

**East Central Regional Transportation Coordinating Council
Advisory Board Meeting
Thu, Jan 8, 2026**

Summary:

The East Central Regional Transportation Coordinating Council (ECRTCC) Advisory Board convened to discuss various aspects of regional transportation services and collaboration among representatives from different counties. Karen Onan welcomed attendees and facilitated introductions, emphasizing the informal nature of the gathering. Notably, Natalie Koerber, the new Executive Director for the East Central Regional Development Commission, shared her background in public policy and community development, fostering a collaborative atmosphere among participants.

During the introductions, several attendees highlighted the need for improved transportation coordination, particularly in Mille Lacs County. Kathy Burski from Kanabec County and Jessica Peterson from Fernbrook Family Center underscored the importance of addressing health-related transportation needs, with Nicki Klanderud from Allina Health contributing insights on patient transportation. The discussions set a collaborative tone, with participants expressing their commitment to enhancing transportation options and working together to tackle regional challenges.

Lynnell Popowski from MnDOT provided updates on the evaluation of the Regional Transportation Coordinating Councils (RTCCs), which will assess the impact of community infrastructure efforts since 2018. The new grant application process will be competitive, focusing on projects that demonstrate measurable community change. Additionally, updates were shared regarding the Greater Minnesota Transit Plan, which is still in draft form, and the development of a transit website by MnDOT for real-time service connections.

Updates on specific transportation initiatives included Brandon Nurmi's report on Arrowhead Transportation's new dispatch system, set for phased deployment, and Tammi's report on the volunteer driver program at TriCAP, which has seen increased ridership despite seasonal challenges. Rhonda Torgersen discussed marketing efforts in Mille Lacs County, including a federal grant for propane buses and technology upgrades. The meeting concluded with discussions on ongoing collaborations and the status of a potential taxi service in Mille Lacs County, which is currently on hold.

Chapters & Topics:

Introduction and Agenda Overview

Karen Onan welcomed everyone to the ECRTCC Advisory Board meeting, emphasizing the informal approach taken since the beginning. She noted that Tim Schmutzer, the chair, was not present yet and began sharing the agenda. Karen encouraged attendees to introduce themselves and to share their contact information in the chat for better networking.

* Introduction of new members and their roles within the advisory board.

Introductions and Welcome Remarks

Karen Onan led the introductions, starting with Natalie Koerber, the new Executive Director for the East Central Regional Development Commission, who shared her background in public policy and community development. Lynnell Popowski expressed appreciation for Karen's organization, while Beverly Sidlo-Tolliver and Tammi Hagen introduced themselves as counterparts in regional transportation and economic development. The atmosphere was positive, with attendees welcoming Natalie and expressing enthusiasm for collaboration.

Introductions and Updates from Participants

Karen Onan led a round of introductions where participants, including Kathy Burski, Jessica Peterson, and Nicki Klanderud, shared their affiliations and roles related to transportation services. Jessica emphasized the importance of transportation coordination in Mille Lacs County, while Nicki highlighted the challenges faced by regional hospitals in ensuring patient access to medical appointments.

MNDOT Updates on RTCC Program Evaluation and Grant Process

Lynnell Popowski from MnDOT announced the initiation of an impact evaluation for the RTCCs, in collaboration with the University of Minnesota. The evaluation will focus on the funding selection process and the effectiveness of the new competitive grant structure, which includes separate budgets for mobility management and operational changes. Karen Onan expressed concerns about the competitive nature of the grants but emphasized the importance of collaboration among RTCCs.

* Coordination and collaboration efforts among different transportation agencies.

* Updates on the new RTCC application and grant processes.

Updates on MNDOT Transit Initiatives

Ted Nelson mentioned that the majority of bus backlogs are being addressed and that the Greater Minnesota Transit Plan is still in development, with phase two expected in winter. While Karen and Michelle were aware of a *new* (to us) Transit APP that would serve the public transit systems in greater MN, Brandon Nurmi clarified that while many transit systems have their own APPs, the new website will serve as an informational resource.

Arrowhead Transportation Dispatch System Update

Brandon Nurmi announced that Arrowhead Transportation is transitioning to a new dispatch system, with initial training concluding soon and deployment scheduled for mid-March. The new app, which will facilitate cancellations, trip planning, and ride scheduling, is expected to launch in April. Additionally, discussions are underway with Chisago County regarding the potential purchase of the North Branch facility to support future expansions.

* Discussion on the impact of new dispatch software on transportation services.

Volunteer Driver Program Update

Tammi reported that the volunteer driver program at TriCAP has been steadily increasing its ride count, aided by new volunteers. The program received a grant (Moving Greater MN Forward grant) to support private pay transportation for those without other options. However, they face challenges in meeting demand, particularly in areas like Mille Lacs County, where volunteer recruitment has been difficult.

Coordination and Updates on Mille Lacs County Transportation Advisory

Natalie Matthewson asked Tammi about TriCAPS' involvement with Mille Lacs County's Transportation Advisory, emphasizing the need for improved communication. Jessica Peterson confirmed the next meeting is on February 5th at 1pm, occurring every other month on the first Thursday. Tammi acknowledged the reminder and expressed gratitude for the collaboration efforts.

Updates on Transportation Initiatives

Rhonda Torgersen shared updates on the growing ridership and marketing initiatives in Mille Lacs County, highlighting a federal grant for five propane buses. She noted the implementation of technology upgrades, including Wi-Fi enabled buses and a new dispatch system that alerts passengers about their trips. Michelle Thomas mentioned sharing posts from Rhonda's team to keep the community informed

Challenges in Non-Emergency Public Transportation

Terry discussed the operational challenges at Attaboys, noting a decline in rides and the lack of compensation for deadhead miles, which complicates their service delivery. Karen asked for clarification on the deadhead issue,* and Kathy added that her organization also faces difficulties with volunteer drivers due to similar constraints. Both emphasized the financial strain caused by state policies affecting non-emergency medical transportation. **Deadhead language used in this context to mean the need for a driver to wait for a rider to complete an appointment – taking time from the driver who could be undertaking more rides for others.*

Updates on Transportation Initiatives and Upcoming Events

Karen Onan shared that the updated transit directories are ready for pickup and encouraged attendees to reach out with any questions. Michelle Thomas mentioned a couple interested in starting a taxi service in Mille Lacs County, which is currently on hold. Additionally, Karen noted ongoing collaboration with the ILT Academy on Smart Shuttle training and provided insights on NLX's shift in focus regarding project readiness.

* Challenges faced by non-emergency medical transportation providers.