

PINAL COUNTY TRANSIT GOVERNANCE STUDY

Technical Working Group Meeting #1

Wednesday, October 30, 2019, 10:00 am

Pinal County Courthouse

Meeting Summary

Travis Ashbaugh with CAG introduced the project. He noted that CAG received 5305(e) transit funding for this study.

Bethany Whitaker from Nelson\Nygaard provided a project overview. She reminded the group that this study wasn't intended to design service yet, but to recommend a structure for governance.

Bethany presented a summary of the proposed project schedule. Current focus is existing conditions analysis – existing service and governance structure. A proposed schedule was shown on a slide. Deb from the City of Maricopa suggested that there be two initial stakeholder meetings instead of just one as shown on the schedule, in order to have a better geographic reach and reach more stakeholders across the county.

Market Analysis

Nelson\Nygaard reviewed the market analysis with the Technical Working Group (TWG), noting the lack of population density throughout the county but projected steep growth, particularly towards Phoenix and along I-10.

A discussion about population/market data shown occurred. Nelson\Nygaard used U.S. Census data and CAG projections as their primary data source. Andy Smith with the RTA noted that the 2020 Census is about happen and could provide validation as numbers given to MAG may be inflated. He asked whether 2020 Census data could be used to caveat existing data.

Bethany pointed to a growing regional need within county, not just commuting to/from PHX and Tucson. She reviewed the current providers in the county, including the three public transportation services (Cotton Express, Central Arizona Regional Transit [CART], and City of Maricopa Express Transit [COMET]), as well as the several human service transportation providers and intercity service provided by Greyhound and Amtrak.

Regarding funding for transit, Bethany explained that \$1.3M being is spent on transit across the county annually. The total is actually closer to \$2M when including human service transportation.

Recent efforts to expand transit within the county, include studies in Casa Grande and Eloy, were reviewed. The Casa Grande study calls phased rollout, with a \$2M cost with full implementation. The Eloy Transit study recommended a circulator and with a regional line. Today, service is largely local because that's where funding is. Existing service is also low-cost "lifeline" style service.

Desired Outcomes

Nelson\Nygaard facilitated a conversation about desired outcomes:

Several attendees were supportive of a seamless regional system, with effective standardized branding

A couple of other attendees said they see it more as "dial-a-ride on steroids," using deviated services, including Uber/Lyft. Others were supportive of a "one-stop shop for transportation services" – the service would bring the county's various services under one umbrella. Residents could reach out to the county's service and be connected to the best transportation resource for their needs.

Another idea from Deb with the City of Maricopa was to establish commuter-oriented routes and services. Part of this model could be to encourage employer-based incentives to use transit. Another part of the scheme could be a TNC system, using an on-demand rideshare bus style service (like Bridj, Uber Bus) to connect rural urban users, and the major cities (PHX and Tucson). Distances involved in the county may make that attractive.

Marsha Ashcroft from Horizon – providing service for low-income and disabled riders is important. The service needs to be easy and simple, and possible to access without internet (which TNC usually requires)

Deb with City of Maricopa – A medical-focused service that provides dial-a-ride, door-to-door service, is likely important, regardless of which governance structure is selected. David with Maricopa – What about a "volunteer driver" program? Many local retirees still having driving abilities

Transit Services in Next 10 Years

The group was then asked to think about where service should be in 10 years. Some predicted growth of a regional system. The Coolidge system (CART) was mentioned as a model that could be built upon by the County and or replicated by individual communities

Andy with the RTA suggested that driverless buses could be a possibility in 10 years. The volunteer driver program mentioned before could engage volunteers as "transit ambassadors" instead of as drivers.

Bethany asked if there would be support for a regional system. The group was in consensus that they thought it was a good idea, but that convincing elected officials might be challenging

Regional system would provide efficiencies for the County and “seamlessness” – efficiencies in cost. RTA funds could also be used as part of local match for federal funding.

It was noted that clear communication with local city councils about the benefits/drawbacks would be crucial. Audra with Maricopa Association of Governments noted that a regional system would mean giving up local control. Articulating that fact early on in the decision making or study process to local elected officials will be important. Consequences of giving up local control need to be stated, and the benefits defined.

Bethany underscored that local communities would be asked to pay into a regional system. Defining a shared vision for what transit will do will be key. Transit needs now vs. 10 years away will be different, so the vision needs to be long term.

Funding and Economies of Scale

Jill with ADOT noted that \$2M in FTA 5311 is disbursed through ADOT throughout the region annually – 400K of that is being spent on admin. Having 4 or 5 other entities try to fight for funding doesn’t make sense, Jill said. Demand for funding already outstrips the funds available statewide. In the last funding round, \$13M was available through 5311 statewide – but applications totaled \$19M.

Andy with the RTA shared that at least one member of every city council wants a regional system, based on feedback at RTA board meetings. Jon Vlaming from the City of Eloy asked if it would be worth taking this study to each city council. Could that be done during this study? Bethany replied that yes, maybe around recommendations stage. Kathy with Pinal County added that there should a strategy on how to approach each council.

Bethany concluded that it sounded like there was the most support among the group present for Scenario 3 – a single local and regional provider. This would be a “service purchase” or “service provider” model, several of the group noted. A regional transit entity would take on the big burden of staffing, reporting requirements that would come with being an FTA recipient. (No community in Pinal County is a direct recipient for FTA – Casa Grande is only one that qualifies, and Maricopa will soon.)

Peers and Peer Review

Nelson\Nygaard and Wilson & Co. will be preparing a peer review to look at existing transit governance structures in places in areas that are rural but growing, have a large geographic area, contain many jurisdictions, and/or that have an existing RTA. The peer review will seek to answer questions about governance and help identify staffing and capacity needs.

Several possible case studies were shared. NAIPTA (Flagstaff) has been successful, engages partners, and operates a BRT but also rural service. Mountain Metro (CO Springs) is catching up to rapid growth. Green Mtn Transit (Burlington, VT) is absorbing failing rural providers. Ozark (NW Arkansas) is struggling to keep up with rapid growth.

There was support for studying other non-transit countywide consolidation/cooperation efforts in Pinal County. CAVIT was suggested as an example – it's the County's joint technical high school. (This would be an example of participation over consolidation.)

Valley Metro and Pima County were discussed as possible case study examples. There was a sense that Valley Metro wouldn't be an ideal example of a regional system due to its focus on jurisdictional equity. Meanwhile, Jill from ADOT noted that Pima County's governance is more splintered than it appears to be on the outside. Branding is phenomenal and seamless operations. Service coordination is good, governance is clunky. Coordination with funding could be better on the RTA level – the City of Tucson actually receives all of the urban FTA funding.

There was some discussion about finding successful examples of regional governance, rather than just unsuccessful ones. Bethany pointed out that everywhere will have things that went right. Even examples of failed regionalism could have lessons, such as about how to keep people at the table.

Travis with the CAG said it would be important get at least one example each of RTA vs. consolidated vs. coordinated governance structures.

It was agreed that the study team would look at CAVIT; NAIPTA; Eagle County, CO; Boise, ID; San Joaquin Valley, CA; and Burlington, VT. CO Springs and NW AR will be eliminated from consideration.

Deb from Maricopa asked about the seasonal winter population – how could their presence affect ridership, service, and funding? Bethany said this could be looked at, possibly by looking at transit service providers that have peak/off-peak seasons.

The meeting concluded.

The next meeting will take place in January 2020.

To-do List

TWG members – Send recommendations for stakeholder representatives by January to CT

Study team/CAG – Make PowerPoint available (website to host study materials?)

Attendees:

Travis Ashbaugh, CAG

Kathy Borquez, Pinal County

Robert Mawson, CAG

Eddie Caine, CAG

Erik Heet, City of Coolidge

Jon Vlaming, City of Eloy

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Central Arizona Governments

Marsha Ashcroft, Horizon Health and Wellness

Jill Dusenberry, ADOT

David Maestas, City of Maricopa

Deb Brunner, City of Maricopa

Audra Koester Thomas, MAG

Andy Smith, Pinal RTA

Jason Hafner, SCMPO

Duane Eitel, Casa Grande

C.T. Revere, Gordley Group

Amy Moran, Wilson & Company

Ben Bachwartz, Wilson & Company