

# EAGLE TRANSIT

## FY 2020 TRANSPORTATION COORDINATION PLAN

### 1. Date adopted by board of directors:

Eagle Transit is part of the Flathead County/Area IX Agency on Aging (AOA) and is governed by the Flathead County Commission, which is comprised of three members:

Phil Mitchell, Chair  
Randy Brodehl  
Pam Holmquist

A. The Transportation Advisory Committee approved the Plan at a public meeting on February 7, 2019.

B. The Plan was approved by the Commission at a public meeting on February 19, 2019.

*Note:* 2/7/19 TAC minutes and the 2/19/19 Commissioner agenda are uploaded to the application website. The minutes of the Commissioners' meeting will be available online in March 2019 at [http://flathead.mt.gov/commissioner/current\\_minutes.php](http://flathead.mt.gov/commissioner/current_minutes.php)

### 2. Agencies involved:

#### A. Summary

Eagle Transit is the public transportation provider in Flathead County for the general public, older adults and people with disabilities. We currently provide all services directly rather than subcontract to or purchase services from other entities. Eagle Transit enters into contracts and agreements to provide certain services. See section C. below for service details.

In developing the FY 2020 Transportation Coordination Plan (TCP), we engaged stakeholders and the general public in multiple ways: bi-monthly Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC) meetings, annual transit community survey, a new onboard survey, annual Transit Planning Public Meeting, targeted invitations to participate in the planning process generally and the TAC specifically (including to private providers), community events and monthly public reports to the Flathead County Commissioners. We attempted to reach a wide range of potential participants through print media, radio, TV, community calendars, newsletters, PSAs, fliers, etc.

#### B. Agencies Participating in Coordination Plan

##### *Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC)*

The TAC is one of the primary ways members of the public, community agencies and organizations can participate in the Transportation Coordination planning process. Eagle

Transit is fortunate to have a very active and involved TAC. TAC members are appointed by the County Commissioners to staggered three year terms. The Committee meets at least quarterly but most typically in January, February, April, June, August and October. Meetings are open to the public and posted on the County website, the online county calendar and in the Daily Inter Lake “Daybook” calendar of local events. Members represent a good cross-section of the community, including Kalispell Regional HealthCare Foundation, Flathead Valley Community College, Montana Employment Opportunities (serving people with disabilities), Whitefish Community Center, the Area Agency on Aging, Big Mountain Commercial Association (funds the Snow Bus through a private transportation provider), local businesses and the Flathead County Commission. One member serving as a Kalispell resident is also on the Kalispell City Council. Members include older adults, people with disabilities and riders. *(See Plan Attachments for a list of current TAC members.)* The Chief of Facilities Operations at Glacier National Park serves as a liaison to the committee.

TAC meetings typically include management updates to members on issues of importance regarding transit services, including contracts and other funding, policies and procedures, budgets, ridership, operations, marketing and outreach and community partnerships. Members provide guidance and input on planning and other issues from a community perspective. Each January, the TAC formally reviews progress over the past year and sets priorities for the coming year as the foundation for the annual Transportation Coordination Plan. Members also serve on ad hoc subcommittees to work on specific tasks.

In addition to the usual public postings, email invitations to the January 3, 2019 and February 7, 2019 TAC meeting at which members discussed and voted on the FY 2020 Transportation Coordination Plan were sent to stakeholders such as AOA Advisory Council members, senior and community centers, Flathead County administration, management, planning staff of the three incorporated cities in Flathead County, media and representatives of community organizations and businesses. All private transit providers in the area were also invited. No guests were present at the January 3<sup>rd</sup> TAC meeting. Several guests attended the February 7<sup>th</sup> TAC meeting but no one provided public comment.

Although there was limited general public participation at the TAC meetings, feedback was obtained through other forums, including an annual community “destination” survey, onboard survey, phone calls with private transit providers, meetings with staff and elected officials of the three incorporated cities, a discussion with Big Mountain Commercial Association regarding winter and summer service coordination and a public meeting to solicit input on transit issues held December 13, 2018.

### ***Plan partners***

In addition to the TAC, Eagle Transit contracts, coordinates or otherwise partners with the following entities to enhance or expand transportation options in Flathead County. *(See Plan Attachments for service details. Copies of contracts/agreements are uploaded to the application website when applicable.)*

**Flathead County/Area IX Agency on Aging (AOA)** - AOA is the county department that includes and oversees Eagle Transit. AOA has allocated both Older Americans Act Title IIIB and state general funding to support Eagle Transit rides for individuals age 60 and older and people with disabilities when needed. Additionally, AOA uses Older Americans Act funds to provide individualized transportation (through subcontracts with local in-home service providers) to older adults who have conditions or needs that make it difficult or impossible for them to use Eagle Transit services, or who have low incomes and live in areas served only by private transit providers. The subcontractors hire attendants to transport clients in staff members' personal vehicles. Note: AOA does not have an agreement with Eagle Transit as it is the same agency.

**Flathead County Road Department** – The Flathead County Road Department provides Eagle Transit with some vehicle maintenance services for the cost of parts only. We have used this option in a limited way in the past because of logistical difficulties. However, in the last year Eagle Transit and Road Department staff have worked diligently to overcome challenges and expand use of the county's mechanic services.

**Flathead Industries (FI)** - The MT Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS) contracts with Eagle Transit to provide weekday transportation for individuals with developmental disabilities to Flathead Industries for work and return home. This service supplements FI's own transportation by bringing individuals to a central point where they can catch Flathead Industries' vans to remote locations. The rides are counted in the paratransit/Dial-A-Ride numbers.

**Kalispell Regional HealthCare (KRH)** – KRH financially assists Eagle Transit to transport elementary school children to S.P.A.R.K., the after school program offered by The Summit, which is part of the KRH system. Eagle Transit offers a public route that provides one-way service from participating schools to The Summit. KRH also provides limited transportation for medical rides in and around the hospital and from outlying areas through a van it owns and operates and through support of the ASSIST program. KRH has a representative on the TAC.

**City of Kalispell** – The City of Kalispell contributes \$15,000 annually to Eagle Transit to support public transportation. Public Works Department staff have been working with the Transportation Manager in the process to secure permits for Kalispell area bus stops on the city right of way in preparing for installing bus stop signs. Eagle Transit has worked with the Parks & Recreation Department to offer a new public route from Kalispell area elementary schools to the City of Kalispell after school program on a trial basis during the 2018-2019 school season. The AOA Director serves on the City's "Trail Crew," which consists of local stakeholders who convene periodically to advise the city on a TIGER grant funded downtown core and rail redevelopment project.

**City of Whitefish** – The City of Whitefish contributes \$9,300 annually to Eagle transit to support public transportation. City staff and elected officials have been meeting regularly with the Transportation Manager this past year to explore opportunities for collaboration.

The City is working with Eagle Transit and other stakeholders to create a new transportation hub at Depot Park, which will include a shelter, to allow for transfers between Eagle buses, intercity service and Amtrak. Discussions have also focused on support for transit-based solutions, such as Park & Ride routes/stops, to traffic congestion and parking issues at city parks, trails and programs.

**City of Columbia Falls** - The City of Columbia Falls contributes \$5,500 annually to Eagle transit to support public transportation. The AOA Director, Transportation Manager and a TAC member have met over the past year with city staff and elected officials regarding transportation routes, services and local challenges/needs.

**North Valley Hospital (NVH)** – North Valley Hospital financially supports Eagle Transit to provide medical rides in the North Valley area.

**Flathead Valley Community College (FVCC)** - Eagle Transit offers discounted “unlimited rides” semester passes to FVCC students. The College subsidizes the cost of the passes and sells them on campus. FVCC has a representative who serves on the TAC.

**ASSIST** – ASSIST is a local, volunteer-based nonprofit affiliated with Kalispell Regional Healthcare that helps individuals with medical needs navigate the healthcare and community service system. ASSIST uses three vans to help transport clients to certain medical appointments. ASSIST staff and volunteers work closely with AOA and Eagle Transit staff to coordinate transportation options for mutual clients.

**United Way/Gateway Community Center** – The Gateway Community Center is home to numerous nonprofits and public service organizations as well as Teletech, a major employer. It is a centrally located, primary destination for many transit users. United Way Director, Sherry Stevens, oversees Gateway Community Center and has worked closely with Eagle Transit staff to establish the Center as a transfer stop, ensuring an unimpeded route for buses and safe, pleasant, accessible access for passengers.

**My Glacier Village** – My Glacier Village is a new nonprofit in the Flathead Valley that follows the national village-to-village model in which older adults can pay a monthly membership fee that affords them volunteer assistance for a variety of tasks, including transportation. My Glacier Village expects to be fully operational by summer of 2019. AOA/Eagle Transit has begun exploring opportunities for partnering and coordination with them.

**Special Friends Advocacy** - Eagle Transit provides transportation for individuals with developmental disabilities who are clients of Special Friends Advocacy for work, shopping and appointments as well as group functions. Our service supplements personal cars, but is the primary transportation. The rides are counted in the paratransit/Dial-A-Ride numbers.

**Momentum Transport** – Momentum Transport offers 24-7 ADA accessible transportation. AOA and Eagle Transit refer private pay clients to Momentum. AOA is considering

contracting with Momentum to serve older adults who need escorted transportation in an accessible vehicle.

**Glacier National Park** - A Cooperative Agreement between the National Park Service, Montana Department of Transportation and Flathead County has supported Eagle Transit to provide daily shuttle service in the summer season within the Park since 2007. Since 2017 Eagle Transit has been offering a summer season commuter route from Kalispell to the Park. As part of the Cooperative Agreement, Eagle Transit has access to GNP buses in the off-season to supplement Flathead County service and to provide to other entities around the state to use (Winter Use Program). This year, three transit entities, other than Eagle Transit, are using 6 vehicles for the off-season. For more information on the shuttle service go to <http://www.nps.gov/glac/planyourvisit/shuttles.htm> .

**Big Mountain Commercial Association (BMCA)** – BMCA is represented on the TAC. Eagle Transit has worked with BMCA to coordinate service in both the winter and summer seasons.

**Climate Smart Glacier Country (CSGC)** - CSGC works with partners to create solutions that conserve resources, promote clean energy, strengthen food and water security, and reduce wildfire and other climate-related risk. CSGC members have provided input on the TCP, worked with staff to make schedules more user-friendly and connected staff to Google Transit. They are also part of the Whitefish stakeholder group working on transit-based solutions for the area.

### ***Agencies not involved***

Agencies that are not involved typically fall into the three categories below. Note: The annual survey was sent to these groups to invite their participation and solicit feedback, which many gave. In addition, letters inviting them to participate in the Plan were sent to each of the private transportation providers, followed by phone interviews or attempts to reach them for interviews. (See Section 4. Needs Assessment for more detail on the survey and private transit provider contacts.)

- **Those that have their own vehicles and need them available 24 hours a day and/or without notice and at their convenience.** These include nursing homes and assisted living facilities, such as Heritage Place, Immanuel Lutheran, Brendan House, Colonial Manor, Prestige, Wel-life, Montana Veteran’s Home, Riverside Senior Living, Edgewood Vista and Lake View Care Center. This category also includes adult and children group agencies such as Lamplighter, Transition Group Homes, Salvation Army Day Care, Stillwater Christian School, Head Start and Boys & Girls Club. Note: Eagle Transit services are available to and often used by residents or clients of these entities.
- **Those that provide little or no transportation but will refer individuals to Eagle Transit.** These agencies generally cannot provide funding for vehicles or services but may provide individual transportation funds. Such agencies include Samaritan House and Community Action Partnership of Northwest Montana.

- **Private transportation companies.** Such companies provide services for a profit and will often consider entering into a contract for their for-profit services. Opportunities for contracting with private providers are considered when looking at unmet needs. For more information see ***Outreach to Private Transportation Providers*** section below.
- **Other Transportation Options:** Uber and Lyft are available in Flathead County. In addition, some Flathead County residents receive individualized transportation services through private home and community-based services providers paid for by Medicaid, Medicaid Waivers, Vocational Rehabilitation or other social service funding sources.

### C. Eagle Transit Services and Vehicle Info

Notes:

- Some routes and services have changed since last year. See the detail below and in Section 4.
- In FY 2018, Eagle Transit provided a total of 99,119 rides.

Eagle Transit provides the following routes/services:

- **Kalispell Green Line City Route:** This is a fixed route service offered M-F, 7:00 am-6:00 pm in Kalispell. The one-way fare is \$1.00, which can be paid by either cash or cashier's check. Also available is a \$25 monthly pass for unlimited rides or punch cards in \$10 increments. Paratransit/Dial-A-Ride passengers who present their DAR I.D. card can ride free. The Green line has two 14 passenger buses operating one route with one bus traveling south and the other bus traveling north in a rough "figure 8" loop meeting every half hour at a new transfer location at Gateway Community Center. The north run covers Hwy. 93 N, stopping at Kalispell Regional HealthCare, Flathead Valley Community College (FVCC) and multiple stops at the Hutton Ranch shopping area before returning south to serve the VA Clinic and senior and low-income housing apartments. The south run covers Kalispell Center Mall, several downtown west stops, the Agency on Aging/South Campus, Salvation Army Thrift Store, Rosauers grocery store, Sunburst Mental Health, Imagine IF Library and Smith's Food & Drug. In FY 2018 the Kalispell route provided 30,915 rides (30.56% of all rides). Note: Until July 1 2018, this route included the Evergreen area. As part of the Planning Committee's work on the 5-Year Transportation Development Plan, fixed route service was discontinued in Evergreen to address capacity concerns. We implemented a combination commuter route and premium Dial-A-Ride program to continue to serve Evergreen residents. Additionally, this route previously ran until 7:00 pm.
- **Kalispell Orange Line City Route:** This is a new fixed route service (as of January 2019) designed to expand neighborhood service in Kalispell, provide easier access to apartment residents, create options for high school students and add a third run to Hutton Ranch as it is the most popular destination for riders. The Orange Line runs M-F, 6:50 am - 6:16 pm in Kalispell. The one-way fare is \$1.00, which can be paid by either cash or cashier's check. Also available is a \$25 monthly pass for unlimited rides or punch cards in \$10 increments. Paratransit/Dial-A-Ride passengers who present

their DAR I.D. card can ride free. The Orange Line has one 15-passenger bus. The route begins in south Kalispell with stops at the Courtyard Apartments and Rankin elementary school. Traveling north along 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue East, the bus stops at Birchwood, Glacier Gardens, East Village and Fernwell apartment complexes. Just off Hwy. 2 East, the bus stops at Taco Bell and Dairy Queen, then heads up Hwy. 93 N to Target and Costco and back into the center of Kalispell. Hwy. 2 West stops include Walgreens, Albertson's and Gateway Community Center (as a transfer point), the Social Security office, and Westgate Senior Apartments. Downtown Kalispell west side stops include Ashley Creek Apartments, Flathead High School and Agency on Aging/South Campus.

- **Paratransit service:** This service is available  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile around the Kalispell, Whitefish and Columbia Falls city routes for individuals who meet the functional need eligibility criteria. An application is required. Four, 13-17 passenger buses transport the passengers. Fares are \$1.00 per one-way trip. Also available is a \$25 monthly pass for unlimited rides or punch cards in \$10 increments. The service is curb-to-curb, or door-to-door on request, and is available by appointment during the same hours the city buses operate. Appointments must be made by 5:00 pm the previous day. Same day service may be available, schedule permitting, for a premium fee of \$5 one-way. In FY 2018, paratransit/Dial-A-Ride in Kalispell-Evergreen accounted for 31,571 rides (31.9% of total rides)
- **Premium Dial-A-Ride service in Evergreen and West Kalispell:** Premium Dial-A-Ride is an appointment-based, curb-to-curb or door-to-door service available to individuals who meet the functional need eligibility criteria who wish to travel in the Evergreen and West Kalispell areas (which are outside the Kalispell paratransit service area). It is available M-F, 7:00 am-5:00 pm. The Evergreen portion of the service area is bordered by Reserve to the north, Whitefish Stage Road to the west, Helena Flats Road to the east and the neighborhoods just south of Hwy. 2. The West Kalispell portion includes neighborhoods off West Reserve to the north and west of Airport Road to the south. An application for the service is required. Rides are offered based on capacity. Fares are \$1 per one-way trip. Also available is a \$25 monthly pass for unlimited rides or punch cards in \$10 increments. Appointments must be made by 5:00 pm the previous day. Same day service may be available, schedule permitting, for a premium fee of \$5 one-way. This is a new service in FY 2019 so no ridership data exists for FY 2018.
- **Whitefish City Bus and Paratransit/Dial-A-Ride:** This is a fixed/deviated route that runs M-F, 10:00 am-2:00 pm. Fares are the same as the Kalispell route. The 15 passenger bus stops at Super 1 Foods, Safeway, Walgreens, Markus Foods, Alpine Village Market and the Whitefish Community Center, Whitefish Care and Rehabilitation Center, Whitefish Manor, 2<sup>nd</sup> St. East and Pine, Imagine IF Library. Paratransit/Dial-A-Ride appointment-based services are provided for individuals who meet the functional need eligibility criteria to travel within  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile of the fixed route. The city bus deviates from the fixed route to pick up and drop off paratransit/DAR passengers. The 10:00-

11:00 am hour is for DAR passengers only. The Whitefish City bus accounted for 4,336 rides in FY 2018 (4.40%).

- **Columbia Falls City Bus and Paratransit/Dial-A-Ride:** This is a fixed/deviated route that runs M-F, 09:20 am-1:30 pm. Fares are the same as the Kalispell route. The 15 passenger bus stops at the Veterans Home, Smith's Food and Drug, North Valley Senior Center and Teakettle Vista. Paratransit/Dial-A-Ride appointment-based services are provided to individuals who meet the functional need eligibility criteria for travel within ¼ mile of the fixed route. The city bus deviates from the fixed route to pick up and drop off paratransit/DAR passengers. The Columbia Falls city bus (accounted for 3,185 rides in FY 2018 (3.2%). Note: Hours for this route have been reduced this past year from 6 hours to 4 hours per day due to lack of ridership.
- **Evergreen Commuter:** The Evergreen Commuter provided limited stop service from Kalispell to the Evergreen area from July 1, 2018 through the end of December 2018. Due to very low ridership (2-4 rides per day), the service was discontinued in January 2019. At the time the service was discontinued, we expanded the Premium Dial-A-Ride service hours in Evergreen from a few hours a day to 7:00am – 5:00 pm to accommodate rider demand.
- **Tri- City Commuter:** This commuter service operates M - F. connecting Kalispell, Columbia Falls and Whitefish. Three trips are provided in the morning and three in the afternoon/early evening. In Kalispell, some of the stops are Smith's Food and Drug, Kalispell Regional HealthCare and FVCC. In Whitefish, some of the stops are North Valley Hospital, Mountain Mall and the post office. In Columbia Falls, the stops are Super 1 Foods and Pizza Hut. A one-way trip is \$1.00. Also available, is a \$25 monthly pass for unlimited rides or punch cards in \$10 increments. Paratransit/ Dial-A-Ride passengers who present their DAR I.D. card can ride free. The Tri-City Commuter replaced the separate commuters from Kalispell to Whitefish and Columbia Falls in July 2018. In FY 2018, the separate commuters provided 9,103 rides (9.2%).
- **Commuter to Glacier National Park:** The seasonal commuter service from Kalispell to Glacier National Park typically operates from July 1 - Sept. 5, barring delays opening Going to the Sun Road or wildfire closures. During the season, the route runs 7 days a week from 7:00 am to 10:00 pm. It originates in Kalispell at Rosauers grocery store with limited stops in Kalispell, Whitefish, Columbia Falls, Hungry Horse, and inside Glacier National Park. Fares are \$5 roundtrip or \$3 one-way. Riders are responsible for fees to enter the Park. The commuter is offered in partnership with Glacier National Park. Eagle Transit provides the bus and the Park pays for the driver and fuel. Total rides for summer season in FY 2018 were 11,442 (11.5%).
- **S.P.A.R.K./Kalispell Parks & Recreation:** S.P.A.R.K. and Kalispell Parks & Recreation are after school programs for elementary school children. S.P.A.R.K. is operated by The Summit Medical Fitness Center, which is part of Kalispell Regional HealthCare. The Kalispell Parks & Recreation program is operated by the City of Kalispell. Eagle Transit has provided transportation to the S.P.A.R.K. program for more



than a decade, but added a run for the Parks & Recreation program on a trial basis for the 2018-2019 school year. For both runs, Eagle Transit provides one-way service from participating schools to drop off locations at The Summit, Trinity and Elrod schools. The route is open to the general public. It only operates during the school year on days school is in session. Pick up stops include the following schools: St. Matthew's, Elrod, Trinity Lutheran, West Valley, Russell, Peterson, Hedges, Edgerton and Rankin. No return service is available. The Summit/KRH financially support Eagle Transit to transport students to the S.P.A.R.K. program. Parks & Recreation students pay a discounted fare. Other riders on this route pay \$1 per trip or can purchase a monthly pass or \$10 punch card. There were 8,091 rides on this route in FY 2018 (8.1%) which did not include the Parks & Recreation program.

*See Plan Attachments for a list and description of Eagle Transit vehicles with mileage as of January 2019. Schedules and brochures uploaded to application website.*

#### **4. Needs assessment and planning**

##### **Summary**

Eagle Transit employs multiple methods to determine area transit needs, including data tracking and analysis, the development of formal planning documents, participation in external community planning processes, bi-monthly TAC meetings (see Section 2. Agencies Involved above), solicitation of public input through meetings and surveys, outreach to private transit providers and monthly public reports to Flathead County Commissioners, as well as regular meetings with Eagle Transit staff to identify issues and potential solutions.

Eagle Transit annual ridership has more than doubled since 2000 and has averaged almost 93,000 rides per year over the last five years, with a high of 99,119 in FY 2018 and a low of 85,305 in FY 2017. During the same period, paratransit rides have averaged 31.5% of all rides, with a low of 26.5% in FY 2014 and a high of 35% in FY 2017. Routes and services have expanded in some areas, especially Kalispell, and have contacted in others, including Evergreen and the outlying, more rural areas of the county as we strive to maintain compliance in our paratransit program and use our resources as efficiently as possible. It is an ongoing challenge to balance the needs of those who live in areas with high demand where population density and geography are a good fit for fixed route/paratransit service with the needs of those who live in areas where overall demand is low and density/distance factors make providing transit costly and logistically difficult. Although Eagle Transit has grown and changed as the area has grown and changed over the last two decades and customers are generally satisfied with services, there continue to be unmet needs, operational challenges and areas for improvement.

## Planning Efforts

### *Development of Internal Planning Documents*

#### **A. Five-Year Transportation Development Plan**

- Eagle Transit is currently in the process of developing a new 5-Year Transportation Development Plan. MDT awarded Eagle Transit a planning grant in 2017. We initially put out an RFP but ultimately decided to lead the planning process internally. We formed a Planning Committee made up of management staff, select TAC members and MDT transit staff. We are using consultants to supplement the Committee's work. We initially anticipated completing the plan by December 2018, but the Planning Committee determined it was critical to make detailed recommendations, including specific route and service changes, for the Kalispell area and monitor their immediate implementation before addressing other concerns. This intensive effort delayed the Committee's work on other pieces of the plan. As a result, MDT recently approved an extension of the grant through December 2019 to allow us to focus on other areas, including developing a more permanent solution for Evergreen, exploring options for expanded or reconfigured service within the other two incorporated cities (Whitefish and Columbia Falls) and on our commuter routes and identifying and developing funding/partnership strategies.

In the first phase of planning, the Committee concentrated on two main issues: 1) reversing the downward trend in ridership on the Kalispell city fixed route and 2) boosting paratransit capacity in the Kalispell area to meet increasing demand for service and ensure regulatory compliance.

The Committee reviewed extensive fixed route and paratransit ridership data, including ridership patterns through each hour of the service day, number of rides at each fixed route stop, paratransit origins and destinations and frequency of ridership, rides per hour by type and location, resource allocation across the service area compared to ridership patterns, etc.

Committee members also considered public and staff input gathered in last year's TCP process and the early stages of the planning grant. Several themes emerged:

- **Riding the bus was frustrating and time-consuming, especially in Kalispell.**  
The Kalispell city bus, where ridership was significantly declining, was a single loop route that took an hour and ten to twenty minutes to complete. Taking into account travel time to and wait times at bus stops, a person could spend more than two hours on a one-way trip. Additionally, while on-time performance had improved substantially over the last year due to route and stop changes implemented in FY 2018, people had grown concerned about the consistency and reliability of the service.
  - A transfer stop was often mentioned as one way to reduce ride time.
- **Many people had difficulty getting to bus stops**, which meant they wouldn't or couldn't ride the bus. They wanted fixed stops closer to where they live and more

convenient stops at the places they go (in front of businesses instead of down the street).

- Inconvenient or difficult to access fixed stops were adding to paratransit demand.
- **Information about buses and stops wasn't always easy to find or user-friendly.** People wanted bus stop signs, better printed schedules, to be able to see Eagle routes/stops on Google Transit, phone apps to track buses and/or schedule rides, a better website and more social media presence, buses clearly marked as public transportation, etc.
- **Better marketing (to target audiences) and incentives (like fare free days and discounts) could boost ridership.**
- **High demand for paratransit services in Kalispell, especially during certain peak hours, was straining the system,** frustrating passengers and drivers and jeopardizing compliance.
- **More public transportation connection between the three cities (and Glacier Park) could benefit workers/employers and businesses depending on tourism.** It could help workers who can't afford to live in areas where jobs are available to get and maintain employment, and it could help relieve traffic and parking congestion.
- **Public transportation supports economic stability and growth and all stakeholders need to be at the planning and funding tables,** including city governments, large employers, health care providers, the business community, etc.
  - Public transportation is a good fit with the cities' growth plans and especially with Kalispell's efforts to redevelop downtown.

**Based on its research, the Committee determined:**

- 1) The length and configuration of the Kalispell-Evergreen fixed route made it difficult and unappealing for people to ride the bus, resulting in a significant loss of ridership over the last two years.
- 2) Due to a growing and aging population, paratransit demand in Kalispell is high and will remain so even with the addition of more convenient fixed routes/stops.
  - a. Eagle Transit had also been offering paratransit service beyond the  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile area to assist people in need, which was further straining resources.
- 3) A disproportionate amount of city route resources (30%) compared to city route ridership (3%) were being used to provide fixed route/paratransit service to the Evergreen area, resulting in a lost opportunity to provide service where it would be more heavily utilized and, most critically, placing a strain on paratransit capacity severe enough to jeopardize Eagle Transit's ability to remain in compliance.
  - a. Evergreen is geographically challenging from a transit perspective as the main roadway (Hwy. 2) where fixed stops have been located, is not within reasonable walking distance of most residences, nor are there typically sidewalks. Additionally, most passengers from the Evergreen area want to go into Kalispell, and especially to Hutton Ranch, which given the distance/time traveled results in a high cost per ride.
- 4) Improving overall user-friendliness is critical with new schedules and bus stop signs being high, short-term priorities.

- 5) Public transit is an essential community asset now and heading into the future, but there is a lot of work to be done to fully engage all stakeholders in the planning process and in supporting the system.

**The Committee recommended the following short-term changes, which were implemented July 1, 2018:**

- **Modification of the fixed city bus route to cover Kalispell only** (instead of both Kalispell and Evergreen) to shorten the route. The route is now called the Green Line. It consists of an “uptown” and “downtown” figure 8 loop (approximately 30 minutes each leg) with a transfer point at Gateway Community Center to shorten the route in its entirety and make it possible for some passengers to further reduce their ride time by transferring. Some stops were modified as well to increase efficiency and convenience. The service hours were reduced by one hour at the end of the day due to low ridership at that time. New hours are 7:00am-6:00pm.
  - **Paratransit Service:** As required by federal law, we continue to provide complementary paratransit service  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile around the Kalispell fixed route to passengers who have a functional need for the service. The fare is \$1, and an application is required.
- **Provision of a commuter route and limited Premium Dial-A-Ride service to replace the fixed route in Evergreen.**
  - *Commuter:* Although the commuter has now been discontinued due to very low ridership, the intent was to continue to serve workers in the Evergreen area who needed to get to jobs in Kalispell or one of the other cities. Commuter times were coordinated with the Kalispell City Bus so that someone in Evergreen could work an 8:00am-5:00pm shift in Kalispell and get to and from work on time.
  - *Premium Dial-A-Ride:* With current resources, we were unable to consistently meet paratransit demands in both Kalispell and Evergreen according to federal guidelines. Rules do not require we provide paratransit service along commuter routes, but we wanted to offer as much specialized service as our capacity would allow in the Evergreen area. Passengers wishing to travel to or from Evergreen complete the paratransit application and pay the same \$1 fare, but because it is not a required service, rides are provided based on available capacity. The Premium Dial-A-Ride service recently expanded hours of operation and now runs from 7:00am-5:00pm. *Note:* We also offer Premium Dial-A-Ride service to passengers wishing to travel to or from West Kalispell as it is also outside the paratransit service area.
- **Creation of a new Tri-City Commuter connecting Columbia Falls, Kalispell and Whitefish** with two morning and two evening runs to accommodate workers. The route is coordinated with Kalispell city bus. It replaced separate commuters from Kalispell to the two cities.
- **Expansion of after-school routes** to include the Kalispell Parks & Recreation Program.
- **Expansion of the summer commuter to Glacier National Park** to include Whitefish and an additional run.

- **Redesign of all bus schedules** to be more user-friendly.
- **Submission of permit applications to the City of Kalispell for bus stop signs** for the Kalispell area

#### **Building on the initial work of the Committee:**

- In November 2018, the Planning Committee Chair and Eagle Transit staff traveled to Bozeman to learn about Streamline and Skyline transit operations.
- In January 2019, a new fixed route was added in Kalispell, called the Orange Line, to expand neighborhood service in the heart of Kalispell, offer stops at multiple apartment complexes, include Flathead High School, add popular stops around Highway 2 and offer another run to the Hutton Ranch area, which is the most popular passenger destination.
- Eagle Transit has completed the steps to participate in Google Transit so passengers can use the site to view our fixed routes and services and expect it to be operational shortly.
- We are actively exploring partnership opportunities with the cities and the business communities to ease summer traffic congestion and more efficiently move local residents and visitors to and from popular seasonal destinations.

#### **The Committee is now entering the next phase of the planning process.**

- The previously completed Transportation Development Plan (2013-2017) incorporates public input from diverse stakeholders, provides general demographic information as well as information on the area's transit-dependent populations, describes community characteristics and analyzes travel patterns. It offers short and long term recommendations with cost estimates. The plan can be viewed at [http://www.flathead.mt.gov/eagle/documents/FlatheadCountyE.T.5YearPlan\\_Updated11\\_2013.pdf](http://www.flathead.mt.gov/eagle/documents/FlatheadCountyE.T.5YearPlan_Updated11_2013.pdf)

#### **B. Area Plan on Aging**

- AOA is in the process of developing a **new Area Plan on Aging, which will be effective October 2019 through September 2022**. Planning efforts include demographic analysis, staff input, focus groups with targeted stakeholders, a public input meeting which was held on January 22<sup>nd</sup> and a public survey due February 8<sup>th</sup>. As with the current plan, affordable, accessible, readily available transportation is emerging as a major concern for older adults in Flathead County as it impacts access to all aspects of community life, including housing and basic necessities, health care and supportive services, socialization and recreation, civic engagement, employment, etc.
- The current **Area Plan on Aging, effective October 2015-September 2019**, identifies additional and more flexible public transportation as one of the major areas of need in Flathead County, stating "As many older adults no longer drive or are limited in their driving, lack of adequate transportation alternatives limits individuals' access to services as well as opportunities for socialization and community engagement." A primary plan

objective is to “prioritize developing and increasing transportation options” in the area. Five open meetings in Kalispell, Whitefish, Columbia Falls, Lakeside and Bigfork were held in conjunction with developing the plan. Transportation was the most often cited concern at these meetings. View the plan online at

[http://flathead.mt.gov/aging/documents/SingedArrealXPLanonAgingOct2015-Sept20162015\\_07\\_24\\_13\\_52\\_41.pdf](http://flathead.mt.gov/aging/documents/SingedArrealXPLanonAgingOct2015-Sept20162015_07_24_13_52_41.pdf)

**C. Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP)** – We continue to update our COOP, which offers opportunities for coordination discussions with various stakeholders.

### ***Participation in External Community Planning Processes***

#### **A. Age-Friendly Flathead**

The Agency on Aging is a founding member of a local coalition working to achieve formal “Age-Friendly Community” designation for the Flathead Valley. The 5-year process begins with an application to AARP by a local government entity or entities, followed by a community needs assessment, development of priorities, implementation of an action plan and evaluation of progress at the end of the 5-year period. Age-Friendly criteria, developed by the World Health Organization, include **transportation**, housing, social participation, respect and social inclusion, civic participation and employment, communication and information, community support and health services, and outdoor spaces and buildings. For more information, go to <https://www.aarp.org/livable-communities/network-age-friendly-communities/>. For transportation specific information go to <https://www.aarp.org/ppi/issues/livable-communities/transportation/>.

AOA Director Lisa Sheppard serves as the Steering Committee Chair. Two TAC members sit on the Steering Committee, Mike Merchant and Hugh Austin, and Hugh is the Chair of the Transportation Subcommittee.

Over the past year, Committee members have met with county and cities’ elected officials and staff about the initiative and begun the community assessment process, beginning with transportation. Additionally, Lisa had the opportunity to attend the AARP annual national Livable Communities conference in North Carolina in November 2018 where she attended multiple sessions related to transportation, connected with the AARP transportation technical assistance team and discussed ways in which the team might support data gathering and planning in the Flathead and connected with the Montana liaison for the LOR Foundation which supports rural initiatives.

#### **B. Community Health Needs Assessment**

AOA staff participated in the current Community Health Needs Assessment process, a joint project of Kalispell Regional HealthCare, North Valley Hospital and the Flathead City-County Health Department. AOA Director Lisa Sheppard participated in an invited focus group meeting in October 2018. A draft of the plan is not yet available.

Staff also provided input on the last Community Health Needs Assessment effective 2016-2019. The report identified access to public transportation as a primary component in promoting healthy communities in the Valley. Eagle Transit was recognized as a valuable resource, but noted additional service is needed. View the report at <http://flatheadhealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/CHIP-2017-final.pdf>

### **C. Engagement with City Planning Efforts and Transportation Discussions**

Over the past year AOA and Eagle staff as well as TAC members have participated in numerous discussions and meetings with staff and elected officials of all there cities regarding various transit related issues, joint efforts and possibilities for future collaboration. Staff and TAC members have also offered public comment at the Kalispell and Columbia Falls city council meetings

#### ***Inviting Public Involvement***

##### **A. Public Meetings**

An open meeting was held on December 13, 2018, 4:00-6:00 pm at the Flathead County Agency on Aging/South Campus to solicit public input on area transit services and needs as part of developing the FY 2020 Transportation Coordination Plan. Twenty-one (21) people, not including staff, participated in the meeting.

The meeting was promoted as follows:

- Local media, including radio, TV and newspapers – PSAs, inclusion in community calendars (Flathead Beacon and Daily Inter Lake) and featured on Flathead County Agency on Aging (AOA) Director’s monthly spot on KGEZ radio
- Paid ad in the Daily Inter Lake
- County calendar of events
- Posted on AOA and Eagle Transit websites
- Invitation letters/flyers sent to all private transportation providers
- Invitation to management and planning staff of all there incorporated cities in Flathead County: Kalispell, Whitefish and Columbia Falls
- Distribution of flyers
  - On all Eagle Transit buses
  - Large display in AOA dining room
  - Emailed to area senior and community centers for distribution
  - Posted countywide in a wide variety of businesses and common destinations
  - Included with the annual “destination” survey mailing
  - emailed to all AOA Advisory Council Members, the Transportation Advisory Committee, and other stakeholders

*See Plan Attachments for list of outreach efforts, invitations, flyers, agenda, handouts and meeting minutes.*

## B. Annual “Destination” Survey

A survey was sent to 124 businesses and organizations where Eagle Transit transports passengers to gather information and feedback about community transit needs. Recipients included area hospitals and medical practices, senior and community centers, senior and other apartments, assisted living and other residential services, public assistance and social services organizations, retail stores, etc. Flyers promoting the December 13, 2018 public meeting were also included in the mailing.

The survey was comprised of three sections: 1) transportation services provided to or used by the respondent’s clients or customers, 2) unmet transit needs, and 3) space for narrative comment. We received 47 responses (37% response rate). Of those received, 33 were from Kalispell, 6 from Whitefish and 7 from Columbia Falls.

Only six of the respondents indicated they provide any transportation themselves, and only one said they provide all needed transportation to their customers or clients.

The most often cited unmet needs were additional hours of service, new/expanded routes and weekend service.

*See Plan Attachments for a copy of the survey and results.*

## C. Onboard Survey (fixed and commuter routes)

An onboard survey was conducted by Eagle Transit staff in November and December 2018 on the Kalispell City Bus (now the Green Line), the Columbia Falls City Bus (fixed deviated), the Whitefish City Bus (fixed-deviated), the Evergreen Commuter and the Tri-City Commuter. The questions covered the reasons people ride the bus, when they typically ride, time spent on the bus, perceptions of safety and comfort, whether a lack of public transportation had ever affected access to employment, medical care or basic necessities and some demographic information.

Response highlights:

- Riders on all routes said they feel safe and comfortable all or most of the time when riding the bus.
- Very few riders (5%) reported employment difficulties related to a lack of public transportation, but some (18%) had been unable to access needed health care and 36% had been unable to get basic necessities.
- **Kalispell City Bus** (57 responses). Riders primarily use the bus for shopping/errands, accessing medical and social services and to get to work. Riders use the bus at all hours service is offered, but 8:30am-noon is a peak usage time. Most riders can now get to where they want to go in 30 minutes or less. 37% said they were age 60 or older; 63% reported having a disability; 23% said they were students.
- **Columbia Falls City Bus** (11 responses). Riders use the bus for recreation or social activities, shopping/errands and getting to medical or social services. They



mostly ride 8:30-noon and early afternoon as that is when the service is offered, and all rides are less than 30 minutes as a function of the distance of the route. All reported being 60 or older; almost three-quarters reported also having a disability; none were students.

- **Whitefish City Bus** (13 responses). Most respondents use the bus for errands/shopping followed closely by accessing medical or social services. Almost all of the riders use the bus from 8:30-noon, followed by early afternoon (this is a function of when the service offered), and most said they get to their destination in less than one hour. Ten riders (77%) reported being 60 or older; more than three-quarters reported also having a disability; none were students.
- **Evergreen Commuter** (9 responses). Most respondents reported they use the bus to access medical or social services, but more than half said they use the bus for shopping/errands and work. Two thirds of the riders use the bus early morning, late morning and early afternoon. All but one rider said they get to their destination in less than one hour; almost half said they get where they are going in a half hour or less. Only a third of riders reported being 60 or older; just under half said they had a disability; two riders (22%) were students.
- **Tri-City Commuter** (6 responses). Almost half of the respondents reported they use the bus for work or school. Most use the bus in the early morning and late afternoon. All but one rider said they get to their destination in less than one hour; half said they get where they are going in an hour or less. Two riders (33%) reported being 60 or older; two said they had a disability; three (50%) said they were students.

*See the Plan Attachments for a copy of the survey and full results.*

#### **D. Other Public Input**

- The Flathead County/Area IX Agency on Aging (AOA) Advisory Council meets bi-monthly to discuss aging and service related issues. Transportation is a frequent discussion item. Meeting times are posted online on the County Commission agenda, the online County calendar and in the Daily Inter Lake “Daybook” calendar of local events.
- The AOA Director reports monthly to the Flathead County Commissioners in a public meeting with the option for public comment on agency activities. The report includes information about Eagle Transit operations and performance indicators. In addition, County Commissioners reviewed and approved the plan on 2/19/2019 at a posted meeting open to the public for comment. (*See Plan Attachments for a sample report.*)
- AOA and Eagle Transit staff participate in numerous local coalitions and workgroups working on care transition and coordination, veterans’ services/issues, home care services, etc.
- The AOA Director, Transportation Manager and other AOA and Eagle Transit staff frequently engage the community about transportation services and issues through

presentations, public meetings, and media. Within the past year, staff have participated in the following:

- Presentations to service clubs and other organizations, including Rotary, Lions, the Lakeside Community Club, church groups, student groups, area Senior and Community Centers and NARFE
  - Presentations to local service providers and advocacy organizations
  - Participation in multiple community fairs and other events, including Winter WarmUp, Community Connect and Senior Safety Day
  - Daily Inter Lake and Flathead Beacon articles
  - Monthly and periodic interviews about AOA/Eagle Transit on KGEZ radio
  - Professional commercial on KPAX (142 spots per month)
  - Monthly ad in Daily Inter Lake; periodic ads in other local papers and the United Way Answer Book
  - AOA staff routinely educate and refer older adults to Eagle Transit services; AOA's routine intake process consists of a "Benefits Check Up" which includes a screening for paratransit services
- Members of the public can obtain information on Eagle Transit services and how to contact Eagle Transit through a variety of means, including a TV commercial, Google Transit, the AOA and Eagle Transit websites, the Eagle Transit Facebook page, AOA newsletter, brochures, radio and newspaper ads and print media. See the websites at <http://www.flathead.mt.gov/eagle/> and <http://flathead.mt.gov/aging/>
    - The AOA website is in the process of being redesigned.
    - We hope to redesign the Eagle Transit website in FY 2020.

### ***Outreach to Private Transportation Providers***

Letters were sent to each company below inviting them to participate in the Transportation Coordination Plan, attend the December 13, 2018 public meeting and attend bi-monthly TAC meetings, with specific mention of the January 3<sup>rd</sup> and February 7<sup>th</sup> 2019 TAC meetings where the FY 2020 plan would be reviewed, discussed and voted on. Attempts were made to reach each company personally by phone to discuss the Plan and get an update on the services they provide. Eagle Transit staff spoke with representatives from Rocky Mountain Transportation, Glacier Taxi, Wild Horse Limousine and Momentum Transportation. The Ride Guy, Arrow Taxi and Montana Trolley did not respond. All but BMCA (represented on TAC, funds Snow Bus service provided by Rocky Mountain Transportation) declined to participate in the plan. However, most are willing to work with Eagle Transit if the opportunity arises. *(Copies of letters uploaded to application website.)*

Below is a description of the services provided by local private transit providers as well as any feedback given during phone interviews:

#### **Taxi Companies:**

- Arrow Taxi: Provides 24/7 service. Offers shuttle, tours and taxi service to all of Flathead County.

- Glacier Taxi: Serves most of Flathead County, primarily operating in Kalispell and Whitefish, 24 hours every day of the week. Five 6-passenger minivans are in service but are not lift-equipped.

**Charter Companies:**

- Rocky Mountain Transportation: In business since 1946, Rocky Mountain is the largest transportation provider in Flathead County, operating school bus service in Whitefish, charter services, a Hertz franchise and the Whitefish Snow Bus (funded by the Big Mountain Commercial Association). The 38 passenger Snow Bus runs primarily in the winter providing free service between multiple stops in Whitefish and Big Mountain Ski Resort.

**Limousine Service:**

- Kalispell Limousine Service: This company offers limousine service in Kalispell and between Kalispell and Missoula and Billings airports. Its fleet consists of a 4-passenger sedan (\$55/hr.), stretch limo holding up to 14 passengers (\$95/hr.), a 15-passenger van (\$75/hr.), a 26-passenger mini-bus (\$195/hr.) and a 7 passenger SUV (\$85/hr.).
- Wild Horse Limousine: Wild Horse has a three-vehicle fleet: a 2005 Ford Excursion, 2014 Lincoln MKT Town Car and a 2014 Mercedes Sprinter Limousine. They provide luxury transportation to proms, birthdays, anniversaries, graduations, and other special occasions as well as cater to corporate and leisure travelers. Hourly rates and minimum charges vary by type of car and service requested.

**Other:**

- Momentum Transportation: Momentum offers ADA accessible transportation 24 hours/7days a week within the Flathead area for a flat rate of \$80 per one-way ride or \$120 per roundtrip. Rides outside the Valley are based on a \$3.5 per mile charge.
- Montana Trolley: The Montana Trolley offers charter services 24 hours/7days a week for special events and tours in Flathead, Lincoln, Lake and Glacier counties. Their fleet includes four trolleys, including *Hazel*, with 6 tables and 3 benches; *Theda*, with 6 tables and benches accommodating up to 15 passengers; and *Ruby*, with seating and standing area for up to 30 passengers. The typical charge is \$125 per hour but rates may vary depending on the event and location.
- The Ride Guy: This is a nonprofit taxi company with volunteer drivers providing free rides in the Whitefish area Thu-Sat from 9:00 pm-2:00 am, primarily to patrons of local drinking establishments.

***Identifying Service Delivery Challenges, Unmet Needs and Opportunities for Improvement or Growth***

Eagle Transit has made significant changes over the last year that have resulted in increased ridership, more efficient and user-friendly service, improved paratransit compliance and new opportunities for community collaboration.

However, some challenges noted in previous years are ongoing, and there continue to be areas of unmet need due primarily to limited resources. There are also new opportunities for change and partnership.

### **Operations, Routes and Service**

- **The majority of Eagle Transit services are provided in the City of Kalispell, but the area would benefit from more runs on existing routes, additional routes and extended days/hours of service.**

One of the keys to ensuring we are providing valuable, customer-driven service (and thus increasing ridership) is designing routes so we pick people up and drop them off in convenient, desirable locations. We have consistently covered major destinations like Hutton Ranch, the hospital/medical offices, FVCC, Meridian/Gateway, downtown and South 93, but it has been more challenging to pick people up within a reasonable distance to where they live given our resources. The difficulty is compounded by winter weather which can make streets impossible to navigate, a lack of sidewalks in many areas, and the aging of the population which can limit passenger mobility. In an effort to address this issue, the new Orange Line fixed route implemented in January 2019 was designed to provide much-needed coverage for centrally located neighborhoods and apartment complexes. It also offers an additional run to Hutton Ranch, which is the most popular destination for passengers. Other areas of Kalispell could benefit from “Orange Line” types of routes that provide neighborhood access and add to or connect with the primary fixed routes. One example is the Two Mile Drive/Three Mile Drive/Liberty Avenue area which includes multiple apartment complexes, many of them low-income or affordable, as well as new, higher density neighborhood developments.

Centralized, high usage areas of Kalispell could benefit from the addition of concentrated routes with frequent runs to allow for 15-30 minute travel throughout the city.

Parking can also be challenging in certain areas of Kalispell, especially downtown and near the hospital. Routes that include Park&Ride options, or shared ride alternatives (like van pools) to and from those locations would benefit workers, employers, visitors and businesses. Centralized, high-frequency routes would complement these types of solutions by making it easier for people to move around town without a vehicle from their primary destination.

Finally, Eagle Transit currently operates fixed route/complementary paratransit service in Kalispell M-F, from approximately 7:00am-6:00pm. The lack of extended weekday hours and weekend service can be problematic for those who need public transportation for employment (i.e. service/shift workers) or other critical activities outside of Eagle Transit’s current business hours. For those who have low incomes, alternative means of transportation are typically unaffordable. For older adults and people with disabilities who depend on paratransit services, especially those who need an accessible vehicle, there are no other low cost options. Additionally, local and visitor access to public

transportation during evening and weekend hours could benefit businesses like shops and restaurants that operate outside of the 8-5 work week.

- **Based on population and demographics, Evergreen needs more public transportation service, but it is logistically challenging and needs a creative solution.**

Evergreen is home to as many people as the City of Whitefish, and it has a significant number of residents who based on income and disability would benefit from public transportation services, especially to travel into Kalispell for work, health care and social services and shopping/errands. However, the main road through Evergreen, Hwy. 2, is not easily accessed from most neighborhoods, and there are few sidewalks or cross streets. Additionally, the population is dispersed. A neighborhood-based model may be more appropriate than the fixed and commuter routes along Hwy. 2 that have been provided in the past.

Until July of 2018, a portion of Evergreen was part of a Kalispell-Evergreen fixed route with complementary paratransit service. Rides were low on the fixed portion of the route and because of the distance traveled the resources required to meet the paratransit demand were straining our system. As a result of short-term recommendations from our TDP Planning Committee, we eliminated fixed route service in Evergreen in July 2018, replacing it with a more limited combination of commuter service and Premium Dial-A-Ride. The Commuter was unsuccessful (2-4 rides per day), so we discontinued it in January 2019. At the same time we extended the Premium Dial-A-Ride hours to try to better meet the demand for specialized transit services in the area, but rides are based on availability.

Developing a more appropriate model for Evergreen is a top priority for the Planning Committee going forward.

- **Expanded and/or reconfigured service is needed in the other two incorporated cities of Whitefish and Columbia Falls**

Eagle Transit offers fixed-deviated service in Whitefish and Columbia Falls M-F, approximately four hours a day. Both cities are supportive of public transportation but have different needs.

Whitefish is concerned primarily with 1) managing traffic/parking/access to popular destinations during the summer and winter seasons, and 2) providing transportation for workers both to increase the pool of potential workers (including those who live in Kalispell or Columbia Falls) and to reduce the number of workers taking up parking spaces at their places of employment. We are in discussions with Whitefish stakeholders about opportunities to partner on transportation options that would support both locals and visitors moving more easily about town and to desired destinations.

Ridership from/in Columbia Falls is extremely low at city route fixed stops, on the Tri-City Commuter (as they were on the separate commuter that used to run between Kalispell and Columbia Falls) and on the summer commuter to Glacier National Park. The vast majority of ridership is older adults who qualify for paratransit services. Consideration of reconfiguring the type of service and/or method of service delivery in Columbia Falls will be part of the Planning Committee's work moving forward.

- **Paratransit/Dial-A-Ride service areas and days/hours of service are limited while demand is increasing**

Paratransit services are provided in limited service areas tied to the fixed routes in Kalispell and the fixed-deviated routes in Whitefish and Columbia Falls. Premium Dial-A-Ride service is offered only in West Kalispell and Evergreen, and rides are based on available capacity. There is no specialized transit between the three cities or in outlying areas. Additionally, paratransit services are only offered during the same days/hours the city buses run, and Premium Dial-A-Ride hours are further limited.

Approximately half the population of Flathead County lives outside the service areas, including many older adults and people with disabilities who do not have adequate personal transportation options. We used to provide a premium service (Country Dial-A-Ride) for those residents but were forced to discontinue it due to increased demand for paratransit/Dial-A-Ride service in the Kalispell-Evergreen area. For adults 60 and older who live in more rural areas, the Agency on Aging may be able to provide escorted transportation services, but funds for the program are limited and it is often reserved for those who need rides to medical appointments.

Limited service areas, limited days/hours of service and the lack of service between cities can make it difficult, and sometimes impossible, for older adults and people with disabilities to access health care and social services, obtain basic necessities and participate in community life.

The demand for specialized transit continues to increase across Flathead County due primarily to the aging of the population (see below). Increased demand without a corresponding increase in resources will likely result in further service limitations.

***A special note about the demand for rides to access medical care:*** Eagle Transit provides approximately 16,000 rides to medical facilities/offices annually. AOA typically provides around 2300 hours of escorted transportation service per year, almost all of which is to obtain medical care. The ASSIST program also has three vans in service providing daily rides to medical appointments. Despite the large amount of community transportation resources devoted to helping people access health care, it is insufficient to meet the demand. We are in the process of putting together a work group to try to come up with new solutions.

- **Commuter service has the potential to support workforce development and enhance visitor experience, but it is currently underutilized.**

Currently, ridership on the Tri-City Commuter is relatively low, especially on the leg between Whitefish and Columbia Falls. Ridership was higher when separate commuters ran between Kalispell and the two cities, but it had declined somewhat over the past few years. Whitefish in particular is struggling to find workers to fill open jobs and has identified a lack of affordable housing in the area as a primary obstacle. Redesigned commuter service could support worker recruitment from surrounding communities.

Improvements last season to the summer commuter route to Glacier National Park, including the addition of Whitefish stops, saw an increase in ridership by visitors, locals and workers. We are considering additional changes this coming season in partnership with Whitefish stakeholders that could further increase utilization of the route.

- **Service to and from Kalispell and within smaller communities like Lakeside/Somers, Bigfork and the Canyon area are often requested by the public, particularly older adults.**

To try to address the demand, we have experimented with largely unsuccessful commuter routes. As one example, in FY 2016, Eagle Transit offered a “Community Connector” commuter route in these areas on a trial basis. Only 310 total rides were provided over a seven-month period. Additionally, we used to offer commuter service three days a week to the Canyon area, but only one rider, on occasion, took advantage of the service.

We know there is demand for Dial-A-Ride type service and other individualized service like escorted transportation as we get frequent requests through both Eagle Transit and AOA. However, we don’t have the resources at this time, separately or in combination with other entities, to put a program in place. As we explore options for Evergreen (see last section below), we hope to develop a model we could replicate in other smaller, more rural areas of the county.

- **Interest is often expressed in affordable, readily available connectivity to the airport, train stations and Glacier National Park.**
  - Both the current and previous Transportation Managers have met with airport management, and they would like to see public transportation available at the airport. However, projected ridership would be low. It does not appear to be financially feasible to add an airport route at this time.
  - Since 2017, in partnership with Glacier National Park, we have been offering summer commuter service from Kalispell to the Park with limited stops in Whitefish, Columbia Falls, Hungry Horse and within the Park.
  - Eagle Transit has a stop near the Amtrak station in Whitefish as does Flathead Transit (offering service from Missoula). We also include the Canadian Visitor Center near the train station as a whistle stop on our summer commuter to Glacier.

## Vehicles and Maintenance

- **Progress has been made on replacing an aging fleet but maintenance continues to be a costly component of operations and current funds are insufficient to allow for fleet expansion.**

Of the 17 vehicles we have available to run on a daily basis, four are more than 10 years old and six have over 200,000 miles. Five other buses will reach 200,000 within a year. Four of the 17 buses are back-up buses; the rest are in service. However three of the buses are in need of costly repairs and one is not being use presently. FY 2016 and 2017 we spent \$123,000 and \$125,000 respectively on bus maintenance and \$130,318 in the FY 2018. Increased frequency of breakdowns and having multiple buses out of service for preventive maintenance or repair further strains system capacity.

Increased use of the Flathead County Road Department's mechanic service has helped us better manage maintenance costs as they charge us for parts but not labor, and we are able to use the labor cost as in-kind match.

## Technology

- **Passengers are increasingly requesting and expecting technological support for their transit experience.**

Technology like Google Transit, cell phone apps and software that allows passengers to schedule their own rides can improve customer experience and may achieve efficiencies in serve delivery.

- **Our current scheduling software can be unwieldy and inefficient.** It may be time to explore other options.

## Planning and Resource Development

- **Public transportation is a vital component of the infrastructure in our community. Most service is provided within cities, especially Kalispell, but historically little emphasis has been placed on joint planning or partnering with city governments, businesses and stakeholders.**

See the *Setting Priorities and Developing Strategies for The Future* section below for a discussion on efforts to better engage cities and other stakeholders.

- **Youth and young adults are less able to afford and less culturally tied to traditional means of transportation. They represent a natural market for transit services.**

Over the last year Eagle Transit has stepped up efforts to reach out to younger riders and increase their transit options, including making presentations to youth/young adult



groups, adding more stops near college student housing, adding fixed route stops at Flathead High School and two elementary schools, adding a trial run for the Kalispell Parks & Recreation after school program, adding Eagle Transit route information to Google Transit, adding a Facebook page and exploring phone apps.

While these are steps in the right direction, future planning and service development should better include the youth perspective.

- **The aging of the population is the single largest factor in planning for the future of transit services in the Flathead.**

The current Area Plan on Aging details the changing demographics relative to the older adult population and points to the need for additional and more flexible transportation as a major priority now and in coming years. The new Area Plan on Aging will do the same.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2017 estimates, 28% of Flathead County is already age 60 or older and almost 19% is 65 and older. Of those 65-74, 23% have a disability; 62% of those 75 or older have one. Twenty percent have difficulty walking. More than 8% of older adults live at or below the federal poverty level, and 12% live at or below 125% of poverty. **This is a permanent demographic shift that will have an unprecedented impact on transit and other services.**

Currently, older adults account for approximately half of all paratransit riders, 40% of fixed route riders and 30% of city-to-city commuter riders. AOA supplements Eagle Transit with Escorted Transportation for adults age 60 and older who can't drive or use public transit, accounting for more almost one-third of the AOA's in-home and community-based independent living services.

### ***Setting Priorities and Developing Strategies for the Future***

The following priorities and strategies were developed through the needs assessment process, performance analysis, general public and rider feedback and TAC input.

#### **1. Engage in strategic planning**

- a. 5-Year Transportation Development Plan (TDP) - The new Transportation Development Plan continues to be in progress with estimated completion by December 2019. Planning Committee priorities for the coming year include:
  - i. Developing recommendations for a new model of service for the Evergreen area, including consideration of creation and implementation of a demand response system and/or volunteer driver program (that could potentially be extended to unserved areas).
    1. Work with consultant to develop a plan and explore applying for an MDT expansion grant to fund the new service.
  - ii. Examining services in Whitefish and Columbia Falls for possible expansion or reconfiguration.

- iii. Exploring changes to commuter services to promote use specifically by workers and visitors
- iv. Identifying and assessing long-range opportunities for expansion of service outside the Kalispell, Evergreen, Whitefish and Columbia Falls areas
- v. Confirming marketing plan priorities
- vi. Developing strategies for planning, partnering and collaborating with other stakeholders, including cities and the business community
- vii. Identifying other potential sources of funding and strategies for pursuing
- b. Age-Friendly Flathead – AOA/Eagle Transit will continue to play a key role in the initiative, including chairing the Transportation Subcommittee.

## **2. Build public, elected official and business community support for a well-planned, coordinated and adequately funded transit system**

Public transportation serves a vital function for individuals who depend on it, but it also supports all sectors of the local economy by connecting customers and employees to businesses. It helps mitigate traffic and parking congestion and environmental concerns by taking cars off the road, which is both a boost to commerce and to the overall quality of life in the community.

Although Eagle Transit is a county operation (funded in part by a voted county mill), service is provided primarily in and between the cities of Kalispell, Whitefish and Columbia Falls.

It is critical transit planning/funding is approached jointly with the county, cities and business communities to ensure integrated needs assessment, sufficient resource development and coordinated service delivery. We have begun engaging city stakeholders over the past year and plan to build on these conversations. We will:

- a. Educate the public, elected city officials, city staff, chambers of commerce and other business stakeholders about public transit's positive impact on economic development and commerce. Present information demonstrate the economic benefits and return on investment of local funding for public transit.
- b. Demonstrate how public transportation can serve cities' growth plans. For example, emphasize the ability of public transportation to aid downtown redevelopment in Kalispell.
- c. Explore transit options that focus on workers to increase the pool of available workers, improve employee attendance, relieve traffic congestion and reduce the need for parking. Options might include express shuttles during peak hours, park-and-rides, van pools or other shared ride services, and employer-sponsored transit passes for employees.
- d. Actively pursue and facilitate city and business community participation in annual and 5-year transit planning efforts; participate in and provide input on cities' planning efforts.
- e. Meet periodically with city staff to address transit-related issues/ideas and identify potential joint projects.

- f. Attend city council and planning board meetings and participate in discussions relative to new development; provide public comment when appropriate.
- g. Approach city councils about increased funding for transit.
- h. Approach businesses about sponsorships or other mechanisms to financially support public transportation.

Building support is an intensive effort that requires consistent and persistent energy. Given staff commitments to administrative and operational functions, the TAC will create a **Transit Ambassador** program in which Committee members and other transit supporters will educate community leaders and the public about the value of public transportation, build relationships and partnerships with key stakeholders and engage in outreach to promote ridership.

### 3. Increase Ridership

Eagle Transit ridership increased 16% from FY 2017 to FY 2018, after a 6.5% decrease the previous year, primarily on the Kalispell-Evergreen fixed. Additionally, the TDP Planning Committee recommended multiple short-term changes (primarily to Kalispell routes and services) that took effect on July 1, 2018 and appear to have reversed the ridership declines on Kalispell fixed routes. So far in FY 2019, ridership on those routes is up 9% over this time last year. Paratransit rides have steadily increased over the last four years from about one-quarter of all rides in FY 2014 to more than one-third in FY 2017 with a slight drop in 2018, which has stretched resources and created logistical challenges to be resolved.

Although we saw a significant jump in ridership over the last year and are on track to provide a record number of rides this year, increasing ridership continues to be a primary objective as a measure of service value to the community and demonstration of the need for increased transit funding in the Flathead Valley.

For FY 2020, our efforts will include the following:

- a. Continue to address ridership growth as part of the TDP Planning Committee's development of mid and long range recommendations as it completes the planning process this year, with an emphasis on Evergreen. (See above for areas of focus).
- b. Continue to adjust Kalispell fixed route services to maximize convenience and efficiency.
- c. Continue expanded Premium Dial-A-Ride hours pending a more permanent Evergreen solution.
- d. Continue to work with the City of Kalispell to obtain permits for and install bus stop signs in Kalispell. Install signs in Whitefish and Columbia Falls when TDP process is complete.
- e. Evaluate the feasibility of continuing the trial run serving the Kalispell Parks and Recreation after school program.
- f. Experiment with rider incentives, like our current "February Fare Free" initiative to promote fixed route ridership; evaluate effectiveness and cost/benefit.

- g. Experiment with options that will appeal to those who might use the bus to get to recreation destinations like parks and trails. For example, consider creating a commuter run that includes a bike trailer like the one used in Glacier National Park to a commuter bus.
- h. Use Transit Ambassadors to promote ridership through targeted outreach.
  - i. Recruit some Ambassadors specifically to work with older adults and people with disabilities to support them to understand and become comfortable using public transportation.
- i. Continue to improve customer experience:
  - ii. “Go live” with Google Transit.
  - iii. Update and post/distribute materials in a timely way.
  - iv. Make information available in multiple formats, including online and in print, and ensure availability on buses, in shelters and in popular community locations.
  - v. Continue to update and simplify schedules to be more user-friendly; consider professional printing when routes have stabilized.
  - vi. Continue to explore cell phone apps and other interactive technology as part of the TDP process; explore new routing/scheduling software.
- j. Explore funding options for modified holiday schedules - Passengers who depend on Eagle Transit services for work, medical appointments and other critical activities often struggle to find alternative transportation on some county holidays such as Martin Luther King Day, Presidents Day, Columbus Day and Veterans Day. Running on holidays is costly and not feasible without additional funding.
- k. Encourage and support youth ridership through targeted outreach, adding routes/stops that serve younger populations and considering technology that may appeal to younger riders.
- l. Pursue additional regular features in local media (to build on monthly radio interviews); prioritize marketing strategies as part of the TDP process.

### ***Potential Route/Service Changes***

The TDP will provide a more in-depth look at costs associated with recommended changes, but the following is a basic estimate and “snapshot” description of options discussed as being of interest to TAC and Planning Committee members. Costs include personnel, fuel, maintenance, insurance and operational support and assume vehicles are part of current fleet.

- Saturday service in Kalispell
  - Fixed route/paratransit (support for three drivers/buses, one dispatcher, 8-hour day): \$ 81,000
  - Commuter (one driver/bus, no dispatcher, 8 hour split shift): \$27,000
- Evergreen service redesigned
  - Demand Response system (one driver/bus with dispatcher support, M-F, 8-hour days): \$133,000

- Volunteer Driver Program (Volunteer Coordinator, background checks/drug tests/insurance for 20 volunteer drivers, one small bus and one minivan, dispatch support): \$106,000

#### **4. Expand Partnerships, Collaboration and Coordinated Service**

- a. Continue to explore partnerships with and financial participation from the City of Whitefish and Whitefish area stakeholders to create the transportation hub, address seasonal traffic/parking congestion within Whitefish and support workforce development.
  - i. Coordinate winter and summer season commuter service with Big Mountain Commercial Association; consider business sponsorship as one funding mechanism.
- b. Work with the cities and business communities in Kalispell, Whitefish and Columbia Falls to explore their interest in supporting summer routes/services between and within the cities to ease seasonal congestion and more effectively and efficiently move local residents, workers and visitors to popular destinations.
- c. Continue the summer season commuter route from Kalispell to Glacier National Park.
- d. Pursue forming a community stakeholder workgroup to address concerns about insufficient resources to support the growing need for transportation to medical/health care services; identify underutilized transportation assets and make recommendations for bringing them into service.

#### **5. Explore New Funding**

Expanding resources is critical to building a public transportation system in the Flathead that supports inclusive engagement in community life, economic development and stability and effective and efficient traffic management. In addition to the partnerships described in the section above, we plan to:

- a. Form a TAC subcommittee to build on the work of the Planning Committee to help staff pursue funding options.
- b. Consider applying for MDT expansion grant funds to support new service in Evergreen or other appropriate projects.
- c. Annually review existing contracts and consider renegotiation of terms where appropriate.
- d. Research other Cooperative Agreements around the country to identify common practices and potential improvements.
- e. Pursue local business sponsorship of routes and services that support economic development, worker and customer access, relief of traffic and parking congestion, etc.

## **TCP and 5311 Application Attachments**

- Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC) member list
- Letters to private transportation providers inviting participation in the plan
- TAC and Flathead County Commissioner Minutes
- Transportation Coordination Plan participant/provider summary
- Contracts and Cooperative Agreements
- List of Eagle Transit vehicles
- Public Meeting, December 13, 2018 – advertising and minutes
- Surveys and results
- Sample monthly report to Flathead County Commissioners
- Eagle Transit Brochures, Schedules and Ads
- Affidavit of Public Notice published in Daily Inter Lake