

New York Metropolitan Transportation Council

A Coordinated Public Transit-Human Services Transportation Plan for the NYMTC Area

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Regional Needs and Strategies



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Regional Needs and Coordination Strategies

Introduction

The NYMTC Coordinated Public Transit-Human Services Transportation Plan has five components:

- **Three Subregional Plans** – There are three stand-alone plans reflecting each of the three subregions of the NYMTC region: New York City, Long Island (Nassau and Suffolk counties), and the Lower Hudson Valley (Putnam, Rockland and Westchester counties).
- **Regional Needs and Coordination Strategies** – This companion document focuses on the unmet mobility needs among the region’s older adults, persons with disabilities, and persons with low income specific to (1) traveling in between NYMTC’s three subregions as well as (2) work trips from the region to areas within the New York Metropolitan area in neighboring states (New Jersey and Connecticut). The second part of the document focuses on potential strategies to address those unmet needs.
- **Executive Summary** – There is also a stand-alone Executive Summary that summarizes the findings from the documents above.

This document focuses on Regional Needs and Coordination Strategies. Mobility options are extensive in the NYMTC region, yet specific gaps in service and the divisions between individual service networks, i.e., jurisdictional boundaries, remain significant to certain populations including older adults, persons with disabilities, and persons with low income. Some desired connections between municipalities are limited or nonexistent, and regional travel often requires multiple transfers between systems with varied levels of service. Two issues in particular, the jurisdictional boundaries that limit transit operators’ abilities to provide regional service, and the need for local connections to facilitate regional travel, are seen as primary challenges for travel between NYMTC’s three subregions as well as inter-regional work trips originating from within the region. These issues apply to both fixed-route bus and paratransit services, as they relate to employment travel, medical and human services trips, as well as social and recreational trips in the region.

Summary of Key Findings

Jurisdictional and Service Boundaries

The funding and administrative structure of transit providers often leads to distinct service breaks at municipal borders. Connections between operators such as Westchester County Bee-Line and MTA Long Island Bus with MTA New York City Transit do exist. Significantly, the introduction of MetroCard transfers between MTA NYC Transit and the suburban bus companies has substantially improved travel between the systems. Ultimately, each individual operator is restricted in how it can provide direct service into a neighboring municipality as opposed to coordinating transfers between bus and/or subway routes. Bee-Line, New York City Transit, and Long Island Bus each have restrictions on providing service in neighboring counties.

Local Connections to Facilitate Regional Travel

While transit connections between New York City and surrounding counties are generally extensive, limited service hours for feeder bus services at outlying rail stations and/or park and ride lots effectively limit travel options for some residents of Rockland, Putnam, Westchester, Nassau, and Suffolk counties. Enhanced local feeders, whether demand-response or neighborhood circulator routes, could improve overall regional mobility by maintaining critical ‘last step’ connections to and from line haul transit routes.

Unmet Need / Opportunities for Service Enhancements

Hours and Areas of Service

The public transportation network that services NYMTC’s ten-county region is extensive, as are services in neighboring New Jersey and Connecticut, yet inter-county and longer trips are often constrained by transit options at the local trip ends. While rail or express bus service may connect a number of counties and municipalities, they are particularly focused on travel into and out of New York City, and customers are not always able to access them when service hours and service coverage are more limited in outlying areas such as during reverse peak commuter hours.

The most commonly identified transportation gap or unmet need emerging from public outreach within the entire region pertained to healthcare employment — specifically home healthcare assistants — and the difficulty in traveling across municipal and county lines to private residences for work. With no access to a private automobile, these individuals may also have a difficult time using public transportation because there is no local public transit route to serve “the last mile” of the trip (or because the route does not operate at times needed), or the challenge of multiple transfers is too difficult, especially if there is a long wait time involved. Indeed, many home healthcare workers must arrive at their patients’ homes early in the morning when some bus services are not running or may be running infrequently.

This need was heard through the study’s public outreach efforts and was raised most often in reference to connections between Queens and Nassau County and between the Bronx and Westchester County. The inter-county transportation issue straddles two primary areas of focus of this study. It relates primarily to employment transportation, yet also pertains to medical transportation and access to healthcare facilities and facilitating home healthcare workers’ access to individuals’ residences. Areas of particular concern include Oyster Bay and other communities in northern Nassau County.

Inter-System Transfers

Overall, public transportation services are extensive in the region and most trips can be accommodated, even if they are lengthy and require multiple transfers. Inter-county resources are available in the less densely developed counties of Rockland and Putnam; however, most of these services are focused on connections to and from New York City. The primary mobility issues raised in Rockland and Putnam counties regarding regional travel relate to the difficulty in accessing train stations or bus park and ride lots, i.e., the beginnings and ends of trips. The long-haul transit to and from the city is generally effective. Thus, this represents more of a local transit issue (access to and from stations) although it relates to regional travel.

Similarly, the frequency of service and number of transfers that may be required to complete a trip may render longer-distance travel difficult, particularly for customers with mobility limitations. For example, a regional trip may be feasible from Putnam County to various boroughs in NYC, yet the combination of local bus service in Putnam County, a train trip on Metro-North Railroad (MNR), and subway and/or bus service to reach a destination in NYC presents a potentially arduous travel experience. Limited service spans and infrequent services only exacerbate trip times involving transfers.

While creating a one-seat ride for lengthy inter-regional trips is often not feasible, primarily due to the presence of multiple operators, it is nonetheless important to foster efficient and timely transfer opportunities between systems and services as many customers rely on the cost-effectiveness of transit for both local and regional trips. Those who prefer not to, or are unable to drive their own vehicles must be able to take advantage of coordinated information, policies, and schedules among the various regional providers to address the need for longer distance trips on public transportation.

Transit Service to Employment

A general need for reverse commute transportation for New York City workers accessing employment sites outside of the city exists. Some trips are easily made, while others (including healthcare related trips mentioned above) require longer travel times, are difficult, or may be impossible at early and late hours. Connections from NYC to Westchester County or beyond to Connecticut are generally more readily available than those from NYC to Long Island. Metro-North Railroad has a more robust schedule of reverse commute trains than Long Island Rail Road (LIRR), due in large part to system limitations in the LIRR, which has fewer tracks to permit reverse peak trips. Westchester Bee-Line and other private operators also offer a reasonable amount of reverse peak bus service north from NYC.

Inter-Jurisdictional Paratransit

Regional paratransit trips were not identified as a notable deficiency from the public outreach efforts. Nonetheless, the inherent difficulty in traveling between jurisdictions on paratransit is highlighted by the transfer process. Most operators (e.g., Access-A-Ride) provide connections to neighboring systems through coordinated transfers, yet this coordination pertains solely to the designation of common transfer locations. To transfer between systems, customers must schedule trips with each connecting paratransit operator. As a result, if the first operator is late to the transfer point, this will result in a missed transfer and the customer will have to schedule a new pickup resulting in a potentially lengthy delay en route. Connecting services seldom wait for customers considered to be late for their pickup even if the delay is beyond the control of the first paratransit service. This issue is described later in this chapter.

Accessibility

In some cases, accessibility issues remain at non-key train stations in the region, even though many MNR and LIRR stations are considered fully accessible. Feedback received during focus groups for seniors and disabled customers did point to complaints of maintenance issues with elevators and other impediments to accessibility at stations. Although elevators and escalators do breakdown and escalators must also be taken out of service at times for maintenance and repairs, the MTA agencies inspect virtually all elevators and escalators daily and make repairs on its elevators and escalators as quickly as possible. MTA posts elevator and escalator status to its

website and telephone hotline, both available at all times. Overall, however, mobility between New York City and the surrounding counties is available via a number of transit and paratransit operators. Local accessibility issues such as physical access to buses and trains can complicate both intra-county travel as well as regional travel for employment, medical, and social trips.

Identified Approaches to Regional Mobility/Coordination

Although relatively few needs and gaps were identified from an inter-regional perspective, several opportunities exist to improve mobility between the NYMTC subregions (New York City, Long Island, and the Lower Hudson Valley) and beyond for work trips emanating from the NYMTC region. These echo strategies identified at the local level but focus on connections between municipalities and counties, where jurisdictional boundaries are most often the greatest barrier to service coordination.

Reverse Commute

The primary obstacles to reverse commuting from New York City to surrounding counties often are the limitations pertaining to the distributor services (or lack thereof) at the non-urban trip ends, i.e., connections from rail stations and major bus stops to employment sites. In areas where transit does not currently address these needs, shuttles to and from the rail stations and demand-response services can help close the gaps and complete the trip. Job Access Reverse Commute (JARC) funding targeted to these services can help provide tailored services that effectively connect workers to jobs while avoiding an over-supply of service in otherwise low-density areas that may not warrant extensive fixed-route transit.

Long Island

The difficulty in providing comprehensive reverse commute connections is particularly relevant in Long Island at many LIRR stations as well as between Long Island Bus routes and residential areas where home healthcare workers and other service workers may need transportation. JARC funding can also be used to extend or subsidize existing transit routes to provide more frequent service or stretch service hours earlier or later than currently feasible.

Along with the need for home healthcare workers to reach individual residences for in-home work, transit services could be enhanced or developed to connect residents of eastern Queens with medical facilities in Nassau County. In this case, major medical facilities across the county line are the primary destination for patients in northern and eastern Queens, as opposed to facilities within the city. These transit trips could be provided through fixed-route service connecting New York City residential areas with major medical centers in Nassau County and would address both medical and employment needs.

Continuation of services already enhanced through JARC funding include reverse-peak trip frequency increases on MTA Long Island Bus routes N6, N20, N22, N23, N25, and N31/32. Saturday and Sunday trips were also added on these and other Nassau County routes to enhance connections between eastern Queens, Nassau County, and western Suffolk County employment concentrations.

Routes such as the N6 already provide connections between Jamaica, Queens, and Nassau County. Several Nassau County routes extend into the Queens transit hubs of Flushing and Jamaica. Transfers are also available between Nassau and Suffolk counties on a variety of bus routes. LI Bus operates several routes into western Suffolk County, including the N19 and N72, which extend as far east as the LIRR Babylon station. Employment centers such as LaGuardia Airport and John F. Kennedy International Airport are not accessible by transit directly from Nassau County or Suffolk County; however, transfers to both airports are available from Flushing or Jamaica via local bus services. Connections can also be made from the LIRR in Jamaica to JFK Airport via the AirTrain JFK service, which operates 24 hours a day.

The imbalance between Nassau and Suffolk counties exists primarily in the hours of service provided by each system. A critical public transit constraint in Suffolk County is the lack of Sunday service on Suffolk County Transit (SCT). This is particularly important for connecting residents with employment opportunities including retail employment at South Shore Mall, Walt Whitman Mall, Smith Haven Mall, and the Tanger Outlet Center. Key bus routes to employment sites in the county include S1, S92, S54, S58, S20, S40.

The lack of Sunday service on Suffolk County Transit limits the mobility of all residents who wish to use (or rely solely upon) public transportation, including use of SCT for access to the LIRR for intra- or out-of-county travel. The Long Island Rail Road is the de-facto transit operation in Suffolk County on Sundays and as such, access to employment or other destinations via the rail service is limited by the lack of local transit connections from stations, which also function as bus hubs during normal SCT operating hours.

Finally, New Freedom funding has been applied to LIRR station accessibility improvements, specifically at the following stations: Merrick, Bellmore, Farmingdale, Bethpage, Freeport, Westbury, Valley Stream, Flushing, Forest Hills, Queens Village, and Wyandanch. Accessibility concerns have been cited through the public involvement process as a limitation in inter-regional travel.

Lower Hudson Valley

A number of reverse commute routes have been identified in Westchester County, focusing on connections between county employment concentrations and connections to subway and bus routes in the Bronx (New York City). In the past year JARC funds have supplemented the operation of five Bee-Line bus services, two of which link directly to the New York City subway (Routes 45 and 55 connect to MTA NYCT Subway Station at Dyre Avenue on the number 5 train and Pelham Bay Park on the 6) and three of which provide additional trips and service hours on local county routes to major retail and commercial areas, including the I-287 corridor, Getty Square, and the Central Park Avenue corridor.

Additional need for late evening and weekday trips has been identified by Westchester County on Routes 2 and 20. Route 2 in particular would provide additional linkages between Tudor Woods and Executive Boulevard in Yonkers for access to medical facilities and hotels. Late evening service from the Jerome Avenue corridor in the Bronx to the Central Avenue Corridor can also address growing need for transportation to retail and commercial sector jobs in Westchester County.

Westchester Bee-Line customers have already benefited from initial JARC-funded enhancements including Route 1X, designed specifically for reverse-commute patrons traveling from the Bronx

to Yonkers, and Route 79 which provides service to employment opportunities at Westchester Airport and ties in to the White Plains Transit Center, where numerous bus and rail services are available.

While Bee-Line operates a shorter span of service than New York City Transit (i.e., not 24 hours), this difference in operating hours does not represent a great imbalance between the two systems. The fact that Bee-Line does not operate 24 hours a day may limit some overnight employment transportation; however, the availability of bus service in many areas after midnight does facilitate late evening employment transportation and connections to New York City Transit for regional trips. Bee-Line's geographic coverage of Westchester County is fairly comprehensive, particularly in the southern half of the county where the majority of the population and employment are concentrated. Both rail and bus service between Westchester County and New York City are readily available from numerous locations.

A greater imbalance exists between Westchester and Putnam and Rockland counties. Transit service in Putnam and Rockland is generally unavailable in later evening hours while some routes also do not operate on weekends. Thus, connections between these counties and neighboring Westchester County or NYC are inherently limited to the local operating schedules. This applies to both fixed-route bus service as well as complementary ADA paratransit.

Connecticut and New Jersey

While JARC funding specifically is not a key factor in providing connections between the NYMTC region and Fairfield County, Connecticut, directly across the border, a number of transit options do exist to facilitate travel from New York City and Westchester County to employment hubs such as Greenwich and Stamford. Local bus services such as CT Transit Route 11A and 11B connect Port Chester, NY, to Greenwich and Stamford. Furthermore, Commuter Connection rail station shuttles allow for both inbound and outbound commuting at the Greenwich, Stamford, South Norwalk, and Westport stations. These shuttles facilitate the local end of regional travel on Metro-North Railroad. In the I-287 corridor, the I-Bus provides service from the heart of Westchester County to Stamford, CT as well as connections to Metro-North Railroad and local bus services in Greenwich.

JARC funding has, in recent years, supplemented local bus and shuttle schedules to provide additional trips and longer service spans, particularly those that serve rail stations. The connection between rail and local bus in Connecticut is fundamentally important in facilitating travel from outside of the state to the numerous employment centers, notably in the southwest region (i.e. Stamford and Greenwich). Additional Sunday service on CT Transit routes in Stamford has also increased the connectivity between rail and local bus services.

In New Jersey, a multitude of reverse commute services connect New York City with municipalities in neighboring Hudson County, including Jersey City, Hoboken, Weehawken, and Union City. JARC funding has enhanced access on NJ Transit Route 129 to growing employment concentrations in Secaucus; in the Meadowlands, including Harmon Cove, a mixed-use development area featuring commercial, retail, office, and light industrial employers; and Newark Airport. This employment area is a destination for both New York City residents as well as Hudson County customers from Union City and neighboring municipalities who commute westbound against the dominant eastbound morning services into New York. Major employers in this area include United Parcel Service and other warehousing operations, along with retail outlets and hotels. Many of these connections are through Manhattan, but there is also a lack of

service from Staten Island to New Jersey. The MTA has begun a limited bus route over the Bayonne Bridge, and there is a study under way for a light rail on Staten Island's West Shore and old North Shore rail line to improve connections to New Jersey.

Other Connections

From Rockland County, express commuter bus service across the Hudson River is available on the Tappan ZEEExpress. This route operates Monday through Friday and offers service from Suffern, Spring Valley Terminal, Exit 14 Park-and-Ride, Palisades Center, and Nyack eastbound to Tarrytown and White Plains. Saturday service is also available on a less frequent schedule. Similarly, the I-Bus in the I-287 corridor links Westchester County with southwestern Connecticut, connecting White Plains and Stamford with daily service.

Transit connections are available between Rockland County and northern New Jersey; however, most of these services are structured with a New York-bound commuting patterns or access to rail stations. Direct transit links between Rockland County and major employment hubs are not as extensive, particularly those in suburban New Jersey settings and urban areas outside of Eastern Bergen and Hudson counties. The majority of services provided by Coach USA (Short Line, Red & Tan Tours) connect Rockland County to Bergen County, NJ, and New York City.

Paratransit

Because each transit operator in the NYMTC region provides complementary paratransit trips in conjunction with fixed-route bus service, these systems are designed to accommodate travel within their own jurisdictions more than assisting with regional mobility. Given the fundamental requirement that paratransit service mirror fixed-route bus service, this is understandable. Nonetheless, from a customer service perspective, a lack of coordination among neighboring systems hampers mobility between jurisdictions. This is of particular importance in locations where major medical (or commercial) destinations lie across the boundaries of transit operators' service areas.

Paratransit operators in the NYMTC region typically facilitate transfers between systems by establishing one or more specific transfer locations at which passengers may switch vehicles to cross city or county lines and continue their trip. No special infrastructure is provided at these locations, which often coincide with fixed-route bus transfer locations.

The greatest number of inter-jurisdictional transfers occurs between New York City Transit's Access-A-Ride service and neighboring paratransit operators in Westchester County (Bee-Line Paratransit) and Nassau County (Able-Ride), and even this total demand is modest. Demand for transfers between the outlying counties in the NYMTC region is more limited, as is total demand for paratransit service.

Westchester County indicates that roughly seven transfers per day are made with Access-A-Ride (592 transfers in 90 days), while no notable number transfers to neighboring systems in Putnam County or Connecticut are reported. Arranging for timed transfers is the responsibility of the customer, who must schedule trips with both paratransit operators and is responsible for paying fares on both (\$4 in Westchester County as of March 2, 2009, and \$2.25 in New York City).

Access-A-Ride provides service within a $\frac{3}{4}$ -mile corridor beyond fixed-route service across the New York City borderline to nearby areas of Nassau and Westchester counties. Westchester

County and Nassau County paratransit services do not operate into New York City. Access-A-Ride passengers may travel into Yonkers and Mount Vernon as far north as the following streets: Union Place in Yonkers from Ravine Avenue to Warburton Avenue; North Macquesten Parkway and Putnam Street in Mt. Vernon; Murray Street and Iden Avenue in Pelham; and Mt. Tom Road and Park Ridge Avenue in New Rochelle. Designated transfer points between New York City and Westchester County paratransit services are in Pelham Manor and Yonkers.

The primary designated transfer locations between Access-A-Ride and Able-Ride in Nassau County are at Long Island Jewish Hospital, Green Acres Mall, and Hempstead Avenue and 223rd Street. Able-Ride reported an average daily transfer rate of 18 trips (6,608 passengers in 2008) to and from Access-A-Ride. Slightly more than half of these transfers occurred in the past year at Long Island Jewish Hospital while the remainder transferred at Green Acres Mall, which also serves as a transfer point between MTA New York City Transit and MTA LI Bus fixed-route services. No transfers were reported at the Hempstead Avenue and 223rd Street location.

While Able-Ride does not note any recurring coordination issues with paratransit transfers to neighboring systems, Westchester County indicated a need for improved communication between its operations and Access-A-Ride in New York City. Effective communication and coordination of certification and eligibility information between operators is critical as passengers who may only require visitor status on a neighboring system are often unable to schedule trips when their home system eligibility is not conveyed to the neighboring operator.

Furthermore, improved communication between operators when transfers will be delayed would improve on-time performance and ensure smoother transfers between systems, especially since operators seldom wait for connecting trips that are late. For example, an Access-A-Ride customer who arranges for a transfer to Bee-Line Paratransit must notify the connecting service if the first paratransit trip is late. This may require rescheduling the pickup, and the customer may be forced to wait after being dropped off by the first vehicle.

Policies differ somewhat in how inter-regional trips are arranged. Whereas New York City, Westchester County, and Nassau County require customers to schedule both trips (when connecting between systems), Putnam County's contract operator for paratransit (First Transit) coordinates directly with neighboring operators to ensure coordinated hand-offs at transfer locations. Demand for paratransit transfers between Putnam County and neighboring Westchester County and to Connecticut systems (e.g., HART in Danbury) is nonetheless quite low.

Strategies to Improve Regional Mobility/Coordination

To address the regional mobility gaps and challenges outlined above, a variety of strategies may prove appropriate throughout the NYMTC region. These strategies focus primarily on paratransit coordination and the need to improve customer mobility across jurisdictional boundaries. To improve reverse commute options on traditional fixed-route transit, addressing imbalances in service and the "last mile" connections can provide the greatest improvement.

Transit and Reverse Commute

Many connections do exist between transit operators in the NYMTC region, and as a whole, the level of service provided is generally reasonable for the individual municipalities. That said, specific trips remain difficult for customers seeking to access jobs or commercial/recreational destinations when neighboring systems do not provide matching hours of service or the trip ends are not feasible on transit. Under the heading of job access and reverse commute services, strategies for improving programs and services that already exist include the following:

- **Consistent Operating Hours** – When specific transit routes are identified as significant reverse commute services and these services cross municipal/service boundaries, ensuring mirrored service hours on both ends of the corridor will allow customers traveling between systems to make connections at all hours. This does not require that overall system service spans among all operators be consistent, as this is not appropriate given the varied levels of service and demand. However, routes that are specifically designed as reverse commute or connecting services should be consistent in hours to maximize mobility through guaranteed transfers.
- **“Last Mile” Services** – Local shuttle services, whether fixed-route, route deviation, or demand-response, can help fill gaps in lower density areas and provide access to and from employment and other destinations within reasonable range of rail stations or other major transit hubs.

Paratransit Coordination

The fundamental issue with paratransit coordination and transfers between systems in the NYMTC region is that the customer assumes the primary responsibility for scheduling transfers and bears the brunt of the inconvenience when trips are late or transfers are missed. Instead, the onus on timely arrivals and convenient, safe transfers between systems should lie more on the operators than the individual customers. This requires improved communication between systems (to alert each other of on-time performance issues or other potential complications) and consistency among all operators concerning policies and procedures for transfers and travel.

Ensuring that transfers are made and connecting trips are available on both the pick-up and drop-off systems in the case of paratransit transfers may have cost implications for operators. Additional effort to contact and coordinate with neighboring systems regarding transfer locations and real-time schedule updates (i.e., notification of late arrivals) may increase operators' costs. Nonetheless, the burden of on-time performance and schedule monitoring should not be placed solely on the customers.

- **Consistent user policies** – All paratransit operators in the region should adopt consistent policies on wait times, on-time windows, no-show or late arrival policies, and dwell times when making arranged inter-system transfers.
- **User-friendly policies** – Systems should place less of the onus for arranging and ensuring timely transfers to neighboring operators on the customer and assume greater responsibility for safe, comfortable, and convenient transfers. When transfers are scheduled (e.g., from Access-A-Ride to Able-Ride), both paratransit operators should be prepared to communicate with each other their arrival and on-time status to ensure that customers do not miss trips because one leg of the connection was running late.

- **Organizations to focus on inter-jurisdictional transfers** – Similar to the “guaranteed ride home” programs offered by many Transportation Management Associations (TMAs), local organizations established to facilitate inter-jurisdictional paratransit travel could offer a number of services to customers, such as assisting with the scheduling of trips across municipal borders by coordinating pickup and drop-off times with multiple operators on behalf of a customer. Furthermore, if equipped with a small but appropriate fleet of vehicles, these organizations could provide rides to customers who may encounter issues in transferring, miss their connections, or require a connection to a neighboring system with shorter service hours. These trips could also be provided by taxi companies with accessible fleets through a voucher or subsidy program.