

REGIONAL WORKFORCE TRANSPORTATION SYMPOSIUM



REGIONAL TRANSIT LEADERSHIP COUNCIL

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Workforce Transportation Symposium Calls for Urgent, Concerted Action

Leaders gather to tackle vexing “connectivity” challenges constricting area economy

Citing the loss of business growth opportunities and unprecedented job growth trends, area leaders are calling for immediate and urgent action to address transportation-related workforce gaps. Nearly 90% of post-event survey takers agreed that now is the time to create a regional workforce transportation strategy.

Regional Workforce Transportation Symposium

The urgent call to action was the outgrowth of a May 30 symposium organized by the [Regional Transit Leadership Council](#) (RTLTC). Against a backdrop of a worsening “geography gap” between where workers live and where the jobs are in Southeast Wisconsin, stakeholders from across the region gathered to chart a course forward.

Participants included employers affected by transit related workforce challenges, elected officials, higher education representatives, transportation officials and workforce development officials who left with a deeper understanding of the depth and breadth of the workforce connectivity gaps facing the region, according to the [post-event survey](#).

The Symposium established five key findings:

1. A new sense of urgency has emerged.
2. Multimodal transit is a core economic driver and regional businesses must take the lead in driving the resolve to address workforce transportation issues.
3. Current workforce transportation efforts need to be urgently scaled and coordinated while a longer-term strategy is developed.
4. A coordinated and regional workforce transportation strategy is the most viable and preferred long-term option and needs to be consistent with the multimodal tenets of [VISION 2050](#), our Region’s land use and transportation plan that is prepared by the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (SEWRPC).
5. The Southeastern Wisconsin seven-county area lacks a means for addressing problems—like workforce transportation—that are regional in nature.

1. Growing Geography and Skills Gaps Spark Sense of Urgency...and Opportunity

“In our business, we’re losing growth because we can’t get the workforce that we need,” said panelist Tom Schulz, vice president of manufacturing for Kronos. “We know that transportation is just one of those components that can help. We can’t wait until tomorrow—we need to take action now.”

To fill these current and future positions in demand, the region possesses considerable “under-tapped and untapped pools of tremendous wage and upskill potential,” according to ManpowerGroup vice president Rebekah Kowalski, one of the presenters. “But, we still need to figure out how to get the worker to the work as many of these under tapped and untapped pools can’t easily access the transportation to get them to the jobs.”

The geography gap is compounded by a “skills gap” between what the region’s workers can do and what employers need or will need, a dynamic that has prompted regional institutions of higher learning to collaborate in order to fill the growing and changing talent needs of area industry. But with limited transportation between educational markets in SE Wisconsin, the ability of these institutions to expand their collective capacity is constrained.

Beyond sharing best practices and curriculum, “how do we share people?” asked Gateway Technical College president Bryan Albrecht. “That is our greatest challenge.”

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—Tom Schultz, Kronos

In the meantime, Southeast Wisconsin companies are facing fierce competition for talent and it is getting increasingly difficult to attract talent to Wisconsin in general and Southeast Wisconsin in particular. Access to transit alternatives is a top “quality of life” issue for top talent when deciding to re-locate.

“We recruit from all over the country,” said Greg Nickerson, chairman of Bader Rutter. “And I can tell you, we’re not very competitive when it comes to transportation. It is part of the decision-making process.”

96% of survey respondents underscored the urgency of the situation agreeing that the region will have lost a huge opportunity for advancing its workforce, competitiveness and community if immediate, collaborative action is not taken.

2. Who Should Lead?

The question then becomes: who should take the lead in resolving an issue that is essentially regional in nature without a mechanism for making region-based decisions? Discussions at the symposium and results from the survey reflect a belief that not much will happen without the support and involvement of the area’s employers and business community. Additionally, some discussions at the Symposium advocated for the formation of employer clusters along geographic lines to establish common workforce transportation needs. For example, could Amazon, Uline and Foxconn work together to push for more efficient local and regional solutions?

Results from the post-event survey generally support the idea that employers must step up on workforce transportation issues:

- 100% of respondents believe that robust and efficient multimodal options are critical to a robust economy and healthy communities.
- 71% believe that the business organizations need to take a leadership role in a seven-county effort to create a workforce transportation strategy.

3. Immediate Concerns Scaling and Coordinating Current Efforts

The program touched on numerous workforce transportation programs currently connecting urgently needed workers to worksites. Subsequent discussions generated new ideas for more collaborative and coordinated efforts like larger companies teaming up with smaller ones to fashion employee transportation cooperatives, for example.

64% of survey takers said the most important near-term priority needs to be centered around regional coordination efforts and creative use of multimodal options.

“How do we tap into everything we already have,” asked Pete Costa, principal at Nelson\Nygaard, a national transportation consultancy. “We need to establish a new mobility goal for Southeastern Wisconsin, but are we maximizing the transportation resources that we have right now?”

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Costa cited numerous examples of companies that treat mobility as an employee benefit as a means of attracting and retaining scarce talent. He also urged the region to emulate other communities that are forming TMAs—Transportation Management Associations. “It’s all of you coming together and determining how do we leverage those public and private resources to get people to and from their jobs on a daily basis in a reliable manner,” said Costa.

4. Collaborative, Regional Approach is Most Viable and Efficient

While the survey revealed concern that many current workforce connectivity programs will not be able to serve the region’s longer-term needs (86% agreement), there was widespread consensus that a coordinated, regional approach must be pursued.

From the survey:

- 97% agreement: The lack of a regional systemic approach to multimodal transit will eventually hurt my company, my tax base, my constituents and the quality of life.
- 95% agreement: Investing in well-coordinated, strategic multimodal solutions will help my organization reach its goals.
- 84% agreement: The multimodal aspects of SEWRPC’s Vision 2050 are a sound platform we can build upon.

A practical plan designed to help manage the anticipated growth triggered by Foxconn was unveiled by GRAEF senior planner, Larry Witzling. The plan calls for smart land use choices by further developing “multimodal transit neighborhoods” to manage infrastructure costs. Witzling demonstrated the vast long-term cost difference between developing new housing units in typical suburban and rural settings versus sites situated in denser, developed neighborhoods. Moreover, many of these neighborhoods already support the urban lifestyle choices favored by younger employees.

The idea is to establish “transit hubs” at the center of these neighborhoods where workers, residing in the type of neighborhood they favor, could connect with a variety of multimodal options to key job and economic hubs. “We think you could start this next week,” said Witzling. “Any two of you—one employer hub and one local neighborhood—could get together and begin the process.”

5. The Core Problem

The four-hour symposium also sought to identify the problem that is common to and at the core of the growing workforce mobility challenges through focused table discussions. Many pointed to misperceptions about transit, that it is often associated with poverty. Others noted that businesses historically have not factored employee transportation as an operational cost. But there was wide agreement (84%) that the people living and doing business in southeastern Wisconsin lack a credible process to understand and resolve transportation and other problems that are regional in nature.

Next Steps and Recommendations

Given this governance void and in light of the clear workforce and economic issues surfaced through this effort, the Regional Transit Leadership Council strongly endorses and recommends the following two actions:

1. Workforce Mobility Management

SEWRPC is committing to creating a team focused on regional workforce mobility solutions. Working with its partners, area workforce development agencies and area businesses, this team will coordinate current ad hoc workforce transportation efforts and support implementation of new innovative solutions across the seven-county region. Its goal would be to increase access to jobs for residents and labor for businesses by creating efficiencies through collaboration and better planning. The team will begin operations next month.

2. Create a Regional Strategy

Given that nearly 90% of those responding to the post-event survey agree “it is time to commission an independent consultant to create a multimodal workforce transit strategy for Southeastern Wisconsin,” area government officials working with business leaders throughout the Region should develop a revenue agreement to fund this effort. This strategy would, in effect, operationalize the previously approved multimodal aspects of the SEWRPC’s Vision 2050 plan.

The Regional Transit Leadership Council believes this process needs to be completed within the next five months and will work with leaders to accomplish this. Once funding is secured, SEWRPC will coordinate the hiring of the independent consultant and ensure the resulting strategy incorporates the latest technical innovations and is completed within 12 months of hiring.

“In the meantime, we will redouble our efforts to expand participation and membership in the RTLC throughout the seven-county region,” said RTLC co-chair John Kissinger.

“Participants clearly told us that an impartial convener and communicator of multimodal transit related issues is needed, and we are committed to vigorously filling that role,” added Paul Decker, the other co-chair.

For more information about the Symposium and its results, you can link to the following presentations and the post-event survey and other resources:

- A. [Symposium open and “Talent/Workforce Dynamics and Landscape”](#)
—Rebekah Kowalski, ManpowerGroup
- B. [“Workforce Challenges”](#)—Willie Wade, Employ Milwaukee
[“Higher Education Challenges”](#)—Dr. Bryan Albrecht, Gateway Technical College
[“Current Workforce Connectivity Approaches”](#)
- C. [“The Commute Economy: Ideas for Addressing Regional Mobility and Workforce Opportunity”](#)
—Pete Costa, Nelson\Nygaard
- D. [“Preparing for the Innovation Ecosystem”](#)—Todd McLees, Pendio
- E. [“Making Foxconn a Regional Catalyst”](#)—Larry Witzling, GRAEF
[“Vision 2050-Our Regional Planning Foundation”](#)
—Kevin Muhs, Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission
- F. [“The Business Case for Regional Collaboration”](#)—Aaron Gruen Gruen + Associates
- G. [Post-Event Survey Results](#)
- H. [Symposium Attendees](#)
- I. [Multimodal Definitions](#)
- J. [Symposium Agenda & Speaker Bios](#)
- K. [Resources referenced during the program](#)
 - a. [The Last Mile: Connecting Workers to Places of Employment](#)—Wisconsin Policy Forum
 - b. [2018: From Rust Belt to Brain Belt](#)—Becky Frankowicz, ManpowerGroup (expanding on Kowalski presentation)

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