability in small towns and rural areas. SURLC is a partnership between the Western Transportation Institute at Montana State University and the Upper Great Plains Transportation Institute at North Dakota State University. The two research entities have a long history of understanding the unique transportation challenges in rural areas and adapting solutions to fit their demographics, resources, and other key characteristics.

SURLC's work is clarifying what "livability" means to rural residents and identifying transportation options. Perhaps more importantly, SURLC is developing tools and recommendations that rural areas and small towns can use to plan for and implement changes that can make a difference, as illustrated by the following projects.

Exploring Transit's Contribution to Livability in Rural North Dakota Communities

Case studies exploring rural livability and transit issues were conducted in Valley City and Dickinson, North Dakota. Many factors contribute to the livability of a rural community, including access to transit. In each community, researchers conducted public/resident surveys, local transit rider surveys, and stakeholder interviews to understand local opinions on livability and transit.

In both towns survey respondents indicated that the most important livability factors are affordable housing, low crime, quality healthcare, cost of living, quality public schools, and jobs. While transit was not among the most frequent responses, residents also expressed considerable support for providing transit services and funding it through various sources. Residents in both cities expressed the opinion that transit should be provided in their community as a transportation option for seniors, people with disabilities, those who choose not to drive, and those who cannot afford to drive. Stakeholders from both communities said transit is a critical lifeline for many residents, and transit riders indicated that transit is very important to their quality of life.

Park County Transit Feasibility Study

Like many rural counties, Park County, Wyoming (population 29,000) is looking for opportunities to

address mobility needs that also encourage economic development. The County partnered with the Powell Economic Partnership, Inc., and Forward Cody, Inc., to explore transportation options that could increase access to businesses and services, facilitate access for tourists to scenic and recreational opportunities, and improve safety and quality of life. In 2016, SURLC completed a study to evaluate the feasibility of a transit system as well as other transportation options. Researchers collected data, gathered public and stakeholder input, and identified transportation alternatives and funding strategies.

Not surprisingly, most county residents rely on a personal vehicle for their primary transportation. Given the long distances between towns in rural areas, a typical commute in Park County is a roundtrip of 50 miles. For a full-time employee, this equates to an estimated \$8,754/year in commuting costs, which can represent a significant financial obstacle to lower income residents. The public input collected in this study demonstrated a desire for expanded transportation options and broad support for public transportation. However, the feasibility study revealed that there were likely insufficient resources at this time to fund and implement a fixed route transit system. Instead, the recommendations included establishing a permanent Transportation Advisory Committee, expanding the existing demand response transit system, and working with major employers and stakeholders to establish ride matching services.

Small Town and Rural Multimodal Networks

SURLC was part of a team led by Alta Planning and Design with support from the National Association of Counties, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), and Blue Cross Blue Shield of Minnesota, which created *The Small Town and Rural Multimodal Networks* report. This document, published in December 2016, is a resource and idea book intended to help small towns and rural communities support safe, accessible, comfortable, and active travel for people of all ages and abilities. Goals of the report are as follows:

- provide a bridge between existing urban focused guidance on bicycle and pedestrian design and rural practice,



City of Dickinson, ND

- encourage innovation in the development of safe and appealing networks for bicycling and walking in small towns and rural areas, and
- provide examples of peer communities and project implementation that are appropriate for rural communities.

This project builds on the increasing interest in small towns to offer non-motorized transportation options and to encourage active travel. The document applies existing national design guidelines in a rural setting and highlights small town and rural case studies. It addresses challenges specific to rural areas (geographic, fiscal) and focuses on opportunities to make incremental improvements. An online edition intended for information sharing that is not affiliated with the FHWA may be found at <http://ruraldesignguide.com/>

Summary

These projects demonstrate rural residents' needs and desire for access to a range of transportation choices for their work, personal, and recreational needs. However, they also underscore the importance of understanding what livability means in an individual community as well as the resources available for developing appropriate and sustainable transportation networks. "Small towns want to retain their unique sense of place, but they also don't want their residents or visitors to be constrained or isolated by lack of transportation," said SURLC Deputy Director Jill Hough; "our projects are identifying feasible options so they can adapt their transportation planning accordingly."

About This Project

David Kack is the Director of SURLC, as well as a Program Manager for Mobility and Public Transportation research at the Western Transportation Institute at Montana State University. Jill Hough is the Deputy Director of SURLC and the Director of the Small Urban and Rural Transit Center at the Upper Great Plains Transportation Institute at North Dakota State University. For more information about SURLC and the projects described in this article, visit the SURLC www.surlc.org.



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