

THE GORGE REGIONAL TRANSIT STRATEGY

FOUNDATIONS MEMO



Prepared by:
Mid-Columbia Economic
Development District

June 2021

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Gorge Regional Transit Strategy Foundations Memo was prepared by the Mid-Columbia Economic Development District in coordination with state, regional, and local partners.

The Mid-Columbia Economic Development District would like to thank the Gorge Regional Transit Strategy Working Group and all stakeholders and interested parties that participated in the outreach events and surveys and provided insights and feedback. Special acknowledgment is due to the US Forest Service Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area staff who provided assistance from the US DOT Volpe Center team that had just completed a local transportation plan assessment for the National Scenic Area.

The Mid-Columbia Economic Development District would also like to thank the Gorge TransLink Alliance transportation providers for their significant contribution to this process and to their heroic efforts each and every day to provide mobility and access to their communities.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Project teams included the members of the Gorge TransLink Alliance, a Working Group representing diverse, bi-state stakeholders, and a bi-state Project Management Team. A full list of partners can be found at <https://gorgetranslink.com/gorge-transit-strategy/>.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT TEAM

ODOT

- Theresa Conley, Region 4
- Jason Kelley, Region 1

WSDOT

- Laurie Lebowsky, SW Region
- Mathew Cramer, SW Region

MCEDD

- Jessica Metta, Executive Director
- Kathy Fitzpatrick, Mobility Manager

Transportation Provider

- Patty Fink, Columbia Area Transit

PROJECT PARTNERS

- Public Transit Providers
- Local, State, Federal Government
- Tribal Representatives
- State and Federal Agencies
- Health and Wellness Organizations
- Higher Education
- Local Employers
- Local and Regional Planning
- Tourism and Outdoor Recreation
- Active Transportation

THE GORGE TRANSLINK ALLIANCE PROVIDERS

We're an alliance of rural providers offering public transportation services throughout the Mid-Columbia River Gorge. You can find more information at gorgetranslink.com.



Columbia Area Transit in Hood River County



The LINK in Wasco County



Mt. Adams Transportation Services



Sherman County Transit



Skamania County Transit

“The ideal transit system for the Gorge would be an integrated system that is more affordable, efficient, and usable than driving a private vehicle.”

*Stakeholder,
ODOT Region 1*



BACKGROUND

In 2019, the Mid-Columbia Economic Development District received a grant from ODOT’s Statewide Transportation Improvement Fund Intercommunity program to lead work to establish a regional transit vision and strategy for the Mid-Columbia River Gorge region.

The purpose of the Gorge Regional Transit Strategy (Phase I) is to combine the goals, policies, and prioritizations of local transportation planning efforts in the Columbia Gorge to establish a foundation for a regional strategy and a collective vision for public transportation. Phase I objectives include strengthening partnerships, completing local plan assessments, and synthesizing goals and policies into a high-level regional vision. Phase II of the Strategy will focus on an implementation strategy with additional data analysis, financial planning, and gaps analysis.

The Gorge Regional Transit Strategy is a roadmap for the future of public transit in the Mid-Columbia River Gorge, establishing a regional vision and identifying strategies that will help the transit system meet the goals and respond to the growing challenges of housing affordability, congestion, environmental degradation, workforce mobility, and the impacts of the ever-increasing population growth in the Portland metro area.

PHASE 1 OBJECTIVES

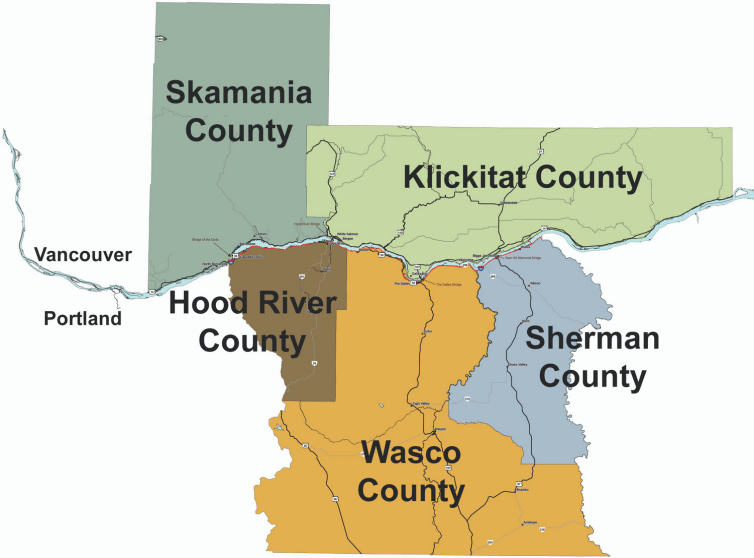
- Strengthen partnerships
- Synthesize existing and ongoing planning efforts
- Complete foundational assessments (gap, capacity, opportunity analysis)
- Synthesize existing goals and policies into a high level regional vision



“Local Transportation System Planning and Land Use planning without a transit vision or strategy for sustainability is challenging. A collective vision will provide more certainty.”

*Stakeholder,
City of Hood
River
Planning
Department*





The Gorge Regional Transit Strategy Area

“Achieve workforce equity by expanding regional transit.”

*Stakeholder,
Goldendale
Chamber of
Commerce*

The strategy area is located within the jurisdictional boundaries of the five transportation providers whose partnership forms the Gorge TransLink Alliance. Providers include Mt Adams Transportation Service (Klickitat County), Skamania County Transit, Columbia Area Transit (Hood River County), the Link (Wasco County), and Sherman County Community Transit.

Although the authorities of the transportation providers end at each of their county lines, transit connections made outside of these borders are important. These counties share a common workforce and a common geography. Residents regularly cross jurisdictional borders to meet multiple needs. While most of the communities have some basic amenities, residents must access the larger metropolitan areas of Portland/Vancouver for specialized services (medical, higher education, shopping) that might not be available in the small towns of the Gorge.

It is also important to recognize that residents of the Portland and Vancouver metropolitan areas travel east into the Columbia River Gorge for both work and recreation. The region’s unique attributes and recreational opportunities attract more than 2 million visitors a year. According to the Columbia River Gorge Scenic Area 2011 Visitor Use Report, over 40% of visitors come from the Portland Metro area. The same report notes that a full 60% of those visiting the Gorge National Scenic Area come from less than 50 miles away. Local and regional governments and agencies are currently struggling to address the impacts of so many visitors on these rural counties and the natural and recreational areas.



The Gorge Transit Strategy documents include a spreadsheet of the transportation plans within the region that synthesizes policies and goals, an Existing Framework memo, a Gaps Analysis memo, and stakeholder work products and surveys. The memos provided information about the current transit system that the Working Group reviewed and responded to as they developed a collective vision of and goals for the regional transit system. All work products and documents can be found at <https://gorgetranslink.com/gorge-transit-strategy/>.

VISION AND GOAL STATEMENTS

Key transit system goals emerged and were refined during stakeholder participation in Working Group sessions and surveys. The stakeholders participating in this process were given the task of identifying and prioritizing goals for a Mid-Columbia River Gorge regional public transportation system that if achieved, could be a powerful tool to help their organizations address the region's most pressing challenges. The Working Group also developed a vision statement that represents the collective regional transit vision of this diverse group of stakeholders.

The Working Group also identified key goals that are critical to the successful realization of the vision but are not under the authority of the transit providers and will require partnerships and coordination with other jurisdictions. For example, goals related to land use policies can only be achieved by working closely with local land use authorities and goals dependent on the connectivity to transportation systems governed by other agencies will depend on agency coordination.

"Provide equitable access to public lands. Protect and enhance scenic cultural, natural, and recreational resources."

*Stakeholder,
USFS Columbia
River Gorge NSA*

"Public transit connectivity should address the needs of the Gorge residents while alleviating congestion due to tourism."

*Stakeholder,
Skamania
County Senior
Services*



VISION STATEMENT

Public transit supports thriving Columbia River Gorge communities by providing access to critical services, higher education, jobs, and outdoor recreation while protecting the natural wonders of the Gorge.

GOAL AREA: COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC VITALITY

Public transit in the Columbia River Gorge supports community livability and economic vitality by supporting business 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 within communities.
- Transit mitigates traffic congestion and dangerous traffic conditions.
- Transit supports multimodal connectivity.
- Transit supports local and regional disaster response.
- Transit supports local planning efforts to develop affordable communities.

GOAL AREA: HIGH-QUALITY SERVICE AND EXPERIENCE

Public transit in the Columbia River 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 service is as convenient as driving a private vehicle.
- 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.

GOAL AREA: ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

Public transit in the Columbia River Gorge protects the natural environment.

- Transit is used in combination with other tools to protect 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.

GOAL AREA: FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

Public transit in the Columbia River Gorge is financially sustainable, expanding operations with increased capacity and new funding sources.

- Transit has new, sustainable, and diversified funding sources.
- Transit providers coordinate services, providing cost efficiencies.
- Transit has the capacity and funding levels necessary to achieve other goal areas.

THE EXISTING FRAMEWORK

The Existing Framework memo summarizes and synthesizes existing local, regional, statewide public transportation plans, studies, and programs and identifies common and conflicting goals, policies, and strategies. These existing plans provide the foundation for the Gorge Regional Transit Strategy. The Existing Framework memo’s purpose was to highlight inconsistencies and commonalities without amending or revising current or adopted plans.

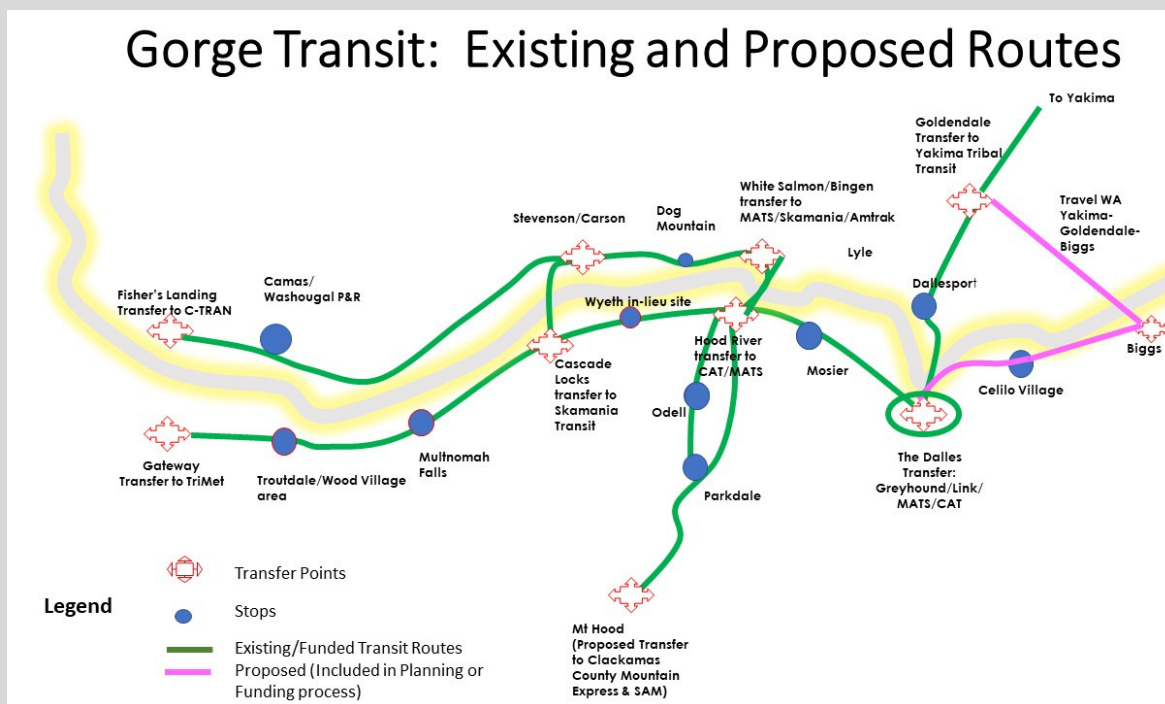
The Existing Framework memo includes an overview of the planning area, a summary of existing services, summaries of the existing local, regional, and statewide public transportation plans reviewed, and a spreadsheet highlighting the goals and policies of each document. These work products can be accessed at <https://gorgetranslink.com/gorge-transit-strategy/>.

Although the plans reviewed are all geographically restricted to local boundaries, a key finding was that the goals and strategies of each plan support the goals identified by the Working Group with no notable conflicts. One of the most consistent themes repeated throughout the plans reviewed was the importance of coordination between stakeholders, which was one of the core takeaways from the first three Working Group sessions. Stakeholders believe that transit can be a successful tool to address regional challenges when there is strong coordination between transit providers and between transit providers and their partners.

A good example of the important role of strong coordination between partners is the successful Dog Mountain Shuttle project, which requires the investment and planning work of multiple agencies and local government partners. This project also meets three other Working Group goals: to provide public transit access to recreational resources in the Gorge, to protect natural resources, and to increase traffic safety by decreasing congestion. The Dog Mountain Shuttle project mitigates the congestion and overcrowding at a popular trailhead in Skamania County along the SR 14 corridor by providing a public shuttle system that is combined with permitting and enforcement systems.

“Health access is important and we need more transit options.”

Stakeholder, Columbia Gorge Health Council staff



GAPS ANALYSIS

The Working Group identified key regional public transportation gaps and opportunities by evaluating existing conditions to the goals developed during the Working Group sessions.

The Working Group participants used a dashboard system to identify the gaps and barriers that exist currently between the goals and the existing system and used a scale of 1-5 to provide an assessment of how close the existing system is to meeting those goals. The completed dashboard can be found at gorgetranslink.com.

Participants noted significant gaps in the local services and regional connections. Specific destinations were mentioned as important access points that need more service: the Columbia Gorge Community College campuses, the Native American In-lieu and Fishing Access Treaty Sites, and healthcare facilities in the Portland metro area. Also highlighted was the need for more coordination between providers and more coordination between stakeholders and community partners. Participants consistently pointed to an integrated fare system as one of the highest current needs. Participants also emphasized the importance of coordination between local land use and public transportation planning.

Participants identified barriers such as the lack of transit and active transportation infrastructure, the lower population density in rural areas, a lack of new funding sources, and the need for more marketing, branding, and public awareness of the existing services. Participants noted that the multi-jurisdictional nature of the bi-state region was a barrier to service integration.

While the exercise was to identify gaps and barriers, participants also wanted to recognize how much progress has been made in the last few years of transit service expansion and expressed the importance of continuing this type of regional transit planning in order to achieve their vision and goals.

“Public transit can increase access to education and training for those who are experiencing transportation-related barriers.”

*Stakeholder,
Columbia
Gorge
Community
College*



“Tribal residents live in all Gorge communities and at Treaty Fishing Access and In-lieu Sites. Many experience huge transportation barriers to accessing the resources they need.”

*Stakeholder, Columbia River
InterTribal Fish Commission*

During Phase I of the Gorge Regional Transit Strategy, a bi-state group of stakeholders worked together to develop a collective vision for a regional public transit system. Representing both public and private sectors, local government and state and federal agencies, this diverse group stated that they were inspired to participate in the Gorge Regional Transit Strategy process because they believe that transit provides all members of the community equitable access to jobs, education, and community resources and that transit can be an important tool to help address some of the region’s biggest challenges.

Throughout the process of the four Working Group Sessions and two stakeholder surveys, participants noted how far the public transit system in the Columbia River Gorge has come in the last four years, with expansion that includes a regionally accessible fixed route system.

The Working Group developed a collective vision that includes a list of goals that will move the region forward to achieve this vision. The goal areas include supporting the local and regional economies, protecting the environment, mitigating traffic congestion, and achieving financial sustainability.

Participants noted that their individual organizations could support these goals by investing resources, providing advocacy when needed, incorporating these goals in other planning processes, and continuing to collaborate and contribute to future planning processes and implementation.

The Gorge Regional Transit Strategy is a roadmap for the future of public transit in the Columbia River Gorge, establishing a regional vision and identifying strategies that will help the transit system meet the goals and respond to the growing challenges of housing affordability, congestion, environmental degradation, workforce mobility, and the impacts of the ever-increasing population growth in the Portland metro area.

Phase I of the Gorge Regional Transit Strategy will be completed after each transportation providers' governing body approval of the Foundations memo. Phase I has achieved the goals of strengthening partnerships and of building on existing local plans to establish a foundation for a regional strategy and to develop a high-level regional vision.

Phase II of the Gorge Regional Transit Strategy will begin in July of 2021. This second phase will focus on a more comprehensive implementation strategy including further data analysis, funding and financial planning, assessment of potential regional governance structures, and operational and policy strategies, and ultimately making clear recommendations for development of a successful regional transit system.

“One challenge is reducing the jurisdictional barriers regarding funding and bistate services.”

*Stakeholder,
Southwest WA
Regional
Transportation
Council*



THE GORGE REGIONAL TRANSIT STRATEGY: OUR FUTURE

This narrative is a compilation of stakeholder input gathered during working group sessions.

Public transit is the single biggest positive impact in the Gorge for equity, health care access, affordable housing, tourism, congestion, and quality of life.

Older adults who don't drive anymore feel a new sense of freedom and independence. They can age in place and still have easy access to medical appointments and shopping and are able to maintain important social connections.

Transit options allow families to spend a lot less of their income on the expense of owning private vehicles and have more money to spend on necessities such as food, housing, medical, or education.

Columbia Gorge Community College students don't have to decide between paying for car ownership or paying college tuition. Many live at student housing on The Dalles campus and take the bus to classes in Hood River.

The Native American communities living along the Columbia River in Oregon and Washington have easy access to the public bus system that connects them to tribal services in Portland or on Yakama Tribal Lands.

Employees use transit because it saves them money and gets them to work on time. Employers provide transit passes because it helps them to recruit and retain employees.

Most residents and visitors travel through the Gorge on transit because the high-quality service is reliable, seamless, and more convenient than driving a car. Residents and visitors hop on the bus to get to downtown areas, solving parking issues and helping cities avoid the large cost of building parking facilities.

Trailheads are all accessed by transit, eliminating the need for large parking lots in pristine Gorge natural areas. Transit providers work closely with land managers to control the numbers of recreational users accessing each trailhead, helping to mitigate degradation of natural resources and managing recreational resources to match their carrying capacity.

Gorge residents and visitors have safe and comfortable transportation options available at both ends of their transit trips, including biking and walking, car and bike share, and taxis.

Development in the Columbia River Gorge is transit oriented. People who work in the Gorge can live in the Gorge because transit connects affordable housing to employment and services.

The region's many transit agencies work together as one easy-to-use network with a single fare system.

Public transit in the Columbia River Gorge is financially sustainable because of the commitment and coordination of local and regional partners.

Transit connects people in the Columbia River Gorge to opportunity and helps our communities to thrive.

