



GORGE TRANSIT STRATEGY WORKING GROUP MEETING #4

MEETING SUMMARY

Date: Wednesday, May 26, 2021

Time: 1:00 – 3:00 p.m.

Location: Zoom Meeting

Participants:

John Andoh, Columbia Area Transit

Rajiv Batra, Urban Planning/Design

Bill Baumann, Human Services Council

Elizur Bello, The Next Door, Inc

Allison Boyd, Multnomah County

Transportation

Lynn Burditt, US Forest Service

Sharon Carter, Klickitat County Senior
Services - Mt. Adams Transportation Service

Annick Chalier, Hood River Energy Council

Teresa Christopherson, Clackamas County
(Mt Hood Express)

David Duncan, Gray Line Charter Services

Valerie Egon, ODOT

Seth English-Young, FHWA-WFL

Leana Kinley, City of Stevenson

Marla Keethler, City of White Salmon

Michael Kelly, Human Services Council

Nick Kraemer, Hood River County Planning

Jamie Lemon, FHWA-WFL

Dawn LeMieux, TNDI Mid-Columbia Health
Equity Advocates Program Coordinator &
CHW

Jesus Mendoza, MCEDD and The Link

Robert Liberty, Columbia River Gorge
Commission

Maya Sullivan, Insitu

Buck Jones, CRITFC

Terra Lingley, ODOT

Sophie Miller, Skamania County Senior
Services

Jessica Olson, Columbia River Gorge
Commission

Norma Pickett, Mt Adams Transportation
Service

Emily Reed, Columbia Gorge Tourism
Alliance

Dale Robins, SW WA RTC

Amy Schlappi, Columbia Area Transit

Wayne Stewart, Historic Highway Advisory
Committee

Nate Stice, Regional Solutions (Governor's
Office)

Lexi Stickel, PacificSource Community
Solutions - Columbia Gorge CCO

Lisa Viles, ODHS, Aging and People with
Disabilities

Marta Yera Cronin, CG Community College

Armando J Zelada, Gorge Pedal, Friends of
the Historic Columbia River Highway

Gordon Zimmerman, City of Cascade Locks
CAT Transit Staff (Hood River County)

Project Management Team: Jessica Metta, MCEDD; Kate Drennan, MCEDD; Patty Fink, CAT; John Andoh, CAT; Theresa Conley, ODOT, Matthew Cramer, WSDOT; Kathy Fitzpatrick, MCEDD

Facilitation Staff: Jessica Pickul, JLA; Nicole Metildi, JLA

Meeting Goals:

1. Report out on what will be included with the Foundations Memo. Receive input on final revisions for the Vision and Goal Statements.
2. Discuss what will be included in the next phase of Gorge Transit and how we can keep the Working Group members involved.

Welcome, Introductions, and Agenda Review

Jessica Pickul, JLA Public Involvement, welcomed the group, and reviewed the agenda.

Kathy Fitzpatrick, MCEDD, shared the **purpose of today's meeting** – to discuss and solicit feedback on the Foundations Memo, reach consensus on the Vision and Goals, celebrate recent project successes, and review the purpose and objectives of Phase 2.

There were no questions or comments from the group.

Project and Foundations Memo Update

Kathy reviewed the **purpose of the Gorge Transit Strategy process** – to build on the recommendations of existing transportation plans to establish a foundation for a comprehensive transit strategy serving the bi-state, 5-county MCEDD region.

The **objectives of Phase 1** were to:

- Build Partnerships
- Complete Foundational Assessments
- Synthesize Existing Goals and Policies
- Develop a High-Level Regional Transit Vision

She then gave a **status update and overview of Phase 1 activities** and how the Working Group has been involved:

- **Working Group Session 1:** Helped identify regional challenges public transit can address and Survey #1
- **Working Group Session 2:** Existing Framework: Participated in initial Vision and Goals discussion and Survey #2; Confirmed local transportation plans, shared goals/policies and conflicts

- **Working Group Session 3:** Refined Vision and Goals of the Gorge Transit Strategy; Contributed to the Gaps Analysis
- **Working Group Session 4:** Confirmed Vision and Goals and next steps for the Gorge Regional Transit Strategy
- **Up Next: June through August 2021** - The Foundations Memo and a summary of the work done to-date will be presented and shared with Transportation Provider Boards

Kathy then shared an overview of the **Foundations Memo**, which is grounded in the work that the Working Group has been doing and summarizes the work that has been accomplished in Phase 1.

Kathy walked through the Foundations Memo with the group and asked for feedback. The Memo includes:

- Background of this work and who funded it
- Phase 1 objectives
- Summary of Memos and Work Products
- Vision Statement
- Goal Areas/Statements
- Recognizes local and existing planning efforts
- A high-level gaps analysis
- Narrative that describes our vision of the future, which takes into account the “postcards to the future” that the group created in the first working session

Dale Robins noted that the map might need to be updated in the Memo to show service between Cascade Locks and White Salmon.

The link to the draft Foundations Memo was shared in the chat: <https://gorgetranslink.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/GTS-Foundations-Memo-Working-Group-4.pdf>

Vision Statement and Goal Areas Update

Kathy shared the **Vision Statement and Goal Areas that the PMT refined based on feedback from the Working Group**. The goal for the group in the meeting was to confirm that the Vision Statement and Goal Areas reflect the vision of what we’re trying to achieve together for Gorge Transit.

Vision Statement

Kathy shared the refined Vision Statement. She added that the PMT heard the previous feedback from this group about creating a rider-facing marketing tagline. This type of marketing and outreach work has been funded by an ODOT grant and will launch in July 2021. This vision statement is meant to resonate with decision makers and legislators.

Refined Vision Statement: *Public transit allows Gorge communities to thrive by providing access to critical services, higher education, jobs, and outdoor recreation while protecting the natural wonders of the Gorge.*

Jessica opened a poll in Zoom. **Everyone responded “yes,” the Vision Statement describes what we’re hoping to achieve with Gorge Transit.**

Participants shared the following thoughts in the chat and through discussion:

- People agreed that **the vision statement is well written and provides a future-based statement** meant to inspire and give direction to the intent of the Strategy.
- Should the vision statement include how **transit needs to be as good as or better than private vehicles**? Kate Drennan, MCEDD, and Kathy shared that this is captured in the Memo. Theresa Conley, ODOT, shared that we could get more specific on this topic in Phase 2 and think about strategies around it.
- The vision statement should be positive and action oriented; show how transit can be the solution to shared challenges
- Do “natural wonders” of the Gorge include a stable and livable climate?
- “Livability” could be included as something we are protecting.
- Suggested edits from the chat:
 - o “Public transit supports Gorge Communities”
 - o “Public transit facilitates thriving gorge communities”

Goal Areas

Goal 1: Community and Economic Vitality

- Kathy shared that this goal area has been simplified to once concept per bullet and added an explanation of what is meant by “Community and Economic Vitality.”
- **Goal language:**
 - o *Public transit in the Gorge supports community and economic vitality by enhancing economic and housing development, the multimodal transportation system, workforce mobility, and regional resiliency.*
 - Transit provides workforce mobility.
 - Transit supports the local and regional economies.
 - Transit provides access to outdoor recreation for residents and visitors.
 - Transit reduces the need for expensive parking infrastructure in urban areas.
 - Transit mitigates traffic congestion and dangerous traffic conditions.
 - Transit supports multimodal connectivity.
 - Transit supports local and regional disaster responses.
 - Transit supports local planning efforts to develop affordable communities.

- Participants shared the following thoughts in the chat and through discussion:
 - o **4th bullet:** Change "in urban areas" to "within communities."
 - o Someone asked if **healthcare should be called out**, to which it was mentioned that this might be covered in another goal area. A few participants recommended wording such as "assists access to medical, social, community to community" or to simplifying to "Quality of Life."
 - o It was asked if **equity was or could be addressed in this topic**. Kathy shared that equity is addressed in another goal area in an effort to simplify things.
 - o Should the **connection to more rural area** residents to cities be mentioned?
 - o **5th bullet:** Could be more explicit about reducing trips/emissions. This could also come later in defining the purposes of reducing congestion.
 - o **Access to jobs and housing** that is made possible by transit is part of community and economic vitality.

Goal 2: High Quality Service and Experience

- Kathy shared that this goal has more to do with rider experience and welcoming people to use transit network.
- **Goal language:**
 - o *Public transit in the Gorge provides all residents and visitors with seamless and equitable access to community resources and to key connection points.*
 - Transit service is reliable, seamless, and coordinated.
 - Transit provides service to key connection points within and outside of the region.
 - Transit service is equitable and affordable, prioritizing underserved and diverse communities while making them feel welcome and safe.
 - The transit network of providers has high organizational capacity.
- Participants shared the following thoughts in the chat and through discussion:
 - o Someone asked if stewardship is a service, to which Theresa replied that the next goal area is about stewardship.
 - o People like to be helpful, not "car-centric," and like less emission production. One member added that it's important to give riders transportation choices.

Goal 3: Environmental Stewardship

- Kathy shared that this was originally just a bullet, but then was pulled out as its own goal area.
- **Goal Language:**
 - o *Public transit in the Gorge protects the natural environment in the Columbia Gorge.*
 - Transit protects our natural resources by reducing overcrowding at popular recreation areas.

- Transit reduces Green House Gas emissions by moving more people with efficient and low/no-emission vehicles.
 - Transit reduces the need for large parking lots in our pristine natural areas.
- Participants shared the following thoughts in the chat and through discussion:
 - Overcrowding can occur despite the mode people take to recreation areas. Consider changing “overcrowding” to “parking.” (Specific to the first bullet)
 - There were several comments about how transit is part of the toolbox to address climate and other regional goals.
 - “Transit supports parking management in recreational areas, reducing concerns around safety and environmental degradation.” (Specific wording suggestion for the 3rd bullet)

Goal 4: Financial Sustainability

- Kathy shared that this goal was taken out and then put back in. It is more of a strategy; however, because financial sustainability is so important to the Working Group, the PMT kept it in as a goal area.
- **Goal Language:**
 - *Public transit in the Gorge is financially sustainable, expanding operations with increased capacity and new funding sources.*
 - Transit has new and diversified funding sources.
 - Transit providers coordinate services, providing cost efficiencies.
 - Transit has the capacity and funding levels necessary to achieve other goal areas.
- Participants shared the following thoughts in the chat and through discussion:
 - **Funding needs to be permanent.**
 - Suggestions and comments specific to the 1st bullet:
 - "Transit has new, diversified, and long-term funding sources" (or continuous, ongoing, etc.)
 - Parking management supports transit access and builds system sustainability.
 - Parking is related to vehicle volume and new Gorge Management allows transit as part of its classification.

Participants also shared the following in the chat:

- The PMT may want to **call out “Columbia River Gorge” in the memo** for clarity within the document.

Recent Successes

Kathy spent some time appreciating all the work that has been done in the past several months to push the Gorge Transit Strategy forward. She also shared the following **recent public transit successes in the area:**

- **Skamania County Transit**
 - o Stevenson/Carson to Bingen
 - o Stevenson to Cascade Locks
- **CAT**
 - o Medical Services Van
 - o Low Income Pass Program
 - o Bus stop at Wyeth In-lieu Site
- **MCEDD**
 - o Gorge Transit Strategy Phase II
 - o GOrge Pass Marketing
- **MATS**
 - o Continued fixed route services
 - o First Bus Shelter
- **Sherman County**
 - o Bus Barn
- **The Link**
 - o New routes, stops, bus

Kathy also shared that the **GOrge Pass**, a universal pass system encompassing all the fixed route services in the Gorge, **will launch in July**. A physical and digital version of the pass will be made available. Marketing for the pass will launch in November and aims to educate Gorge residents (and Portland residents) about existing services and the pass.

Next Steps and Phase 2 of Gorge Transit

Theresa gave an overview of Phase 2 and presented the objectives for the next phase.

In Phase 2, technical experts will come together to identify opportunities for efficiencies, define services, and develop a set of prioritized strategies and action items to achieve the high-quality, seamless system envisioned.

Phase 2 Objectives:

- Operationalize the Vision – building on Phase I Vision Statement, Goal Areas & Goal Statements
- Identify and prioritize implementation actions to create a high-quality, reliable, seamless, efficient and well-coordinated regional transit service

Phase 2 will consist of developing the following:

- Public engagement plan
- Baseline operational assessment

- Interim memos refining preferred regional transit future (mapped with high-level costs), policy changes, funding strategies and organization approaches to achieve vision
- Simple public-facing final document

Participants shared the following thoughts in the chat and through discussion:

- **Is everyone at the table for the Phase 2 discussion** (i.e., federal government, agricultural department, State and local communities, etc.)? The Working Group participants this session include FWHA, USFS, Gorge Commission. Theresa said that the structure of the advisory committees and groups will also bring in more people.
- **Potential congressional issues** surrounding the Gorge and Mt Hood Act and associated impacts on funding and sustainability.
- **Cost to create and operate a transit system** that implements the Vision and Goals will be addressed in Phase 2, as well as identifying funding gaps and where efficiencies can be created to fill those gaps.
- How this **integrates with electrification work at the state level**. Theresa anticipates that Phase 2 will have more detailed focus on some of the foundational strategy areas and a higher level view on others as partners work together.

Timeline

Theresa shared the **timeline for Phase 2**, which is still being finalized. The general schedule is as follows:

- **Now – July 1:** Develop and Finalize the Scope of Work and Request for Proposal
- **Summer 2021:** Release Request for Proposal
- **Fall 2021:** Notice to Proceed and start work on deliverables through Spring 2022
- **June 2022:** Phase 2 complete

Public Involvement Plan

Theresa walked through the **Public Involvement Plan** for Phase 2.

The **Project Management Team (PMT)** will lead overall guidance and project management and will consist of: ODOT, WSDOT, MCEDD, and Transit Providers (CAT included here).

The **Advisory Committee**, which will be more technical in nature, will provide project guidance, deliverables review, and policy guidance. The committee will consist of:

- Transportation providers (especially if they do not have capacity to be on PMT)
- Local governments (transportation and land use planners)
- Tribal representative
- Human Service agencies

The **Stakeholder Advisory Group** will provide strategic direction on deliverables, will be comprised of Working Group participants, and may meet when key deliverables need to be discussed.

Jessica asked what participants thought about the Working Group becoming the Stakeholder Advisory Group, noting that Kathy will meet with people to clarify their involvement and capacity to participate.

Participants shared the following thoughts in the chat and through discussion:

- There was a question about **where the Gorge Commission fits in**. Kathy shared that Commission staff have helped guide understanding of existing plans and policies and have participated in the Working Group sessions. There is also an open invitation for staff and board members to serve on the Stakeholder Advisory Group. **PMT may need to confirm with Gorge Commission staff whether or not the group would like to be on the Project Management Team in Phase 2.**
- There was a question about **whether end-users should be a part of this process** or if there will be a general public advisory committee. Theresa responded that the Advisory Committee is meant to include technical experts who will help implement the strategy, and the Advisory Group will bring an end-user perspective.
- There were questions about whether there would be a **series of community conversations with the general public** and what **role employers** would play.
- There was general concern about **how end-users and those who are not yet users will be engaged** and included in the public involvement process. Someone mentioned **giving end-users a stipend** for their time.
- The Public Involvement Plan **feels agency-heavy and does not seem to include Federal input.**
- Kathy stressed that this is a regional effort that will use data from **but not duplicate** local planning efforts.
- **ADA issues** usually get left to the end of a process. This community needs to be invited to the table sooner. Kathy agreed and noted that we are building upon the Transportation Innovations Work of 2019 so as not to duplicate efforts.
- Someone noted that they **would like to hear from local riders** about how they get to recreational resources.
- We should note **how feedback gathered through local planning processes will be included** in the Phase 2 process and public engagement for this project.
- Someone mentioned that the current **Tahoe transit strategy is using interactive input tools and is worth emulating.**
- We might consider using **interactive surveys** that can allow people to provide feedback on their transit needs.

- Seth English-Young, FHWA-WFL, noted that the Federal Highway Admin-Western Federal Lands is currently working on a **federal lands access program study on SR14**. They are working with Forest Services and WSDOT and they are aware of the Gorge Transit Strategy process, so **Federal *is* aware of this effort**. FHWA is talking about how to best integrate their process with this process. Kathy will follow-up with Seth about this.

Wrap Up and Closing Comments

Jessica asked the group to share their thoughts on how we can improve and how the PMT can involve the working group in the next phase. Participants were invited to email Kathy directly.

Kathy and members of the Project Management Team thanked everyone for their engaged participation and closed the meeting.