

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Muskegon Area Transit System (MATS) provides public transit throughout Muskegon County, with two distinct services. Fixed-route service is provided primarily in Muskegon, Muskegon Heights, and Roosevelt Park, as well as portions of Norton Shores, Muskegon Township, Montague, Whitehall, and Dalton Township. GoBus demand-response service is provided countywide for persons with disabilities, as well as those over the age of 65.

In the last decade, MATS ridership has followed a similar trajectory to national trends. Fixed-route ridership peaked in 2011 but has declined in recent years as an improving economy has coincided with a changing mobility landscape. Factors such as an increase in teleworking, online shopping, and home delivery, as well as the emergence of new technologies such as app-based ride-hailing services have all contributed to the decline in fixed-route bus ridership nationally and in the Muskegon region (**Figure 1**). At the same time, demographic trends including the aging of baby boomers have resulted in a growing demand for GoBus demand-response service and similar services nationally. Although **Figure 2** shows that GoBus ridership has been fairly flat over the past five years, actual ridership is not indicative of demand as GoBus trip requests can be denied, due to capacity constraints, for passengers who are not certified as disabled according to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

In recent years, MATS has faced considerable funding challenges, which has necessitated cuts to both fixed-route and GoBus service. Even with these cuts, MATS had an operating deficit of nearly \$400,000 in FY2019. Due to financial constraints, the denial rate for GoBus was approximately 30 percent in October 2018.

Figure 1 | MATS Fixed-Route Passenger Trips

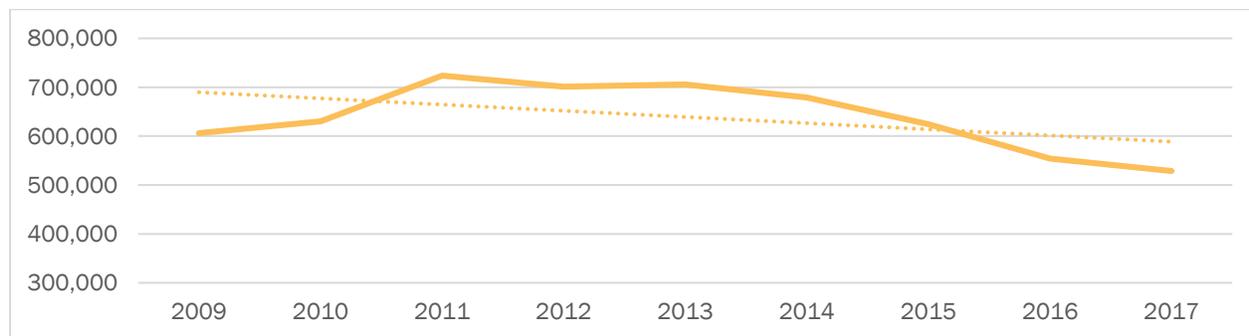
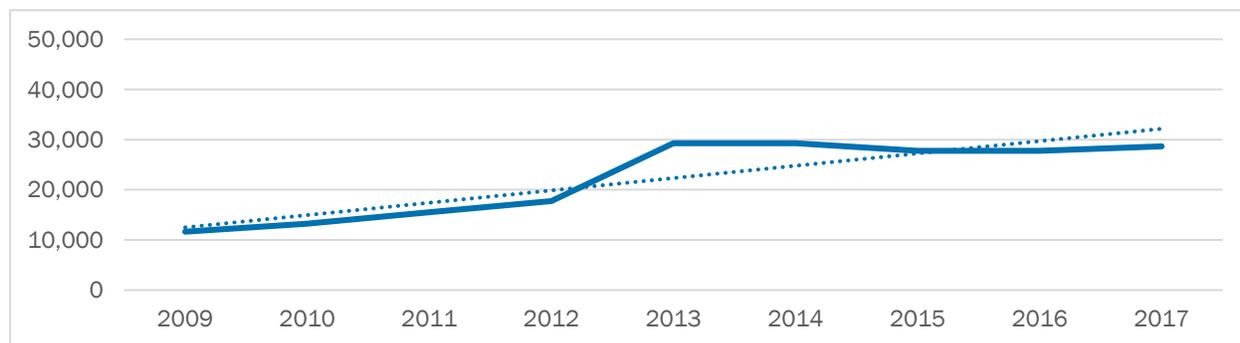


Figure 2 | MATS GoBus Passenger Trips



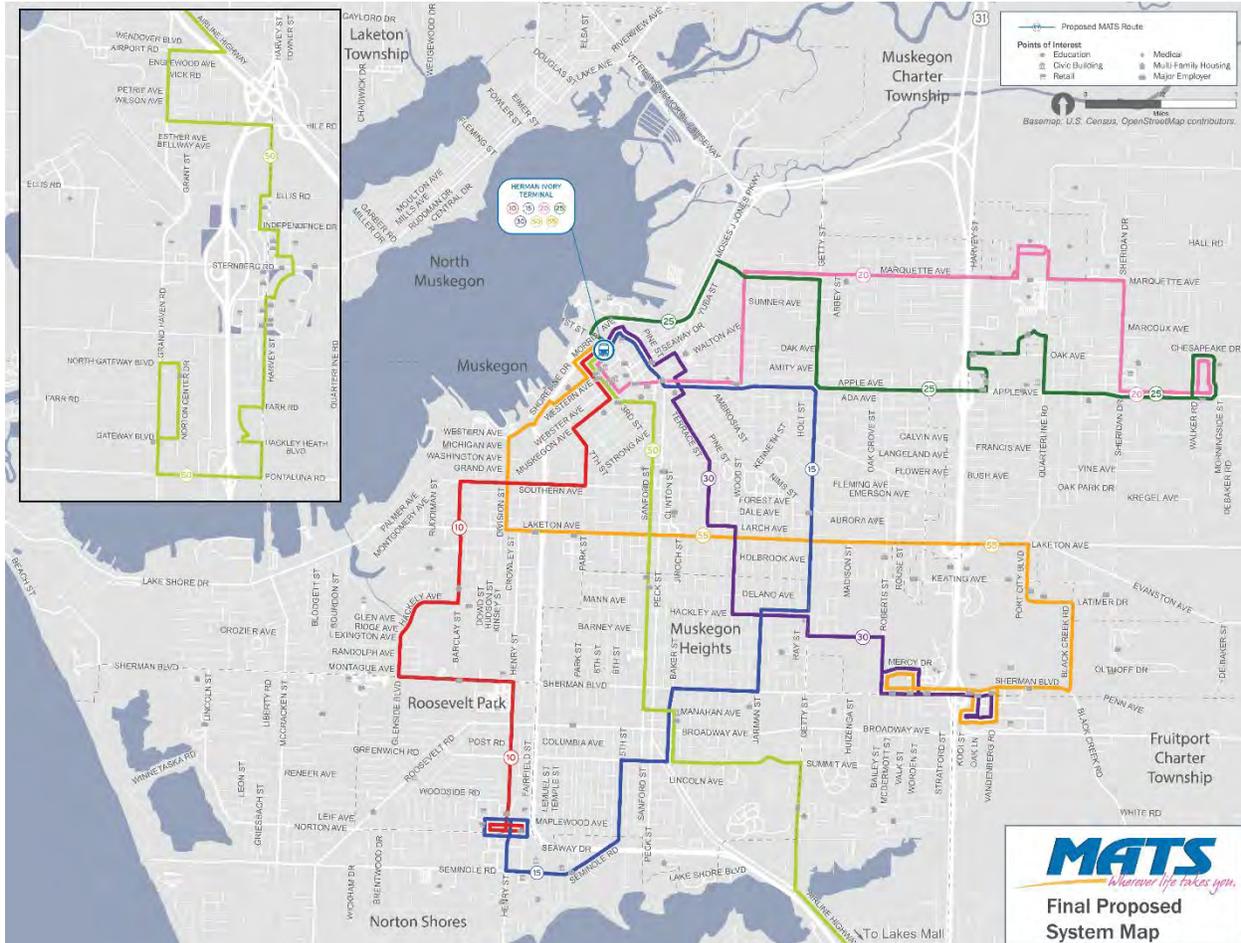
The Route Study and Comprehensive Operational Analysis provided an opportunity to take a fresh look at all aspects of MATS services and operations, and to develop recommendations for a more efficient, effective, and financially sustainable transit system for the Muskegon region.

This document consists of ten chapters that follow this executive summary. Each corresponds to the major phases of the study:

- **Chapter 2 – Existing Services.** An overview of existing transit services in the study area, including operating characteristics and supporting amenities.
- **Chapter 3 – Fares and Finances.** A projection of the transit system’s costs and revenues, along with an inventory of available funding sources.
- **Chapter 4 – Market Analysis.** An assessment of the market for transit services throughout Muskegon County, based on population and employment density, as well as socio-economic and demographic characteristics.
- **Chapter 5 – System Performance and Peer Comparison.** A system-level comparison of service policies and performance metrics in relation to a set of comparable peer systems.
- **Chapter 6 – Stakeholder Outreach.** A summary of public and stakeholder input, collected in meetings and surveys over the course of the study, and used to inform the development of preliminary recommendations.
- **Chapter 7 – Identification of Service Issues and Opportunities.** A diagnostic assessment of the existing systems’ strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities, as identified through the combination of technical analyses, stakeholder outreach, and industry best practices.
- **Chapter 8 – Preliminary Service Scenarios and Stakeholder Reactions.** A review of the two preliminary service redesign scenarios each for fixed-route and GoBus service, and the feedback received from stakeholders in response to each scenario.
- **Chapter 9 – Final Recommendations.** A detailed set of recommendations designed to better align transit service with ridership potential, and to improve the ridership, productivity, and financial sustainability of the transit system.
- **Chapter 10 – Financial Plan.** Cost estimates for the operating and capital expenditures required to implement the final recommendations.

Figure 3 shows a system map of the recommended fixed-route network. This network is intended to be the core of a multi-modal system that also includes ADA paratransit service and innovative demand response service known as microtransit. A summary of the key recommendations of the Route Study and Comprehensive Operational Analysis is provided immediately after the fixed-route system map.

Figure 3 | Recommended Fixed-Route Network



Summary of Key Recommendations

Fixed-Route Service

- Simplified and streamlined network featuring bi-directional service on every route.
- Extensive use of interlines to ensure that all most riders have a one-seat ride to key destinations such as grocery stores and healthcare facilities.
- Direct service from Herman Ivory Terminal to the Lakes Mall area.
- Hourly pulse at Herman Ivory Terminal to facilitate seamless connections between any two routes.
- Reduced service coverage (picked up by microtransit), focusing on corridors with the highest ridership potential.
- Reduced service hours (picked up by microtransit), focusing on period with the greatest ridership demand.

ADA Paratransit Service

- Adherence to ADA coverage requirements ($\frac{3}{4}$ mile buffer around fixed-route service) to manage demand.
- Adherence to ADA eligibility requirements (verified disability), to encourage use of more cost-effective fixed-route and microtransit services among those able to use these services.
- Establish process for suspending the eligibility of riders who abuse the system with frequent no-shows.

Microtransit Service

- App-based demand-response service (with phone-in option available for those without access to a smart device).
- Maximum 30-minute wait time from trip request to pick-up.
- Jurisdiction-wide service coverage for every participating (local funding partner) jurisdiction.
- Weekday service from 5:00 am to midnight, to facilitate job access for 2nd and 3rd shift workers.
- Weekend service including both Saturdays and Sundays.
- Corner-to-corner service model (with exceptions for age and disability considerations) to minimize deviations and maximize operational productivity.
- Turn-key contract service provided by a vendor based on favorable rates and ease of implementation.

Fleet and Facilities

- Eight vehicles needed for fixed-route service recommendations (not including spares).
- 35-foot transit coaches needed to accommodate anticipated fixed-route ridership demands.
- One vehicle needed for ADA paratransit service (not including spare).
- Six to nine microtransit vehicles in operation on weekdays; five on Saturdays; and four on Sundays.
- Eight-passenger vehicles used for microtransit service, with at least 50 percent of microtransit fleet wheelchair accessible.
- Shift focus and resources to deploying passenger shelters throughout the fixed-route service area instead of building a second transit hub in downtown Muskegon Heights.

Fares and Funding

- Significantly reduced local share contribution increases compared to the status quo. Additional operating revenues of approximately \$385,000 required in 2020 to implement the final recommendations, increasing to \$464,500 by 2024.
- Reduced capital needs compared to the status quo through the use of third-party contractor to provide turn-key microtransit service (i.e., contractor provides both capital and operating components of new service).
- No recommended changes to fixed-route or GoBus fares; implementation of moderately priced microtransit service.

11. CLOSING STATEMENT

As a department of Muskegon County, MATS has historically prioritized service coverage over productivity. In practice, however, MATS' efforts to serve all County residents, combined with budgetary limitations, have resulted in a service that serves very few residents well.

In the urbanized area of the County, MATS' current fixed-route network is characterized by circuitous alignments and large one-way loops. This service design succeeds in casting a wide net, but fails to provide the type of direct service that would appeal to a broad range of area residents. Both inside and outside of the urbanized area, MATS' GoBus service offers a lifeline to seniors and residents with disabilities in need of mobility assistance, but in practice, the large service area and lack of resources results in frustration among prospective riders who are often unable to book a reservation.

At the root of many of MATS' challenges is an unsustainable funding situation. While federal and state funding cover the majority of MATS' operating and capital expenses, these funding sources come with local matching requirements for operating expenses. Over the past several years, the amount of local match funding provided by the local funding partners has not kept pace with the rise in costs associated with operating MATS' service. In addition, many jurisdictions in the County that currently receive GoBus service do not provide any local match funding, creating an inequitable local funding structure.

While MATS faces a number of daunting challenges, the recommendations laid out in this document provide a viable path forward to ensuring the long-term productivity and financial sustainability of the system. These recommendations include a rationalized fixed-route network, stricter adherence to ADA requirements, and an innovative approach to demand-response service that creates the potential for MATS to serve existing riders better and attract new customers. However, realizing the full potential of the recommended services depends upon the financial support of individual jurisdictions throughout Muskegon County.