

Whatcom Human Services Transportation Plan

ADOPTED OCTOBER 2022

Human services transportation serves people with special transportation needs — individuals who are unable to transport themselves or purchase transportation because of disability, income status, or age.



The Whatcom Council of Governments (WCOG) updates the region's Human Services Transportation Plan (HSTP) every five years to identify transportation gaps for people with special transportation needs. The HSTP presents goals and strategies to close those gaps.

In 2022 the HSTP was updated concurrently with the regional transportation plan, *Way to Go, Whatcom: 2045 Regional & Metropolitan Transportation Plan*. This plan forecasts transportation demand over the next 23 years and presents strategies to meet that demand in alignment with regional transportation goals.

Why do we need an HSTP?

Challenges that transportation-disadvantaged people face are serious and affect many aspects of their lives. From getting to and from work on time, to attending school; doctors' appointments, picking up groceries and prescriptions, meeting with friends and assistance providers – all these basic transportation needs are often an overwhelming obstacle for residents due to their age, income, or disability.

The HSTP identifies regional goals and priorities to address special transportation needs, and this process assists agencies and organizations to access the funding they need to carry out critical services.

In addition, the WA State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) also uses this plan to ensure funding requests to the state's Consolidated Grant program have value in a community-based process.

What types of transportation are considered?

All forms of transportation within and outside of the Whatcom region have been considered in the plan, including public transit (fixed route and paratransit), school district bus service, intercity and private buses, passenger rail, air travel, ferry, non-emergency medical transportation, and vans, shuttles, cars, and bikes.

Who developed the plan?

Interviews with over twenty different agencies, organizations and individuals provided key input into the HSTP's development, including persons with special transportation needs and staff of agencies serving clients who face transportation challenges due to age, income, or disability.

Feedback was also gathered through outreach as part of the *Way to Go*, *Whatcom* update, through Whatcom's Community Transportation Advisory Group, and through a large-scale public engagement survey conducted in 2021 with households across Whatcom County.

How many people in Whatcom have special transportation needs?

The full extent of need within the Whatcom region is not known. However we do know that, amongst the population in Whatcom:¹

- 20% are over the age of 65
- 28% are too young to drive
- 14% live below the poverty line
- 7% are working-aged individuals with disabilities
- Homelessness increased 22% between 2021 and 2022

What does Whatcom's existing transportation network consist of?

There are numerous transportation options other than personal vehicle available in the region. Yet for those needing special transportation, the cost, accessibility, and schedule of these services may impact their usefulness.

Within Whatcom County, individuals have access to transit and bus services provided by Whatcom Transportation Authority (WTA), Lummi Nation Transit, school district and private school bus services, and intercity buses. Travelers may also use passenger rail, air travel, ferry service to Lummi Island, taxi and rideshare services, rental vehicles (cars and bikes), and community group transportation services.

Non-emergency medical transportation is provided by Northwest Regional Council. In addition, there are private non-emergency ambulance services, medical flights and helicopters, and a shuttle service for the VA hospital.



¹ Data sources: WA State Office of Financial Management, Forecasting and Research Division: <https://ofm.wa.gov/washington-data-research/population-demographics/population-estimates/estimates-april-1-population-age-sex-race-and-hispanic-origin>; American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, 2020, U.S. Census Bureau: <https://censusreporter.org/profiles/05000US53073-whatcom-county-wa/>; A Home for Everyone: Whatcom County Coalition to End Homelessness 2021 Annual Report, July 2021, Whatcom County Health Department: <https://www.whatcomcounty.us/DocumentCenter/View/57826/PIT2021>; Disability & DVR Statistics Report, July 2017, WA State Division of Vocational Rehabilitation: <https://www.dshs.wa.gov/sites/default/files/dvr/pdf/2017%20Disability%20%26%20DVR%20Statistics%20Report.pdf>

Where are the gaps in Whatcom's transportation system?

Through interviews, surveys, and discussions with transportation providers, several issues have been identified that present real challenges for those with special transportation needs:

Transit

Although WTA's fixed and paratransit route services received praise, there were also several issues brought up by stakeholders. The most common concerns were the limited hours of operation, infrequent service to rural communities, access to bus stops, the large window of arrival times for paratransit, limited paratransit service areas, and the need of multiple agencies for more free bus passes to distribute to clients in poverty.

WTA is aware of these challenges. Their 2040 WTA Long Range Transit Plan concentrates on advancing equity within the community that is efficient and supports environmental goals.

Limited options

A reduction in transportation options after COVID-19 reductions has impacted travel in the region, with fewer taxi services, minimal rail service, difficulties in medical transportation, and one less intercity bus service. Transportation Network Companies (TNCs) like Uber and Lyft often don't serve rural communities and therefore can't serve as an alternative for many with special transportation needs.

Equity

The list of equity challenges is long and covers a diverse range of issues, from a lack of flexibility in the school bus system to the lack of day-of transportation solutions to food access barriers for rural residents. The majority of concerns listed in the full report concern medical trips and those living in rural communities.

Access

Being able to use the existing transportation network requires access to it, and there are several access gaps in our community. These include a lack of safe access to bus stops, to a lack of wheelchair-accessible taxis and TNCs; individuals seeking care and substance abuse treatment often face burdensome and lengthy trips across multiple transit transfers; hospitals discharge patients after transit hours of operation; and transit or bicycle/pedestrian access to county parks and recreation facilities can be limited.

"We must ask ourselves: are we as a region being creative when looking at transportation options, or are we rejecting ideas simply because they're new?"

New goals

A set of goals were developed and prioritized by the Whatcom HSTP Stakeholder Group:

1. **Options** for reliable and independent transportation.
2. **Access** that is equitable regardless of location, age, income, or disability.
3. **Safety** and comfort for travelers with special transportation needs.

Strategies to address gaps

To advance the above regional human service transportation goals, the HSTP Stakeholder Group identified the following strategies:

1. Develop innovative options for transportation that include new services, creative pilot projects, and technology improvements.
2. Increase access by reducing gaps in the public transportation system, improving infrastructure and system operations, encouraging transit-oriented development, and providing education opportunities regarding transit options.
3. Improve safety for travelers through outreach, infrastructure, services, and environmental justice policies.

What does an ideal transportation system look like?

HSTP stakeholders were asked to describe what an ideal transportation would look like, one that served the needs of every member of our community. A full list of responses is in the complete report but here are some ideas:

A responsive, frequent transit system with good geographic coverage and safe and accessible pedestrian and bicycle networks to bus stops and stations

Fare free transit options on certain routes

Every bus stop is covered with seating

An on-call, non-emergency medical transportation service for community members in need

A formalized van or cab service that operates along transit routes

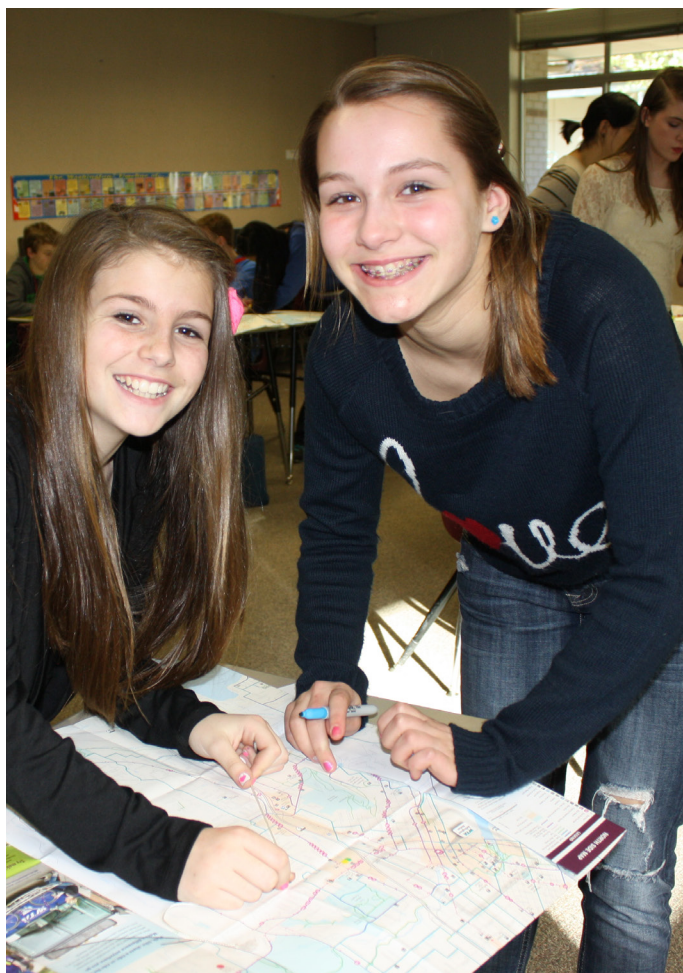
A formalized neighborhood transportation network

Trails and paths incorporated into new county housing developments

WTA and school bus networks working together

Programs to assist transportation as a standardized part of addressing homelessness

“Independent mobility that allows families to get their needs met is essential to get to the next socio-economic level, which will then allow for a choice of where they work and live.”



The full Human Services Transportation Plan and more information about its development, uses, and how it fits within the regional transportation planning process is available at www.wcog.org/hstp or by phone (360-676-6974) or email (wcog@wcog.org). Para asistencia en español, por favor enviar un correo electrónico a espanol@wcog.org.