

Miles City, Custer County Montana

# Custer County Transit Coordination Plan

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Custer County Transit  
Karl Swartz, Transit Supervisor  
[k.swartz@co.custer.mt.us](mailto:k.swartz@co.custer.mt.us)  
(406) 874-2222

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# Executive Summary

This plan is the Public Transit-Human Services Transportation Plan for Custer County Montana. This plan fulfills the requirements of the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) under the Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act, signed into law as a reauthorization of surface transportation programs through Fiscal Year 2020. According to requirements of the FAST Act, locally developed coordinated public transit-human services transportation plans must be updated to reflect the changes established by the FAST Act legislation. The FAST Act applies new programs and rules for all Fiscal Year 2016 funds and authorizes transit programs for five (5) years.

Formula Grants for Rural Areas (Section 5311 Program): This program enhances the access of people in non-urbanized areas by providing public transportation. Federal funds pay 86.58 percent of capital costs and 54.11 percent of deficit operating costs (corresponding to Montana's allowable sliding scale match rates), 80 percent of administrative costs, and 80 percent of maintenance costs. The remaining 13.42, 45.89, 20, and 20 percent, respectively, must come from the local recipient. Eligible recipients of these funds can be a state agency, a local public body, a nonprofit agency, or an operator of public transportation services. Ten percent of the state's Section 5311 apportionment is dedicated to carry out a program to develop and support intercity bus transportation. In some instances, MDT transfers excess 5311 funds to the three urban areas as Section 5307 funds

Transportation is a critical component of Miles City and the surrounding area of Custer County Montana. Transportation provides access to jobs, education, health care, human services and allows all community members, including older adults and people with disabilities, to live independently and engage in community life. It is the purpose of this plan for local stakeholders to work collaboratively to do the following activities:

1. Community Resources:
  - Custer County Commissioners
  - Custer County Transit Advisory Board
  - Custer County Council on Aging
  - Medical and Mental health agencies, education and social service agencies
  - Senior volunteers and Senior Housing agencies
  
2. Community Transportation needs:
  - Transportation to social service agencies, medical facilities, medical providers
  - Transportation to grocery stores, pharmacies, and public utilities companies
  - Transportation to out of town providers and companies as show above
  
3. Plan for achieving goals:
  - Provide affordable and safe public transportation to the citizens of Miles City by reaching out to the community to understand the public transportation needs. Assign an Advisory Board to oversee the adoption of policy and procedure to best serve the identified needs. Hire administrative personnel and drivers that understand the mission, are held accountable to the mission, and provide outstanding public service.

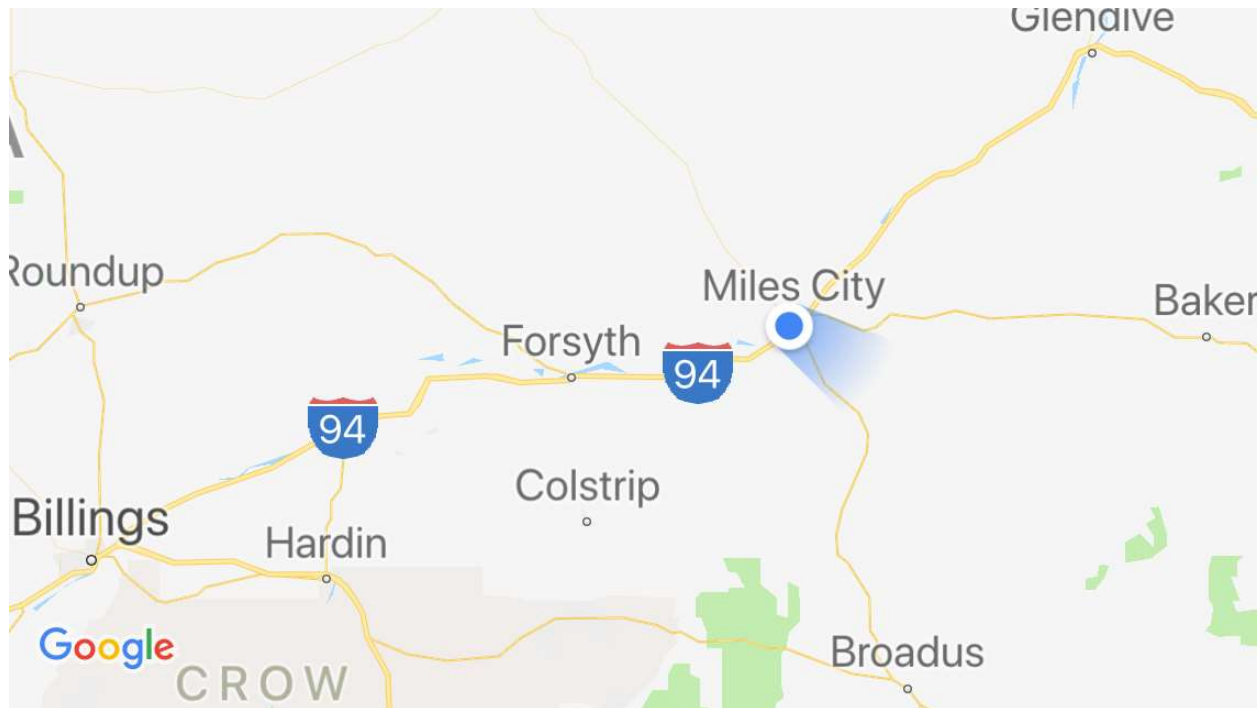
This plan was developed and adopted by the Custer County Transit Advisory Board. More information about the Advisory Board can be found in Appendix A.

## I. Geographic Area

Miles City is the County seat of Custer County in Eastern Montana. It is located at  $46^{\circ}24'30''\text{N}$   $105^{\circ}50'24''\text{W}$  (46.408460, -105.840093),<sup>[6]</sup> at an altitude of 2369 feet (722 m).

According to the United States Census Bureau, the city has a total area of 3.34 square miles (8.65 km<sup>2</sup>), all land.

Miles City experiences a semi-arid climate with long, cold, dry winters and hot, wetter summers.



## II. Population Demographics

As of the 2020 United States Census, within the geographical area of Custer County there were 11,867 people, 2456 over the age of 65, 4903 households with 2.3 persons per household. The population density was 3.1 inhabitants per square mile. There were 5,702 housing units. The racial makeup of the county was 94.1% white, 2.3% American Indian, 0.6% black or African American, 0.7% Asian, 0.1% Pacific islander, and 2.3% from two or more races. Those of Hispanic or Latino origin made up 3.7% of the population.

Of the population 5.8% is under 5 years of age, 20.7 percent is under 18 years of age, 20.7 % is over 65 years of age. 13.1 % of the population has a disability and is under 65 years of age.

The median income for a household in the county was \$52,965 and the media income was \$30,504. Of the population 11.5% were in poverty status.

## III. Assessment of Available Services

Except for Custer County Transit there is no other operating transit support systems in the area. There are no ADA accessible vehicles or services aside from the local hospital, but this service only caters to hospital patients. All other ADA accessible vehicles are operated by private parties or businesses and are not available to the general public.

## IV. Assessment of Transportation Needs and Gaps

Most current needs and gaps assessed for Custer County Transit include staffing gaps, vehicle maintenance and subsequent downtime, increased Transit induced ride declines, and the challenge of maintaining the “on demand” ride feature. Another ongoing need being addressed is the Transit workspace and the challenge of housing Transit vehicles to keep them out of seasonal inclement weather.

Custer County Transit had a major increase in rides between the 1st quarter of FY23 with around 200 rides a week to the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarters stats of over 300 rides a week. Despite the large increase in passengers Custer County Transit has also experienced a major increase in declines between these two quarters from 60 declined rides a month for the 1<sup>st</sup> quarter to over 120 declines for the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter.

During the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter of FY23 there has also been an increase in what are dubbed “regular riders” or passengers that book multiple and repetitive days during the week. Custer County transit currently services over 30 of these individuals who absorb various time slots throughout the month. These Transit riders’ needs range from getting to work, visiting family in the local residential facility, and routine medical appointments such as physical therapy. These “regular” passengers schedule around the same time; normally from 8AM to 12PM. This severely bogs the transit down to the point where getting additional rides booked during this timeframe is highly difficult unless there is a rider cancelation.

The Transit has also seen a major increase of rider requests during the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter of FY23 due to harsh winter weather conditions including severe sub-zero temperature drops. These conditions caused havoc not only by incapacitating individuals’ personal vehicles due to the cold, but the weather also influenced many Transit riders decision not to drive due to poor road conditions.

The ebb and flow of drivers and vehicle breakdowns also played a major role in the increase in declined rides. Going from three full-time drivers down to two and losing one part-time driver near the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Quarter put a strain on both the remaining full-time and part-time drivers. All drivers experienced a massive spike in passengers that went from a normal day of 8-10 riders to around 12-17 due to the shortage of vehicles and drivers. Current staffing includes one Transit supervisor, two full-time drivers and three part-time drivers to augment five vehicles. Other personnel include one full-time dispatcher, a newly hired Relief Part-Time Dispatcher, and a newly hired full-time driver trainee with staff now totaling 9 personnel.

Vehicle breakdowns (yielding repair cost totaling over \$10K) and the subsequent maintenance downtime that followed have affected the local ride declines which then in turn sparked multiple canceled trips to Billings. The transit has experienced various issues with its two high-mileage Dodge vans and at one point having major oil leakage on both vans due to a common manufacturing flaw of a part. One of the Dodge vans sustained an internal catastrophic failure of its transmission towards the middle of the FY23's 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter. That vehicle was incapacitated and unable to be driven for almost three weeks while awaiting transmission replacement and dropped Transit van availability from 3 vans to 2. Around the same time the Transit also had multiple problems with its ADA compliant Ford Cutaway bus. This wheelchair capable vehicle has been down for over two months due to intermittent issues with the fuel management system to include the vehicles the wheelchair lift. This vehicle issue prompted the transit to reach out to The Powder River Transit in Broadus Montana to borrow a wheelchair complaint vehicle to compensate for rides during the repair process.

Due to the aforementioned challenges and the steady incremental increase in ride demand, Custer County Transit has all but lost its "on demand" ride feature that was once available. Individuals must now schedule rides at least two to three days in advance which affects passengers' ability to receive medical attention due to scheduling conflicts plus impacts riders in need of basic necessities such as shopping for food or paying bills in person.

Custer County Transit continues to operate out of borrowed office space at the Eastern Montana Event Center outside of the city limits and located on the far west side of the community. This location is a few miles from most of the medical facilities and grocery shopping areas (the two biggest demands for rides). In FY22 the county commissioners approved the construction of a Transit addition adjacent to the new Custer County Firehall. This space will be totally dedicated to Custer County Transit and will provide new office space for Transit employees, a shared wash bay for vehicles, and an enclosed climate-controlled bay to park all Transit vehicles. The parking bay is a welcome addition for the Transit vehicles as it will help lower vehicle maintenance issues due to the extreme heat/cold temperature shifts through the fiscal year.

With the constant fluctuating and rising construction costs between labor and building materials, Custer County now finds itself short of around \$100K to finish the Transit addition. To properly get the Transit operating in its proposed office space, funds of around \$6K are also required to furnish the new addition. Additional capital grant funding will also be required to purchase two new vans for the Transit to meet the increase in ride demands.

## V. Goals and Strategies

### Developing Strategies to Address Gaps and Needs

In conjunction with its Transit Board advisors and guidance from the County Commissioners, the Custer County Transit will continually assess local transit needs and any transit needs beyond Miles City in the attempt to increase weekly ride support ratios and lower the “declined rides” rate and renew the “on demand” feature.

Custer County Transit will meet the increasing demand for local Transit support by working directly with local medical agencies and social services to help identify and provide Transit assistance and coordination for any community members in need of support.

Custer County Transit will also continue to hold active lines of communication and work in conjunction with its regional transit partners to bridge any transit gaps for Eastern Montana and support its outlying community’s needs.

#### Goal #1:

Maintain an active Transit Advisory Board

Need(s) Being Addressed: Assimilate data, write and approve policy and procedures, oversee planning for future transit needs.

Timeline for Implementation: Scheduled quarterly meetings

Parties Responsible for Leading Implementation: County Commissioners

Parties Responsible for Supporting Implementation: Transit Supervisor

Performance Measures/Targets:

Incorporate appropriate members to address transportation requirements for local passengers.

Continue to identify individuals with disabilities, seniors, and individuals with low income in need of transit support.

Prioritize transportation services and funding for future growth.

#### Goal #2:

Meet increasing demand for transit needs by expanding driver support

Need(s) Being Addressed: Continue staffing growth to be able to cater for the “on demand” feature of the transit service and supplement the increased weekly ride demand.

Timeline for Implementation: On going, interview prospective drivers through the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter of FY23.

Parties Responsible for Leading Implementation: County Commissioners

Parties Responsible for Supporting Implementation: Transit Supervisor

Performance Measures/Targets:

Increase driver staffing from 3 full-time drivers to 4 full-time drivers and continually reassess Transit needs.

Pre-employment Drug testing.

Training on vehicles, First Aid, CPR, AED, policy and County procedures.

### Goal #3:

Expand Transit vehicle fleet to accommodate increasing ride demand.

Need(s) Being Addressed: Augment and replace current Custer County Transit high-mileage vehicles

Timeline for Implementation: When FY24 grant funding becomes available.

Parties Responsible for Leading Implementation: County Commissioners

Parties Responsible for Supporting Implementation: Transit Supervisor

Performance Measures/Targets:

- Increase Transit fleet from 5 to 6 vehicles and augment new vehicles with additional Transit drivers.
- Support the increase from the 1st quarter's 200 rides a week, to the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarters over 300 rides a week.
- Attempt to sustain a zero "declined" rides status on a weekly basis.

### Goal #4:

Utilize new Transit Vehicle Shelter and Office Space

Need(s) Being Addressed: Complete and furnish the new Custer County Transit Firehall addition.

Timeline for Implementation: Anticipate late summer of FY24.

Parties Responsible for Leading Implementation: Custer County Commissioners

Parties Responsible for Supporting Implementation: Transit Supervisor

Performance Measures/Target:

- Park Transit vehicles indoors to protect from exposure to the elements.
- Centralize the Transit location to support easier access for the community.
- Utilize FY24 Grant funds to supplement the over \$100K needed to finish the Transit addition.
- Furnish Transit office workspace for Transit employees.

## VI. Plan Adoption

Consistent support from both the Custer County Commissioners and the Transit Advisory Board has allowed Custer County Transit to provide over 6,000 rides locally and over 70 rides to Billings since the beginning of FY23. Since its inception, Custer County Transit currently has assisted with over 12K wheelchair lifts for disabled individuals within the community.

Currently all citizens to include, the elderly, the disabled, and members of the general public are able to request and secure rides on this service. Custer County Transit is a next day call in, curb-to-curb service, providing service Monday thru Friday, 8am to 6pm, Saturday 9am to 3pm. Holidays observed are New Year's Day, Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Thanksgiving and Christmas. Fare rates are as follows: \$2 per round trip locally, \$1 per additional stop. \$10 round trip to Forsyth and \$25 (round trip on the same day, one-way rides are the same fare) to Billings or Glendive.



## Appendix A: Transit Advisory Board

The Transit Advisory Board consists of representation from local agencies as well as participation of individuals with disabilities, older adults, and members of the general public. More information about the Transit Advisory Board is available upon request by contacting the Transit Supervisor

Name	Agency
Kevin Krausz- Ex-Officio	Custer County Commissioner
Karl Swartz - Secretary-Ex-Officio	Transit Supervisor
Rebecca Lynam-Ex-Officio	Custer County Council on Aging
Kent Williams- Chairperson	
Tara Andrews	
Kim Blunt	
Deb Schmeling	