CHAPTER SEVEN
ASSESSMENT OF COMMUNITY NEEDS

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Chapter Seven
Assessment of Community Needs

INTRODUCTION

We are a society that takes great pride in our independence and mobility. Whether speaking of upward mobility in a career, moving from state to state, or deciding to take in a Broadway show, a person’s ability to move is a symbol of success, vitality and fulfillment. Most Americans are not consciously aware that even a minimal loss of that independence, either gradual or sudden, can easily cause us to become disaffected from the simple choices we take for granted each day. While there is low general public awareness of the millions of people whose lives are governed by the simple act of getting from Point A to Point B, the fact is that individual mobility is a societal issue.

When the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed by Congress, one intent of the Act was to create full participation in American life for those individuals with disabilities. The ADA once again highlighted the critical role that mobility and access play in the vitality and health of overall social systems by providing access to economic, social, educational and cultural opportunities. The message of the ADA is one that includes and extends beyond people with disabilities in Sarasota County.

A traditional TDP or TDSP designs products and services to meet the demands of different market segments that have the greatest likelihood of utilizing those services. The STEP process, however, has a much broader goal in mind. This goal is to address mobility needs at the individual as well as the market and community levels. In this way, the STEP seeks to maximize individual mobility through community level investments. This chapter presents an assessment of community mobility needs in Sarasota County.

ASSESSMENT OF UNMET MOBILITY NEEDS IN SARASOTA COUNTY

The public involvement process in the STEP was extensive. Its purpose was to take a comprehensive approach to determining transportation needs in the county for the purpose of developing alternatives. The components of the process included:
• The establishment of a STEP Advisory Committee composed of the following community
leaders and transportation stakeholders throughout the county:

  Robert Miles  The Venice Foundation
  Phyllis Bohnenberger  WAGES
  Alex Boudreau  Sarasota County Transportation Department
  John Cross  South Biscayne Baptist Church
  Richard Dreyer  FDOT
  Ellery Girard  Sarasota County School Transportation
  Jay Goodwill  SCAT
  Phil Lieberman - SCAT
  Jerry Gray  Sarasota County Planning Department
  Barbara Grill  Citizen Advisory Committee
  Robert Herrington  Sarasota/Manatee MPO
  Beverly Kent  Senior Friendship Center
  Mark Gumula - FDOT
  J. P. Marchand  Sarasota County Transportation Department
  J. Mack Reid  Boys & Girls Clubs of Sarasota
  Dale Vollrath  Suncoast Workforce Development Board
  Ernest Gerlach  Citizen Representative
  Mike Bigner, The Venice Foundation
  Tim Dutton - Human Services Planning Association

• More than 20 community leader interviews with individuals representing government
officials, the business community, human service agencies, and citizens groups

• A written survey of more than 400 agencies, organizations, and groups providing services to
Sarasota County residents and visitors

• Three facilitated discussion groups with over 30 representatives from faith-based
organizations that provide transportation assistance, youth organization representatives,
and the Transportation Disadvantaged Local Coordinating Board

• Two community forums with involvement of local chambers of commerce in two south
county communities: Englewood and North Port
Creation of an Internet web page dedicated to the STEP process for public review and comment on the process and/or documents related to the study.

In addition to the public involvement process, other analytic techniques were used to assess transportation demand in the county, including:

- Demographic analyses;
- Evaluation of existing public transportation services; and
- Fixed-route and paratransit demand estimation.

All of the above activities have created a rich and diverse body of information far more extensive than that typically collected for transportation plans developed for other communities. The level and depth of involvement also have achieved a primary objective of the STEP, which is to develop a true community-level plan for transportation. Below is a discussion of potential market segments and unmet transportation needs of various population segments in Sarasota County. Chapter Eight will present a wide array of alternatives designed to address the levels of demand discussed in this chapter.

**Workers/employment trips**

The economic boom of the late 1990s has created greater opportunity in the employment market than at any other time in the 20th century. Unemployment rates continue to fall as wages increase and inflation holds steady. In Florida, targets for reducing welfare recipients have been exceeded as more people have voluntarily given up public assistance benefits. It is assumed these individuals are choosing to give up their benefits due to the booming employment marketplace. In spite of the favorable marketplace for employment, there remain large service sectors of the economy where unskilled or semi-skilled laborers work shifts around the clock for relatively low pay. In 1995, the service sector of the economy in Sarasota County accounted for 50 percent of the workforce, which includes professional services as well as semi-skilled jobs. In addition, as discussed in Chapter One, current projections show that of the 36,000 new jobs forecast to be created in Sarasota County by 2010, more than 28,000 will be located in unincorporated areas currently not well served by public transit.
Below are unmet transportation needs among various market segments of workers that were identified throughout the STEP process. If steps are taken to meet these demands for transportation, the market for employment will be enhanced for employees to compete for higher paying jobs and for employers to gain the most competent employees.

In addition to unmet needs, there is the possibility of enticing commuters to utilize alternative means of transportation even if they currently have other transportation options. According to the 1990 Census, 1 percent of commuters in Sarasota indicated they used public transit for work purposes, and another 12 percent used car pools and van pools. Efforts undertaken to attract discretionary riders to the transit system could increase the percentage of commuters utilizing public transit for work trips.

Second and Third Shift Workers

With the current span of service provided by the SCAT fixed-route system, second shift workers can use transit to travel to work but not home at the end of their shift. Third shift workers cannot use transit to get to work but in many cases could use it to get home. Since many second and third shift employees occupy positions in the service, manufacturing and light industrial sectors of the economy, they also are likely to be prime transit and alternative transportation markets. Fixed-route systems with limited resources often gear their services toward the standard 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM work shift since the majority of workers fall within these hours.

Weekend Service on SCAT Fixed-route System

Current weekend service includes Saturday service that operates the same level of service as weekdays. Traditionally, weekday revenue hours entail the highest number of revenue hours in the system because of frequencies, spans, and peak periods of service. A standard rule of thumb is that when Saturday service is provided, the revenue hours represent approximately 50 percent of weekday revenue hours. When Sunday service is provided, even fewer revenue hours of service are operated at approximately 33 percent of weekday revenue hours. However, because SCAT operates with service frequencies of 60 minutes and limited service coverage, reductions to 50 percent and 33 percent may not be appropriate. SCAT, however, operates no Sunday service. Again, as above, the service, manufacturing and light industrial sectors...
sectors of the economy often operate on weekends. Therefore, those working Sunday shifts cannot use fixed-route services for their transportation needs.

Direct Access to Major Employment Sites (especially along the beaches and sites near I-75)

The I-75 corridor, which spans the entire length of Sarasota County, is designated by the Sarasota County Comprehensive Plan for development of light industrial, manufacturing, warehousing and office uses. Specific areas include the University Parkway, Fruitville Road, Laurel Road, and North Port interchanges. Although the corridor will experience a high degree of development, I-75 is at the eastern edge of the urban area and not as ripe for fixed-route expansion. In addition, fixed-route systems are based on networks of routes that often do not foster direct origin-destination travel. This is especially true along the beaches, which are all served from Downtown Sarasota and require transfers for many traveling to the beaches from mainland Sarasota County.

Single-auto households

In 1990, 47 percent of all households in Sarasota County had only one vehicle available. One vehicle households with one or two working adults are often prime targets for alternative transportation products and programs since employment sites are dispersed. When it is not feasible for both household adults to coordinate transportation efforts, then the second adult must secure other means of travel whether for work or shopping and other household needs. In many instances, the existing fixed-route system cannot meet the travel needs for these types of households.

Inter-county transportation between Sarasota and Manatee/Charlotte Counties

The Highway 41 and I-75 corridors, which run through Sarasota, Manatee and Charlotte Counties, create a level of economic interdependence in the region. Unemployment in Sarasota County is low and job opportunities are high because the City of Sarasota is the largest city in the region. Currently, SCAT maintains a regional connection with the Manatee County Area Transit at the Sarasota/Bradenton airport. There, customers from both systems may transfer between buses. However, the connectivity provided by this arrangement is limited and does not begin to address the need for travel between Manatee and Sarasota Counties. Currently,
Charlotte County has no public transit service and in years past was not receptive to contracting with SCAT to provide services within that county. However, Charlotte County recently decided to invest in a community dial-a-ride service. Therefore, there are future possibilities for inter-county cooperation between Sarasota County and Manatee and Charlotte Counties.

**Children/Youth Market**

The economic boom of the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century discussed in the section above also has brought with it a cost to the millions of working moms and dads across the country. Employers are asking more of employees in order to keep the business of America growing and prospering. Whether single or dual parent households, the enormous pressures parents face regarding the welfare of their children is something we all feel, whether we have children or not. There is no greater stress for working parents in modern times than coordinating the daily lives of their children prior to, during and after school. It has to be a source of frustration for all community resources serving youth and youth-related activities, not to mention parents, that the investments in children's programs yield many wonderful opportunities for participation until the challenge of transportation inevitably enters into the mix.

From intramural sports to church programs to music lessons to activities at public parks, the opportunities to enrich and develop young minds are vast. However, transportation takes center stage in determining the level of access to these opportunities. According to the on-board survey of SCAT’s system conducted in 1999, about one in five passengers is under the age of 18. The percentage of under 18 riders (19 percent) increased over a similar on-board survey conducted in 1997 when youth ridership accounted for 11 percent of total ridership. The youth market has traditionally been a challenging market for fixed-route transit to serve based on the location of homes, schools, and activity centers to which youth may want to travel. This challenge also can be seen as an opportunity to explore creative means of maximizing youth mobility in safe and secure environments.

**Seniors and people with disabilities**

For a vast majority, personal mobility is something taken for granted. Most never realize that it is a luxury, and a potentially fleeting luxury at that. For millions of Americans, daily lives are governed and structured by the simple act of getting from Point A to Point B. In a training class with fixed-route bus operators, the instructor asked the participants to list all of the things
they might do after getting off work. Go to the bank, one said. Stop and get a video, said another. Buy groceries, said a third. The instructor then said, Now imagine that you are on a vehicle taking a demand response trip and you ask the driver if you can stop into Walgreens for a minute to buy toothpaste. The driver then responds that he/she cannot do that because he/she must drop you off in order to be on-time to make the next pick-up. The bus operators then stare with disbelief as the concepts begin to sink in.

Sarasota County is a popular retirement location and retirees in the county tend to age in place. In the 1990 Census, 40 percent of the county population was over the age of 60 compared to 24 percent for Florida, and by 1996 the median age for the county was 50.1. The highest concentrations of senior populations are in South County (Venice and North Port) and along the beaches. A recent White House Summit on Aging concentrated heavily on the issues facing seniors regarding aging and driving. As one local senior volunteer put it recently at a public workshop, seniors volunteer to take other seniors to doctors’ appointments because they realize the day is coming when they will no longer be able to drive and will require assistance themselves. This concept, the continuous replacement of generations of younger seniors assisting older seniors, is one that should be capitalized upon further in Sarasota County.

According to SCAT records, those paying half-fare (seniors and persons with disabilities) account for approximately 25 percent of overall ridership. In addition, of the 188,066 advance-reservation trips provided by Senior Friendship Centers in fiscal year 1998, 57 percent were classified as serving elderly clients (including elderly low-income and elderly-disabled). A total of 16 percent of trips served non-elderly persons with disabilities (the other 27 percent were low-income, non-disabled, non-elderly). However, mobility challenges for seniors and persons with disabilities remain a current and future issue. Services available for seniors and persons with disabilities, including accessible fixed-route service, paratransit, and ADA-mandated paratransit, help to provide for the mobility needs of these populations. However, there are still a number of operational and funding constraints that restrict access even when services are available. Funding constraints for the Transportation Disadvantaged non-sponsored program serve to limit the mobility of the populations who fit the definition of TD.

Fixed-route systems have limitations in terms of service area and frequency. Often, seniors and persons with disabilities experience difficulties in accessing, waiting for and navigating bus routes and stops. Although there may be many seniors and persons with disabilities who are physically able to use fixed-route transportation systems, many residential developments along bus routes still have many residences that are beyond the traditional catchment area for fixed-routes which is four blocks or one-quarter mile. Correspondingly, paratransit services
often have quality, availability and flexibility issues. Customers have to wait for pick-ups, must have fairly precise appointment times, must call in advance for a trip, and cannot stop at multiple destinations. As a result, there are many opportunities to explore not only enhancing fixed-route and paratransit services but also to define other or new alternatives that can be tried to serve this market.

**South County Market Area**

There is currently a geographic and psychological division between urbanized Sarasota and the areas collectively referred to as South County (Venice, North Port, Englewood, and surrounding communities). During public meetings with residents of South County, participants repeatedly expressed that, as a constituency base, the area’s transportation and other civic issues do not command comparable attention to that paid to urbanized Sarasota to the north. Compounding the issues are demographic characteristics that vary somewhat from northern portions of the County. For instance, Venice has a greater proportion of senior populations than Sarasota, and Englewood has a seasonal population up to 40 percent, much higher than most communities. Finally, both North Port and Englewood, and to a lesser extent Venice, maintain social, cultural and economic interdependence with Charlotte County.

When examining transportation issues and jurisdictional boundaries, sometimes the manmade lines take precedent over the reality of interdependence between communities. In fact, there are many services in Charlotte County (e.g. Port Charlotte, Murdock) that are more convenient and accessible to South County residents than comparable services in Sarasota County. While residents with personally owned vehicles are afforded unrestricted travel over county lines, the result of jurisdictional boundaries is an artificial line in the provision of public transportation services unless formalized agreements between counties exist.

Historically, SCAT has improved services in the Venice area as development has occurred and also has initiated regional system connections in both North Port and Englewood. Although fixed-route bus service does operate in South County, it is limited in its scope and availability. While a majority of SCAT routes operate at a frequency of one bus each hour, a majority of routes south and east of Venice only provide one bus every two hours. Bus routes, for the most part, are not easily accessed from residential areas. Correspondingly, the provision of Senior Friendship Center (SFC) operated paratransit service in South County can be expensive due to the costs of sending empty vehicles from Sarasota to make pick-ups in South County.
The issues that face South County residents with unmet transportation demand encompass all of the unmet needs discussed above with the addition of travel needs across county lines. In addition, there will continue to be transportation issues for the communities well into the future, including:

- North Port as a municipality is completely platted (designated for development) and there is little additional land available for new roads;

- North Port is designated by the Comprehensive Plan to experience the most future growth;

- There are several major developments in North Port that are in the planning and/or construction stage, including residential and multi-family residential uses;

- As development continues in North Port there will be a need to connect intra-city locations; and

- Englewood is now and will continue to be far removed from major employment centers in northern Sarasota County and new industrial centers along I-75.

**Low-income persons**

Low-income persons have long been a staple, as well as stable, transit market. In American society, social mobility is in many ways directly or intimately linked with physical mobility. When a person lacks physical mobility, they also can be socially, economically, and culturally disaffected from all the activities that comprise American life. This includes purchasing power. Everything that people purchase is influenced by the ratio of cost to personal income. For instance, a rule of thumb for homeowners is that their monthly mortgage payment should not exceed 25 percent of gross monthly income. However, for lower income persons, the rent or mortgage they pay for housing may exceed 50 percent of their income. Therefore, public transportation is a logical transportation purchase for low-income persons given its fractional cost compared to owning and operating a vehicle and relatively low percentage of income. Low-income persons also constitute many of the market segments discussed in this section, including (but not in all instances) seniors, persons with disabilities, urban and rural residents, and youth.
Economics also have an impact on the choices people make regarding residence. In the 1990 census, the highest concentrations of low income persons were found in downtown Sarasota, which is served by 15 of the 20 SCAT routes; however, affordable housing is not as abundant in downtown as other areas of the county. In fact, there are many affordable housing units, among them mobile home parks, that currently are either not served or not as well served by SCAT. For these individuals, the only other transportation options available to them are friends, families, and in some instances, taxi services. Senior Friendship Centers, in its role as CTC, is also charged with serving low-income persons under the Florida Transportation Disadvantaged Program. Usually, low-income persons served by the CTC are either elderly, disabled, or a child at-risk. Under the parameters of the TD non-sponsored program, only individuals who are not able to use the public transit system are eligible to received trips subsidized with TD Trust Fund monies. However, because the availability of trips provided through this program is limited and regulated through the implementation of trip purpose priorities, the trips desired by able-bodied low-income persons who do not live in the vicinity of a fixed-route receive low priority under the this program.

**Agencies and organizations**

In the Sarasota County Transportation Resources and Needs Survey of agencies, groups, and organizations conducted as part of the STEP, transportation to and from the agency was the most commonly cited issue making it difficult for clients and potential clients to access services. In fact, a full 55 percent of responding agencies and organizations reported unmet transportation needs, including medical, recreation, education, and shopping. While many agencies are providing transportation assistance through volunteers or agency vehicles, those resources are limited or stretched thin and often there are not designated drivers. Therefore, even agencies with resources often cannot accommodate all of the transportation needs they would like to provide, including group trips to special events and/or field trips and weekend service.

**ASSESSMENT OF COMMUNITY NEEDS: SUMMARY**

The discussion of unmet transportation needs in this chapter has been addressing the subject of travel. This is what transportation enhancement in Sarasota really means: the concept of individuals traveling wherever and whenever they choose. In the alternatives discussed in Chapter Eight, there is a concentration on achieving the ideal of addressing transportation
needs at the individual level. Just as it is likely that it takes a village to raise a child, full realization of the STEP will require a community effort that brings together formerly disparate pieces of the mobility puzzle to form a cohesive, collaborative village that nurtures opportunity for its children of all ages. The alternatives presented in the next chapter provide a blueprint vision of what this village could look like.