

# Application: SPAR- Spruce Pine Access Route

Mitchell County Transportation  
Community Rides Grant Program

## Summary

**ID:** 8424210784

**Status:** Final Report

**Last submitted:** Oct 11 2022 10:14 AM (EDT)

## Final Report Form

**Completed** - Apr 27 2023

The purpose of this report is to document the strategies you implemented for this project, the outcomes, and to help others learn from your experience. Please be honest about any challenges you faced, or things you would have done differently. Some of the information and photos/graphics from this report may be made available to the public, but we will get your permission in advance.

All boxes on the form can be expanded. There are no character limits, but be as concise as you can, while including all pertinent information and data you have collected. Most questions are required, but some are optional. For the uploads, you can upload multiple files if needed. If you prefer to submit your report as a Word document, you can [download this list of the questions](#) and send your responses to your project manager.

This report is due no later than March 31, 2023.

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This report is due April 30, 2023.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Please provide a 1-3 paragraph summary with the crux of what people need to know about your project and the key outcomes.

Mitchell County Transportation applied for the Community Rides Grant to address pedestrian traffic in & around the town of Spruce Pine, NC. Our project was specifically trying to address highways 19E and 226. Most pedestrian traffic was to Walmart a 4.2-mile walk, taking 1.5 hours. This 4.2 mile walk has no sidewalks, no roadside shoulder and has steep embankments. In some places pedestrians have no choice but to walk in the road with traffic passing at 55mph.

We had never operated a fixed route in Mitchell County. Developing a route, locating stopping points, establishing times and considering shelters was all a learning experience. We created a committee that spent hours riding, timing, branding, and promoting the project. Our partner, the Town of Spruce Pine, immediately started helping to design the route. They providing a parking space for the vehicle with security and lighting. They were a very valuable partner in helping to promote the project with manpower to deliver flyers, rack cards, and putting up bus stop signs.

The Pine Line was proving to be a success when the unthinkable happened. Mitchell Transportation and the Pine Line got caught up in a multigenerational feud between the city and the county. With an election in the future, the mayor of the town spoke at a county commissioners meeting asking the county to be the sole funder for the project once the grant was finished. The Pine Line received much chatter on social media with town tax payers and county tax payers weighing in on which should fund the Pine Line in the future. Town citizens saw this as a county project and county citizens saw this as a town project. In the end, the transportation director was asked to seek funding from a private grant for an additional year of funding. They wanted time for a committee to seek private funding for at least some of the cost of salaries and fuel to operate the project. Looking back, we never anticipated sustainable funding to be an issue. We blindly thought that if we proved the project to be a success that the funding would come. What we would do differently would be to look for outside funding sources on the very first day of operation. We would have formed a committee on day 1 to be out in the community meeting and talking with possible funders. Another problem that we encountered was our EDC director had resigned and shortly after the Chamber Director resigned. Our NRTAP project manager was extremely helpful and strongly suggested we work with our Chamber of Commerce to seek future funding. We struggled with getting an appointment with the new director or them taking any interest in helping promote transportation. What transportation did not know was the Chamber and County were in their own discussion. In the end the county cut funding for the chamber. Mitchell County was forming a Travel and Tourism Board. We are currently communicating with the TTB asking them to help promote transportation and to seek funding for the fixed route in the town of Spruce Pine.

## TELL YOUR PROJECT'S STORY - Who, What, Where, When, Why & How

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### Describe where your agency is located and the service area for the project.

Mitchell County NC is located in the northwestern region of North Carolina. We are a rural mountain county named after Dr. Elisha Mitchell that discovered Mt. Mitchell, elevation 6,684 in 1835 making it the highest point east of the Mississippi River. Mitchell County has steep curvy roads, with mostly no shoulders, some areas do not even have guard rails. The town of Spruce Pine is 6 miles from milepost 318 on the Blue Ridge Parkway. In 2020 the census records record the county population as 14,903, and the town of Spruce Pine as 2,222. Mitchell County is a tier 1 county, meaning we are among one of the most distressed counties in NC.

One round on the Pine Line is 16.6 miles and takes one hour and has 10 stops. The Pine Line weaves in and out of the city limits stopping at key areas. The route runs for 12 hours, 5 days a week.

### What was the problem or need that this project hoped to address?

The Pine Line was to get pedestrian traffic off of major highways that have no sidewalks. Success! Now the only time you see pedestrian's walking those highways are late afternoons and weekends.

### What were the original project goals and did they change at all over time?

The original project had no specific numbers in mind. Plain and simple we had no idea that a D/fixed route would work in our small rural mountain county or in the town of Spruce Pine. We knew of no small town in the state of NC that had a fixed route. Our goal was to see no pedestrian traffic along hwy. 226 at Grassy Creek. Again, we have accomplished this goal with the exception of when we are not operating.

The only way our project has changed is we have discontinued some stops that were not performing well and added new stops that were requested. These stops are at the public park and long term care facility. And like we stated above we changed the hours from 6am-6pm to 7am-7pm.

**Who were your project partners? Who was your most effective partner?**

Our project partner was the town of Spruce Pine. They were instrumental in helping to plan the route. They have provided us with a secure, lighted parking lot, office space for our drivers to secure tablets and keys and they are providing fuel for the last 5 months of this fiscal year. They were very effective with the implementation of our project and they have been a very vocal and loud cheerleader for the Pine Line.

**Who was the target audience for the project?**

Residents within the city limits of Spruce Pine and outlying areas were our targeted audience. The Pine Line route was designed with stops at 5 public housing complexes, 2 grocery stores, 1 bus shelter located in the center of town, 1 stop at the local community college, and 1 stop at the public park and long-term care facility. We mainly were trying to address pedestrian traffic of workers trying to get to the fast food restaurants and multi-price-point chain discount variety stores.

**What strategies did you use to implement the project?**

We worked immediately once we received notice that we had received the grant on promoting the project. We hit the ground running with articles in the local weekly newspaper, radio, social media, county website, town of Spruce Pine website, flyers, and signage. We put up yard signs at the housing projects telling the residents to be watching for the route starting Nov.1st. You had to be in another county to not know that the Pine Line was coming. We also went around to the community civic groups talking about the new route and what we hoped would be a huge success and IT IS. We were prepared for it to take time for the Pine Line to catch on, however, that was not the case. The Pine Line had riders on the very first day.

**What resources did you use? (e.g., outside funding, technology, technical assistance, consultant expertise, training, partners, etc.)**

Mitchell Transportation had asked for an extension to our fleet of a 22' LTV before we even knew about the Community Rides grant. We received this vehicle 2 months before our grant began. We rebranded this LTV specifically for the Pine Line project. This has been our favorite branding to date. The Pine Line vehicle looks very different from our demand response vehicles. To purchase this vehicle, we used 5311 Capital funding. We purchased the fixed route module software from our software provider Tripmaster. This was paid for by the county. The county also provides our HR, they pay for training, benefits, IT and all other indirect costs. We purchased our shelter and bench. We also ordered our bike rack. These three items were purchased from the RTAP funding. Due to Covid-19 these items took almost one year to receive. Last but not least, the land for the bus shelter was donated to us by the former Spruce Pine town manager which owns the long time family property.

**Did the project follow your anticipated timeline? If not, why?**

Our Community Rides project got off the ground in record time. We received notice that we had received the funding in Sept. By having the vehicle we were able to get the fixed route off the ground Nov. 1st. We think this was amazing for our first time starting a fixed route. We were prepared for it to take some time for the Pine Line to catch on with the riders, however, that was not the case. The Pine Line had riders on the very first day.

**Please upload a map and/or other images that help provide context or demonstrate the impact of your project.**

[Pine Line QR ad.pdf](#)

**Filename:** Pine Line QR ad.pdf **Size:** 488.5 kB

[New Hours.pub](#)

**Filename:** New Hours.pub **Size:** 484.9 kB

**Is there a web site or page where one could learn more about your services related to this project?**

[www.mitchellcountync.gov](http://www.mitchellcountync.gov) <https://www.facebook.com/mitchellcountytransportation>

**OUTCOMES, IMPACT & PERFORMANCE MEASURES**

**What were the project outcomes? Did you achieve your project goals?**

11,180 times a passenger has crossed the threshold of the Pine Line. The Pine Line has become for #1 a safe zone, we transportation to food pantries, drug stores, employment, recreation, visit a loved one in long term care, shopping, laundry, medical, and last but not least, socialization. Of all the funny things, some of the riders of the Pine Line dressed up for Halloween and went to lunch together. How can you not laugh at that?

Did we achieve our goals? Yes! You do not see pedestrians walking Hwy. 226 at Grassy Creek during the hours the Pine Line is operating.

**What impact has this project had on passengers, partners, the transit agency, and/or the broader community?**

It was brought to the city and counties attention not long after the project began that the Pine Line was a life line. Riders quickly started writing, calling, talking on social media about how much this project was needed. Something that pedestrians didn't even know they could access (public transportation) or did not have the money for, quickly became as important as water. It gave independence, reliability, affordability, socialization, and safety.

**If you have testimonials from people impacted by the project, please share them here, ideally with their name and who they are (rider, partner, etc.). You could also share a link to any video testimonials.**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=62vfXIQ4n5E&t=3s>

**Please share your performance measures here and/or as a chart or spreadsheet attachment in the next question.**

The Pine Line has had 11,180 passengers to board. That means in the 15 months of the project 11,180 times someone with a deficiency in transportation has got to where they wanted or needed to go.

**Upload at least one chart (or spreadsheet) to show the data you collected for your performance measures and the impact of your project.**

[Pine Line total units.xlsx](#)

**Filename:** Pine Line total units.xlsx **Size:** 16.8 kB

**Were your initial performance measures valuable, or how have they changed? How will you measure the value of this project going forward?**

Initial Performance Measures, we had none. Plain and simple we had no idea that a D/fixed route would work in our small rural county or in the town of Spruce Pine. We knew of no town our size in the state of NC that had a fixed route.

How will we measure going forward? By the numbers and by distributing surveys. We only see the Pine Line growing. We have seen lives changed because of the Pine Line. In the short life of 15 months passengers riding the Pine Line have been able to secure full time jobs due to dependable transportation. Passengers have been able to go from being homeless, or living in old motel rooms to clean apartments. One couple has been able to purchase a car and rent a home out of town. They couldn't have done this until they had dependable transportation to work. One sight impaired gentleman was able to take his wife out to eat for the first time in years. She passed away the first of the year and he boarded the Pine Line one Monday morning and asked for a ride to the funeral home to make her arrangements. That shows how the Pine Line is meeting the needs for all aspects in life, from the cradle to the grave. Social determinants to health, we feel we are doing our part. Hospital, doctor's offices, food pantries to the rec. park with bike routes, pool, walking trails, skate boarding, to the long-term care facility across the road, we can proudly say we are meeting a huge part of the need in social determinants of health.

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## **ACCOMPLISHMENTS, CHALLENGES & LESSONS LEARNED**

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**What about this project are you most proud of?**

We are very proud to say we are a success! We were needed! The people that laughed at our idea, had no idea. We saw a need, we saw people walking a dangerous road, in bad weather, in the dark, and we have met the challenge for the most part. We still have a dream of later hours and at least Saturday service.

**What challenges or barriers did you face, internal or external?**

Politics! And to a certain extent we still face it. The county want the town to fund at least part, this is internal. The city wants to county to own it 100%, this is external. Our committee is looking for outside funding that would be a source of funding for salaries and fuel going forward.

**What would you do differently if you had the chance?**

What we would do differently? We would go in asking the town for more in-kind contributions. Then, we would start work immediately on sustainable funding, even before we knew if the project would be a success or not.

**If another transit agency was about to start a similar project, what would you want them to know? What could other stakeholders (government agencies, local businesses, advocates, riders, etc.) learn from your project?**

Politics is alive and well. Do not have the assumption that old opinions and politics have changed. Know your partners and have a commitment from them right from the start. Put a funding committee together at the beginning of your project. Give the committee your stats monthly so they can be sharing those with possible funding streams. Don't delay looking for sustainable funding.

**Are there any other files you would like to upload that demonstrate the project outcomes? (e.g., updated marketing materials, reports from consultants, etc.)**

**PROJECT SUSTAINABILITY**

**What is the future of the project or service? Is ongoing funding secured?**

We have applied for two grants for FY24. If we do not receive these the county is prepared to take on the salaries for the Pine Line. Spruce Pine has stated they would supply the fuel. So, the Pine Line is secure for the immediate future. We will do our best to find sustainable funding from business partners, hospital, TTB, and outside sources for the foreseeable future.

**How will your partnership(s) continue after this project?**

The town of Spruce Pine along with the COG distributed a planning survey last fall. The survey showed that the citizens of the town wanted to see the Pine Line continue even though a small percentage of those taking the survey rode the shuttle. We feel good about our partnership with the town and believe they and the county are committed to keeping the Pine Line running.



**Will any policies, plans, or procedures that were developed during the project continue to be used?**

We didn't really have any new policies, procedures that we needed to put in place for the D/fixed routes.

**Would you have been able to implement this project or service without this grant program?**

No

**Is there anything else you want to share about your project that did not fit into any of the questions above?**

Had we not received this grant we could not have implemented the Pine Line. Funders want to see numbers. How can you give them numbers if you have never tried something before? Mitchell County and the town of Spruce Pine can never express enough gratitude to the committee that helped to pick our project. People in the Spruce Pine area are a lot safer today because you believed along with us that the Pine Line was needed. This grant has changed lives! This project was like a life preserver thrown out and some people didn't even know they were treading water. Like the old saying "you don't miss the water until the well has gone dry" On the days the Pine Line has not ran due to holidays or weather, we have multiple messages on our answering machine wanting to know when the Pine Line will start back. It has become water to a community that didn't realize they were in the desert. Thank you, THANK YOU, THANK YOU!

## **Final Report Upload (if not using the above form)**

Completed - Apr 27 2023

[Mitchell End of Project presentation-Mar 23 \(1\)](#)

Filename: Mitchell\_End\_of\_Project\_presentat\_LZFNWqm.pptx Size: 152.6 MB

[Pine Line - Mitchell County](#)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=62vfXIQ4n5E&t=3s>

## **Upload PowerPoint (or Conference Poster)**

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- In addition to answering the above questions, please submit a PowerPoint (or conference poster) either in SurveyMonkey or via email to your project manager. If you are interested in doing a conference poster and would like to learn more or see a template, let us know!
- The presentation length should be approximately 15-20 minutes or 15-20 slides and should utilize the Widescreen (16:9) format.
- The audience for the presentation is primarily other rural or tribal transit agencies, but also potentially local, state, or federal agencies or other transit stakeholders.
- Tell the story of the project, with who, what, where, when, why, and how, just to give enough context. Then focus on the outcomes and the lessons you learned and what others can learn from the project.

- Use pictures, maps, and charts to depict your geographic area, service delivery, operations, performance measures, and/or community impact, etc.
- Include testimonials from those involved and impacted, if possible.
- This PowerPoint is due April 30, 2023.

### **Mitchell End of Project presentation-Mar 23 (1)**

**Filename:** Mitchell\_End\_of\_Project\_presentat\_eX3fya2.pptx **Size:** 152.6 MB

### **Pine Line - Mitchell County**

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Available in the  
Spruce Pine area

10 stops

# Pine Line

# Bus Route

828-688-4715

