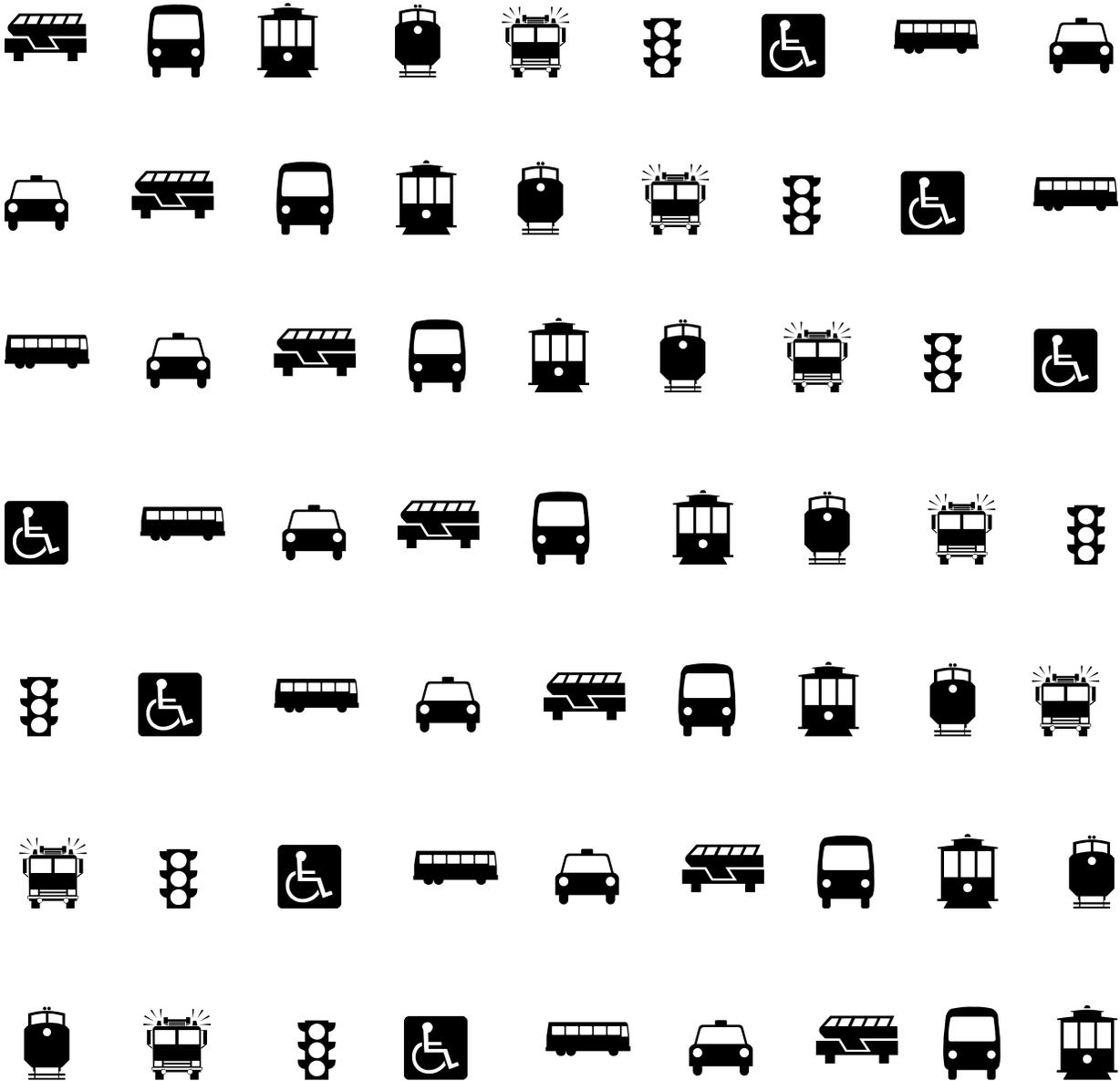




Chapter II Introduction



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II. INTRODUCTION

Historically transit ridership in the United States has experienced a downward trend since population centers left the inner cities and moved to the suburbs during the post WWII period. This shift in land use trends from high density compact urban development to low density development created an automobile dependent society. As automobile production and ownership increased transit ridership declined.

The last decade has seen a resurgence in transit ridership across the country. Today, public transportation is highly effective in many large metropolitan areas. This is due to the congestion and high costs of parking that often characterize these areas. Nationwide, suburban locations have not shown the increased demand for transit services that has characterized the major metropolitan areas. Nonetheless, the NRPC Region has demonstrated increasing demand for transit services over the last ten years with fixed route transit ridership increasing at twice the rate of population growth.

The Nashua region is comprised of two key transit markets; the transit dependent population and commuters traveling to the greater Boston area. These are two very distinct markets with differing needs. The transit dependent population relies upon the Nashua Transit System to meet their transportation needs, while commuters seek convenient, inexpensive and reliable transportation to reach employment destinations.

Nashua is a small city surrounded by suburban and rural development. Parking is ample and inexpensive, and traffic congestion is moderate. Currently, few incentives exist for drivers to switch transportation modes and utilize public transit. Until the costs and inconvenience of owning and operating a personal vehicle increase considerably, people are likely to continue using the automobile for most trips. As costs rise in the future, people may begin to consider switching transportation modes from the personal automobile to public transit. For these reasons, the focus on transit improvements and expansions in the near future is to improve the overall quality of service for current transit dependent riders. However, the plan does include specific recommendations to improve access for commuters traveling to the greater Boston area.

A. HISTORY OF TRANSIT SERVICE IN THE NRPC REGION

The City of Nashua has been operating fixed route public transportation since 1984 under the Citybus logo. Prior to that time, transit services in Nashua had been provided simultaneously by two different operators. General purpose public transit was provided by Hudson Bus Lines Company for over thirty years. The company operated a regional network, a city-based system and school bus service for the City of Nashua. As the region went through the process of suburbanization, and automobiles became the preferred mode, the transit system began to decline. As a result, the bus company implemented service reductions throughout the early to mid 1970's.

During the late 1970's a report was issued by the NRPC, entitled the Special Purpose-Urban Rural Transit Plan (SPURT) which concluded, "that there was a definitive need for a system that would provide transportation to the elderly, handicapped and low-income residents of the region." As a result of this plan, a new demand responsive operator was created: the Greater Nashua Transportation Services, Inc. GNTS began operating specialized van service to the elderly, handicapped and other transit-dependent persons in 1979, providing service to Nashua, Hudson, and Merrimack.



The creation of GNTS provided service for the transit-dependent segment of the population in Nashua, but during the last half of the 1970's the region began to experience a degree of growth that warranted reconsideration of the potential for a fixed-route, general purpose public transportation system. As development rapidly proceeded in the city, traffic congestion became a greater concern. Higher traffic volumes also played a major role in the City's designation in 1978 as being in violation of air quality standards for carbon monoxide.

The NRPC was commissioned by the City of Nashua and Town of Hollis to conduct a Nashua Area Mass Transit Study, completed in 1981. It produced the recommendation of a fixed-route system for the City of Nashua composed of eight routes, with downtown Nashua serving as the hub of the system. The study also concluded that transit service for Hollis was not warranted, based on the lack of potential transit demand. A process of review and comment on the study was conducted over the next year and a half, and in June of 1983, the Mayor and Board of Aldermen approved funding for a transit system at a local cost of \$250,000 per year. A private management firm was selected to operate the system, National Transit Services, Inc. The administration and planning for the system was vested in the Nashua Development Director's office (now Urban Programs). The transit system began operating in September of 1984.

Toward the end of the 1980's, it was recognized that inefficiencies existed in the operation of two separate transit systems, one for fixed-routes and the other for demand-responsive trips. There were two general managers, separate staffs and a level of competition between the two systems for attracting trips among transit-dependent persons. The City addressed the issue by putting both services out to bid in 1990 as a single contract. First Transit currently contracts with the city to operate Nashua Transit System, under the Citybus name.

B. PURPOSE OF THE TRANSIT PLAN FOR THE NASHUA REGION

The purpose of this regional transit plan is to guide the development of transit service in the NRPC region (See Figure 2-1, p. II-4) for the coming 20 year period. This plan has been developed both in response to federal requirements and also because there are serious issues facing the transit system in the next 20 years. The transit system will be faced with the following challenges:

- **Improving and Expanding Existing Services** – The data shows that there is a growing need for transit in its traditional core service area, the City of Nashua. That trend will likely continue and plans should be developed now for expansion of service in Nashua.
- **Regionalization** – For the past twenty years development of the transit system has primarily focused on development of service in Nashua. Improvements to that service will be an important component of the overall development of the service. In addition, increased development outside Nashua will increase the need for transit service in the towns surrounding Nashua: Hudson, Merrimack, Milford, Hollis, Brookline, Amherst and Wilton. When those services are implemented a major challenge will be the development of a fair method for assessing costs to the benefiting local governments.
- **Increasing the Efficiency, Security and Amenity of the Transit System** – As ridership on the transit system increases, there are increasing demands for service. However, historically, transit funding has not kept pace with the service need. Implementation of Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS) can help improve the system at a low overall cost. Intelligent transportation systems apply telecommunications technology to the transit system to allow the same vehicles to be used in a more cost effective manner and to increase rider amenities.



- **Funding Changes** – Currently the transit system receives over \$1.5 million per year in federal transit operating assistance. These funds are used to support the system and reduce the cost of the service for local governments. It is very likely that those federal operating assistance funds will be lost in 2012, due to revised Census numbers and potential changes to existing funding allocations. A long term plan must be developed over the next ten years for replacing those funds.

C. ORGANIZATION OF THE TRANSIT PLAN FOR THE NASHUA REGION

The Transit Plan for the Nashua Region is organized in three main chapters. Chapter Three describes the existing system, the routes that are served, the number of rides being provided and the vehicles and facilities used to provide the services. It also describes the people who currently use the transit system based on data from an on-board transit survey conducted in May of 2002. Chapter Three includes an identification of issues with the transit system that need to be addressed in the plan.

Chapter Four focuses on areas in the NRPC region that would most likely benefit from the provision of transit services. These have been identified based on the characteristics of the riders described in Chapter Three from the on-board transit survey and demographic characteristics of the population derived from 2000 census data.

Chapter Five describes the goals that have been identified for the improvement of the transit system in the development of this plan. Chapter Five then identifies the specific steps that are proposed to meet each of the goals. Chapter Five also provides information on the costs of those improvements and funding streams that can be utilized to pay for transit system improvements.

Chapter Six assigns approximate costs to the projects identified in Chapter Five. This chapter also provides a thorough description of current funding options for transit projects and anticipated changes to future funding.



Figure 2-1: NRPC Region

