

Chapter 6

PUBLIC TRANSIT

A well utilized and accessible public transit system is the backbone to any successful transportation system. It is critical to connect consumers to employment centers, educational centers, the medical community, and quality of life functions, as well as access/connection to other modes of transportation. Public transit provides a vital link to those in the community who do not have access to a car, or those who are physically or economically disadvantaged. The public transit system of Herkimer-Oneida Counties is that vital element and backbone of the two-county regional transportation system. It is a system of public and private operators working jointly to provide the best service to the region's consumers.

Urban Transit Operator- Centro¹

On April 1, 2005, Oneida County joined Central New York Regional Transportation Authority (CNYRTA), which assumed all operations of the Utica Transit Authority (UTA). The following October, CNYRTA assumed the operations of the Rome VIP Transportation, providing transit services for the City of Rome. At that time, the State of New York provided significant capital assistance to immediately rehabilitate the transit bus fleet and maintenance facility, which had fallen into a state of disrepair.

Private Transit Operator – Birnie Bus Service, Inc.²

Birnie Bus Service, Inc. (BBS) is a privately owned company that provides interurban transportation in Central New York from Syracuse to Little Falls, and rural public transportation in Oneida, Herkimer and Madison Counties. The fares charged by BBS are on a zone-to-zone system in accordance with an approved tariff. BBS has its major office and garage facilities in Rome, New York. BBS transported over 43,000 passengers on its line-haul segment in 2011.

In January 2004, the public transit services previously provided by the Utica-Rome Bus Company, Inc. (Coach USA) and Oneida County Rural Transit had changed. In an expanded agreement with Oneida County, Birnie Bus Service began providing a changed service in its line haul operation in the Mohawk Valley Corridor. Birnie Bus Service took over the public transportation service from the Utica-Rome Bus Company. Birnie Bus Service also became the new operator of the expanded Oneida County Rural Transit services for Oneida County (OCRT), in which they took over the rural transportation service from the Oneida County Office for the Aging. The rural service provided public transit to passengers who need service from and to the non-urbanized rural area to and from the urbanized area. OCRT transported over 23,000 passengers in 2013.

¹ Central New York Regional Transit Authority

² Birnie Bus Service, Inc.

Mobility Transit Planning³

Federal Requirements

The new two-year transportation authorization bill, MAP-21 effective October 1, 2012 to September 30, 2014, consolidates certain transit programs to improve their efficiency. The requirement, originally established under SAFETEA-LU, for MPOs to coordinate with human services agencies and public transit operator to develop a coordinated plan remains a requirement in MAP-21. Although there are changes to the transportation grant programs human service agencies and public transit use, the Urban Area Formula Grants (Section 5307), the Enhanced Mobility for Seniors and Individuals with Disabilities (Section 5310), and the Rural Area Formula Grant (Section 5311) will continue to be the core FTA grant programs of coordination efforts.

6.1 EXISTING ASSETS

Urban Transit Operator

Centro of Oneida - Utica

Centro of Oneida's Utica operation consists of fixed route and demand-response services in the City of Utica and the Towns of New Hartford, Whitestown and Kirkland. The fixed route system is comprised of eleven routes operating in a pulsed, time-transfer system with schedules coordinated at Centro's Transit Hub located between Bleecker and Elizabeth Streets in Downtown Utica. Complementary Centro Call-A-Bus demand-responsive service is provided to individuals with disabilities who are unable to use the regular route transit system and who meet the criteria established by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. Both the regular route and demand-responsive services are based at the Centro maintenance and operations facility located at 185 Leland Avenue in Utica. Centro of Oneida – Utica's fleet is comprised of 32 vehicles, including twenty-four 35 foot transit coaches, seven 26 foot vehicles and one van used in Call-A-Bus service. Heavy duty transit coaches typically last twelve years in fixed-route use. The average age of the fixed-route fleet in Utica is 2.8 years. Centro of Oneida – Utica transports in excess of one million riders annually in fixed route and demand-responsive service in over 900,000 revenue miles of service.

Centro of Oneida – Rome

Centro of Oneida's Rome operation consists of fixed route and demand-responsive services in the City of Rome. The fixed route system consists of six routes operating in a pulsed, time-transfer system with schedules coordinated at Centro's George Street terminal at 225 Liberty Street. Complementary Centro Call-A-Bus demand-responsive service is provided to individuals with disabilities who are unable to use Centro's regular route transit system and who meet the criteria established by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. Centro's maintenance facility is located on Race-Martin Street Station in Rome. The Centro of Oneida – Rome fleet comprises seven vehicles, including five transit coaches larger than 26-feet and two 26-foot long demand-responsive vehicles. The average age of the fixed-route vehicle fleet in Rome is 4.3 years. Centro of Oneida – Rome transports 164,000 riders annually in fixed-route and demand-responsive service in over 211,000 revenue miles of service.

³ HOCTS 2012 Coordinated Plan Update, Parkway Center's 2012 New Freedom Application

Rural Transit Operator

Capital

Between both the Oneida County Rural Transit and the Four County Line Run, Birnie Bus Tours, Inc. operates and maintains 16 Oneida County owned service vehicles. Four vehicles were newly purchased in 2013 and two vehicles are in the process of being retired. Five of these buses are operated under the Four County Line Run and ten under Oneida County Rural Transit. All, except for two, are wheelchair accessible. Birnie Bus Tours maintains and operates one maintenance truck for the purpose of servicing the Oneida County fleet. This vehicle is also owned by Oneida County.

Services

BBS provides area residents with coach line service between Utica and Rome along Route 69, with route deviation onto Route 69. Also as of January 1st 2004, BBS took over rural transportation service from the Oneida County Office for the Aging, providing public transit to passengers who need service out of the non-urbanized area and within the non-urbanized area. The thirteen route deviation transportation services are provided Monday through Friday. The rural transportation service area includes Boonville, Utica, Camden, Remsen, Floyd, Chadwicks, Rome, Sauquoit, Taberg, Waterville, Bridgewater, Sauquoit, Vernon and Barneveld.

Human Service Contracts

BBS is a large provider of human services transportation in Oneida County holding contracts with; Developmental Disabilities Services Office (DDSO), The ARC of Oneida-Lewis Chapter, Upstate Cerebral Palsy (UCP), Vocational & Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities (VESID), Ava Dorfman Senior Center, YMCA, Resource Center for Independent Living (RCIL) and others. Birnie operates a number of Section 5310 funded vehicles via operating lease with the grant recipient.

ADA Paratransit

Under Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, public transportation systems are required to provide ride services for people with disabilities when mobility limitations prevent them from using the transit bus. Such services are called demand response as they typically are initiated by an individual request for service from the disabled customer. ADA regulations expressly define the types of service, the accessibility features required on all transit vehicles, the eligibility criteria and application processes, and parameters for scheduling rides.

Major ADA service criteria include:

- *Definition of the Service Area* – $\frac{3}{4}$ mile to either side of the bus route.
- *Service Requests* – requests taken during normal business hours with a mim. of 24 hrs notice.
- Trips must be delivered within scheduled time.
- *Fares* not to exceed twice the fixed route fare.
- *Trip Purpose Restrictions* trips cannot be prioritized based on purpose or type of disability.
- *Hours and Days of Service* to match that of the fixed route service.
- *Service Restrictions* – it is illegal to limit transportation to an eligible customer for any of the following:

To limit the number of trips that a customer can request

To offer untimely pick up times

- To offer trips with excessive lengths or ride times
- To deny an eligible trip
- To create a waiting list for eligible customers who wish to use the service

Mobility Transit Planning

Transportation Coordination Committee

Established under the SAFETEA-LU requirement, the HOCTS Transportation Coordination Committee (TCC) was formed in 2007 and helped shape the *2008 Coordinated Public Transit-Human Services Transportation Plan for Herkimer and Oneida Counties*, which was adopted in June of 2008. The committee's purpose is to foster cooperation and facilitate a coordinated process of comprehensive transportation planning on behalf of the target populations. Its members include public and private transportation providers, not-for-profit transportation providers, human service providers, governmental social service agencies, transportation planning agencies, the general public, and other stakeholders. A total of 29 human services agencies, transit operators, and state and local government representatives attended the initial TCC meeting in 2007. As of June 2012, the TCC membership has grown to a total of 40 agencies and 52 members.

Since 2009, HOCTS staff had received comments from human service agencies and the community on the need for more transportation coordination and options, more transportation-related partnerships, and cost-cutting measures in the delivery of transportation services for customers. This caused the need to reconvene the TCC on a regular basis to discuss and plan for the necessity for a more of a holistic approach to transportation options and modes to move people to where and when they need to go. The TCC is a formal setting with the goal of bringing together transportation service providers and programs to identify needs and barriers, and brainstorm ways to address these gaps in a coordinated planning effort.

This holistic approach is found in the concept of Mobility Management, which is one of the strategies of the 2012 Coordinated Plan Update. The Mobility Management concept addresses the identified needs of: eliminating duplication of services, public education of current transportation options, a single point of access for all transportation options, and more accessible transportation options. It would also address the need for increased rural service, affordability for any population, increased volunteer drivers, expanded bus routes, and sustainable funding streams. This concept would be achieved by the development of a mobility management transportation network that could accommodate individualized transportation options involving multiple modes of transportation. Mobility Management is a strategic approach for managing and delivering coordinated transportation services to a designated area. It connects individuals with unique mobility needs to the most appropriate transportation mode and provider. This increased mobility management effort will be a catalyst for future guidance of the committee and coordination activities.

Figure 6.1, HOCTS Transportation Coordination Committee

Agencies represented on the HOCTS Transportation Coordination Committee (As of March 2014)	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The ARC, Oneida-Lewis Chapter, NYSARC 2. Ava Dorfman Senior Center 3. Birnie Bus Services, Inc. 4. Catholic Charities of Herkimer County 5. Central Association for the Blind & Visually Impaired 6. Central New York Labor Agency 7. Central New York Regional Transportation Authority 8. Central New York Veteran’s Outreach Center 9. CENTRO of Oneida 10. Commission for the Blind and Visually Handicapped 11. Community Transportation Service- Old Forge 12. Cornell Cooperative Extension-Oneida County 13. Cornerstone Community Church 14. Faxton Sunset – St. Luke’s Health Care Center 15. Folts Home 16. Herkimer Area Resource Center 17. Herkimer County Department of Social Services 18. Herkimer County HealthNet, Inc. 19. Herkimer County Office for the Aging 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 20. Human Technologies Corporation 21. Kids Oneida Inc. 22. LutheranCare 23. Medical Answering Services 24. Mohawk Homestead 25. Mohawk Valley Healthcare Center 26. Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees 27. NYS Department of Transportation Region 2 & Main Office 28. Oneida County Department of Social Services 29. Oneida County Office for the Aging and Continuing Care 30. Oneida-Indian Nation & Nation Legal Dept. 31. Parkway Center 32. Presbyterian Home 33. Rescue Mission 34. Resource Center for Independent Living 35. Rome Memorial Hospital 36. Sitrin Health Care Center 37. St. Joseph’s Nursing Home 38. Valley Health Services, Inc. 39. Vocational & Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities (VESID) 40. Workforce Investment Board

6.2 HIGHLIGHTS SINCE LAST LRTP

Urban Transit Operator

Since 2009, numerous capital improvements have been made to the Centro of Oneida garages in Utica and Rome. In addition, 24 of the 31 older vehicles assigned to the Utica Garage have been replaced and in Rome, four of the seven vehicles have been replaced. An aging inventory of bus shelters in Utica were all replaced. Most significantly, in 2013/2014 the Authority installed a new Intelligent Transportation System (ITS) on all buses in its two Oneida County garages. The purpose of this project is to provide cellular mobile voice and data communications between the

Authority's operations centers and buses in the field. This will assist in the management of Centro's fixed route and demand-responsive operations, allowing the Authority to fine tune service and quickly identify and respond to operating anomalies. Information regarding anticipated bus arrival time at bus stops can now be provided to customers on a real-time basis. Other benefits include provision of real-time arrival information at strategically placed dynamic message signs in public places and on the internet, automated vehicle stop announcements, vehicle performance monitoring and automated passenger counters.

In February 2013, Centro of Oneida opened a new transit hub in downtown Utica at 15 Elizabeth Street in collaboration with the City of Utica. This facility replaces the Authority's main bus stop on Genesee Street in downtown Utica, which exposed transit passengers to all the unpredictable weather related events common in Central New York. The new facility provides a climate controlled waiting area with restrooms, customer service information, dynamic messaging signs, fare media vending kiosks, bicycle racks and space for Centro dispatching. Covered platforms allow assignment of specific routes to dedicated platforms permitting passengers a greater degree of comfort in completing their trips. Overall the facility has enhanced the users comfort and safety, ultimately complementing the Centro operation.

Rural Transit Operator

As of January 1, 2011 the NYSDOT has assumed sponsorship and oversight of the four county Commuter Service from Little Falls to Syracuse. Funding needs continue to remain on the TIP, but Oneida County no longer serves as a pass through for the associated operating and capital funds.

Mobility Transit Planning

Coordinated Public Transit-Human Services Transportation Plan for Herkimer and Oneida Counties: 2012 Update

The 2012 Coordinated Plan Update builds upon the initial 2008 Coordinated Plan with a more comprehensive vision of coordination, sustainability, and desired future mobility options to address the Plan's identified needs and gaps. This will be achieved by the three following visions for the two-county area:

1. To shift the focus of transportation services from static transit operator schedules to quality customer focused transportation services for individuals and targeted populations, by developing a community transportation system.
2. Encourage the coordination of resources for federally-assisted grantees to reduce duplication, increase service efficiency, maximizing the use of federally-funded assets, and to increase access for the low-income, older adults, and persons with disabilities
3. Raise public awareness of the coordination efforts through the strengthening of the Transportation Coordination Committee, by public education of mobility services, and expanded participation in community efforts of mobility management of transportation services.

Transportation Coordination Committee

At the October 2013 TCC meeting, committee members ranked the priority of Coordinated project ideas, which were developed by the members, for the MPO to pursue as short term and long term projects. This list will be reviewed annually by the committee members and MPO staff for progress, funding opportunities, evaluation, and new project ideas. The overall

consensus of the committee was that there is a need to conduct an inventory of existing transportation-related agencies, services they provide, vehicle inventories, schedules, and routes. The inventory is necessary before any major coordination project is developed. Discussions will be ongoing with the MPO and the committee members.

Mobility Management

In 2013, Parkway Center, Utica, NY applied for and was awarded the 2012 New Freedom Program grant and hired a Mobility Manager in December 2013. The goal of the Oneida and Herkimer mobility management program is to provide public education to individuals about available transportation services within the Counties that will enable them to meet their basic needs. The role of a mobility manager will be to provide a single point of access for transportation information, to coordinate and market available transportation options, and to facilitate communication between public and private transportation service providers. The Parkway Center will meet this need through education to consumers, creating a website that houses transportation information for the Counties and marketing alternative transportation options, including ridesharing, public transit and volunteer driver services.

6.3 CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Urban Transit Operator

Centro of Oneida, Inc., as a wholly owned subsidiary of CNYRTA shares the Authority's mission and challenges. Centro of Oneida also has challenges and opportunities discrete to Oneida County. Among the latter is a critical need for a new bus maintenance facility in Utica. The current facility, which is leased from Oneida County, lies in the Mohawk River flood plain. The Mohawk River floods periodically, particularly in Spring as the snowpack melts. When it floods, the Utica facility becomes uninhabitable. While arrangements have been made to store buses elsewhere temporarily, this is clearly an unsustainable arrangement. Planning has begun to identify appropriate sites, but no capital funding is currently available, given the Authority's other capital funding needs.

In addition to significant capital constraints, CNYRTA, and other upstate providers of public transit services, are faced with persistent shortfalls in operating funding. State operating aid and County tax receipts began to decline in 2008 with the advent of the economic recession. As a result, CNYRTA was forced to raise fares and reduce services beginning in 2009. Continuing budgetary shortfalls forced the Authority to reduce service again in 2010 and yet again 2011. During those years, all CNYRTA operating subsidiaries in the four county service area, including Centro of Oneida, were stripped of their least effective services. While the most recent budgetary cycle resulted in no additional decrease in operating aid, the ability of upstate systems to grow with demand and support economic expansion has been eliminated. Further declines in State aid will compromise the Authority's ability to fulfill its core mission.

Major structural deficiencies in transit and capital and operating funding threaten public transit services in upstate New York. Revenue from the Petroleum Business Tax, the largest source of upstate transit operating funding, is forecast in the State budget to decline through 2020, posing a significant challenge for any future increases. The structure of State operating funding created 30 years ago cannot sustain the transit services necessary to grow the upstate economy.

The State's transit infrastructure requires consistent capital investment to maintain a state of good repair and provide safe, reliable service to the public. Unpredictable and inadequate funding continues to impede the ability to plan for even routine capital replacement. The transit infrastructure of upstate transit systems is funded almost exclusively (80%) by Federal aid, with the remainder being State and local matching funds. Capital funding for all upstate transit systems is dependent on annual appropriations in the State budget. While funding for upstate capital projects has been appropriated since 2006-07, it was not made available to upstate transit systems until SFY 2013-14, when the State provided \$21 million for Non-MTA capital projects. Without a sustained State infrastructure funding program, capital needs continue to accrue, slowing infrastructure investments that could improve the condition of vehicles and facilities and provide the added capacity to meet new demands for service. These capital funds are needed more than ever, as federal transit funding has remained flat while federal discretionary programs to address capital needs no longer exist.

Rural Transit Operator

In spite of increased mandates and system operating costs the Transit services BBS provided since 2004 have stayed substantially intact. With the help of Oneida County Planning sponsorship of coordination meetings, both providers and consumers of Transit have kept in touch helping to promote visibility and system awareness. Although system ridership has increased in the past few years, maintaining ridership gains is always a challenge. Other known challenges to overcome are system image, marketability and keeping technologically current. These elements can have direct impacts, positively or negatively on the system.

Mobility Transit Planning

Sustainable future funding is always a challenge. Federal and NYSDOT operating assistance and capital funding are determined by the current Federal transportation legislation. Government transportation regulations from current and future federal transportation legislation dictate the transportation programs and funding for the transit operators. Appropriate number of staff and staff time to manage the federal transportation legislation and mandates on a local level needs to be taken in consideration.

Transit Capital

Note: Figure 6.2 and Figure 6.3 are for illustrative 20-year estimates purposes only and may not be current after date of publishing.

Figure 6.2, Total Estimated 20-Year Transit Funding

Total Estimated 20-Year Transit Funding	
Federal Transit Administration (FTA) Programs	
Section 5307 Urban Operating	\$70,466,740
Combination of Section 5307, 5309, 5339 Transit Capital, and NYSSDF	\$31,845,600
Section 5311f Rural Operating Intercity	\$10,500,000
Section 5311 Rural Operating	\$2,200,000
Section 5311 Transit Capital	\$14,036,800
New York State Share	
Section 5307 Urban Operating	\$57,400,000
Combination of Section 5307, 5309, 5339 Transit Capital, and NYSSDF	\$7,438,700
Section 5311f Rural Operating Intercity	\$4,410,000
Section 5311 Rural Operating	\$924,000
Section 5311 Transit Capital	\$1,754,600
Local Share	
Section 5307 Urban Operating	\$8,449,280
Combination of Section 5307, 5309, 5339 Transit Capital, and NYSSDF	\$3,980,700
Section 5311f Rural Operating Intercity	\$4,410,000
Section 5311 Rural Operating	\$924,000
Section 5311 Transit Capital	\$1,754,600
Federal Total	\$129,049,140
New York State Total	\$71,927,300
Local Total	\$19,518,580
Total Estimated 20-Year Funding	\$220,495,020

*Source: 2011-2015 TIP, Centro of Oneida, and Birnie Bus Service, Inc.

Figure 6.3, Estimated 20-Year Transit Capital & Operating Needs

Estimated 20-Year Transit Capital & Operating Needs*		
Capital		
Transit Operator	Projected Capital Projects	Total Cost Estimates
Centro of Oneida-Utica	30 Replacement Buses	\$12,750,000
	31 Paratransit Vehicles	\$2,790,000
	New Transit Garage	\$20,000,000
Centro of Oneida -Rome	9 Replacement Buses	\$3,825,000
	10 Paratransit Vehicles	\$900,000
Centro of Oneida	Various bus shelters, supervisory and	
	Service vehicles for Utica and Rome	\$3,000,000
Birnie Bus Tours	9 Fixed Route Intercity	\$5,945,000
	38 Rural Route	\$11,450,000
	5 Other Vehicles	\$151,000
Total Capital		\$60,811,000
Operating		
Transit Operator	Projected Capital Projects	Total Cost Estimates
Centro of Oneida	5307 Operating Assistance	\$136,316,020
Birnie Bus Tours	Rural 5311f Intercity Operating Assistance	\$19,320,000
	Rural 5311 Operating Assistance	\$4,048,000
Total Operating		\$159,684,020
Combined Capital and Operating 20-Year Estimates		\$220,495,020

*Source: 2011-2015 TIP, Centro of Oneida, and Birnie Bus Service, Inc.

6.4 PRIORITIES AND PROJECTS

Urban Transit Operator

Transit systems in upstate New York are enjoying unprecedented growth in ridership, productivity and popularity, despite weathering years of stagnant and unpredictable funding. By raising fares, streamlining service and creating new business models, transit agencies across upstate have made tough decisions to maintain core services in their communities. In Oneida County, the long range goal of CNYRTA is to maintain the public investment in the physical plant in a state of good repair while providing efficient, effective transit mobility to the populace.

In the short term, the overriding capital investment most needed is a new garage maintenance facility. It is anticipated that any such facility must be sized to accommodate the combined fleets of the current Utica and Rome garages.

Rural Transit Operator

It is difficult to envision increased funding for “new” projects thus BBS’ focus is on the continuance of existing services and vehicle replacement with an eye on incremental service shifts that will better serve the ridership. Having said this, efforts have been made to increase advertising and further invest in website development.

Rural transit does have an opportunity to expand service. As the population within the two-counties continually seeks to live in the rural areas connections are still need to the urban center. This provides opportunities through review of existing routes and identifying areas of potential re-organization or expansion.

Rural transit is also seen to have an opportunity in providing service for seasonal opportunities or areas where a large tourism industry exists. This could include localized service between neighboring vacation towns for those people vacationing there, thus reducing seasonal roadway congestion. Another option would be to provide service based on attractions or seasonal activities. This could include additional runs into wooded areas during the autumn for “leaf-peeping” or providing service along the Erie Canalway corridor to support tourism.

Mobility Transit Planning

Mobility transit planning opens the door to many projects which can be undertaken to increase the overall mobility within the transit system and through connections to other modes of transportation. One effort the MPO is planning to undertake is the completion of a system wide base level analysis for transit resource, provides, rolling stock, generators and needs within the entire two-county area. This effort will be outlined and progressed through the UPWP annual work program.

The continuation of the TCC will be a critical element to successfully growing the transit mobility in the region. The TCC has a membership that is very interested in working together to find solutions to get their customers, especially in rural areas, the needed transportation for medical appointments, employment, groceries, quality of life issues, and to deter isolation. As the TCC grows and has small successes, the membership is expected to grow. Ideally the TCC will branch out to include linkages to other transit using populations that have not been identified as special needs populations (i.e. college students, neighborhood residents, tourism sites). The TCC is viewed as the coordinating arm in the large context of transit mobility.

A priority project to continue is The Parkway Center Mobility Management program. The objectives of the program are to develop program materials, including online resources, printed materials and workshop curriculums, meet with local program and services providers in the transportation sector, and pilot educational workshops in the community. In person workshops, peer based travel training, a comprehensive website and printed materials will be developed to help reach the intended audiences. This program is planned to ultimately fill a large void in the communication network and help to share the resources available across the region.

CONCLUSION

The transit system is one area where the MPO can realize increased system capacity and functionality. The diverse landscape of the MPO, with urban and rural areas necessitates creating quality linkages to allow people to move between these areas. Expansion of rural transit opportunities, re-organization of urban systems, tie-ins in to seasonal and tourism based activity centers and populations looking for alternatives to automobile all create an opportunity for growth. Mobility is a driving priority of this plan and the transit system, as outlined above, is poised to be the mechanism that makes mobility truly a reality within the MPA.