2017 Year End Summary

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​Project Background and Tools

Move Together NY’s (MTNY) primary goal is to improve transportation access to health care and employment, particularly in rural areas, where cross county travel is required.  We do this largely by gathering information and input from a wide range of stakeholders, identifying gaps, common problems, and strategizing to create collaborative, regionally focused transportation solutions.

​When the Move Together NY project began in 2016, we conducted a community and stakeholder outreach survey to help us prioritize our work, based on what stakeholders saw as needed and useful. The survey indicated that there was a need for regionally focused materials and information on existing transportation options.  This led to the development of County Fact Sheets and the MTNY Explorer, an online interactive mapping tool.

​The **County Fact Sheets** were created for all the counties in our core region (Cayuga, Chemung, Cortland, Seneca, Schuyler, Tompkins and Tioga Counties).   This useful tool helps to quickly orient the user with the region and can be used as a foundation of information to support decision making.  They include a snapshot of each county, relevant demographics, cross county commute patterns and transportation information in a uniform format, making them easy to compare and interpret.  These were created using common software (Office Suite), in a template format, to allow for additional counties to be added.

​Complementing the County Fact Sheets is the **MTNY Explorer**, an online interactive mapping tool.  This allows users to view transit coverage across the region, displaying transit system routes, intercity bus routes, as well as the location of health care facilities and large employers.  The map allows users to “drill down” by clicking on any feature to get additional information such as the number of employees at a particular location, or the frequency of service along a particular bus route.

​These tools are intended to give decision makers, transit and other transportation providers a basis of information to build an informed case for improving cross county connections in our region.  These tools were used during the creation of **Schuyler County Transit’s new route**, connecting Schuyler County and Tompkins County.  The new route was specifically designed to complement TCAT existing routes, target employment trips and to create easy access between partnering hospitals, Schuyler Hospital and Cayuga Medical Center.

Partner Meetings:  A Focus on Solutions, and Resulting Challenges

While the above tools and information are useful and necessary, there are still several underlying barriers that must be addressed in order to make real progress towards better regional connectivity.  From the eye of the consumer, crossing county lines to get from their home to their doctor’s office should not be a complicated matter.  From the perspective of a transportation provider, however, it becomes evident that there is a complex web of issues that must be addressed in order to provide this service, ranging from funding, and operating authority, to union rules, and legislative approvals.  Some of these barriers are real and some are perceived (but not necessarily less complicated).

​With the awareness that a lot more work is needed, in the Spring of 2017 the Move Together NY team hosted a Partner/Provider meeting that brought together a group of 37 stakeholders, to brainstorm  the benefits, barriers and solutions to creating a more regionally inter-connected transportation system.  Stakeholders represented transit providers,[1] social service agencies, economic development, county planning, chambers of commerce, non-profits supporting people with disabilities, mobility management and rural health organizations, who all faced challenges getting people across county lines.  A follow-up meeting focused on solutions, where participants were led through a Design Thinking process to dive deeper into some of the more feasible transportation solutions and think creatively about how they could be improved.

​Many transportation projects, such as designing and implementing new service, can take many years to develop, therefore, the group focused on seemingly simpler technological improvements, such as Wi-Fi on buses, or common fare/media structure to travel between systems. At first glance, these solutions may seem more feasible, since all they require is purchasing and installing a device that, in theory, already exists.  Looking deeper, however, there are still several challenges to implementing technology improvements.  The upfront cost of the technology is prohibitive for many of the small rural systems, and would still require dramatically improved coordination across counties.  In addition, while technology could improve the user experience, it does not address the basic lack of overall transportation service or the ability of services to connect.

​Through these meetings, it was clear that participants saw many benefits to collaborating and there was a definite willingness among agencies and transportation providers to do so.  There was also excitement around co-creating new and innovative solutions.   However, there are also very real funding and regulatory barriers limiting coordination and often preventing these solutions from being tested.

Participants stated that the primary challenges to collaborative projects included a lack of inter-county coordination, the current federal/state funding structure (funding allocation is competitive, on a county by county basis, and often for a short 2-3 year time span) and regulations/restrictions around operating authority.   Given this feedback, the MTNY team decided to look into these issues further, and identify  opportunities to make collaboration easier, supporting our long term goal of improved/increased service and access to medical appointments and health care.

Further Research and Interviews

​The Move Together team interviewed veteran transportation leaders who are long time champions of coordination.  The interviewees were regional managers, community and human service transportation providers, medical transportation leaders, former Department of Transportation leaders, and MPO leaders, who collectively, have worked in almost every capacity of transportation, and whose varying perspectives represent many regions in Upstate NY. This led us to draft a set of 3 recommendations, including both regulatory changes, as well as changes to the way information about regulatory processes is provided.  The recommendations will be finalized in a report and shared with decision makers in 2018.

​Recommendations address the following topics:

1. NYS Operating Authority Application/Revision process for transportation providers
2. State Operating Assistance (STOA) Eligibility Requirements
3. Federal Section 5311 Public Transportation in Non-urbanized Areas Grant Application

Each recommendation is presented in the context of the barrier it is aimed at addressing, with relevant background information and suggestions for improvement.

[1] Transit representation was excellent and included: Centro, Cortland Transit, BC (Broome County) Transit, TCAT (Tompkins County Area Transit), Schuyler County Transit, and First Transit

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Initial priority projects for 2018 include:

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* **Finalizing and presenting the above recommendations**
* **Working with partners to develop a regional pilot project**
* **Planning the 2018 MTNY Partner Provider Meeting around improving Regional Volunteer Driver Services**