



Mountain Climber

FY 2024 TRANSPORTATION COORDINATION PLAN

Section 1: 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:

Brad Abell, Chair

Randy Brodehl

Pam Holmquist,

- A. The Transportation Advisory Committee reviewed the Plan at a public meeting on February 2, 2023 and gave final approval on February 16, 2023.
- B. The Plan was approved by the Commission at a public meeting on 2/28/ 2023. *Note: 2/02/23 TAC minutes and the 2/28/2023 Commissioner agenda are uploaded to the application website. The minutes of the Commissioners' meeting are available online at [Meeting Minutes :: Flathead County \(mt.gov\)](https://www.flatheadcountymt.gov/MeetingMinutes) .*

Section 2: 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 2024 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, and bi-monthly public reports to the Flathead County Commissioners. 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), Big Mountain Commercial Association (funds the Snow Bus through a private transportation provider), local businesses and the Flathead County Commission. *(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 reviews progress over the past year and sets priorities for the coming year as the foundation for the annual Transportation Coordination Plan. At times members also serve on ad hoc subcommittees to work on specific tasks.

Invitations to the December 20th, 2022, Annual Public Meeting 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. Our Annual Public Meeting has typically been scheduled for December or January. This year due to extreme inclement weather attendance to the meeting was very low. We did however receive numerous phone calls and email responses with useful feedback regarding public transportation in the Flathead Valley. In the future we may consider moving our public meeting to November.

Although there is typically limited general public participation at the TAC meetings, feedback is obtained throughout the year through other forums, meetings and phone calls with private transit providers.

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) — We partner with Flathead County/Area IX AOA in informing seniors about the services that Mountain Climber and the AOA have available.

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

Flathead Industries (FI) — Over past years MT Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS) has contracted 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. We do not currently have a contract due to the fact that we are currently providing “Zero Fare” service. We have continued to provide the same service as when the contract was in place. We may sign another contract in FY24 when we return to charging fares again.

Logan Health —

- 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 ASSIST has a representative on the TAC.

City of Kalispell — The City of Kalispell contributes \$15,000 annually to Mountain Climber to support public transportation.

City of Whitefish — The City of Whitefish contributes \$9,300 annually to Mountain Climber to support public transportation. A few years ago Whitefish City had worked with Mountain Climber and other stakeholders to create 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, as well as visitor management. Some options include expanded commuter service between the cities, connectivity with the airport and Park & Ride routes/stops. Kevin from the Whitefish Chamber invited Mountain Climber Director to attend the Whitefish Transportation Task Force Meetings over the past year.

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 reinstated full service, five days a week in Columbia Falls. Service was reduced to one day a week service during the pandemic. After one year of reinstated and improved On Demand service the numbers in Columbia Falls have caught up to Whitefish and are almost at full capacity for the one driver.

Flathead Valley Community College (FVCC) — We have had a great working relationship with FVCC over the years and have offered Student Passes in the past when fares were in place. We will be revisiting the Student Pass when we reinstate our fares in FY24. Our new TAC Chair is the Foundation Assistant Director for FVCC and brings with her a transportation background and knowledge.

Elder Hub — We work with the Elder Hub to help create awareness about transportation services provided in the Flathead Valley. We will be presenting on Mountain Climber services in an upcoming monthly meeting for the Elder Hub.

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 had also facilitated a grant that allowed Mountain Climber to provide On-Demand Saturday service during the 2021/2022 ski season in Whitefish.

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.)

- **Entities 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 in the past have provided individual transportation funds or purchase tickets or passes for clients from Mountain Climber. We have been operating a “Zero Fare”

system for about three years, however we plan on reintroducing our fares this next fiscal year. Mountain Climber plans to reinstate the process by which social service agencies can purchase discounted tickets or request scholarship tickets or passes for clients in need. Such agencies include Samaritan House, Community Action Partnership of Northwest Montana, and The Flathead Warming Center and the Veteran's Food Pantry.

- **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.

C. Mountain Climber services and vehicle information

Notes:

- In FY 2021, Mountain Climber provided a total of 68,304 rides. The Covid 19 pandemic had profoundly affected the total rides for FY2021. In FY2022 Mountain Climber provided 75,914 rides which brought us back to within 2500 of pre pandemic numbers. So far in FY23 (7) months in we have provided 42,769 rides.

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. We have been operating our demand response service now for 1 ½ years. 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 55% of the rides are booked through the App which is a 10% increase from a year ago. This service has been largely accepted by Mountain Climber riders and continues to grow in ridership. We are continually signing up new riders on a daily basis, filling their transportation needs to get them to work, school, medical appointments and shopping.
- **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 returning from both cities 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. Since the pandemic there has been no charge for rides however our plan is to reintroduce fares in FY2024.

- **S.P.A.R.K. Route:** S.P.A.R.K. is an afterschool program for elementary school children operated by The Summit 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 FY2021 total rides were 7,487 and in FY2022 total rides were 10,285.

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 steadily been increasing since numbers dropped during the pandemic.

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 had allowed us to perform much needed maintenance and repairs to our fleet.

Mountain Climber's ridership has grown over the last two decades and customers who have access to and use the service are generally satisfied. However, due to the population influx our ability to fulfill requested rides is starting to become an issue. 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

Development of internal planning documents

- Flathead County Public Transportation Director's bimonthly 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, Kalispell, and Columbia Falls
- Distribution of flyers/invitations
 - On all Mountain Climber buses/ handed out by drivers
 - Large display at the AOA/Kalispell Senior Center
 - Emails/handouts to all AOA Advisory Council Members, Whitefish Community Center, Columbia Falls Senior Center, the Transportation Advisory Committee, and other stakeholders
 - App notifications, tabling at FVCC

1. Public Input

- 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 02/28/2023 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), however we have continued to place a full page ad in the Daily Interlake Know Your Community yearly publication
 - 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 app.

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: mtnclimber.org

Outreach to Private Transportation Providers

Letters were sent to each company below inviting them to participate in the Transportation Coordination Plan and attend bi-monthly TAC meetings. 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.
- Mountain Shuttle
- RockNrides406: opens at 4PM daily.
- Kalispell Taxi

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.
- North Start Transport

C. Identifying Service Delivery Challenges, Unmet Needs and Opportunities for Improvement or Growth

Mountain Climber has made significant changes over the last three 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, however 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 and providing service where 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 a challenge 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 ADA accessible services, 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, however 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 in our Demand Response service over the past year and it has proven to be very successful in meeting the need.

- 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

Ridership in Whitefish has been increasing over the past couple of years and was making it difficult for our single driver to keep up and still provide satisfactory service. We added a driver to whitefish during summer 2022. Adding the second driver will help us keep up with the increase in ridership as well as the increasingly challenging traffic issues.

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 8,492 (2021) residents. Whitefish stakeholders are concerned primarily with, 1) managing traffic/parking/access to points of interest during the peak

seasons, 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, and 3) Transportation to and from the airport. In the future we plan to revisit 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 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 were also available during regular service hours for half of last year until Columbia Falls reached a consistently higher number of riders, not leaving time to travel between the two cities. Most riders are older adults, however in the past several months we are transporting younger individuals as well as students. With the on demand service versus the previous paratransit service we are able to serve all who need the ride rather than seniors and those with disabilities only. The service grew from 866 rides the entire first quarter we reinstated 5 day a week service in January of 2022 to 1713 rides during summer quarter 2022. In a short time we have more than doubled our ridership and are now at max capacity for the one driver at least three days a week. We are now evaluating the feasibility of putting a second driver in Columbia falls for at least part of the day.

The Columbia Falls area Chamber of Commerce promotes the city and surrounding communities as the "Gateway to Glacier National Park." With 5,545 (2021) 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 is a much needed service. A commuter between the three cities would aid worker and visitor mobility and support economic development as well as facilitate frequent requests for medical and student rides.

- Demand/Response service and days/hours of service are limited while demand is increasing. Everyday we are signing up new riders.

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

The demand for specialized transit continues to increase across Flathead County due primarily to the aging of the population (see below) and population growth in the valley. Increased demand without a corresponding increase in resources will likely result in further service limitations. On any given day we could be at maximum capacity by 10:00 a.m. if not even a day or two in advance in many cases.

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, enhance visitor experience and in doing so support economic development.*** We have seen an increasing need to get elderly, disabled as well as general public transit dependent riders between the cities for doctor appointments, work and college. It has become evident that we need to put intercity connecting routes as a priority for expanded service.
- Mountain Climber will still be looking for ways to increase and improve service in the most densely populated areas of Flathead County.
- Interest is frequently expressed for affordable, readily available connectivity to the airport, train stations and Glacier National Park.

2. Vehicles and Maintenance

- **Progress had been made on replacing an aging fleet until the news of continued bus shortages across the country. Buses we ordered two years ago will not be made available for another 3 – 5 years. Vans that we have had on order for almost 2 years have still yet to be delivered. Maintenance continues to be a costly component of operations.** Of the 18 vehicles we have available to run on a daily basis, six are more than 10 years old and one has over 295,000 miles. Three have 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 FY2022 we spent nearly \$107,000 on bus maintenance.

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. We are now up to 55% of our daily rides are booked through the app and require no dispatch assistance.

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 couple of years 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.
- 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.**

Section 4: Setting Priorities and Developing Strategies for the Future

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

A. Engage in ongoing strategic visioning and planning

- The Flathead Valley was the second fastest growing area in Montana and the third fastest growing area of its size in the nation until **“In new data released by the U.S. Census Bureau on March 24, Kalispell, Montana was named the new fastest-growing micropolitan area in America. Mar 29, 2022”** 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 require 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 over the past couple of years 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 couple of years 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 plan 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. We will work with the City of Columbia Falls demonstrating the importance of public transportation within the city as well as possible future reintroduction of intercity connecting routes.
- 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 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, attend FVCC, 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. Increasingly this is our most frequently asked question, do we provide transportation between the three cities.

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 Logan Health Care system, FVCC, etc. We will be exploring a Pilot Program that will meet the intercity connectivity needs in Flathead Valley.

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. Even many of those who we provided service to believed the service was 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 had 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, two years ago, 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 two years during the pandemic, our ridership has been steadily recovering due to the on-demand service we are providing in conjunction with our ride-hailing app.

For FY 2024, our efforts will include the following:

- Continue to address ridership growth and demand as part of Mountain Climber's ongoing focus
- 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)
- Reintroduce fares creating more value to the service we are providing while gaining more availability and improving rider accountability. Increased ridership on fixed commuter routes between cities, which positively impacts federal funding.
- Continue to improve customer experience:
 - Promote the Via Mobility app to current and potential riders
 - 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 TCP 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 for riders with disabilities.

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 2024, we plan to request that Logan Health Care system (which also includes Logan 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

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

TCP and 5311 Application Attachments

- Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC) member list
- Letters to private transportation providers inviting participation
- TAC and Flathead County Commissioner minutes
- Annual Summary-December 2, 2022
- List of Mountain Climber vehicles
- Public meeting, December 20th, 2022 — advertising and minutes
- Sample monthly report to Flathead County Commissioners
- Mountain Climber brochures and ads
- Affidavits of Public Notice published in Daily Inter Lake

