
Meeting Minutes

Regional Planning Affiliation 1 (RPA-1) Transportation Advisory Group (TAG) meeting Tuesday, April 20th, 2021 at 9:15 a.m.

Members in attendance: Janna Diehl, NE Iowa Area Agency on Aging; Lori Egan, NEICAC EARL Transit; Spif Slifka, Howard County Business and Tourism; Amy Chicos, Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services; Jenna Mockler-Gjerde, Luther College; Lukas Phillips, Luther College; Danielle Cushion, Upper Iowa University; Peggy Shea, Helping Services.

Others in attendance: Aaron Detter, UERPC Transportation Planner.

1. Detter started the meeting off with a welcome at 9:15 a.m. He also conducted introductions as the group welcomed new representatives from Luther College and Upper Iowa University.
2. Detter provided an update on Regional Planning Affiliation 1 (RPA-1) planning activities and work products. He informed the group that he recently developed the draft Transportation Planning Work Program (TPWP) which will go through a public review period and approval at the Policy Board's next meeting in May. He also noted that he will soon begin preparing the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) for the region, which will go through its public review and a public hearing in June/July.
3. Egan provided EARL Transit updates, including her work on the consolidated funding application to the Iowa DOT, noting that the public hearing date was set for April 22nd. She noted that there will be three new conversion vans replacing several older vehicles. She noted that a current focus is making sure transportation is available to get people to COVID-19 vaccination appointments. She also noted the challenges in workforce and hiring and retaining drivers.

Diehl noted that those age 60 and older have access to free transportation to get the COVID-19 vaccine. She noted that people can call NEIAAA directly at 800-779-8707.

4. General member updates:

Chicos echoed appreciation for EARL transit, noting that so many of the Vocational Rehabilitation clients use EARL to get to work, and are especially grateful for the in-town services. She noted the need for services that extend later into the evening and night, and also town-to-town services.

Cushion mentioned the challenges for students who do not have a driver's license, especially those coming from larger cities where they had more transportation options, because of the lack of options other than driving in northeast Iowa. Egan echoed the need for education and said that it is an ongoing issue, reminding people that EARL is for anyone and everyone.

5. Floor items

Members discussed the meaning behind the acronym EARL—Easy, Affordable, Reliable, and Life-changing, and that last one has everything to do with people's reliance on and habituation to personal, often single-occupant vehicles.

Diehl noted the lack of knowledge, especially among older adults, who may not know this is out there, or may be intimidated as to the "unknown" of how it works.

Mockler-Gjerde discussed budget challenges at Luther College with running shuttles, and the expectation is that the tickets sold need to pay for the service. She added that students in most need of the transportation may also be those who have the hardest time affording the ticket price. Members discussed potential for collaborative efforts.

Slifka added that we may even want to reach out to the office of the Secretary of Transportation at the USDOT to make sure they understand the great need for transportation options in rural America—because "why not?", anything's possible.

Members continued to discuss the workforce challenges of drivers. Egan noted the variable nature of the schedule for drivers, and that many of them would want some kind of full- or part-time benefits. Detter also noted that the addition of other services, such as a circulating shuttle

in Decorah, could open up new job opportunities and bring different applicants because of the reliable, full-time or close to it nature of that type of driver job.

Shea noted the example of some colleges or universities that offer a discounted transit/shuttle pass that students can buy “up front” for the semester, regardless of how much they end up using it. So based on the sale of those passes, there’s “up front” money to run the system for a given timeframe (semester, school year, etc.). Detter also noted the potential for including such a pass in student fees, where all students could use or benefit from the service, even though many might not use it, but it creates a very reliable funding source to pay for transit/shuttles.

6. Detter noted that the next meeting would not be for several months, or potentially in the fall, but that members can always contact him with ideas for meetings or anything that they’d like to get the group together to discuss in the meantime.
7. The meeting adjourned at 10:15 a.m.