



Mountain Climber FY 2023 TRANSPORTATION COORDINATION PLAN

Introduction: Date adopted by board of directors

Mountain Climber is Flathead County Public Transportation and is governed by the Flathead County Commission, which is comprised of three members:

Randy Brodehl
Pam Holmquist, Chair
Brad Abell

- A. The Transportation Advisory Committee approved the Plan at a public meeting on February 10, 2022.
- B. The Plan was approved by the Commission at a public meeting on February 24, 2022.

Note: 2/10/22 TAC minutes and the 2/24/22 Commissioner minutes are uploaded to the application website. The minutes of the Commissioners' meeting are also available online at http://flathead.mt.gov/commissioner/current_minutes.php

Section 1: Agencies involved

A. Summary

Mountain Climber is the public transportation provider in Flathead County for the general public, older adults and people with disabilities. We currently provide all services directly rather than subcontract to or purchase services from other entities. Mountain Climber enters into contracts and agreements to provide certain services. See section C. below for service details.

In developing the FY 2023 Transportation Coordination Plan (TCP), we engaged stakeholders and the general public in multiple ways: bi-monthly Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC) meetings, annual Transit Planning Public Meetings, community and stakeholder presentations and events, bi-monthly public reports to the Flathead County

Commissioners and a business survey. We attempted to reach a wide range of potential participants through print media, radio, community calendars, newsletters, PSAs, fliers, etc.

B. Agencies participating in the Transportation Coordination Plan

Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC)

The TAC is one of the primary ways members of the public, community agencies and organizations can participate in the Transportation Coordination planning process. Mountain Climber is fortunate to have a very active and involved TAC. TAC members are appointed by the County Commissioners to staggered three-year terms. The Committee meets at least quarterly but most typically in February, April, June, August, October and December. Meetings are open to the public and posted on the County website, the online county calendar and in the Daily Inter Lake "Daybook" calendar of local events. Members represent a good cross-section of the community, including Logan Health, Flathead Valley Community College, Montana Employment Opportunities (serving people with disabilities), Whitefish Community Center, the Area Agency on Aging, Big Mountain Commercial Association (funds the Snow Bus through a private transportation provider), local businesses and the Flathead County Commission. One member serving as a Kalispell resident has also been on the Kalispell City Council. Members include older adults, people with disabilities and riders. *(See Plan Attachments for a list of current TAC members.)*

TAC meetings typically include Director updates to members on issues of importance regarding transit services, including contracts and other funding, policies and procedures, budgets, ridership, operations, marketing and outreach and community partnerships. Members provide guidance and input on planning and other issues from a community perspective. Each December, the TAC formally reviews progress over the past year and sets priorities for the coming year as the foundation for the annual Transportation Coordination Plan. Members also serve on ad hoc subcommittees to work on specific tasks.

Invitations to the February 10, 2022 TAC meeting at which members discussed and voted on the FY 2023 Transportation Coordination Plan were sent to stakeholders such as AOA Advisory Council members, senior and community centers, Flathead County administration, planning staff of the three incorporated cities in Flathead County and other stakeholders, as well as all private transit providers in the area. Several guests attended and participated in the meeting, including staff from the ASSIST Program, Flathead Valley Community College, Logan Health - Whitefish, the City of Kalispell and the City of Whitefish.

Although there is typically limited general public participation at the TAC meetings, feedback is obtained throughout the year through other forums, including a business survey, meetings and phone calls with private transit providers, meetings with and presentations to staff and elected officials of the three incorporated cities, and meetings with and presentations to the business community, including local Chambers of Commerce. We also held a public meeting to solicit input on transit issues on January 12, 2022.

Plan partners

In addition to the TAC, Mountain Climber contracts, coordinates or otherwise partners with the following entities to enhance or expand transportation options in Flathead County. *(See Plan Attachments for service details. Copies of contracts/agreements are uploaded to the application website when applicable.)*

Flathead County/Area IX Agency on Aging (AOA)

Flathead County Road Department – The Flathead County Road Department provides Mountain Climber with some vehicle maintenance services for the cost of parts only. Note: AOA does not have an agreement with the Road Department as it is a county function.

Flathead Industries (FI) - The MT Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS) contracts with Mountain Climber to provide weekday transportation for individuals with developmental disabilities to Flathead Industries for work and return home. This service supplements FI's own transportation by bringing individuals to a central point where they can catch Flathead Industries' vans to remote locations. The rides are counted in the On-Demand numbers.

Logan Health Previously called Kalispell Regional HealthCare (KRH)

- Logan Health financially assists Mountain Climber to transport elementary school children to S.P.A.R.K., the afterschool program offered by The Summit, which is part of the Logan Health system. Mountain Climber offers a public route that provides one-way service from participating schools to The Summit.
- The ASSIST program is a local, volunteer-based nonprofit affiliated with Logan Health that helps individuals with medical needs navigate the health care and community service system. ASSIST uses three vans to help transport clients to certain medical appointments. Until recently, the program served clients within and around Kalispell but is now focusing on those who live outside the Mountain Climber area of service and within 25 miles of Logan Health's main Kalispell facilities. ASSIST staff and volunteers work closely with Mountain Climber staff to coordinate transportation options for mutual clients.
- Logan Health has a representative on the TAC.

City of Kalispell – The City of Kalispell contributes \$15,000 annually to Mountain Climber to support public transportation. The Public Works Department processes permits for and installs Kalispell area bus stops on the city right of way.

City of Whitefish – The City of Whitefish contributes \$9,300 annually to Mountain Climber to support public transportation. City staff and elected officials have been meeting regularly with the Mountain Climber Director this past year to explore opportunities for collaboration. The City is working with Mountain Climber and other stakeholders and has created a new transportation hub at Depot Park, which includes a shelter, to allow for transfers between Mountain Climber buses, intercity service and Amtrak. Discussions have also focused on transit-based solutions to traffic and parking congestion, mobility and affordable housing for workers, and visitor management. Some options include expanded commuter service between the cities, connectivity with the airport and Park & Ride routes/stops. Mountain Climber has begun coordination with the Snow Bus.

City of Columbia Falls - The City of Columbia Falls contributes \$5,500 annually to Mountain Climber to support public transportation. Beginning January 1, 2022, Mountain Climber has reinstated full service, five days a week in Columbia Falls after this service was suspended due to the pandemic.

Flathead Valley Community College (FVCC)

My Glacier Village – My Glacier Village is a nonprofit in the Flathead Valley that follows the national village-to-village model in which older adults can pay a monthly membership fee that affords them volunteer assistance for a variety of tasks, including transportation. Mountain Climber is exploring opportunities for partnership and coordination.

Big Mountain Commercial Association (BMCA) – BMCA is represented on the TAC. Mountain Climber works with BMCA to coordinate and augment service with the Snow Bus in both the winter and summer seasons. BMCA has also facilitated a grant that allows Mountain Climber to provide On-Demand Saturday service during the 2021/2022 ski season.

Climate Smart Glacier Country (CSGC) - CSGC works with partners to create solutions that conserve resources, promote clean energy, strengthen food and water security, and reduce wildfire and other climate-related risk. CSGC members provide input on the TCP and ongoing transit needs/issues and are part of other stakeholder groups working on transit-based solutions, especially in the Whitefish area.

Section 2: Agencies not involved

Agencies that are not involved typically fall into the three categories below. Note: Letters were sent to each of the private transportation providers inviting them to participate in the Plan. (See Section 3 for more detail on private transit provider contacts.)

- **Those that have their own vehicles and need them available 24 hours a day and/or without notice and at their convenience.** These include nursing homes and assisted living facilities, such as Heritage Place, Immanuel Lutheran, Brendan House, Colonial Manor, Prestige, Wel-life, Montana Veteran's Home, Riverside Senior Living, Edgewood Vista and Lake View Care Center. This category also includes adult and children group agencies such as Lamplighter, Transition Group Homes, Salvation Army, Day Cares, Stillwater Christian School, Head Start and Boys & Girls Club. Note: Mountain Climber services are available to and often used by residents or clients of these entities.
- **Those that provide little or no transportation but will refer individuals to Mountain Climber.** These agencies generally cannot provide funding for vehicles or services but may provide individual transportation funds or purchase tickets or passes for clients from Mountain Climber. Mountain Climber also has a process by which social service agencies can purchase discounted tickets or request free tickets or passes for clients in need. Such agencies include Samaritan House, Community Action Partnership of Northwest Montana, and The Warming Center.
- **Private transportation companies.** Such companies provide services for a profit and will often consider entering into a contract for their for-profit services. Opportunities for contracting with private providers are considered when looking at unmet needs. For more information see Section 3 below.
- **Other Transportation Options:** Uber and Lyft are available in Flathead County. In addition, some Flathead County residents receive individualized transportation services through private home and community-based services providers paid for by the individuals themselves or by Medicaid, Medicaid Waivers, Vocational Rehabilitation or other social service funding sources.
- **Glacier National Park:** Though we no longer manage their shuttle system we still collaborate with them on transportation between the park and the nearby communities.

C. Mountain Climber services and vehicle information

Notes: .

- In FY 2021, Mountain Climber provided a total of 68,302 rides. The Covid 19 pandemic has profoundly affected the total rides for FY2021.

Mountain Climber provides the following routes/services:

- **Kalispell, Whitefish and Columbia Falls City Demand/Response Service:** This is a new service that has been introduced to Kalispell, Whitefish and Columbia Falls. Mountain Climber clients can pre-schedule rides in advance or call for same day rides. Demand/Response service can also be accessed through our ride hailing app by Via Mobility launched on July 28, 2021. Currently, around 45% of our riders book their ride

through the App. This service has been largely accepted by Mountain Climber riders and continues to grow in ridership each month.

- **Whitefish & Columbia Falls Commuter:** This commuter service operates M – F, connecting Kalispell with Whitefish and Columbia Falls. One trip is provided in the morning and one in the afternoon/early evening. In Kalispell, the stop is Gateway community center. In Whitefish, the stop is the Depot transit center near the Whitefish library. In Columbia Falls, the stop is Super One Foods. The Commuter schedule also coordinates with the Whitefish Mountain Snow Bus to enable worker travel, primarily from Kalispell to Whitefish. During the Covid pandemic rides are free.
- **S.P.A.R.K. Route:** S.P.A.R.K. is an afterschool program for elementary school children operated by The Logan Health Medical Fitness Center, which is part of Logan Health. Mountain Climber provides one-way service from participating schools to The Summit. The route is open to the general public. It only operates during the school year on days school is in session. Pick up stops include the following schools: Trinity Lutheran, West Valley, Russell, Peterson, Hedges, Edgerton and Rankin. No return service is available. Logan Health financially supports Mountain Climber to transport students to the S.P.A.R.K. program. Other riders may ride on this route. In FY 2021 total rides were 7,487.

Section 3: Needs assessment and planning

A. Summary

Mountain Climber employs multiple methods to determine area transit needs, including data tracking and analysis, the development of formal planning documents, participation in external community planning processes, bi-monthly TAC meetings, solicitation of public input through meetings and surveys, outreach to private transit providers and monthly public reports to Flathead County Commissioners, as well as regular meetings with Mountain Climber staff to identify issues and potential solutions.

Mountain Climber annual ridership has more than doubled since 2000 and has averaged almost 97,000 rides per year over the last five years, with a high of 116,017 in FY 2019 and a low of 85,305 in FY 2017. ***However, due to the Covid 19 pandemic the annual ridership for FY2021 plummeted to 68,304.***

Increased federal 5311 and state TransADE funding over the past few years has allowed us to cover the increased costs of doing business (in particular rising health insurance premiums) and to maintain an aging fleet but has been insufficient to allow for overall expansion of service. Stimulus dollars provided through the Cares Act has allowed us to perform much needed maintenance and repairs to our fleet. However, funds received through the TransADE program was reduced substantially for the FY2022 budget.

Although Mountain Climber's ridership has grown over the last two decades and customers who have access to and use the service are generally satisfied, funding continues to be a major barrier to creating and implementing transit-based solutions to pressing concerns, including traffic and parking congestion (especially during the summer season), worker mobility and economic development/sustainability, affordable housing, an aging population, access to health care and high-volume visitor management related to our proximity to Glacier National Park, Whitefish Mountain and other outdoor recreation.

B. Planning efforts

Planning Efforts Made Public

- Flathead County Public Transportation Director's monthly spot on KGEZ radio
- Paid ad on KGEZ radio.
- County calendar of events
- Posted on Mountain Climber websites
- Invitation to management and planning staff at the City of Whitefish
- Distribution of flyers/invitations
 - On all Mountain Climber buses
 - Large display at the AOA/Kalispell Senior Center
 - Emails/handouts to all AOA Advisory Council Members, the Transportation Advisory Committee, and other stakeholders

Section 4: Public Involvement

- The Flathead County Public Transportation Advisory Committee meets bi-monthly to discuss service-related issues. Transportation expansion is a frequent discussion item. Meeting times are posted online on the County Commission agenda, the online County calendar and in the Daily Inter Lake "Daybook" calendar of local events.
- The Mountain Climber Director reports bi-monthly to the Flathead County Commissioners in a public meeting with the option for public comment on agency activities. The report includes information about Mountain Climber's operations and performance indicators. In addition, County Commissioners reviewed and approved the plan on 2/24/2022 at a posted meeting open to the public for comment.
- - Mountain Climber staff participate in numerous local coalitions and workgroups working on providing transit solutions for care transition and coordination, veterans' services/issues, home care services, etc.
 - The Mountain Climber Director, and other staff frequently engage the community about transportation services and issues through presentations, public meetings, and media. Within the past year, staff have participated in the following:
 - Presentations to service clubs and other organizations
 - Presentations to local service providers and advocacy organizations

- Participation in multiple community fairs and other events
 - Daily Inter Lake and Flathead Beacon articles
 - Monthly and periodic interviews about Mountain Climber on KGEZ radio
 - Monthly ad on KGEZ radio (replaced monthly Daily Inter Lake ad mid-year)
 - Periodic ads in other local papers and the United Way Answer Book
 - AOA staff routinely educate and refer older adults to Mountain Climber services; AOA's routine intake process consists of a "Benefits Check Up" which includes a screening for transit services
- Members of the public can obtain information on Mountain Climber's services and how to contact Mountain Climber through a variety of means, including the Via Mobility app, the Mountain Climber website, the Mountain Climber Facebook page, AOA newsletter, brochures, radio and newspaper ads and print media. See the website at <http://www.flathead.mt.gov/mountainclimber/>

Section 5: Private Sector

Letters were sent to each company below inviting them to participate in the Transportation Coordination Plan and attend bi-monthly TAC meetings, with specific mention of the February 10, 2022, TAC meeting where the FY 2023 plan would be reviewed, discussed and voted on. Mountain Climber staff wrote letters and made phone calls to representatives from Rocky Mountain Transportation, Wild Horse Limousine and the Whitefish Shuttle. Most are willing to work with Mountain Climber if the opportunity arises. The Big Mountain Commercial Association (BMCA), which funds Rocky Mountain Transportation to operate the Snow Bus, is represented on our TAC.

Below is a description of the services provided by local private transit providers as well as any feedback given during phone interviews:

Taxi Companies:

- Arrow Shuttle: Provides 24/7 service. Offers shuttle, tours and taxi service to all of Flathead County.
- Glacier Taxi: Is no longer in business

Charter Companies:

- Rocky Mountain Transportation: In business since 1946, Rocky Mountain is the largest transportation provider in Flathead County, operating school bus service in Whitefish, charter services, a Hertz franchise and the Whitefish Snow Bus (funded by the Big Mountain Commercial Association). The 38 passenger Snow Bus runs primarily in the winter providing free service between multiple stops in Whitefish and Big Mountain Ski Resort.
- The Whitefish Shuttle: Whitefish Shuttle provides year-round transportation and guide service to Glacier and other outdoor recreation sites with a focus on hikers and bikers. Fees vary.

- Arrow Shuttle also offers charter serve for groups up to 11 people.

Limousine Service:

- Wild Horse Limousine: Wild Horse has a three-vehicle fleet: a 2005 Ford Excursion, 2014 Lincoln MKT Town Car and a 2014 Mercedes Sprinter Limousine. They provide luxury transportation to proms, birthdays, anniversaries, graduations, and other special occasions as well as cater to corporate and leisure travelers. Hourly rates and minimum charges vary by type of car and service requested.

Other:

- Montana Trolley: The Montana Trolley offers charter services 24 hours/7days a week for special events and tours in Flathead, Lincoln, Lake and Glacier counties. Their fleet includes seven trolleys, they are named Hazel, Theda, Ruby, Patriot, Jack, Dorothy and Choo Choo. The typical charge is \$125 per hour but rates may vary depending on the event and location.

Section 6: Plan for Growth and/or Increased Ridership

Mountain Climber has made significant changes over the last two years that have resulted in increased ridership, more efficient and user-friendly service, and new opportunities for community collaboration.

However, some challenges noted in previous years are ongoing, and there continue to be areas of unmet need due primarily to limited resources. There are also new opportunities for change and partnership.

1. Operations, Routes and Service

- **The majority of Mountain Climber services are provided in the City of Kalispell, but the area would benefit from more individualized and extended days/hours of service.**

One of the keys to ensuring we are providing valuable, customer-driven service (and thus increasing ridership) is designing routes so we pick people up and drop them off in convenient, desirable locations. We have consistently covered major destinations like Hutton Ranch, the hospital/medical offices, FVCC, Meridian/Gateway, downtown and South 93, but it has been more challenging to pick people up within a reasonable distance to where they live given our resources. The difficulty is compounded by winter weather which can make streets impossible to navigate, a lack of sidewalks in many areas, and the aging of the population which can limit passenger mobility. In an effort to address this issue, an investigation into Demand/Respond service and accompanying mobile software began. ***After an RFP was approved by the county commissioners,***

Via Mobility was selected to provide a ride hailing app along with continued support. Launch of this system came on July 28, 2021. This has proven to be an excellent way to address the issues mentioned above.

The lack of extended weekday hours and weekend service can be problematic for those who need public transportation for employment (i.e. service/shift workers) or other critical activities outside of Mountain Climber's current business hours. For those who have low incomes, alternative means of transportation are typically unaffordable. For older adults and people with disabilities who depend on paratransit services, especially those who need an accessible vehicle, there are no other low-cost options. Additionally, local and visitor access to public transportation during evening and weekend hours could benefit businesses like shops and restaurants that operate outside of the 8-5 work week.

- **We have expanded our Demand/Response service to Evergreen.**

Typically, we have found that fixed routes in Evergreen had very low ridership but Dial-A-Ride type service was well used. To avoid the added requirements of parallel paratransit service associated with a fixed route we have been able to increase our On-Demand service to include Evergreen.

- **On-Demand service is provided in the other two incorporated cities of Whitefish and Columbia Falls.**

Mountain Climbers offers on-demand service in Whitefish and Columbia Falls. Both cities are supportive of public transportation but have different needs.

Whitefish

Though ridership within Whitefish was down due to Covid 19 it has increased beyond our expectations after launching on-demand service without an increase in service hours.

Home to Whitefish Ski Resort and a gateway community to Glacier National Park, Whitefish is a popular tourist destination in both winter and summer. It is also home to 7,870 residents. Whitefish stakeholders are concerned primarily with 1) managing traffic/parking/access to points of interest during the peak seasons, and 2) providing transportation for workers both to increase the pool (including those who live in Kalispell or Columbia Falls) and reduce the number of workers taking up parking spaces at their places of employment. We are in continuing discussions with Whitefish stakeholders about opportunities to partner on transportation options that would support both locals

and visitors moving more easily about town and to desired destinations as well as between the cities.

Columbia Falls

Due to the Covid 19 pandemic service was reduced within Columbia Falls to one day a week. Finally, beginning January 1, 2022 full service was re-instituted. Rides between Columbia Falls and Whitefish are also available during regular service hours. Most riders are older adults who qualify for paratransit service and have scheduled deviated rides in the past. Now they are able to benefit by our on-demand service.

The Columbia Falls Area Chamber of Commerce promotes the city and surrounding communities as the “Gateway to Glacier National Park.” With almost 5,000 residents, Columbia Falls is the closest incorporated city to the Park (17 miles). Like Whitefish, commuter service to the Park and between Columbia Falls and Whitefish and Kalispell would aid worker and visitor mobility and support economic development.

- **Demand/Response service areas and days/hours of service are limited while demand is increasing.**

Due to the launch of our app, we were able to return some of our dispatchers to their driving positions and provide more Demand/Response service to Kalispell and surrounding communities.

Limited-service areas, limited days/hours of service and the lack of service between cities and the smaller communities can make it difficult, and sometimes impossible, for older adults and people with disabilities to access health care and social services, obtain basic necessities and participate in community life.

The demand for specialized transit continues to increase across Flathead County due primarily to the aging of the population (see below). Increased demand without a corresponding increase in resources will likely result in further service limitations.

A special note about the demand for rides to access medical care: Mountain Climber provides more than 16,000 rides to medical facilities/offices annually. The ASSIST program also has three vans in service providing daily rides to medical appointments. **Despite the large amount of community transportation resources devoted to helping people access health care, it is insufficient to meet the demand.**

- **Expanded and redesigned commuter service has the potential to support workforce mobility and enhance visitor experience and in doing so support economic development.**

Currently, Mountain Climber only has two commuter routes, the Whitefish and Columbia Falls Commuter... Whitefish in particular is struggling to find workers to fill open jobs and has identified a lack of affordable housing in the area as a primary obstacle. Redesigned and expanded commuter service could support worker recruitment/retention from surrounding communities.

Our new and rebranded system, called the Mountain Climber, will still be looking for ways to increase and improve service in the most densely populated areas of Flathead County.

- **Service to and from Kalispell and within smaller communities like Lakeside/Somers, Bigfork and the Canyon area are often requested by the public, particularly older adults and people with disabilities.**

To try to address the requests, we have experimented with largely unsuccessful commuter routes but look forward to benefitting from the proposed planning by an outside planning consultant.

We know there is demand for on-demand service and other individualized service like assisted transportation as we get frequent requests through both Mountain Climber and AOA. We also know affordable housing concerns are driving a new interest in commuter service for workers from the Canyon area, primarily into Whitefish.

As we explore options such as van pool programs and integrated commuter service, we hope to develop models that could potentially serve the smaller, more rural areas of the county.

- **Interest is often expressed in affordable, readily available connectivity to the airport, train stations and Glacier National Park.**

This too may be addressed through the help of an outside planner.

2. Vehicles and Maintenance

- **Progress has been made on replacing an aging fleet, but maintenance continues to be a costly component of operations and current funds are insufficient to allow for fleet expansion.**

Of the 18 vehicles we have available to run on a daily basis, five are more than 10 years old and three have over 200,000 miles. One bus has over 250,000 miles. Five of the 18 buses are back-up buses; the rest are in service. In FY 2021 we spent \$223,583.73 on

bus maintenance including stimulus funds. Whereas, half way through FY2022 we've only spent \$35,535.62 on bus maintenance. ***In the last quarter of the 2022 fiscal year, we expect to receive the mini-vans and cut-away buses that have been ordered. This new equipment will help us to further hold the line on our maintenance costs.***

3. Technology

- **Passengers increasingly request and expect technological support for their transit experience.**

Because of this we are now using a mobile app software that can be used to schedule your trip without the help of a dispatcher after initial set-up. Our past scheduling software was unwieldy and inefficient.

4. Planning and Resource Development

- **Public transportation is a vital component of the infrastructure in our community. Most service is provided within cities, especially Kalispell, but historically little emphasis has been placed on joint planning or partnering with city governments, businesses, and stakeholders.**

Over the last year Mountain Climber management, county officials and TAC members have engaged in multiple, ongoing discussions with city staff and elected officials, chambers of commerce and other business representatives and community stakeholders regarding their transit needs and their interest in the Mountain Climber. These discussions have illustrated both the growing need for transit options in our Valley and the changing perception that transit can be a viable solution to the challenges we face, particularly as it relates to workforce development and visitor management. Through these discussions we have improved our working relationships with stakeholders and hopefully paved the way for joint planning and projects in the future.

- **Youth and young adults are less able to afford and less culturally tied to traditional means of transportation. They represent a natural market for transit services.**

Mountain Climber has stepped up efforts to reach out to younger riders and increase their transit options, including making presentations to youth/young adult groups and increasing service near college student housing.

While these are steps in the right direction, future service development should better include the youth perspective. We should also explore planning and funding partners who represent the interests of youth and young adults in our communities.

- **The aging of the population is a major factor in planning for the future of transit services in the Flathead.**

The current and previous Area Plan on Aging details the changing demographics relative to the older adult population and points to the need for additional and more flexible transportation as a major priority now and in coming years.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2017 estimates, 28% of Flathead County is already age 60 or older and almost 19% is 65 and older. Of those 65-74, 23% have a disability; 62% of those 75 or older have one. Twenty percent have difficulty walking. More than 8% of older adults live at or below the federal poverty level, and 12% live at or below 125% of poverty. **This is a permanent demographic shift that will have an unprecedented impact on transit and other services.**

Setting Priorities and Developing Strategies for the Future

The following priorities and strategies were developed through the needs assessment process, performance analysis, general public and stakeholder feedback and TAC input.

A. Engage in ongoing strategic visioning and planning

The Flathead Valley is the second fastest growing area in Montana and the third fastest growing area of its size in the nation. Additionally, approximately 3 million visitors a year come to enjoy Glacier National Park, Whitefish Mountain, Flathead Lake, and the many other recreational opportunities our area has to offer, which simultaneously creates economic opportunities and challenges related to worker and customer mobility and visitor management. Flathead is also home to many local and relocated retirees whose need for transportation alternatives increases as they age.

High-volume tourism combined with increases in the local population, new residential and commercial development, and aging communities requires a sustained commitment to planning and a willingness to evolve to meet growing needs and changes in expectations regarding the availability and range of public transit options.

Our work this last year on the Mountain Climber has given us a new perspective about what's possible. A transit system design that enables comprehensive connectivity within and between our communities will support economic development and raise our overall quality of life. It works for people who depend on transit to navigate everyday life and for residents and visitors who want to access employment, health care, shopping, dining, lodging, recreation and other points of interest, the airport, etc. ***We have come to learn, though, that our primary goal should be to service our core riders as efficiently as possible. We will look for ways to expand service to Flathead County residents first, ones that are truly transit dependent and need our service for vital daily functions such as medical visits, work, and shopping.***

B. Build public, elected official, business and community organization support for a well-planned, coordinated and adequately funded transit system

Public transportation serves a vital function for individuals who depend on it, but it also supports all sectors of the local economy by connecting employees, local customers, and visitors to businesses. It helps mitigate traffic and parking congestion, infrastructure damage and environmental concerns by taking cars off the road, which is both a boost to commerce and to the overall quality of life in the community.

Although Mountain Climber is a county operation (funded in part by a voted county mill), service is provided primarily in and between the cities of Kalispell, Whitefish and Columbia Falls.

It is critical transit planning/funding is approached jointly with the county, cities, business communities and others to ensure integrated needs assessment, sufficient resource development and coordinated service delivery. We have extensively engaged stakeholders over the past year and plan to build on these efforts. We will:

- Educate the public, elected city officials, city staff, chambers of commerce and other business stakeholders about public transit's positive impact on economic development and commerce. Present information that demonstrates the economic benefits and return on investment of local funding for public transit.
- Demonstrate how public transportation can serve cities' growth plans and specific projects. For example, we will continue to work with the City of Kalispell to emphasize the ability of public transportation to aid downtown redevelopment, and with the City of Whitefish to look at ways to aid visitor travel and reduce the need for parking during the summer and winter seasons.
- Explore transit options that focus on workers to increase the pool, improve employee attendance, relieve traffic congestion, and reduce the need for parking. For example, we will continue discussions with the City of Whitefish and area businesses about enhanced commuter service to move workers from Kalispell and Columbia Falls as one way to address their affordable housing concern. Valley-wide options might include express shuttles during peak hours, park-and-rides, van pools or other shared ride services.
- Actively pursue and facilitate city and business community participation in annual and strategic planning efforts; participate in and provide input on cities' planning efforts. For example, we plan to work with the City of Kalispell as they develop their new Transportation Plan, *Move 2040*.
- Meet periodically with city staff and elected officials to address transit-related issues/ideas and identify potential joint projects.

- Attend city council and planning board meetings and participate in discussions relative to new development; provide public comment when appropriate.
- Approach city councils about increased funding for transit.
- Approach businesses and community organizations about sponsorships or other mechanisms to financially support public transportation.

C. Focus on partnering to expand commuter service as the next step toward increased connectivity and integration

We hear repeatedly from stakeholders about the need to connect our communities to ease traffic and parking congestion and support worker mobility, local commerce, access to critical services, access to recreation and opportunities for residents and visitors alike to participate in community life. Commuter service is needed 7 days a week for extended hours to accommodate workers, especially those in the tourism/service industry, and customers.

To that end, we plan to focus on securing partners to develop, fund and implement expanded commuter service between the three cities of Kalispell, Columbia Falls and Whitefish. Potential partners include the cities, Chambers of Commerce, Big Mountain Commercial Association and other business groups, individual businesses, hotels, large employers, the Kalispell Regional Health Care system, FVCC, etc.

D. Build our integrated community brand

Mountain Climber no longer has limited name recognition among the general public. Before our rebranding people used to mistake us for a trucking/transport company, and even many of those who know we provide passenger transportation believe the service is only for older adults and people with disabilities. As a complicating factor, people often did not recognize some of our buses as public transportation as they were “wrapped” with advertising from local businesses. While the advertising has been a good source of local revenue, it came at the expense of our own identification as public transportation and the opportunity to visually promote our services and presence in the community. ***All of that was resolved when we rebranded and wrapped our buses to unmistakably identify who we are to the public.***

Over the past year as we engaged community stakeholders in discussion about the Mountain Climber, it became apparent that not only the concept but the name itself was capturing peoples’ imaginations. It represents a new image and a new way of thinking about transit that is a good fit with the natural beauty of our area, the local economy, and our way of life.

The County Commissioners approved the rebranding, last fiscal year, and we created a new logo and, wrapped the buses. We also changed the name/logo on all our printed materials and website. We developed and implemented a new marketing plan around the Mountain Climber brand. We were able to accomplish this without additional funding.

E. Increase ridership

Although we saw a significant drop in overall ridership over the last two years, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, our ridership is slowly recovering due to the on-demand service we are providing in conjunction with our ride-hailing app.

For FY 2023, our efforts will include the following:

- Continue to address ridership growth as part of Mountain Climber's ongoing focus
- Continue to explore whether we need limited Kalispell fixed route services/stops as needed to maximize convenience and efficiency
- Focus on building partnerships to expand commuter service, especially between the three incorporated cities (see above)
- Develop other partnerships and collaborative efforts to address the growing need for public transportation to access health care and related services (see below)
- Continue offering our service fare free.
 - Research shows that small urban, rural and resort communities benefit the most from systems that do not collect onboard fares, as do those where the percentage of farebox revenue to operating expenses is low. Flathead County matches all of these indicators. Potential benefits include:
 - Increased ridership on fixed routes, which positively impacts federal funding. Research shows ridership increases anywhere from 20%-60% in a matter of months upon implementation. Currently, we are fare free and feel that this has contributed to our recovery from the Covid reduction in ridership.
 - Reduced staff time spent on the collection, counting, depositing and accounting of fares
 - Increased access for riders with low incomes
- Continue to improve customer experience:
 - Promote the Via Mobility app to current and potential riders
 - Update and post/distribute materials in a timely way
 - Make information available in multiple formats, including online and in print, and ensure availability on buses, in shelters and in popular community locations
 - Targeted outreach, adding services that serve younger populations
 - Approaching FVCC about new opportunities for collaboration
- Pursue additional regular features in local media (to build on monthly radio interviews); prioritize marketing strategies because of the TDP process

F. Increase service options for older adults and people with disabilities

- We will also continue to look for creative ways to add or reconfigure our service to make it even more efficient and user friendly.

G. Pursue collaborative partnerships to address the increasing need for transportation related to access to health care and related services

Given the large number of medical rides we provide, in FY 2023, we plan to request the Logan Health Care system (which also includes North Valley Hospital and numerous health care providers), the Dialysis Clinic and other community stakeholders:

1. Participate in a workgroup to identify transit needs related to access to health care and develop options
2. Consider providing and/or jointly pursuing financial support to increase capacity

For example:

- We have developed our on-demand system designed to provide convenient, efficient transportation from housing complexes primarily serving older adults, people with disabilities and others who are transit-dependent to the Logan Health Medical Center and surrounding health care providers.
- ***We have begun a partnership with ASSIST to expand and better coordinate service.***

H. Explore long-range options to expand service within smaller communities and from those communities to the three cities

As noted above the demographics and geography of our smaller communities make it difficult to offer service in a cost-effective way. In the past much of the demand was driven by older adults who needed transportation into Kalispell or one of the other three cities to access health care and related services and to shop or take care of other business outside their home communities. However, since our rebranding we are now seeing more younger people riding the bus to work and school as well. Expanding our on-demand system to include areas outside our three service areas would be beneficial but costly.

I. Explore other funding

Expanding resources is critical to building a public transportation system in the Flathead that supports inclusive engagement in community life, economic development and stability, visitor and worker mobility and effective and efficient traffic management. In addition to the partnerships, and sponsorships described above, we plan to:

- Annually review existing contracts and consider renegotiation of terms where appropriate
- Consider applying for MDT expansion grant funds to support new service priorities
- Research other collaborative efforts around the country to identify those that might be replicated here
- Look for grant opportunities

J. TransADE Matching Fund

TransADE is a funding opportunity provided by MDT. The funds come from a percentage of the tax on rental cars and other rental equipment in the state of Montana. This is an extremely important part of our revenue. Without TransADE and our one mil of county property tax funds we would not be able to provide the required match for our 5311 grant. Our match is as follows:

Operations – 45.89%
Administrative costs – 20%
Bus maintenance – 20%

For FY23 our TransADE allocation will be \$159,206, which is a 28% increase over FY22. Our 5311 allocation is \$919,163 for FY23, which is a 23% increase over FY22.

K. Capital Request Justification

For FY23 we will propose the following capital request for buses from MDT:

Two seventeen seat cutaway shuttle buses.

These two buses will replace two high maintenance buses:

Bus 7704 which will be 10 years old in FY23 and has 178,117 miles. This bus has cost us \$27,238.97 in the last 3 years.

Bus 3801 which will be 11 years old in FY23 and has 204,230 miles. This bus has cost us \$61,362.16 in the last 3 years.

TCP and 5311 Application Attachments

- Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC) member list
- Sample letter to private transportation providers inviting participation in the plan
- TAC and Flathead County Commissioner minutes
- Annual Summary-December 2, 2022
- List of Mountain Climber vehicles
- Public meeting, January 12, 2022 – advertising and minutes
- Sample monthly reports to Flathead County Commissioners
- Mountain Climber brochures and ads
- Affidavits of Public Notice published in Daily Inter Lake