INTRODUCTION

Connect Northwest Arkansas (NWA) is a 10-Year Transit Development Plan (TDP) that will serve as a “Blueprint” for improving and expanding transit in the NWA region. The Northwest Arkansas Regional Planning Commission (NWARPC), Ozark Regional Transit (ORT) and Razorback Transit (RT) are committed to ensuring that this plan improves transit by connecting NWA at the regional and local levels, saves people time and ultimately provides the community with greater mobility and freedom.

PROJECT VISION:

If you connect people and save them time, you give them freedom.

Transportation opportunities and challenges are regional and cannot be defined by one jurisdiction. NWA is a massive region and spans over 40 miles from south to north with transit needs that vary throughout the linear corridor. Connect NWA focuses on how to improve fixed route transit and builds upon the recent success both ORT and RT have had coordinating and expanding service in the four main urban areas and surrounding communities that include (from south to north) Fayetteville, Springdale, Rogers and Bentonville.

WHY TRANSIT?

Connect NWA establishes a shared understanding of transit success in connecting the community. Transit may not seem like the optimal or most popular mode of travel in the NWA region since the 420,455 people who live in the area only average 8,000 transit boardings a day. However, something is missing from this statistic and the conversation in general: the potential for transit in the region is great and these numbers reflect a transit system that is underfunded and not designed to meet the transit potential of the region. It is critical that the NWA Community understands the following about transit:

› The benefits of transit (why does transit matter)?
› What makes transit effective?
› What supports transit?
› How do you design transit?

Before proceeding it is important to establish a shared understanding about what a transit network is and its most basic components. A transit network is a set of routes that follow specific alignments with stops along the way that operates during certain times of the day and at various service levels. From the time it starts in the morning to the time it stops in the evening is known as its span. How often a bus or train arrives at a given stop or departs from a terminal is known as its frequency.
Why Does Transit Matter?

- **Save Money**
  A household can save $10K by living with one less car.

- **Reduce Congestion**
  Congestion costs Northwest Arkansas residents $103M per year. Transit helps reduce the number of vehicles on roadways.

- **Environmentally-Friendly**
  Public transit saves the country 4.16 billion gallons of fuel per year.

- **Travel Safely**
  Transit is 10x safer than traveling by private automobile.
What Makes Transit Effective?

Effective transit...

- Takes me where I want to go
- ...When I want to go there
- It is reliable
- It saves me time
- It gives me freedom

This means that transit is designed to serve areas with high levels of productions (i.e. housing) and attractions (i.e. employment centers). In other words, transit needs to be designed to pick people up from where they live and take them to where they work, eat, play or need to go.

This means that transit needs to be frequent to allow for spontaneous use similar to the benefit of owning a car. More frequency translates into a reduction of overall travel time. This is accomplished by providing freedom to show up at a bus stop or station and know that the next train or bus will arrive soon and by minimizing transfer time on trips where passengers take more than one route.

Unreliable service results in that feeling you get when you are at an airport and the monitor shows that your flight is delayed or canceled. This same feeling of anxiety is common among transit passengers that experience buses that are late or do not show up at all. Transit must be reliable so that passengers can count on it every time. This is accomplished through increased frequency, realistic schedules, passenger amenities at stops and stations and working with cities to implement transit reliability treatments.

This is one of the most important components of an effective transit system. NWA residents have a wide range of modes to choose from when deciding how to travel such as driving or biking and all of these modes offer competitive travel times when compared to transit. There is no one solution for travel time savings, but rather, a combination of practices that help contribute to travel time savings. Even if you have a bus route with a frequency of every 5 minutes it will not matter if the route alignment is not intuitive and direct because the trip still takes longer than an alternative mode. That is why it is necessary to have frequent, direct, reliable service that will help passengers save time.

These benefits when implemented in conjunction with each other will provide transit users with freedom. Freedom to spend more time with their family. Freedom to work more and travel less. Freedom to safely and reliably go to work, dinner or the hospital. Freedom to connect to NWA.
What Supports Transit?

**Density**
Transit works best when stops are located near a variety of destinations where people want to go, such as job centers, schools, medical facilities, and housing complexes.

**Connectivity**
Transit should provide seamless transitions to other routes, park & rides, sidewalks, and bicycle routes. This ensures ease and comfort for passengers navigating the system.

**Ease of Use**
Transit should be easy to navigate and convenient to use. When transit is integrated with technology, it can make taking transit an easy choice for travel.

**Community Support**
Whether you advocate for transit at city hall or simply choose to ride the bus, support from the community encourages local leaders to invest in transit.
How Do You Design Transit?

Improving transit is often a balancing act of deciding where the bus picks you up, how often the bus comes, and when service runs. In other words, frequency, span of service, and route design are all important aspects of delivering transit.

**Frequency**

*How often the bus comes*

- 60 Minutes
- 30 Minutes
- 15 Minutes

**Span of Service**

*How early service starts and how late service runs.*

- 6:00 AM
- 8:00 PM

**Route Design**

*Where the bus goes and how it gets there*
STUDY PROCESS

The study began in January 2019 with an extensive data collection effort and review of past and ongoing plans. Data was collected to analyze ridership, travel patterns, travel time and on-time performance for the entire NWA study area. The first major milestone of the project was to develop a Public Engagement Plan that would ensure the entire study area had an opportunity to learn about transit and provide input that will directly inform the recommendations of the Connect NWA.

Parallel to the public engagement effort was the existing conditions analysis that consists of the following technical analyses:

- Market Analysis
- Fixed Route Transit Operational Analysis
- Benchmarking Review

This brings us to where we are today. The next steps in the process will involve the development of a Regional Transit Framework that will include recommendations for regional and local service standards and alternatives with service level and route alignment modifications and additions. The project team will organize an opportunity to gather community input on the recommendations so that the project team will be able to develop a Preferred Alternative (PA) for both the region and each individual community. What is important about this process is that the community will not have to choose between alternatives. Instead, they will be able to provide input about what they do and do not like about the recommendations. The project team can then isolate the strengths and eliminate the weaknesses of the recommendations to determine the PA that has community support and will help shape the future of transit in the region.
Connect NWA Process & Timeline

**Education & Engagement**

- **Spring 2019**
  - Survey
  - Community Events
  - Stakeholder Meetings

- **We are here**
  - Develop Transit System Alternatives
  - Analyze Community Input

**Review Alternatives**

- **Fall 2019**
  - Community Events
  - Community Presentations

- **Refine Alternatives**
  - Fall-Winter 2019
  - Refine Transit System Alternatives
  - Analyze Community Input

**Finalize Plan**

- **Winter 2019**
  - Community Presentations
  - Adopt Plan
EXISTING CONDITIONS

The Market and Operational analyses will provide an in-depth and detailed review of the existing conditions under a ‘transit lens’ in NWA. However, this section is intended to highlight some of the broad takeaways that the project team discovered to date.

STATE OF TRANSIT

The review of past plans and ongoing studies that both directly and indirectly relate to transit ensured that the project team respected existing planning processes underway for the area and captured insight from the ongoing community dialogue. The review included plans and programs across a variety of disciplines including land use, economic development and other relevant topics.

From this review the project team concluded that transit improvements are needed, and that Connect NWA’s vision and goals align with the previous and ongoing studies, plans and initiatives of the region. The following excerpts help capture the shared understanding of the important role that transit will play in NWA:

“Build better connectivity among regional employers, the University of Arkansas, and entrepreneurial support organizations to capitalize on the organic growth potential of the region’s three Fortune 500 companies and a Class I Carnegie research institution.”

“Access to people, places, products, and services fosters economic and social mobility. The Northwest Arkansas Council should ensure that the services and funding of Razorback Transit and Ozark Regional Transit keep up with rapid population growth and the long-term needs of Northwest Arkansas. That includes assisting both systems as they explore ways to provide more trips.”

— Greater Northwest Arkansas Development Strategy, Northwest Arkansas Council
Guiding Principles of the Northwest Arkansas Design Excellence Program:

“Strengthen Public Life: Create opportunities for people to spend quality time in public – moving or staying, alone or with others.

Elevate Standards of Sustainability and Resilience: Adhere to standards of sustainability, elevate ambitions and demonstrate relation of resilience to people and place.

Celebrate Local Cultures and Place: Enhance and respond to local social history and cultures as well as climate and geography.

Build Regional Capacity: Raise local ambitions and build knowledge and skills among design community and public.”

— Northwest Arkansas Design Excellence Program, Walton Family Foundation

“Northwest Arkansas communities should work with NWARPC to improve its existing public transit service and to get ‘Transit Ready’.”

— Northwest Arkansas Transportation Alternatives Analysis
PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

The Connect NWA public engagement effort revealed that the NWA community supports transit and wants more of it. Public engagement is one of the most important components of this study and that is the reason that the first chapter of this plan covers the ongoing public engagement effort. Chapter 1 provides an in-depth summary of the robust public engagement plan the project team developed and continues to implement. Most importantly, the chapter details what the public communicated to the project team about their current experiences with transit, what they want and need from transit and what would make them use transit.

The public engagement effort ramped up with a week-long series of public engagement opportunities from April 2-6, 2019. The project team coordinated nine public events throughout the region in a wide variety of locations meant to capture all types of transportation users (e.g. Fayetteville Farmers Market, Springdale Walmart, NWACC). A public input survey was administered both in hard copy and online from April through May.

A total of 1,299 surveys were received by the project team. The survey revealed that most respondents (80%) get around by personal vehicle daily, while 22% use RT and 9% use ORT. 24% also responded that they use a bike. Nearly 70% of respondents thought the transit system is reliable.

One of the most important insights discovered from the survey was that an overwhelming number of respondents (nearly 70%) would prefer more frequent bus service as opposed to walking less to their bus stop and having less frequent service throughout the region.

This critical finding from the public engagement effort aligns with the discussion about what makes transit effective and reveals that NWA wants a transit system that is reliable, allows for spontaneous travel, saves them time and gives them freedom.
MARKET ANALYSIS

The market analysis revealed the locations of the existing and future micro markets that currently or will support transit due to demand, potential or appeal associated with land use characteristics. The market analysis helps define the expansive study area and break it down into smaller markets that were easier to assess. Analyzing smaller market areas allowed the project team to understand all the micro markets that drive transit use and how they fit together knowing that the region as a whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

The market analysis revealed where growth is occurring in this rapidly expanding region in terms of population (where people live) and employment (where people travel to for work, leisure or services). The region is host to many large institutions and employers such as the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, Walmart’s Headquarter (HQ) in Bentonville, Tyson Foods’ HQ in Springdale, and JB Hunt’s HQ in Lowell. Areas of high population and employment are proven to support transit. As such, understanding the locations of the highest concentrations of population and employment helped the project team isolate areas with the highest demand and potential for successful transit.
Study Area Fixed Route Regions
Study Area Population Density

[Map showing population density in different areas with color coding for population density ranges from less than 1.25 to more than 20 people per acre.]
Study Area Employment Density

- County Border
- Major Roads

Employment Density:
- Less than 1.25 Jobs per Acre
- 1.25 - 4
- 4 - 10
- 10 - 20
- More than 20 Jobs per Acre
The market analysis identified potential transit need defined by groups of transit-dependent and target transit rider populations. This was an important component of the process as it ensured that while Connect NWA work towards improving transit for everyone in the region, the study must take measures to maintain and improve connectivity for the most vulnerable populations of the region. This transit need is characterized by identifying areas with greater portions of the population who are low income, minorities, elderly, disabled, and others and may face challenges related to transportation.
OPERATIONAL ANALYSIS

The NWA region is served by two separate transit providers (Ozark Regional Transit and Razorback Transit) that work in conjunction with each other to move people safely and efficiently throughout the area. The operational analysis explores how both services provide regional and local connectivity and provides both system- and route-level analysis to generate a better understanding of the NWA region’s existing transit service. In addition to a technical analysis, the project team rode the individual routes throughout the regional transit network. The project team made important discoveries during these analyses that will help shape the recommendations in ways that build upon the strengths of the existing transit network.

Travel Time Using Transit from Union Station
The operational analysis provided benchmarks for each agency, route and community in terms of Key Performance Indicators (KPI) such as travel time, level of service, reliability, ridership, connectivity, funding, population and employment served and travel patterns. These KPIs established a baseline that the project team will use in the development of both regional and local service standards.

**KEY FINDINGS**

Connect NWA represents a culmination of an exhaustive technical analysis and the voice of a NWA community that supports transit. The study will serve as the foundation on which to build a TDP that connects people, saves them time and gives them freedom. Below is a bulleted list of the key takeaways that will help inform the decision-making process as the project moves forward:

- The NWA community understands the important role for transit and its potential to connect people.
- The NWA community is still learning what effective transit looks like, what supports it and how to design it.
- Transit funding varies greatly between communities in the region and the current funding structure needs to be evaluated.
- Recent changes in transit service that increased frequency and modified route alignments to be more intuitive and shorten travel time resulted in over a 40% increase in ridership providing a “proof of concept” that aligns with the discussion about transit in this introduction.
- The NWA community wants a high capacity transit solution such as a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) or Light Rail Transit (LRT) line that connects the region with high frequency. Connect NWA needs to provide recommendations that will advance and develop the core fixed route transit for a high capacity transit solution to be feasible.
- Communities throughout the region understand the relationship between land use and transportation and are taking actions to plan and invest in transit supportive development.

- NWA hosts many large institutions and employers that currently have the potential to generate and attract transit trips. Connect NWA will identify opportunities for partnerships and design recommendations that meet these large institution’s existing and future customized needs.
- Overall the region has many transit gaps due to high demand and low supply.