

## Rural Transit Day Chat July 16, 2026

### Summary

The nation's seventh [#RuralTransitDay](#) Chat on July 16, 2026 took place on Zoom and was moderated by Stephanie Lewis of Florida RTAP and John Andoh from El Paso Transportation Authority. National RTAP Executive Director Robin Phillips and Knowledge and Resource Manager Cara Marcus were panelists, and National RTAP's San Jose State University graduate school summer interns Minnie Esquivel Gopar and Sy Maestas also participated. Many organizations also posted on other social media platforms, including X, Instagram, and LinkedIn. We also held Photo Contest and Student Artwork Contest "Prequel" on X.

The chat focused on what agencies are doing to recognize passengers and staff on Rural Transit Day and throughout the year, and included a discussion about challenges, solutions, and best practices. 38 individuals from 16 states participated in the chat. Access the [recording](#) on YouTube.

Participants included the following organizations:

- |                                                             |                                                  |                                                                 |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Arrowhead Transit                                        | 11. ICF                                          | 23. San Jose State University                                   |
| 2. Berrien Bus                                              | 12. LETS Transportation                          | 24. Schuylkill County                                           |
| 3. Catholic Social Services<br>of the Miami Valley          | 13. Macon-Bibb County<br>Transit Authority       | Transportation Authority                                        |
| 4. City of Brainerd & Crow<br>Wing County Public<br>Transit | 14. Maumee Valley Planning<br>Organization       | 25. Southwest Georgia<br>Regional Commission                    |
| 5. City of Coolidge Transit                                 | 15. Montachusett Regional<br>Planning Commission | 26. Tooele County<br>Transportation                             |
| 6. Dalton Council on Aging                                  | 16. Mountain Valley Transit                      | 27. Tooele County<br>Transportation                             |
| 7. DSPD                                                     | 17. Namekagon Transit                            | 28. Transnnovation, Inc.                                        |
| 8. Georgia Department of<br>Transportation                  | 18. Newton County<br>Community Services          | 29. Virginia Department of<br>Rail and Public<br>Transportation |
| 9. Greater Hartford Transit<br>District                     | 19. NKADD                                        |                                                                 |
| 10. Hope Network<br>Transportation                          | 20. PARC                                         |                                                                 |
|                                                             | 21. PDRTA                                        |                                                                 |
|                                                             | 22. RLS & Associates, Inc.                       |                                                                 |

We also have a Rural Transit Day [news page](#) with more information about the special day. Answers to chat questions are provided below.

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**Question 1:** Please introduce yourself and your transit agency. How many square miles do you serve? What types of modes of transit do you operate in your service area? If you're not with a transit agency, tell us about your organization.

**Answers:**

- Participants provide free rides, fixed route, ADA complementary paratransit, demand response, commuter routes, vanpool service, on-demand curb to curb service, and microtransit.
- Service areas for those on the chat spanned from 1.68 sq miles - 3,500 sq miles and ridership spanned from 13K riders to 50K riders.

**Question 2:** What is the best thing about rural transit?

**Answers:**

- Rural Transit has been the most rewarding job I have had that serves all ages and all walks of life. (Vanessa Mendoza, City of Coolidge Transit)
- The best thing about having rural transit is that our organization is able to be a resource for those in the rural community where there are limited resources for people. (Heather Robison, Catholic Social Services of the Miami Valley)
- In my area, if we didn't have public transit there would be so many people who couldn't make it to their hospital appointments. (Brandt Ketterer, Mountain Valley Transit)
- Definitely the people. The drivers are some of the nicest folks you'll ever meet. (Cara Marcus, National RTAP)
- My favorite thing about rural transit is honestly when it actually exists – hahaha. We don't have transit that covers all of our communities, but it is fantastic where we do have it. (Sierra Nathans Lightner, Maumee Valley Planning Organization)
- The ability to connect people to opportunities. Being far away from an urbanized area where you may not have a lot of grocery, medical, educational opportunities, rural transit can get people to those opportunities to allow them to have a great quality of life. (John Andoh, El Paso Transportation Authority)
- The scenic drives. You've got lots of open spaces and fresh air, and, you know, lucky in Florida, we have so much coastline, and some of our rural transit providers are on the coast, so we can see the beautiful ocean and get that breeze. And enjoy the beach, maybe on a short, maybe a short operator layover. Take a ride or take a, take a stroll and get that sand between your toes. Our most southern, rural transit agency here in Florida is Key West. (Stephanie Lewis, Florida RTAP)
- For me, it's the people and the communities they serve. Rural transit drivers and staff are deeply committed to helping people access essential services and stay connected to their communities. (Minnie Esquivel Gopar, San Jose State University)

- We provide a real tangible benefit to folks who sometimes feel isolated and alone...which is not a problem on the NYC subway! (Paul Gillespie, Berrien Bus)
- Rural transit is special because it connects interesting places. (Sy Maestas, San Jose State University)
- Meeting my neighbors and seeing parts of my community I don't always see. I see rural transit as the strength of our whole nation, that this is how we move people between and through places and give people access to their potential and our communities to their potential. And that the work that we all do is to make that easier, more available and accessible. And I think that it is the fundamental work that makes communities strong, however, whatever their size. (Robin Phillips, National RTAP)

**Question 3:** In addition to this chat, how are you celebrating Rural Transit Day?

**Answers:**

- We host a family-friendly day with free food, giveaways, tour of our buses, kid games and this year it fell during fair week, so we are celebrating at the fair! (Trisha Drain, Newton County Public Transit)
- Cara showed a video of the What I Like About Rural Transit Student Art Contest that National RTAP held and talked about some of the fun things she saw agencies doing on Facebook, like giving out free hot dogs. Robin said she was telling everyone about Rural Transit Day.

**Question 4:** How does reliable rural transit support economic opportunity?

**Answers:**

- Arrowhead Transit did a study that we reinvest just over 77% of our annual operating budget back into small local businesses. There is a lot more riding on us than just people! We also hosted the MN State Bus Rodeo last year and had a local [economic impact](#) of \$90,000 in one weekend. (Dominick Olivanti, Arrowhead Transit)
- APTA's [Economic Impact of Public Transportation Investment](#) evaluates how investment in public transportation delivers economic value. For example, \$1 billion in transit investment creates or sustains 41,400 jobs.
- People rely on rural transit for access to jobs, school, health care, and shopping. Having reliable transit options makes these activities possible for more people. (Sy)
- Cost of gas won't likely go down and estimated cost of owning a car might be roughly \$5000/year. (Marcy Jaffe, Transnnovation, Inc.)
- Reliable transit helps people get to work, school, healthcare appointments, and other essential services. Beyond that, transportation helps connect people to opportunities they might not otherwise be able to access. (Minnie)
- The Florida Public Transportation Association, or otherwise known as FPTA, has developed a website that discusses the economic impact of transit. And the former chair of the FPTA notes that, in her regards on that website, says, Transit is good for Florida. It increases mobility for residents and visitors, and it creates a 5 to 1 economic return for our communities. (Stephanie)

**Question 5:** What types of innovative mobility such as vanpools, partnerships with TNCs, etc., do you implement as a complement to your rural transit program?

**Answers:**

- Look to [TACL, the Transportation Technical Assistance Coordination Library](#), for resources about developing and implementing these types of partnerships. You'll find resources like FTA's Mobility on Demand Sandbox Demonstration: Adaptive Mobility with Reliability and Efficiency (AMORE) Final Report, where transit hailing solution was designed to meld the flexibility of a Transportation Network Company (TNC) with the efficiency of a fixed-route bus by grouping customers traveling in similar patterns and allowing quicker connections to the core transit system.
- Demand-responsive options such as paratransit pair well with transit programs because they can operate with greater flexibility. This is valuable for many users who need to access destinations that are distant from a set route. (Sy)
- A transit system that I manage in California, the city of Escalon, operates a deviated fixed route service called E-Trans that connects Escalon to Modesto, which is in San Joaquin County and Stanislaus County. To complement that service, we have a partnership with Uber, and we call that service E-trans on the go. That service is available to anybody if their trip originates in Escalade and they're traveling to Riverbank, Oakdale, and Modesto. And we will subsidize their trip at \$10 per ride. We found that program to be very successful in providing mobility when the deviated fixed route may not work, or when the deviated fixed route is not operating. In El Paso, we have a vanpool program, and we presently have 138 vanpools that are running. And about 23 of those vans operate solely in the rural area. And the balance does serve the urban area. But when it comes to passenger miles reporting, and revenue miles reporting, we're able to report on that data which helps increase the amount of rural funds that comes back through the TxDOT processes. So having vanpool programs, partnerships with Enterprise is a great way to get federal funding to support your overall transit operation. And we find great value through our vanpool program. (John)

**Question 6:** How do you recognize your drivers for the work they do?**Answers:**

- We provide a financial bonus for master driver and elite master driver, and we have an employee of the month with parking space based on driver stats. (Trisha)
- We have the classic "Employee of The Month" that comes with a gift basket/parking spaces. We give out years of service pins. We also do annual holiday and valentines day gifts (Dominick)
- One of our Florida senior services agencies says that they have several ways to recognize their employees. They have an agency employee of the month nominated by other employees. That person is given a day off, a certificate, and a token. And they also have the Transit Star of the Month that's selected by the Transit Managers, and they receive a reserve parking space, a gift card, a certificate, and a pin to wear on their uniform. (Stephanie)
- National RTAP has a [Driver Retention Best Practices Spotlight Article](#) at with lots of good ideas for driver recognition. And you can also send them a [Rural Transit Hero Card](#)!
- An agency in Massachusetts gives barbecues throughout the summer, occasional pizza days, and bagels and muffins every Friday morning. So, the drivers come and they know it's a fun and delicious place to be. Bus rodeos are also a great way to recognize drivers. (Cara)
- Driver recognition is incredibly important. Drivers are often the face of rural transit and play a huge role in supporting their communities. (Minnie)

- I like greeting and thanking the operators I encounter during my commute. I'm grateful to have a transit option and it's nice seeing familiar faces on my rides. (Sy)

**Question 7:** What type of technology do you use to make it easier for the transit rider to navigate the system? How do you address the use of technology when it comes to cellular and the spotty nature of the coverage?

**Answers:**

- National RTAP offers a suite of [free technology tools](#). We also have a technical brief on [Broadband Access and Rural Transit: Bringing Connectivity to Rural Communities](#) to help troubleshoot limited connections. Many people on the call praised National RTAP's GTFS Builder.
- We just launched our very own [Arrowhead Transit App](#) in May. This works on all our services including Fixed Route, Deviated Fixed Route, On-Demand, Paratransit, and Subscription Routes. (Dominick)
- Many people rely on cell phones to navigate transit. The Federal Highway Administration [addresses this use](#) in a policy aimed to improve technology in rural areas. (Sy)
- We are just approaching our one year of our white label mobile app through Spare. So excited to hear about their success. We are around 27% of our trips booked through the mobile app showing the importance of accessibility option for booking helping get riders where they need to go. Brainerd also added an AI Voice Dispatching Agent to successfully book and update trips so customers can hold of us anytime of the day! (Aaron Forstrom and Crystal Gauthier, City of Brainerd & Crow Wing County Public Transit)
- In the case of El Paso, we have partnerships with Transit App and Movit App, and we have real-time transit through Peak Transit, so people can track our buses in real time, which is an excellent opportunity for rural transit, when, as you know, many cases, rural transit runs in excess of 60 minutes or greater. So, having someone be able to go out to the bus when the bus is about to arrive makes it much easier than being out in the hot sun. It's 105 degrees out here today, for instance, having to wait for a bus that's going to come 90 minutes later. We link our app to, like, Token Transit, so you could pay your fare. We link it to bike share system, so you can unlock bicycles. You could trip-plan on Transit and Movit. So, there's so many ways that you can make these mobility-as-a-service apps work to help benefit your rider, and they have one place to get all the transportation that they need, information that they need. (John)
- The newest Build250 bill offers a clause, if passed, that can allow transit agencies to procure technology and software by shopping around in different states if it's not advantageous to get it locally. (Rebecca Rahman, Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation)

**Question 8:** What is the one piece of advice you would give to new professionals starting in the rural transit industry?

**Answers:**

- Contact all other existing rural transit providers in your area, make connections, ask them what works and doesn't work, offer to partner on things like driver training and resource sharing. My agency is small; so are the other agencies in my area, county by county, but we help each other however we can. (Brandt)

- Rural Transit is always evolving, so always be ready to adapt and change to all of the great things happening! (Holly Bachschneider, Arrowhead Transit)
- Find a mentor who can help you get situated, answer your questions, and advise you. The Transit Workforce Center (TWC) has a robust [mentorship program](#) that can help. Also, go to your State RTAP Manager! (Cara)
- Always be curious and willing to ask questions. (Sy)
- There's always something new and exciting going on in rural transit. Never forget why you're here - it's for our riders. (Crystal)
- Establishing peers in the industry is very helpful. There are always people willing to help. Through my membership with APTA, I'm peer to a newly hired transit manager, and I give him advice on how to manage his system and connect to opportunities and resources. (John)
- Find a mentor and build your network. Having people you can learn from, ask questions and connect with makes a really tremendous difference when you're getting started at a new job or a new environment. And something that I've learned through my field work with National RTAP is how collaborative and supportive the rural transit community can be as a network, both for the professionals in the field and also the communities that they serve. (Minnie)
- You're not alone. There are lots of resources and free resources, especially through National RTAP, that can help with policies and training and paperwork. And then always, you can reach out to your State DOT and other regulatory partners. (Stephanie)

**Question 9:** We've filled our Rural Transit Day Time Capsule! The raffle winner was Helen Yanulus, Grants and Communications Manager, Monroe County Transportation Authority, Pennsylvania, who won a Rural Transit Day t-shirt. Now we're looking for a host who is able to have it buried at their site for National RTAP's 40th birthday and uncovered for its 50th birthday. Please let me know if you'd like to be considered for the raffle at [info@nationalrtap.org](mailto:info@nationalrtap.org) after you've obtained the necessary permissions.

**Answers:**

- No answers during the chat.

**Question 10:** What does the future of rural transit look like to you?

**Answers:**

- More connected. More responsive. (Robin)
- Connect to surrounding communities. Online Apps, more comfortable drive on buses. (Vanessa)
- Some of our rural transit agencies have expressed interest in making their fleets one hundred percent electric. (Rebecca)
- I think the future of rural transit will continue to include innovation in technology, partnerships, and service delivery while remaining focused on meeting community needs. Hopefully intentional design and more livable communities to better support rural and Tribal transit. (Minnie)
- Internet will be more available in the rural areas so that we can explore more and implement more technology-based solutions to make it easier for people to get to quality-of-life opportunities, autonomous vehicles, apps, being able to schedule demand response trips in real time and not the next day or through by calling a dispatcher. I see an exciting future for rural

transit. Hopefully, Starlink will be cheaper and be readily available and accessible for all these rural areas that don't have good connectivity to cell phones. (John)

- National RTAP's [John Martin Series](#) explores trends in transit over the last decade and looks to the future.
- The power of rural transit is in its people – drivers and riders alike. I hope it expands to include many more people in coming years. (Sy)