Ozaukee County Shared-Ride Taxi

Summary:

What has started out as a transportation program for the elderly and disabled persons has expanded into the Ozaukee County Shared-Ride Taxi program. The Ozaukee County Shared-Ride Taxi serves riders of all ages throughout the county. The county is divided into 6 zones, and depending on the zone, the ride cost could vary from $2.75 to $6.50 per trip for adults, from $2.50 to $5.75 for students, and from $2.25 to $5.25 for seniors/disabled (children ages 5 and under, accompanied by an adult are free). One could use the services as many times as necessary, and the only limitation posed is the number of bags a rider could bring into the vehicle. Since the inception of the program in 1998, ridership has increased especially among the employed. Due to the popularity of the program, it is currently in the process of expanding its operation hours.

Description:

The Wisconsin state statute 85.21 provides funding to all counties for specialized transportation for the elderly and disabled. In addition, the Older American Act provides federal dollars that can be used for elderly transportation.

In the 1970s, Ozaukee County had a program only for the elderly and disabled. This program was funded with both state and local dollars. The services were contracted out to two agencies: one agency was responsible for volunteer drivers, and another agency was responsible for providing the wheelchair accessible vans. The county took over the program in 1983 (meaning the services were no longer contracted out to other agencies). The program consisted of 6 vehicles: 3 sedans and 3 wheelchair accessible vans.

The program “enhanced both the elderly and disabled persons’ ability to stay independent.” However, rides were not provided to residents of nursing homes. The program allowed 3 roundtrips per week, or 6 one-way trips Mondays through Fridays, from 7:45 a.m. to 5 p.m. Due to the limited number of trips allowed and operating hours, riders mainly used the services for attending medical appointments.

As one of the first programs, the Elderly and Disabled Transportation Program provided transportation services to senior citizens and the disabled to anywhere within Ozaukee County. (A senior citizen is defined as anyone over the age of 60 years old.) Rides were provided within a mile of the county line for work purposes and farther outside the county for medical services that were not available in the county. Back in the 1970s,
riders were even allowed to go to Northridge Shopping (located outside of the county) center for shopping and errands.

Needless to say, the program provided senior citizens and the disabled the ability to live without a vehicle and stay independent. Due to the high demand and cost of the transportation services, in November 1993, Ozaukee County requested that the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (SEWRPC) study the possible effects of the program’s expansion and prepare a plan. The demand for services was higher than the county was able to provide. The SEWRPC’s recommendation was to expand the current elderly and disabled transportation program into a shared ride program. The county agreed to expand the program in 1997, and thus, the Ozaukee County Shared-Ride Taxi program was implemented in January 1998. The Planning Transit Committee, the Department of Transportation, and the County Board were involved in the project.

The official name of the program is “Ozaukee County Shared-Ride Taxi” which is currently under the Ozaukee County Transit Services. The program originated in the Ozaukee County Aging Services Department. The program was moved to the Transit Services in January 2003.

The Shared-Ride Taxi Program started on January 1, 1998, and at the time, there were nine vehicles in operation. In July 1998 the out of county transit services were also contracted with a private provider. In the transition, there was never a lapse in service. In addition to the funding provided by State statute 85.21 (for the elderly and disabled), and other state and federal dollars, money provided by federal Section 5311 was also used to purchase vehicles. Funding from State statute 85.20, which provides state funding for mass transit, was also used for the program. Through federal Section 5311, 80% of the vehicle costs were paid for by federal funds.

There are 18 vehicles in the fleet, with 13 on the road with 4 ADA accessible. Currently, there are 17 county owned vehicles and 1 owned by the service provider (G & G Enterprises). As of August 2003, the one vehicle owned by the service provider will no longer be utilized, and thus the fleet will be completely owned by the county. G & G Enterprises received the first 5-year contract to provide services in the county. There are cost savings to go with a private contractor. As of January 1, 2003, the contractor provides drivers and dispatch, and county fuels the vehicles and maintains them. Some of the vehicles are spares, and 13 vehicles are used to operate the program. On the
application to the state (WISDOT) for funding purposes, it was written that 13 vehicles were to be used to run the program in the county. (The application is submitted on a yearly basis.)

If the state decreases the state reimbursements, the county has two options: 1) county could increase its budget, or 2) the county could cut back on the level of service. The state/federal funding is possible through the Congestion Mitigation Air Quality (CMAQ) Improvement Program and Federal Transit Administration (FTA), and the state’s 85.20 statute for mass transit and state statute 85.21 providing services for the elderly and the disabled.

The Ozaukee County Shared-Ride Taxi serves the whole county, curb-to-curb. The county is divided into six zones, and depending on the number of zones traveled, fares vary. The one-way trip fares are as follows:

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Within 1 zone</th>
<th>Within 2 zones</th>
<th>Within 3 zones</th>
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<tr>
<td>Adults</td>
<td>$2.75</td>
<td>$3.75</td>
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<td>Students</td>
<td>$2.50</td>
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<td>$4.50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Seniors/Disabled</td>
<td>$2.25</td>
<td>$3.25</td>
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Frequent riders could purchase prepaid punch cards for $20 per card/piece, which has a value of $22. The hours of operation are as follows:

Monday – Thursday: 6 a.m. to 6 p.m.
Friday: 6 a.m. to 9 p.m.
Saturday: 8:30 a.m. to 6 p.m.
Sunday: 8 a.m. to 12 p.m.

For those who need special assistance, the Shared-Ride Taxi provides door-to-door service at no extra charge. This service is also available for those who are handicapped and wheelchair bound, with the caveat that the person has to be ready at their door side. Because of insurance issues, this extra service is not available to all riders.

The community was really supportive of the program. There were some concerns expressed by other groups who provided free transportation services. They complained that because their services were free, they were overwhelmed with additional riders. Services provided by groups who do not charge are contingent upon the availability of volunteer drivers.

The county’s main goal is to provide better and more services. It was more of an economic decision to provide additional services.
User Assessment

Customers:

The county notified all elderly citizens, who used the Elderly and Disabled Transportation services, of the implementation of the Shared-Ride Taxi program. In addition to notifying previous users of the Elderly and Disabled Transportation, the general public learned of the new program via extra advertisements and posters around the county. With the implementation of the Shared-Ride Taxi program, services improved and fares decreased for the elderly and disabled. The Shared-Ride Taxi program was open to the general public, which allowed those who were not elderly or disabled to use the services.

The Ozaukee County Shared-Ride Taxi program came about because there was a need. The Ozaukee County Aging Services Department was on the "look out" to help the elderly, and worked with SEWRPC to improve transportation services to the elderly. The senior citizens expressed a need to improve transportation access. In November 1993, the Ozaukee County Board asked the SEWRPC to prepare a transportation plan for public transit. As a result, the recommendation was to expand the existing transportation program for the elderly and disabled.

The "Elderly and Disabled Transportation" Program was one of the first programs provided by the Aging Services Department. The Shared-Ride Taxi program started as an extension of the Elderly and Disabled Transportation Program. When the Shared-Ride Taxi program started in January 1998, the Elderly and Disabled Transportation program changed to providing out-of-county transportation only. In-county transportation is provided through the Shared Ride Taxi Program.

The fares for the Elderly and Disabled Transportation Program are charged according to the distance of travel, from $3.50 for traveling 0-5 miles one way, to $8.00 for 25 miles. The program is mainly utilized by the elderly and disabled who need medical treatments outside of the county.

Agency:

The idea to start a shared-ride taxi program originated from the Aging Services Department. The Aging Services Department was responding to the needs expressed by the elderly and other persons who needed transportation but were not eligible for the program operating at that time. In the summer of 1997, the county asked for RFPs (Request for Proposals) for the implementation of the Shared-Ride Taxi program.

The Aging Services Department and SEWRPC were the major players in the project. The program was moved from the Aging Services Department to the Transit Services on January 1, 2003.
Technology Assessment:

Relative Benefits:

According to those involved in the implementation of the program, “it is a fantastic/great program.” As a result, it provided a boom to the county. The program provided more service to disabled adults and to the average adult majority. It was a battle getting the program implemented because some county board members were not receptive to the idea. Initially, there were complaints about the high cost of the program; the program was averaging $13-15 per trip. State and federal funds picked up 60% of the costs, program fees picked up approximately 15% and the county paid for the rest.

With more medical services available in the county, there are fewer rides provided out of the county to receive certain type of medical services. However, with the shared-ride taxi, the disabled could get jobs, especially, the developmentally disabled. The biggest jump in ridership came from this group, having transportation to and from work. Slowly, more adults are using the program and the biggest use is for work.

As for the advantages of the program, it serves the disadvantaged who do not have their own transportation but need to get around the county, and it’s inexpensive for the riders.

As for the disadvantages of the program, riders are not allowed to bring more than two bags in the taxi. Another disadvantage is time: one could wait up to 45 minutes, and the service ends at 6 p.m. The lack of evening hours is another disadvantage. The program operates until 6 p.m. Monday through Thursday and Saturday, until 9 p.m. on Friday, and until 12 p.m. on Sunday. Because the program does not run around the clock, those who work during the day are at a disadvantage.

Trial process:

The conversion of the program from senior citizens to the shared-ride taxi was easy. The department did experience some problems with phones not working in the few beginning days of the program, but the vehicles were out there. Because the drivers keep track of the number of riders, the county was able to see the results from the project right away.

Some concerns were raised because of the belief that everyone in Ozaukee County has a car. Some of these issues were raised in the papers, and in the beginning of the shared-ride taxi program, there was minimal marketing done. Marketing was not a focus. It was through word of mouth that many riders heard about the shared-ride taxi. However, within the past three years, the focus has changed with more emphasis on marketing. The county took baby steps. The figures of ridership and costs are discussed in a report on a monthly basis.
Observability:

The success of the program was observed through ridership. A couple of months into the program, SEWRPC conducted surveys, where some suggestions were made. Nonetheless, no major changes were made. The department did not hear many complaints from the senior citizens. Aside from a couple of County Supervisors (who were against the program), nothing negative was said about the program.

The demand was high, and the program’s success was observed through the increase in ridership. Program costs increased, but the program was seen as an investment in something helpful to the people.

Complexity:

Some officials from the City of Mequon expressed concerns that it did not need the program because everyone had cars – this has not proved to be the case. Moreover, the reasons for continuing the program: demand, ridership, and expectations.

Ozaukee County’s attitude toward change and innovation was skepticism, because they were taking a small program and opening up to everyone. There were concerns about costs with who was going to pay, and whether if it was really needed. Several Ozaukee County Board members, opposed the program initially. In fact, a couple of County Board members showed opposition well into the first year of program operation.

For the 1998 project year, the county was still trying to see how the program was going. At budget time, there were concerns whether the program would get funded or not. In the fall of 1998, during a discussion for 1999 funding, someone forced the issue by suggesting a resolution to support the program. The county clerk forced the issue, to put an end to the battle. The resolution passed, and its passage provided some calm with the issue of continuing the shared-ride taxi program in the county. The ultimate approval lies with the County Board. Even though Ozaukee County is “slow to embrace change,” the expansion of the shared-ride program has proved to be one change very beneficial and valuable to the county.

Cost:

Currently, the program costs $914,000 annually (which includes grant money and revenues). Capital expenditures vary from year to year due to investments on buying additional vehicles. Out of the $914,000, $110,000 is tax levy from the county.

Consequences of Failure:

Currently, the shared-ride taxi program does not work for some people due to the limited hours of operation. The county is working to expand the hours until 9 p.m., Mondays through Fridays starting in July 2003. The program will receive some funding
via the WETAP program grant. The county has received word that this project has been approved.

In the beginning, there were concerns about ridership not growing, and whether the ridership would become strong enough for the program to continue. Due to the high demand of transportation services by the elderly and disabled and other county residents, there really weren’t any real concerns about the program not working.

**Implementation Issues:**

To implement the same program in another city will depend on the city recognizing the need and accepting the need. It will not be difficult in Wisconsin to implement the same program in another city because the state already provides funding for a portion of this service.

As for dos and don’ts, the implementation of the program was not too difficult for Ozaukee, but there was a big learning curve. The program started out as a small operation earmarked for the elderly, to finding out what other funding was available, to writing RFPs, and to expanding the program into a separate entity. SEWRPC was very helpful, and it is very helpful to rely on someone who knows transit. Originally, dispatch came out of the same office. It has been more successful to have dispatch provided by the contractor.

A lot of the counties have volunteer type transportation services. There are still programs in the county that are free to the riders. For example, Interfaith provides transportation free of charge. However, the service is dependent upon the availability of volunteers. The Ozaukee Family Services also provides free transportation services, but the program is also based on volunteers.

As for other innovations from Aging Services Department, there is the meal program. There are nine meal sites within the county. Participants are expected to donate about $3, and need to make reservations one day before. Walk-ins are accepted only if extra meals are available. Menu changes everyday, and the caterer was recently switched to the Sheriff’s Department (who also prepares food for the jail). The nine meal sites are located as follows: 3 senior centers, 1 church, 2 fire departments, 2 housing units, and 1 American Legion. Some seniors complain that due to lack of their own transportation, they have to take the taxi to get to one of the meal centers. With the costs of the taxi and having to donate for the food, some complain that the trip and the meal could get expensive. Some do not participate in the meal program because they cannot afford to go. The department is looking for ways to provide transportation to the meal sites, so that it is not a burden for senior citizens to participate.

Ozaukee and Washington counties started the shared-ride program at the same time. Several municipalities Waukesha County have their own services. The City of Port Washington’s program has been operating longer than the Ozaukee County Shared-Ride Taxi program. The transportation services provided by the City of Port
Washington and the County of Ozaukee are not duplicated. In other words, the transportation services provided by Ozaukee County extends into the City of Port Washington if the rider is leaving the city, but the services provided by the City of Port Washington only extends 2 miles beyond city limits.

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