

Program Justification Section 5311

Introduction

The Rio Metro Regional Transit District (RMRTD) is the regional public transit provider for Bernalillo, Sandoval, and Valencia counties. RMRTD manages and operates commuter rail and bus transit service within, and connecting, the three-county region, making it a leading transportation provider offering regional service in the area. RMRTD's services also provide linkages to other regional transportation markets including Santa Fe/Taos and Socorro. In light of this, the job of the RMRTD is a critical one; providing services across jurisdictional boundaries within the region and connecting our region to others. This helps to meet an important transportation need for connectivity as tens of thousands of trips each day occur between different towns, cities, counties, and tribal areas within the region.

Rio Metro's **mission statement** reflect this regional focus:

"Rio Metro collaborates to provide safe, accessible, efficient, and innovative transportation services for the benefit of our diverse local communities and the regional economy."

While local service is currently provided by Rio Metro in certain rural areas, the agency's additional priority going forward is to offer service that enables customers to access regional destinations.

Goals and Objectives

Rio Metro's mission statement emphasizes the agency's regional focus and also encompasses fiscal responsibility, innovation, and efficiency. Other goals that are critical components of the agency's mission include responsive, affordable, convenient, and reliable service all while maintaining a safe and secure atmosphere for passengers and employees. Further, Rio Metro strives to provide the greatest possible service to populations that are more likely to be transit-dependent, including seniors, youth, low-income, and individuals with disabilities. While transit-dependent individuals live and travel throughout the entire service area, higher concentrations exist in certain areas or communities.

Goal 1: Provide, Exceptional Customer Experience

1. Make transit trips as convenient and time-competitive as possible with auto trips
2. Focus on safety, security, attractiveness, cleanliness, comfort, and tailored amenities both on vehicles and at stops/stations.
3. Improve schedules, service information and transit awareness through coordination with other transit providers to make using transit as easy as possible.

Goal 2: Transformative Regional Services

1. Expand the "regional priority network" to connect key centers and corridors, including added Rail Runner service.
2. Expand local circulators to connect the regional network with residential areas and smaller/rural communities.
3. Support regional transportation demand management (TDM) programs, bicycle/pedestrian, and first/last mile programs to improve access to fixed-route transit.

Goal 3: Strong Transit-Centered Communities

1. Leverage existing MOA relationship with MRCOG to better integrate regional transit planning with local land use planning/ design.
2. Increase support for Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) in areas well-served by transit.
3. Promote better pedestrian and bicycle connections to the regional transit system to improve public health outcomes, decrease social / economic isolation, and reduce household transportation costs.

Goal 4: Sound Financial Stewardship

1. Pursue efficiency gains across all modes (rail, bus, and demand-response service).
2. Seek new and expanded revenue sources (including local & regional, state & federal, and public-private partnerships) to diversify the funding base and provided a stable funding source for Vision Plan implementation.
3. Pursue the most cost-effective agency structure, potentially including independence from MRCOG, acquisition of capital assets from NMDOT, and enhanced coordination/consolidation with ABQ RIDE.

Goal 5: Innovative Programs and Partnerships

1. Integrate transit investments with the regional economic development strategy.
2. Pursue public-*public* partnerships (including school districts and UNM/CNM) to offer free/discounted transit passes, joint marketing, and education.
3. Pursue the most cost-effective agency structure, potentially including independence from MRCOG, acquisition of capital assets from NMDOT, and enhanced coordination/consolidation with ABQ RIDE.
4. Pursue public-*private* partnerships (including major employers) to fund targeted service to employment centers, transit benefits to employees, and joint marketing.

Goal 6: Industry Leading Knowledge and Practice

1. Conduct orientation and on-going professional development for staff and Board, including in-person visits with peer agencies.
2. Broaden the stakeholder perspectives provided to Rio Metro leadership and create opportunities for ongoing engagement and leadership development.
3. Become a resource for local jurisdictions to support best practice pilot programs, staff training, and implementation of Vision Plan priorities.

General Program Need

Public transportation is vital for a successful metropolitan area and helps support economic growth. Due to the regional – as opposed to jurisdictional – nature of the area’s housing, employment, and services markets, it is important for transit to seamlessly and efficiently move people across a region regardless of jurisdictional boundaries. Transportation needs to change with the region – as population and developed land increase, so does the demand for transit service.

As detailed in the *Connections 2040*, the long range transportation plan for the Albuquerque Metropolitan Planning Area, the population in the three county area has grown significantly in recent

years. Between 2000 and 2017, the regional total population climbed to 905,049. Currently in 2018 it is 887,077. Approximately one third of the growth occurred in Valencia and Sandoval Counties, but Bernalillo County still houses the vast majority of the jobs, highlighting the need for a regional transit system to get people from their homes to their jobs.

The region's population growth is expected to continue for the foreseeable future and will be especially pronounced in areas west of the Rio Grande, particularly southwest and northwest Albuquerque (Bernalillo County) and Rio Rancho (Sandoval County). By 2040, the three-county population is projected to surpass 1.1 million, an increase of about 40% from 2012. Meanwhile, the total number of jobs is expected to grow from 389,000 in 2025 to 455,909 by 2040. Already, tens of thousands of individuals commute across county lines every day primarily from Sandoval and Valencia counties while growing in coming decades, it will not keep pace with residential growth, requiring even more people to make multi-county trips every day.

These projected increases in population and jobs within the Rio Metro service area will result in more single occupant trips, increasing travel time and delays, congestion, and air pollution, affecting vehicle drivers and transit riders alike. The population growth on the west side combined with the bulk of jobs still on the east side will severely tax the region's river crossings, many of which are currently operating at or over capacity. It will become increasingly important to provide viable multimodal transportation options to the traveling public, particularly for the growing segments of the population that are transit dependent, such as seniors, youth, disabled, and low-income persons, as well as for those traveling across the river to reach their destinations.

The senior (65 and older) population in particular is expected to double in the next 30 years, from 117,600 (13 percent of the region's population) in 2012 to 234,151 (21 percent of the population) in 2040. This population group will require additional transportation options to remain active and independent.

Meeting these travel challenges will require the development of a stronger and more integrated regional transit system. Rio Metro is the only public transit agency providing service between the three countries, within the three counties, Pueblo of Isleta, and other the smaller communities. In some cases, Rio Metro is the only transit provider of any sort.

Transit ridership in the region has increased dramatically in recent years. The number of transit riders in the Albuquerque Metropolitan Statistical area which includes the three counties almost doubled from 7.8 million in 2004 to 14.3 million in 2012. This growth has been driven primarily by ABQ Ride, but it has also been fueled by Rio Metro's rail and bus services. Most noteworthy, Rio Metro provides almost \$5 million per year to ABQ Ride in order to further support regional transit ridership and facilitate connectivity.

However, while transit ridership has been improving, the overall transit mode share compared to driving remains low for several reasons: land use in the region which often consists of low density single use developments with disconnected street networks, is not conducive to transit; parking is plentiful and often free; public policies have been geared toward single occupant vehicles instead of alternative modes of transportation, and most recently the emergence of COVID-19. These factors create challenges for all transit providers, and particularly Rio Metro, whose primary service areas consist of low density, these service improvements must also be accomplished by land use reforms at the municipal level to maximize transit's potential in the region.

Specific Program Need

Generally, this grant application will provide funding for the rural portions of Bernalillo, Sandoval and Valencia counties. Specifically, these programs will be continued with the receipt of this funding. First, these funds will support purchased commuter bus transportation serving Cuba, Cochiti Lake and Jemez Springs in rural Sandoval County. Second, Transit service for the rural portions of Valencia and Bernalillo counties including the Pueblo of Isleta will be provided with the requested operation funds. Given the integrated and comprehensive structure that Rio Metro affords, such a diverse group of projects put forth certainly will continue to enhance transit service coordination for communities located in rural Bernalillo, Sandoval and Valencia counties.

Total cost for the operating portion of this request is \$1,926,723 comprised of \$963,362 Federal funds and \$963,362 local matching funds. Total cost for the capital portion of this request is \$228,954 comprised of \$183,163 Federal funds and \$45,790 in local matching funds. Local matching funds consist of Gross Receipt Tax collected through the State from member communities. These funds will provide transit services in Bernalillo, Sandoval and Valencia counties. For this round of 5311 funding Rio Metro will only be requesting monies for operating funds. These funds, in this funding request, are critical to ensuring integrated service delivery for rural resident and visitors through Fiscal Year 2023.

Conclusion

Rio Metro has made great strides in providing transportation services throughout the region, serving transit dependent populations as well as choice riders. Commuter bus routes link rural areas to the urban center and the New Mexico Rail Runner Express, while demand response operations are benefiting from new equipment and vehicles, enhancing passenger comfort and safety. This request for funding will allow Rio Metro to continue to provide quality transit services that enhance mobility management for the general public, seniors and individuals with disabilities as well as continue to provide the utmost safety standards to prevent the spread of COVID by passengers or operators.