Round-the-Mitten Transit Tour



1,600+ Miles • 17 Communities • 14 Days
100+ Discussions • 50+ Transit Rides

Experiences and recommendations from traveling around Michigan, using only public transit

Transportation Riders United

ROUND THE MITTEN
2026
TRANSIT TOUR

Information

Transportation Riders United is a Detroit-based nonprofit organization with over 25 years of transit advocacy experience. TRU believes everyone should be able to get where they need to go, regardless of whether they drive. TRU educates, advocates, and mobilizes for more and better public transit and other affordable, sustainable mobility options throughout the Detroit region.

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This report was compiled with the best and most recent publicly available information as of November 2026. While TRU has made every effort at accuracy, we cannot guarantee the information is totally accurate. Please contact us with questions and corrections.

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Executive Summary

In June 2026, Transportation Riders United (TRU) undertook the Round-the-Mitten Transit Tour, a 14-day, 1,600-mile journey across 17 communities in Michigan's lower and upper peninsulas using (almost) only public transportation. Utilizing intercity bus, Amtrak train, local bus, on-demand transit, ferry, and bike (plus a few shared car rides when no other options existed), the tour evaluated Michigan's transit network firsthand across more than 20 local and intercity providers. Timed as the Michigan Department of Transportation's (MDOT) prepared its Michigan Mobility 2050 long-range plan and as Michigan selected new state leadership, TRU also hosted 8 community conversations with over 100 residents to gather direct feedback from all across the state on Michigan's mobility challenges and opportunities.

Over 7% of Michigan households lack access to a personal vehicle, with another 8–10% having fewer adults than vehicles, figures projected to grow alongside the state's aging population. This tour made it clear that service remains too infrequent, disconnected, and underfunded to meet resident needs and that Michiganders throughout the state want better.

Key Findings

- **Infrequent and Inconvenient Intercity Schedules**: Outside of the I-94 corridor, most intercity bus and rail lines operate only once daily. Departures frequently occur at impractical hours—such as 6:00 AM trains out of Port Huron and Grand Rapids or midnight departures from Marquette. Furthermore, Amtrak schedules prioritize Chicago travelers rather than convenient in-state trips.
- **Disconnected Regional and First/Last-Mile Networks**: Residents across both urban centers and Upper Peninsula towns expressed a strong desire for better connections between neighboring communities. Intercity stops often lack shelters or sidewalks, and local transit systems frequently close before intercity buses or trains arrive.
- **Unreliable Rail Service and Missing Contingencies**: Weather and freight interference routinely delay Amtrak service. When severe weather canceled a morning train in Grand Rapids during the tour, no replacement bus service was provided, leaving vulnerable passengers stranded—including seniors and other non-drivers.
- **Demand for Safe, Walkable Streets**: Across community conversations, seniors recalled walking on far safer streets in decades past, while younger residents and parents want walking and biking to be safer in their communities.
- **Funding and Structural Barriers**: Most residents believe that MDOT's $8 billion annual budget overly prioritizes road repaving and shortchanges public transit. At the local level, state laws and municipal "opt-out" patchworks restrict several agencies to single-city tax bases, stifling regional expansion.

Documented Local Innovations

Despite systemic constraints, TRU documented several successful transit modernizations across Michigan that serve as models for statewide replication:

- **Clean and Green Fleets**: Agencies including SMART, Flint MTA, Grand Rapids' TheRapid, Lansing's CATA, and Port Huron's BWATA are leading the transition to zero- and low-emission fleets utilizing hydrogen, electric batteries, and compressed or renewable natural gas (CNG).
- **Modern Rider Technology**: Providers are improving accessibility and convenience through credit card tap-to-pay fare systems, real-time vehicle tracking, and automated Q'STRAINT wheelchair securement systems.
- **Community and Regional Integration**: Traverse City's BATA coordinates its free Bay-Line route to meet incoming intercity buses, Saginaw is redeveloping its historic train station into a mixed-use hub featuring housing

and childcare, and tourist circulator trolleys in Port Huron and St. Joseph/Benton Harbor have successfully built ridership in car-centric communities.

Summary of Recommendations

To build an affordable, reliable, and accessible statewide transit network that works for everyone, TRU urges bold and swift actions by state lawmakers, MDOT, and local transit agencies:

1. **Increase and Modernize Transit Funding**: Double the Comprehensive Transportation Fund (CTF), restore Local Bus Operating (LBO) funding to cover 50% of agency operating costs, encourage countywide transit millages statewide, and establish a dedicated MDOT initiative to build regional connections between neighboring cities.
2. **Double Intercity Frequencies and Improve Northern Schedules**: Double Amtrak and intercity bus frequencies statewide, launch a six-times-daily coast-to-coast express bus connecting Detroit, Lansing, and Grand Rapids, accelerate Detroit–Grand Rapids and North–South passenger rail studies, and overhaul Northern Michigan intercity bus timetables so transfers occur during daylight hours.
3. **Invigorate State-Supported Amtrak Service**: Enforce reliability and emergency contingency standards on Amtrak, add daily Kalamazoo–Pontiac roundtrips, and redesign timetables to prioritize travel within Michigan rather than solely to Chicago.
4. **Galvanize Local and Rural Transit**: Establish a statewide goal of 15-minute bus frequency in every Michigan city, expand seven-day-a-week rural dial-a-ride service with extended hours in every county, and grow ridership through unified marketing (such as West Michigan Rides), free youth fares, and expanded medical transit.
5. **Standardize Infrastructure and Walkable Development**: Tie state funding to minimum stop standards (shelters, seating, and unified statewide branding), standardize tap-to-pay fare technology across agencies, and promote mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly development around transit hubs in communities of all sizes.



Why a Transit Tour?

For twenty five years, Transportation Riders United (TRU) advocated for better transit in Southeast Michigan. We worked with riders and stakeholders to find opportunities for our agencies to improve. Yet today more than ever, the decisions impacting our transit agencies - and those across the entire state - are happening at the state government level. TRU has long worked with a few groups around the state but in 2025-26, it became increasingly clear that we need to expand our transit experience and relationships to be truly statewide.

TRU's Round-the-Mitten Transit Tour was inspired in part by an effort in 2012 by the **Trans4M Transportation Reform Coalition**, which they called the Michigan Transportation Odyssey.[1] That "Odyssey" began as a thought experiment posed by Dave Bulkowski, Executive Director at **Disability Advocates of Kent County** (DAKC), who postulated how difficult it would be to get from Grand Rapids and Detroit to the Sleeping Bear Dunes, entirely via public transportation. DAKC, the **Michigan Environmental Council** (MEC), and other Trans4M groups traveled around a good portion of the state, documenting their experience and speaking with riders. The first Michigan Transportation Odyssey would happen in 2012; two more would follow in 2013[2] and 2014.[3]

> **"Yet today more than ever, the decisions impacting our transit agencies - and those across the entire state - are happening at the state government level.**



> **"We need to expand our transit experience and relationships to be truly statewide.**

Unfortunately, Michigan's cross-state transportation options have not significantly improved since the Transportation Odysseys. TRU and the newly formed **Move Michigan Transportation Alliance** (Move MI) have refocused once again on the challenges Michiganders face travelling across and around our state. While groups involved in Move MI strongly agree that Michiganders need better ways to travel the state, most coalition members represented metro areas and southern Michigan. We wanted to know if interest in cross-state transit was consistent throughout the state. TRU also wanted firsthand experience with our existing



transportation network and opportunities to talk with folks all around the state about what they wanted to see when it came to changes and improvements in transit.

This idea became viable when TRU was awarded MEC's ECO Innovation Prize.[4] The **McKnight Foundation** also provided critical support to hold community conversations with people throughout the breadth of Michigan, to develop a shared vision of the transportation our state needs. TRU was then able to bring on a Michigan Healthy Climate Fellow, Michael Goldman Brown Jr., to plan and lead the trip, through a program/grant offered through the **Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy** and the **Community Economic Development Association of Michigan** (CEDAM). Thank you to all the donors that made this trip possible. Everyone should be able to get where they need to go, regardless of whether they drive. The fact that this is not the case today poses a major challenge for equity and inclusion in our state. The mobility of hundreds of thousands of Michiganders with disabilities is extremely limited, sometimes non-existent, when trying to travel outside of major cities, and even within our metropolises, there are major challenges. Additionally, more than 7% of Michigan households don't have cars.[5] This number will only grow as the percentage of seniors living in Michigan continues rising, the number of young people obtaining their driver's licenses continues declining, and average car prices continue to increase.

Why connecting Michigan's communities matter

On top of those reasons, all Michiganders have a better transportation experience when everyone doesn't have to rely on cars to get from place to place. Not only are personal vehicles one of the highest contributors of emissions within Michigan,[6] but they contribute to a series of indirect effects that make our air and water less healthy and our urban spaces less pleasant. Personal vehicle dependence leads to increased construction of parking (often at the expense of existing buildings and green spaces), and costly roadway widening projects. Additionally, it encourages dangerous behaviors that can lead to crashes, particularly driving





when one is uncomfortable, unfit, or unfocused; and feels that they don't have an alternative to their personal vehicle.

In Metro Detroit, TRU has seen acutely what problems exist when transit connections are solely local, not regional; folks are restricted in where they can find employment, visit loved ones, access medical care, and participate in activities that provide great quality of life. Across the entire state, but particularly in rural Michigan, the idea that residents have to restrict a number of trips to certain destinations; visiting friends/family, medical appointments, shopping areas/districts due to them feeling that their only viable option was driving was raised multiple times. It was disheartening to hear some of these issues echoed throughout the state, particularly where transit networks face major gaps due to opt-out communities. A lack of regionality in our transit connections hurts Michigan's economy, our desirability as a place to live, and most importantly, our residents.

How the Tour Worked

Traveling the state entirely via public transit is possible, but quite a challenging matter. While our intercity bus connections are reasonably frequent along the I-94 corridor (with more than six buses traveling in each direction daily), the rest of our intrastate intercity bus routes run less than two times per day in each direction.

> **“Traveling the state entirely via public transit is possible, but quite a challenging matter.**

With this in mind, we began planning our route around the state. Initially, we planned on a journey with 6 stops: Detroit, Ann Arbor, Lansing, Kalamazoo, Grand Rapids, and maybe Traverse City to hit Up North. However, this trip grew into the 17 city odyssey as we slowly explored what was possible with our bus network, and aimed to visit as many places as possible.

We used a 24 hour itinerary on a spreadsheet to keep track of bus departures and arrival times. We researched the frequency and bus schedules of intercity buses and trains in the state, even making a map to act as a rough guideline and reference. Then, we began “blocking” out easier sections and identifying chokepoints where we only had one time a day where we could travel. In general, everything south of Grand Rapids-Lansing-Bay City had multiple options, but all travel Up North represented a major issue: Since each north-south bus route is once a day, any stop Up North required an overnight stay.

Our stops were decided based on a few factors. Each stop needed to have a hotel and food options accessible by transit or walking. Even downstate, there were still some difficulties fulfilling this requirement (for example, we planned to take the train from Battle Creek to East Lansing, but **CATA**

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	
dates option 3	***Wed 6/3***	***Thrs 6/4***	***Fri 6/5***	***Sat 6/6***	***Sun 6/7***	***Mon 6/8***	***Tues 6/9***	***Wed 6/10***	***Thu 6/11***	***Fri 6/12***	***Sat 6/13***	
	MO, MB, P	*MO, MB, P*	*MB, P*	*MB, P*	*MB, P*	*MB, P, Z*	*MB, P, Z*	*MB, P, Z*	*MO, MB, P, Z*	*P, MB, MO*	*P, MB*	*P,*
Times	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	*Day 6*	Day 7	Day 8	Day 9	Day 10	Day 11	
City	Port Huron	Flint/ Saginaw	Bay City*	Alpena	Petoskey / Charlevoix	Mackinac Is.*	Marquette	Traverse City	Grand Rapids	*Benton Harbor^*	Kalamazoo	B
5:00 AM		Uber to Train Station					5:15, Indian Trails Arrives					
6:00 AM		6:20, Amtrak PH to Flint					*6:46am, take MarqTran Marquette Mall to Downtown*	6:50, Indian Trails Arrives		*6:00, Amtrak Departs Grand Rapids*		
7:00 AM	7:29, SMART 561 FAST from Larned & Griswold to 23 Mile & Gratiot	7:30, Amtrak to Flint Arrives			7:15, Indian Trails departs Mackinac City for Petoskey		*(nap in hotel!)*	7:00, Indian Trails Departs St. Ignace for Traverse City				
8:00 AM	8:26, SMART 561 FAST Arrives	MTA Route 10 to Downtown, requires advanced call, at either 7:45am or 8:15am			8:30, arrive in Petoskey					*8:09, Amtrak Arrives in St Joseph*		
9:00 AM	9:10, Blue Water Area Transit from 23 Mile & Gratiot to Downtown Port Huron	Transit tour??		(chill)		ferry boat to Mack Island			bike trail?	TCATA Red or dial-a-ride to destination?		
10:00 AM	9:55, Blue Water Area Transit Arrives		10 (or 11)am Saginaw Area Transit Route 9 From Stars Plaza to SVSU	*Alpena DART to event, runs 9am to 5pm*				10:15, Indian Trails Arrives in Traverse City				10 Fr Ka to
	(go to, drop off		10:55, Bay City Metro Bus from SVSU to Bay City Central	**Public brunch**				(check in to	11:45, Indian Trails from TC to Grand Rapids	*(Z leaves from*	**Kalamazoo community**	10

A screenshot of the spreadsheet TRU used to plan the transit tour. It was quite complicated!



The East Lansing train station. CATA does not serve this station when the train arrives.[28]



does not serve the East Lansing train station when the train arrives. Thankfully, there is a hotel a 15 minute walk away from the station). Not every hotel had to be downtown; in Saginaw, there are no downtown hotels, but we were able to leave/arrive around the bus schedule. And in Alpena, our hotel was downtown, but we were able to use dial-a-ride service to reach the suburban bus stop. Big cities were automatically included, but for smaller cities, we based stops on where our partners were that we could host meetings with. This resulted in some further out stops being added, including Marquette. A few were added for convenience as well. While we had no events in Mackinaw City or St. Ignace, we wanted to highlight the Mackinac Island ferries, and given Mackinaw's location as a transfer point between the Up North bus routes, it made sense to stop in and recuperate for a break between the Bay Region, Traverse City, and the Upper Peninsula.

Calling transit agencies to verify their travel policies was essential to our planning process. In Alpena, we had to verify that the dial-a-ride operated when we left, and that it was open to non-residents (which it is!). We also occasionally relied on some favors from smaller agencies, including receiving an out of hours ride in Marquette.

Once we had the bulk of our schedule pinned down, we added a few day trips and small detours in between, including Benton Harbor, Battle Creek, Marquette and Port Huron. Only one stop was cut, being Mount Pleasant, which would have required us to circle back Up North as we wanted to hit the Upper Peninsula. With our schedule done, all we had to do was book our tickets and hotels. Then, it was off on our transit tour!

Michigan's Current Statewide Public Transportation Network



Where TRU Went on the Round-the-Mitten Transit Tour



Experiencing Transit Across the State

Port Huron (June 3)

The Tour started in Detroit, where we rode **SMART's FAST Gratiot** bus from downtown Detroit to 23 Mile & Gratiot in Chesterfield, then transferred to the **Blue Water Area Transit** (BWAT) regional **I-94 express route** (a rush-hour service between Port Huron and Chesterfield Twp.), with the driver dropping us right at our hotel. In Port Huron, we joined transit advocate, Blue Water Transit bus driver, and union president Tyler Moldovan for a lecture on urban renewal given by Jim Soto, Professor of Philosophy and English at St. Clair County Community College.

Afterwards, we rode the **Blue Water Trolley**, a 10-cent bus that loops around the city with historical narration, and toured Blue Water Transit's facilities with their director, Dave McElroy and community and labor relations manager, Lee-Perry Belleau. On our tour, we learned that Port Huron has had their 80-cent bus fare since the 1970s and has run a diesel-free fleet since the 1990s, with all buses powered by Compressed Natural Gas produced onsite at the bus garage, which insulates the agency from fuel-price swings and even generates revenue from surplus CNG sales.

> **"Port Huron has had their 80-cent bus fare since the 1970s and has run a diesel-free fleet since the 1990s.**

The day closed with a Community Conversation at the St. Clair County Library, where 15 area residents shared their experiences getting around Port Huron and the state. At our community conversation, residents expressed their desire for more transit, with a particular focus on expanded connections to Metro Detroit outside of rush hour, and expanded local service. Many attendees were affiliated with **Port Huron Urbanists**,[7] a group ran by Tyler Moldovan, and kept the conversation going over dinner.



Port Huron's Blue Water Trolley, a popular tourist trolley operated by BWAT.



The Port Huron Amtrak Station. The once a day train leaves at 6am, and arrives after 11pm.



The crowd at our Port Huron community conversation, held with Port Huron Urbanists.

The next morning (June 4), we had an **Amtrak Blue Water** train to Flint. Port Huron is served by only one round trip a day, and the only train westbound departs at 6:20am. To get to the station, we had to request a BWAT dial-a-ride pickup, which they told us would pick us up between 5-5:20am. After a 4:30 am wake-up, we had to scramble to catch the dial-a-ride when it arrived at 5:05 am, and arrived with a long time to spare before our train. To our surprise, the small station was packed, including seniors visiting family in Milwaukee, a girls'-weekend group bound for Chicago, Pokemon fans visiting Chicago, and Mennonite families.



A large crowd boards Flint's once a day train towards Chicago. These trains are often fully sold out, even though it arrives in Flint at 7am!

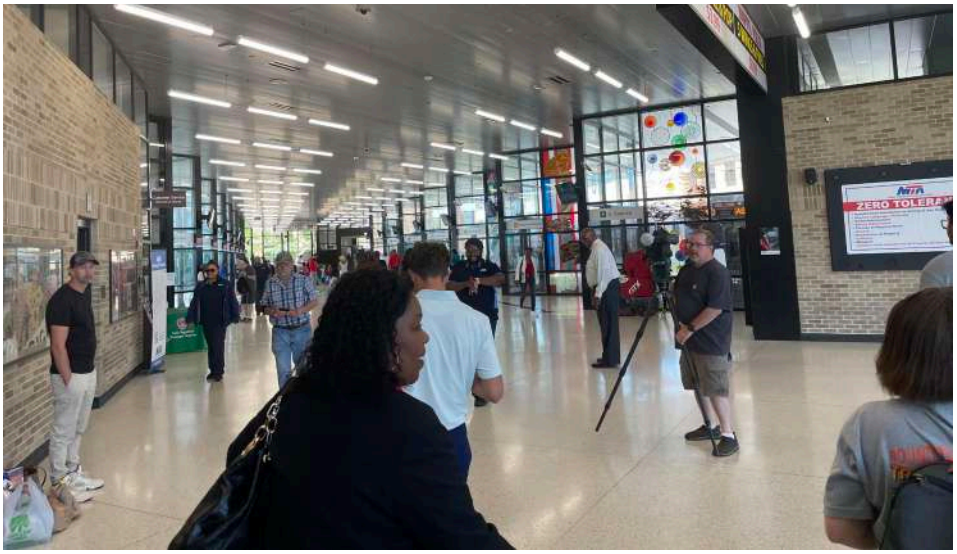
Flint (June 4)

After a short hour-long train, we arrived in Flint to a packed station, as dozens of people boarded for travel further west. In Flint, we toured the **Mass Transit Authority of Flint** (MTA) headquarters and facilities, meeting with staff. The agency shared a lot of innovations and other strengths they were proud of, including:

- Having no outsourced employees (even for its forthcoming Flex-type service),
- Using reloadable tap-to-pay fare cards like in Chicago,
- Running employer-funded but public regional routes to Great Lakes Crossing, Brighton, and Howell,
- Operating an entirely diesel-free fleet mixing hydrogen, CNG, and electric buses,
- A beautiful downtown transfer hub featuring stained-glass labor history



TRU and MTA staff pose in front of an MTA hydrogen bus and trolley bus.



MTA Flint's beautiful downtown transfer hub, full of passegners.

art and food options,
- And their 30+ institutional partnerships, which continue to grow.

While meeting with the MTA staff, two local news stations came out to interview us about our experience on the tour so far. Thank you to Mid-Michigan Now[8] and ABC 12[9] for sharing our experiences with your viewers.

Over lunch with Andrew Watchorn of **Strong Towns Flint's transit committee**,[10] we discussed ideas like a direct **Detroit–Ann Arbor**-style bus between Flint and Detroit and adding Genesee County to the **Regional Transit Authority of Southeast Michigan** (RTA),[11] plus interest in a similar connection for Port Huron–Detroit. Our time in Flint ended with an MTA bus trip from downtown to the Amtrak and intercity bus station.[12]

TRU Director Megan Owens returned back to Detroit after our visit in Flint, traveling on **MTA's hourly regional route to Great Lake Crossing**, then **SMART's FAST Woodward** bus back home for other obligations. Local express transit links like this between metropolitan areas are uncommon but crucial.

The rest of our team boarded a local bus back to Flint's Amtrak and **Indian Trails** bus station (which is right next to MTA's headquarters). This stop is a request-only deviation, but drivers understand and it is popular at times for the buses and trains. After our morning and afternoon in Flint, it was off to Saginaw!



Our Saginaw community conversation.



Megan interviewed by ABC 12 about the Transit Tour.



Saginaw (June 4-5)

From Flint, the rest of Team TRU continued to Saginaw via a fast, new Indian Trails bus; a 50-minute trip which unfortunately runs just once a day in the afternoon. In Saginaw, we met **Saginaw Transit Authority and Regional Services** (STARS)'s leadership and held a Community Conversation with their staff, including Executive Director Amy Bidwell and Director of External Affairs Jamie Forbes, **Disability Network of Mid-Michigan Community** Services Director Terri Robis,[13] a STARS rider, and STARS board members.

We learned that Saginaw's population has dropped 50% in 50 years, that STARS (unlike countywide-funded SMART or BWAT) is funded only by Saginaw City, and that they're working towards debit-card payment, a regional Flint connection, and a transit master plan. Currently, STARS offers a Bay City regional connection via Saginaw Valley State University (SVSU). STARS also have a new route-specific icon symbology, which helps riders identify and remember routes. Afterwards, we visited Saginaw's historic Potter St. train station, which STARS, the city, and local advocates

hope to preserve as part of a mixed-use redevelopment with expanded STARS facilities, a daycare, apartments, and a new transfer hub. In the longer-term, there was hope that MDOT's Corridor ID study could extend the ***Wolverine*** train north to Flint and Saginaw. Then, it was off to a suburban hotel for a much needed night of rest.

On the morning of June 5th, we did a radio interview with Jason 'Bear' Adams of Saginaw's 98-KCQ country station about our experiences on the trip so far. Afterwards, we rode a STARS bus out to SVSU, and transferred to a **Bay Metro** bus to Bay City.

Bay City (June 5)

The trip from Saginaw to Bay City was very simple. Thankfully, since each of these routes runs multiple times a day, and they have a designated transfer stop on SVSU's campus, riders have multiple options and are not stranded if one bus is canceled.

Unfortunately, our team encountered our first major hurdle in Bay City. One of our team members had a medical situation that required urgent care. The nearest urgent care facility was two miles away, too far to walk. As in many smaller communities we visited, Bay City does not have Uber or Lyft. The traditional taxi company could not pick us up for another 2.5 hours. Thankfully the bus was able to save us, taking our ill team member to the hospital with only a 30 minute wait. This experience spotlighted a serious issue transit riders across Michigan face all the time. How do you get to the doctor without a car when no one can drive you and an ambulance is unnecessary? This is something Michigan needs to improve on

After this medical emergency, the remainder of our team held a stakeholder roundtable with the Disability Network of Mid-Michigan once again. Once this meeting was over, it was back to Bay Metro's downtown transfer hub, where Indian Trails buses make their stop in Bay City. This also marks the beginning of our "Up North" leg, where most cities have only a once a day Indian Trails bus to get between them.[14]



Bay City's busy downtown transfer hub.

> **"How do you get to the doctor without a car if no one can drive you and an ambulance is unnecessary?**

Alpena (June 5-6)

The bus from Bay City had a 15-minute Burger King food stop built into it, a common site on long distance bus routes across the country. Upon arrival in Alpena, we watched other passengers get picked up by family at the Alpena stop. Alpena's Indian Trails bus stop is 2.5 miles out of town. Therefore, we boarded a pre-arranged Dial-A-Ride from **Thunder Bay Transportation Authority** (TBTA), whose driver had volunteered for this trip outside normal operating hours. Alpena's Indian Trails bus stop could leave much to be desired, as it has no shelter, bench, sign, or pavement markings to indicate that it is a bus stop.[15]

The next day (June 6), we met TBTA Mobility Manager Brandi Anderson for a wide-ranging discussion on rural transportation. This included non-emergency medical transportation (NEMT) and social-service transportation, service gaps for veterans, and ideas for nontraditional transit outreach. Afterwards, we toured TBTA's facilities and talked with dispatch about how they coordinate service.

That evening, a TBTA dial-a-ride picked us up at our hotel and dropped us off back at the Indian Trails "bus stop". Once again, this trip was outside normal service hours, but at least our group only had a 30 minute wait at the bus stop. We once again boarded the 8:45pm northbound bus to continue north to Mackinaw City.

Mackinaw City (June 6-8)

In Mackinaw City, the Indian Trails bus dropped us off at the Municipal Building, between downtown shopping and the ferry docks. The stop was marked by a sign, bench, local directory, trash can, flower bed, streetlight, public restroom (one of only three in the city) and vending machines within about 100 yards, where arriving riders were seen using nearby infrastructure to continue their trips by bike. This was in stark contrast to the Alpena stop - and a welcome upgrade that more towns Up North should have. Additionally, Mackinaw City's Indian Trails stop was within easy walking distance of nearly every hotel.

However, we noted a core flaw to the intercity bus network in this region: Three Up North bus routes all converge in Mackinaw City and St. Ignace (linking western, eastern, and central Michigan with the UP). In theory, this means Mackinaw City should have numerous options for day trips to St. Ignace or Petoskey. However, all of these routes depart southbound between 7:00–8:00 am and northbound between 9:55–10:45 pm, meaning southbound arrivals land at night after most businesses close and day trip travel is very difficult.

While getting around entirely on foot, we spotted a **Straits Regional Ride** vehicle and several ferry-company shuttles picking up guests from resorts and parking lots. The town could use a tourist trolley like Port Huron's, since local attractions such as the Mackinac Point Lighthouse, Fort Mackinac, and Colonial Michilimackinac aren't connected by local transit.



Mackinaw City was a pleasently walkable cand bikeable community, likely owing to its tourist status.



"[Mackinaw City] could use a tourist trolley like Port Huron's, since local attractions such as the Mackinac Point Lighthouse, Fort Mackinac, and Colonial Michilimackinac aren't connected by local transit.

In Mackinaw City, another member of the TRU team joined the tour, taking the prize for longest transit trip: traveling all the way from Detroit to Mackinaw City on the Indian Trails bus. While a long bus ride (coming in at over 8.5 hours!), this was at least a one seat ride.

Mackinac Island (June 8)

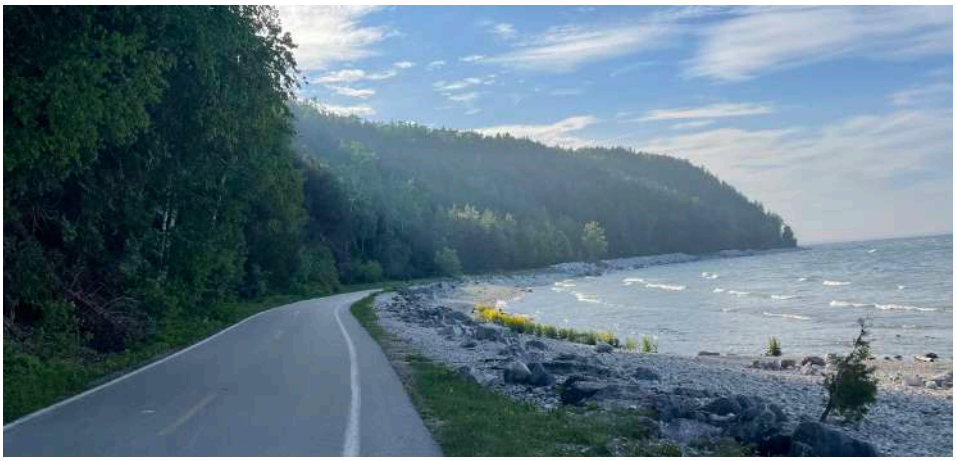
On June 8, we took a ferry to Mackinac Island for $41 per person round-trip (including booking fee). This trip let us choose between an open upper deck and sheltered lower deck. During the peak tourist season, the Mackinac Island ferries are some of the most frequent transit in the state, coming in at every 15 minutes at points. However, this high cost and the options available show that the priority on these ferries is tourists, not for daily commuting.

Once on the island, we reveled in the state's only car-free community and rode M-185, the sole stretch of MDOT road reserved entirely for non-motorized vehicles (and the only state highway with no cars in the country!). Biking on the Island was incredibly easy without having to worry about cars, and horse drawn carriages in the town provide an alternative to driving. Returning on the last ferry of the day, we watched riders disembark with bikes and pedal off while others walked or caught a shuttle to their hotel or a satellite parking lot.

However, there are serious issues facing the island. The two ferry companies, **Shepler's** and **Arnold's**, have been owned by the same company since 2024, though a new state law allows the island to regulate ferries more like a public utility. The island is working to reduce prices and increase off-season service. The challenge of getting to or from the Mackinac region without a car remains a big one, as shown by the infrequent and inconvenient intercity bus schedules. The Mackinac area could be an even stronger tourism hub if these issues were addressed



Mackinac Island's ferries are a crucial transportation link for not just tourists, but island residents. Thankfully, Islanders have more power to regulate prices now.



Marquette (June 9)

The trip to Marquette started roughly, as we missed our planned 9:55 pm departure from Mackinaw City to St. Ignace for an 11:20 pm connection towards Escanaba. Thankfully, we caught a 10:45 pm bus by special driver exception.[16] The St. Ignace Transportation Center stop was closed for remodeling, but we were able to stay on the same bus, before switching buses about four hours later in light rain at the **Delta Area Transportation Authority's** (DATA) headquarters in Escanaba, at roughly 3am. Here, we transferred to another bus and finally arrived in Marquette at 5:00 am on June 9th.

"We reveled in the state's only car-free community and rode M-185, the sole stretch of MDOT road reserved entirely for non-motorized vehicles.

We arrived in Marquette at an unwalkable, highway-adjacent stop with a portico, benches, trash cans, and bike racks. There was no transit service this early in the morning, so we caught a ride from local cab company **Checker Transport** to a Holiday Inn to wait out the rain. Later in the day, we walked about 15 minutes along an uncomfortably narrow, high-traffic sidewalk to Kohl's, the nearest **MarqTran** stop, finding the stop only by spotting a small waiting crowd (once again, it lacked any signage indicating a bus stop).

The bus carried us to the MarqTran Passenger Transfer Station downtown, adjacent to the Iron Ore Heritage Trail connecting to Republic Township, the high school, medical center, and Northern Michigan University. We held a Community Conversation at Northern Michigan University with **Michigan United**,[17] where we covered funding and incremental system improvements. Riders praised MarqTran's free summer youth rides and called for better stop signage, mapping/tracking, a downtown circulator or trolley, greater frequency, and longer intercity service hours.[18] Since MarqTran service ends at 6 pm on weekdays, we got a ride back to the hotel from a friend at the **Michigan Public Transit Association** (MPTA),[19] then a late-night ride to the bus stop around midnight from another local contact for our departure back downstate.





Our largest community conversation was in Marquette, making this a very worthy stop on the transit tour! Thank you to Michigan United for getting such a large crowd.





Lacey and Nancy showed us what transit was like in Traverse City.

Traverse City (June 10-11)

Departing Marquette shortly after midnight, we transferred buses again in Escanaba at about 3 am and in St. Ignace around 7 am, waiting under the Transportation Center's awning in misting rail until the bus arrived, just as one of us returned from a quarter-mile walk to a grocery store to use the bathroom. Thankfully, the driver waited for them before departing. We finally arrived in Traverse City around 10:30 am behind schedule at **Bay Area Transit Authority** (BATA)'s Transit Center.

BATA's routes are timed so several buses depart right as the Indian Trails bus arrives, including the **BayLine**, a free, fixed-route bus running every 15 minutes that connects most of downtown to the hospital, Meijer, senior center, and hotel row on US-31, though the route seemed underused by tourists. We rode the BayLine to our hotel, then again to meet Lacey Edgecomb, Director of the **Traverse City Senior Center Network**.[20] Lacey is a BATA rider herself to better advocate for the service and the people she serves. She is working with BATA on programs to shift seniors away from car-centric habits, though she noted the shelter and infrastructure quality was poor sharply across the street from the center. At that stop, we met 92-year-old Nancy, a **BATA Link**[21] rider who values the service for her independence and wants better intercity connections, including train service to Detroit. We closed the day discussing how transit and active-transportation advocacy could complement each other with the **Grand Traverse Safe**

"Departing Marquette shortly after midnight, we transferred buses in Escanaba about 3am and in St. Ignace about 7 am … we finally arrived in Traverse City around 10:30 am.

Streets Alliance, amid growing regional investment in e-bike and nonmotorized infrastructure.

We headed to Grand Rapids the following day, June 11.[22] Compared to our odyssey through Up North, our ride south from Traverse City was relatively mundane.

Grand Rapids (June 11-12)

In Grand Rapids, TRU's Executive Director Megan rejoined the tour. She rode Amtrak all the way from Chicago. Amtrak's ***Pere Marquette*** route only has one roundtrip a day, and the trip from Chicago leaves in the evening for an 11 pm arrival in Grand Rapids. Unfortunately, significant storms resulted in the train running very slowly, then having to be canceled altogether. Megan got off the train and waited at a dark train station for nearly an hour before a series of buses came to take her and other riders to their final destinations.

On the afternoon of June 11, the rest of the TRU team got to Grand Rapids. The team arrived at Rapid Central Station, and toured the facility and headquarters with **TheRapid's** planning team. On this tour, we learned that their fleet runs almost entirely on compressed and renewable natural gas, discussed BRT, the redesign of the **DASH** downtown circulator, an upcoming millage renewal, system design, and toured a new on-site daycare aimed at commuting parents.

> **"At 5:40am, Amtrak told us our train was cancelled and there would be no replacement buses**



This Mennonite woman's train was cancelled and no alternative was provided. Mennonites and Amish are common sites on Midwest Amtrak service, since they do not drive.



Later, we rode the DASH about half a mile to a meeting at **Downtown Grand Rapids, Inc.**,[23] where a community conversation with **Disability Advocates of Kent County**,[24] **Strong Towns Grand Rapids**,[25] and the **Essential Needs Task Force**.[26] This community conversation showed that there is strong service in some neighborhoods but frequency and availability struggles in suburban areas, a patchwork of local opt-outs limiting service throughout all of Kent County, and accessibility concerns around driver training, accessible stops, last-mile infrastructure, and the **GO** paratransit scheduling system.

On the morning of June 12, we had an Amtrak train to St. Joseph that was scheduled to depart at 6 am. Unfortunately, our biggest challenge yet hit: At 5:40 am, Amtrak told us our train was cancelled and there would be no replacement buses after a major storm. The next option to get to St. Joseph and Benton Harbor was an Indian Trails bus to Benton Harbor in 8 hours. While we understand that bad weather impacts every mode of travel, the last minute notification and the lack of any alternatives was a stark reminder of the real crisis Michigan's cross-state transit options can cause. Even worse, unlike train stations along the Wolverine and the I-94 corridor, the Grand Rapids train station is only open for one hour each morning and one hour each evening, so we couldn't even wait inside.

After exploring every other option, the team ultimately took a local bus to a rental car location and drove to Benton Harbor. We were lucky we had the financial and physical ability to do so. That wasn't available to many others waiting on the train, including a large group of Mennonites and a visually-impaired senior traveling to visit her new

born grandchild who were particularly devastated by the cancellation. This would not have been a major issue if we had numerous trains and buses a day, running every hour or two. Whereas drivers can wait out the storm and leave when it's done, transit riders often must wait the entire day - or cancel their trip due to issues like this.

Benton Harbor and St. Joseph (June 12)

We made it to St Joseph in time for a small morning community conversation at a coffee shop on the broader transit landscape and regional millage ideas. We noted that St. Joseph's recently reinstated their downtown paid parking, with an alternative option in the **Shop & Shore trolley**; a red, 30-minute-loop trolley run by **Visit Southwest Michigan** with four stops across St. Joseph and Benton Harbor, similar in spirit to Port Huron's trolley. They look forward to improved frequency and better network integration with the region's public transit system.

We then participated in a robust discussion with municipal and county officials, as well as local business and nonprofit leaders on transportation in **Berrien County**. Berrien County has had a slew of transit issues over the past few years, especially given the level of segregation between St. Joseph and Benton Harbor. At the time of writing, Berrien County has three transit agencies: **Niles Dial-a-Ride** for Niles, **Berrien Bus** for rural areas, and **Twin Cities Area Transportation Authority** (TCATA) for Benton Harbor and St. Joseph. TCATA has struggled financial struggling for a long time and had to consider dissolution

It is in this context that this stakeholder conversation occurred. We shared our experiences with countywide transit systems in southeast Michigan, and how to get voter approval for funding in challenging times. Thankfully, on November 3rd, 2026, TCATA was able to secure IPAF funding to explore countywide service.

After our meeting, the team split: one member drove the rental car to Kalamazoo (as there was no drop-off option in Berrien County), while the other caught a ride to the Benton Harbor bus station near the highway to continue by transit, taking a smooth 7 pm **Greyhound** to Kalamazoo Metro's Transportation Center, a combined train station and bus transfer hub. The only hiccup on this trip was in Kalamazoo; with the bus ticket counter closed, fare had to be paid via a token vending machine that only accepted $20 bills.

Kalamazoo (June 12-14)

The next day, June 13, after a somewhat uncomfortable walk down narrow roads with no sidewalks, we rode the local bus from the hotel to Kalamazoo's downtown transit center. We got a great tour led by **Kalamazoo Metro** Chief Operating Officer, Keshia Woodson-Sow, who discussed the Transportation Center, bus depot headquarters, bus operations, partnerships with social-service and outreach organizations, and near-collision detection technology used in route planning.

> **"We participated in a robust discussion with municipal and county officials, as well as local business and nonprofit leaders on transportation in Berrien County.**



Our Benton Harbor / St. Joseph stakeholder meeting.

Later, we caught a bus that was diverted off-route by unmapped construction detours to the **Open Roads Bike Program's**[27] new facility for a community conversation. There, enthusiastic participants debated whether Kalamazoo's transit was adequate or falling short, agreed on the need for more service and funding, raised concerns about public unfamiliarity with available transit options, and called for more frequent train and transit connections to Detroit and to Grand Rapids. We then continued the discussion over a follow-up happy hour to close out the night.

Battle Creek (June 14)

The morning of June 14, we boarded a packed train from Kalamazoo to Battle Creek. Between these two cities, Amtrak has four round trips (Three *Wolverine's*, one *Blue Water*), meaning the service operates almost like commuter rail. Battle Creek has an older station building, but is a great space to wait featuring a patio, vending machines, bathrooms, and seating; a welcome change after some of the Up North stops. Indian Trails and Greyhound buses also service this facility, which is right next to the **Ride Calhoun** transfer hub.

At the train station, we began a tour with Ride Calhoun director Mallory Avis and Operations and Maintenance Supervisor Cade, covering the agency's garage, old and new headquarters, and transfer center as it transitions from a city department to a countywide agency with new millage funding earmarked for fleet and facility expansion (currently, Ride Calhoun's fleet is composed of a mix of buses from other agencies in the state). We also discussed their newly restored weekend service and a planned multimodal transfer center combining the bus and train stations. After this tour, we caught the evening *Blue Water* train to East Lansing. Due to delays, this train arrived at 11 pm, but at least our hotel was a 10 minute walk from the station.

Lansing (June 14-15)

We caught **Capitol Area Transit Authority** (CATA) buses to the State Capitol in the morning to deliver letters to legislators about our experience and learnings. We struggled a bit because of the lack of a crosstown route linking the East Lansing Amtrak





Kalamazoo's historic downtown train station serves Amtrak, intercity bus, and all local buses at a beautiful transfer hub.



Ride Calhoun is slowly expanding service countywide and consolidating various local agencies into one.



While in Lansing, we made sure to drop off information to legislators about what we'd been doing and learning

station with downtown Lansing directly. Afterward, we discovered that our bus stop and the next one along the route were both temporarily out of service for construction, with Lansing's physical out-of-service marker giving no indication of the nearest working stop. Thankfully, after our time at the Capitol, we worked around this hiccup and boarded a **Michigan Flyer** bus to Ann Arbor.

Ann Arbor (June 15-16)

The Michigan Flyer dropped us off at a temporary stop due to construction at Blake Transit Center. We found the temporary TheRide-bus pickup area, and rode to **TheRide's** maintenance facility to meet Director of External Affairs Jeff Pfeiffer and maintenance lead Tony Sclafani.

The next day, we toured Ann Arbor Public Schools' electric school bus lot with our partners at the **Ecology Center**, seeing 13 electric buses and a solar canopy that brings them from 40% to 80% charge in an hour of midday sun, at costs comparable to gas buses thanks to stacked grant funding.

As we prepared to depart Ann Arbor, the same construction-driven temporary stops made it unclear where to catch the outbound Indian Trails bus, underscoring a need for clearer signage. Thankfully, we were able to find our bus and head to Jackson for our final stop of the tour.

Jackson (June 16)

Along the way to Jackson, we met Phillip, a senior citizen heading to Kinross who took up bus travel after his eyesight declined. Once we got into Jackson, we toured **Jackson Area Transit Authority** (JATA)'s transfer center, garage, and headquarters



Ann Arbor's new electric school bus fleet.



We got to see TheRide's maintenance facilities and saw what it was like to maintain the buses we all rely on.





The historic Jackson Coney Island was a highlight of our visit to the city.

with JATA VP of External Affairs Hunter Causie, discussing the agency's mixed fleet (which, like Ride Calhoun's, includes coaches from other transit systems) and its expanding Rides to Wellness program.

Afterward, we took a bus to Jackson Coney Island for lunch and caught a bus to Jackson's 150-plus-year-old train station; a historic, mural-adorned landmark, for the final train ride of the tour, which ended at Royal Oak Station.

Home (June 16)

As we stepped off onto the embankment in Royal Oak, across from one of SMART's major transfer centers, we were excited to be home after two weeks traveling across our entire state. This journey was exhausting, but highlighted what it's like for transit riders outside of Detroit, and for those of us who want to travel outside of Metro Detroit too. Thank you to everyone who met with us, and made this possible!



The platform at Royal Oak train station.[29]



The original Round-the-Mitten transit tour group, on our first day. We've come far in 14 days!

Observations from Community Conversations

Concerns

Across all eight community conversations we held residents' skepticism that Michigan's transportation spending is actually serving community needs. When asked, the vast majority responded in the negative. Some participants gave mixed answers, mentioning the need for balancing priorities, and a handful declined to answer for lack of information. Numerous "no" responses specifically distinguish between visible road improvements and a lack of comparable transit investment.

The same underlying doubt surfaced across all communities. Kalamazoo participants openly debated whether current service was adequate at all, and public unfamiliarity with available transit options came up as being as much of a barrier as service itself. In Bay City, a similar idea of unfamiliarity was raised, which stakeholders framed even more directly as a "stigma" around riding transit at all. One noted that agencies need to actively teach first-time riders how to use the bus.

Respondents in Bay City, Port Huron, and Saginaw alike described falling back on an informal network of family, friends, neighbors, and occasional taxis or rideshare rather than transit itself; in Bay City, that gap was large enough that the United Way reported fielding daily calls from residents seeking transportation help. Saginaw respondents linked their own service gaps to real recent cuts to STARS' weekend hours and coverage; one said plainly that transit "is not improving", while Port Huron respondents pointed to physical gaps compounding the service gaps: sidewalks that, as one put it, often "last 1–2 houses then end," and a city master-planning process one respondent called "lackluster, setting us up for missing the mark for the next 20 years."

In Grand Rapids, our conversation opened by noting that service is already strong in some neighborhoods, before turning to where the network falls short. Outlying suburban areas struggle with frequency and availability even where Grand Rapids' core routes run well, a gap compounded by a patchwork of local opt-outs that limits how far service reaches into Kent County. Accessibility came up as its own cluster of concerns, spanning four distinct points raised in the conversation: driver training, accessible stops, last-mile infrastructure,



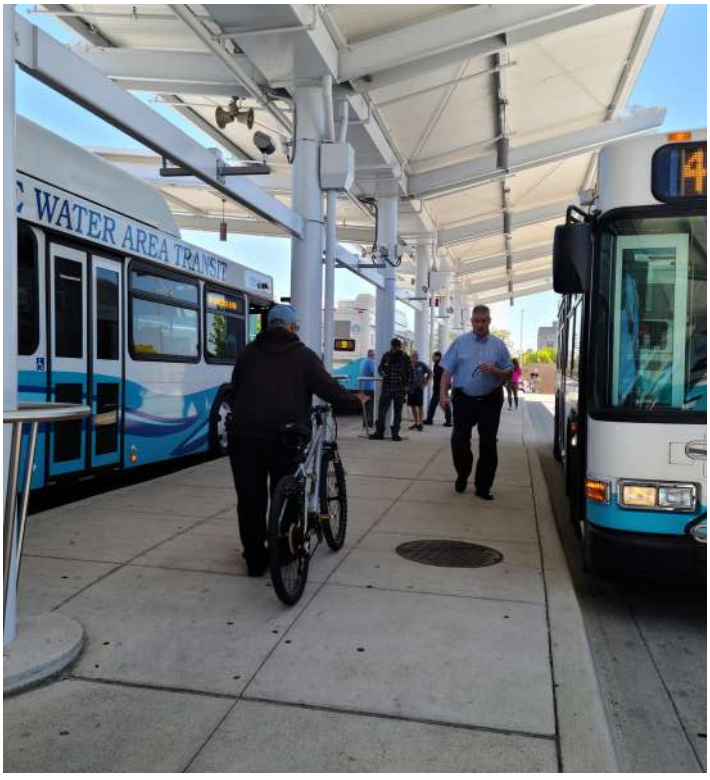
A vast majority of MDOT's funding goes towards repaving roads. Across the tour, people wanted MDOT to fund more transit, not just roads (Image: Muñoz, "Wet, Freezing Conditions Delay MDOT's I-696 Repairs.")



and the GO paratransit scheduling system specifically.

In numerous communities, stakeholders raised a concrete street-level example of the same problem; a particular local big box retailer or destination was unwilling to permit a bus stop on its property. There was also a broader worry that rural and smaller-metro areas are treated as an afterthought next to Michigan's larger population centers, with the region's aging population cited as a coming pressure point on whatever transit does exist.





Riders in Port Huron wanted expanded off-peak service and international connections to Sarnia in Ontario.



Trolleys were a popular vision for many regions, drawing on the examples of Port Huron and Flint.

Visions

When asked to look further ahead, residents across the tour described transit less as a service to patch and more as a culture to change — and in a few places, that change is already underway.

Port Huron residents had a vision that extended past Michigan's borders entirely: alongside a wish for expanded off-peak connections to Metro Detroit, one respondent specifically envisioned international connections to Canada, via better transportation across the Blue Water Bridge to Sarnia, Ontario, and another floated ferry service for Port Huron itself.

Saginaw respondents' visions for STARS ranged from full seven-day coverage to fully on-demand, 24/7 availability, with one imagining service eventually covering all of Saginaw County rather than its current footprint.

Bay City stakeholders were interested in the idea of attracting "choice riders", people who have a car and choose transit anyway, rather than only aspiring to serve those with no other option.

Two places pointed to models already working that others could learn from: Marquette riders praised the agency's free summer youth rides, and multiple conversations, particularly in Traverse City and Marquette, singled out Port Huron's own Blue Water Trolley and Shop & Shore trolley as models worth replicating.

Desires

Beneath larger concerns and visions sits a long list of specific, practical requests. In virtually every community we visited, riders and residents had specific requests for their transit agencies and cities at large.

Port Huron respondents asked for separated bike lanes, safer walking and biking infrastructure, a cross-town bus route, more frequent local service, and almost every participant mentioned the idea of better connections to Detroit.

In Saginaw, there was a desire for more transit funding, and regional integration. STARS is very interested in a redevelopment project around Potter Street Station, their historic train station, which could potentially act as a future terminus for the Wolverine service. There was also a lot of interest in increased service frequency and the resumption of Sunday service.

Bay City respondents wanted countywide and cross-county service agreements reaching the Thumb (Bad Axe–Port Austin), Traverse City, Midland, Saginaw, Standish, Detroit, Ann Arbor, and Grand Rapids, plus one specific request for transit access to the Cleveland Clinic in Ohio; on the service side, they asked for a one-hour demand-response model, Wi-Fi on buses, and bus aides able to help riders with disabilities board safely and carry groceries.

In Flint, we heard a similar sentiment; folks want more of a connection to Detroit in a similar way to how Detroit and Ann Arbor are linked at present, with rail and express bus. Saginaw respondents wanted STARS route extensions to Carrollton and Frankenmuth, more inter-county connections generally, and access to the Thumb region, alongside a set of more discretionary, leisure-oriented destinations such as Traverse City, Bay City, Midland, Mt. Pleasant, and, notably, Ohio's Cedar Point and Michigan's Adventure.

Marquette's asks were extremely concrete. Primarily, folks are interested in improving the system, through an improved website, as well as better signage and mapping. There was also a lot of interest in the idea of a downtown circulator, and longer service hours. Ebikes were also raised as a micromobility option that is becoming increasingly popular with the youth in response to gaps in the public transit network.

Conversations in Traverse City surfaced a few ideas, primarily around safe street development. Similarly to in Marquette, biking and ebiking are exploding in popularity, and infrastructure is still catching up.



Many riders pointed to the D2A2 bus as an example they wish they had in their region, or from their region to Detroit.



Riders in Traverse City wanted expanded safe streets.

In Grand Rapids, participants liked the free DASH downtown circulator route, though there were some concerns raised about the recent reconfiguration of the route to serve new downtown attractions. Two major points of desire raised were for service to no longer be constrained to the borders of the six communities that currently opt-in, and for the development of a convenient, express transit option connection to Detroit. One participant also raised the idea that the current network, organized around routes that feed into a downtown hub, would be a more car-competitive option for crosstown trips if more routes served the outer edges of town. This was emphasized by the fact that many of these areas have become trip generators as the city has suburbanized and jobs/major destinations moved outside of downtown cores.

Our Kalamazoo Community Conversation had a strong focus on safe streets. In particular, participants pondered what improving streetscapes and the pedestrian environment would mean for transit and the community more widely. Many major streets in Kalamazoo are wide, 4-5 lane proto-highways, built and expanded to move automobiles from place to place quickly, rather than to contribute toward an environment that people want to spend time in, kids want to walk to school in, students want to bike along, families want to shop in, etc. The city is doing a lot of work towards changing this, however, and has taken over a number of major streets from MDOT, with plans to make them safer and more appealing to pedestrians, and folks wanted to see a lot more movement in this direction. Changing the way our streets feel was seen as key to improving transit ridership, especially choice ridership; folks generally do not like waiting for a bus on the side of the road exposed to the elements, where cars are passing at 45mph+, and where they may have a long or unsafe walk to their final destination. Streets that are designed for communities and the people who live in them tend to be much more inviting, and encourage not just transit ridership but walking, biking, and other ways of getting around that reduce congestion, emissions, and road wear and tear.

“Streets that are designed for communities and the people who live in them tend to be much more inviting, and encourage not just transit ridership but walking [and] biking.



Grand Rapids' DASH downtown shuttle is popular, but riders had some concerns about it's recent reroute.[30]



Kalamazoo has numerous, wide one way roads downtown. The city is working to make these safer streets.[31]



Improvements Needed

We learned a great deal from our experience planning the trip and travelling all throughout the state. We learned even more talking with hundreds of fellow riders, community conversation participants, transit agency leaders, and others we met throughout the trip.

We saw thousands of rides going well and smoothly getting people where they needed to go. There are hundreds of transit agency staff at scores of transit agencies throughout the state are working hard every day to innovate and provide the very best services they can, often providing service in ways other agencies may want to copy.

Despite that, there remain many gaps in the state's overall transit system and a great deal of room for improvement in many places. Examples of both great ideas and opportunities for improvement are summarized here:



Intercity Travel Improvements

1. **Improve frequency**
   - Add Kalamazoo–Pontiac Train Trips
2. **Add more options**
   - Launch a Coast-to-Coast Express Service linking Detroit and Grand Rapids
   - Expand Michigan's Intercity Rail Network
   - Increase Regional Connections
3. **Ensure workable schedules**
   - Workable Timing for Amtrak, the U.P. and Northern Michigan
   - Ensure Intercity Transit Stops Have Local Transit Connections
4. **Get the basics right**
   - Fight to Improve Reliability for Rail
   - Improve stop infrastructure
5. **Statewide branding and marketing**

Local Transit Improvements

1. **Expand service to meet local needs**
   - Expand Route Hours and Frequencies
   - Expand Nonemergency Medical Transportation (NEMT) Programs
   - Allow Counties to Have Countywide Transit Expansion Elections Statewide
2. **Creative solutions to common challenges**
   - Adopt Tap-to-Pay and Simple Payment Mechanisms for Transit Statewide
   - Clean Fuels Can Drive Major Cost Savings and Environmental Benefits
   - Utilize "Trolley" Service in Transit-Resistant Communities
   - Develop Programs for Youth Riders
   - Promote Ridership Through Targeted Programs
3. **Integrate with the community**
   - Ensure Safe Streets and Mixed-Use Development Around Transit Centers
   - Encourage the Transit Masterplanning Process to Incorporate More Vision

Traveling Between Cities

Improve Frequencies for Intercity Bus & Amtrak Trains

Across the tour, the single biggest barrier to traveling across the state was availability of intercity bus or train service at reasonably convenient times. Most cities in Michigan that have intercity connections have just one trip each way each day. Even worse, many are at extremely inconvenient times:

- The only trains out of Port Huron and Grand Rapids are at 6am, before most local bus routes begin.
- Mackinaw City's three intercity bus lines all cluster their departures between 7:00–8:00am southbound and 9:55–10:45pm northbound, so anyone arriving from downstate lands well outside when businesses are open.
- Marquette's only intercity bus east departs after midnight.

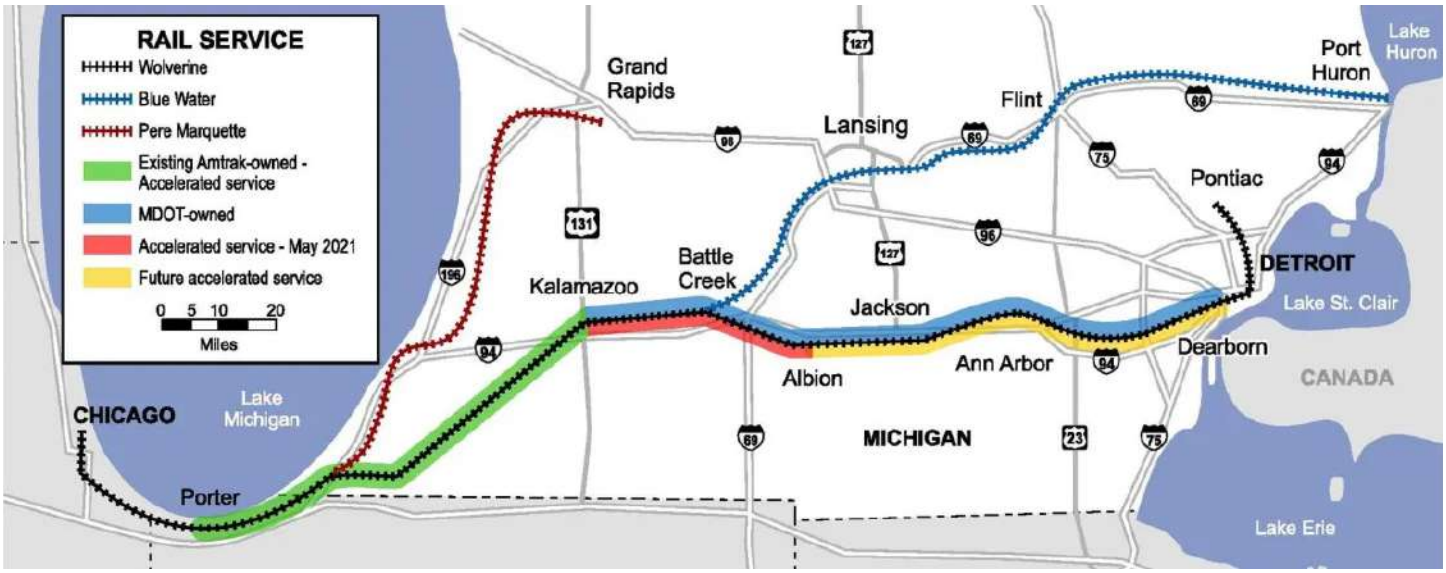
Single-frequency service leaves no room for error: miss it, and you're stranded until the next day. Michigan needs to double or triple frequencies to make these services real options for travelers.

Run Kalamazoo–Pontiac Train Trips, Improve Times & Frequency

The Kalamazoo–Battle Creek Amtrak segment offered a glimpse of what more frequency could look like: with four trains running in each direction daily, the route already functions a little like commuter rail, and residents indicated commuting between the two cities via transit is genuinely feasible.

Multiple riders along the route, including participants in the Kalamazoo community conversation, specifically asked for better train connectivity toward Detroit; a few Kalamazoo–Pontiac trips would directly answer that demand.





Map showcasing Michigan's current passenger rail services, and MDOT owned rail.[32] As of 2026, many 110 MPH accelerated rail service sections have been opened between Albion and Jackson.

Add More Options

Launch a Coast-to-Coast Express Service to Detroit & Grand Rapids

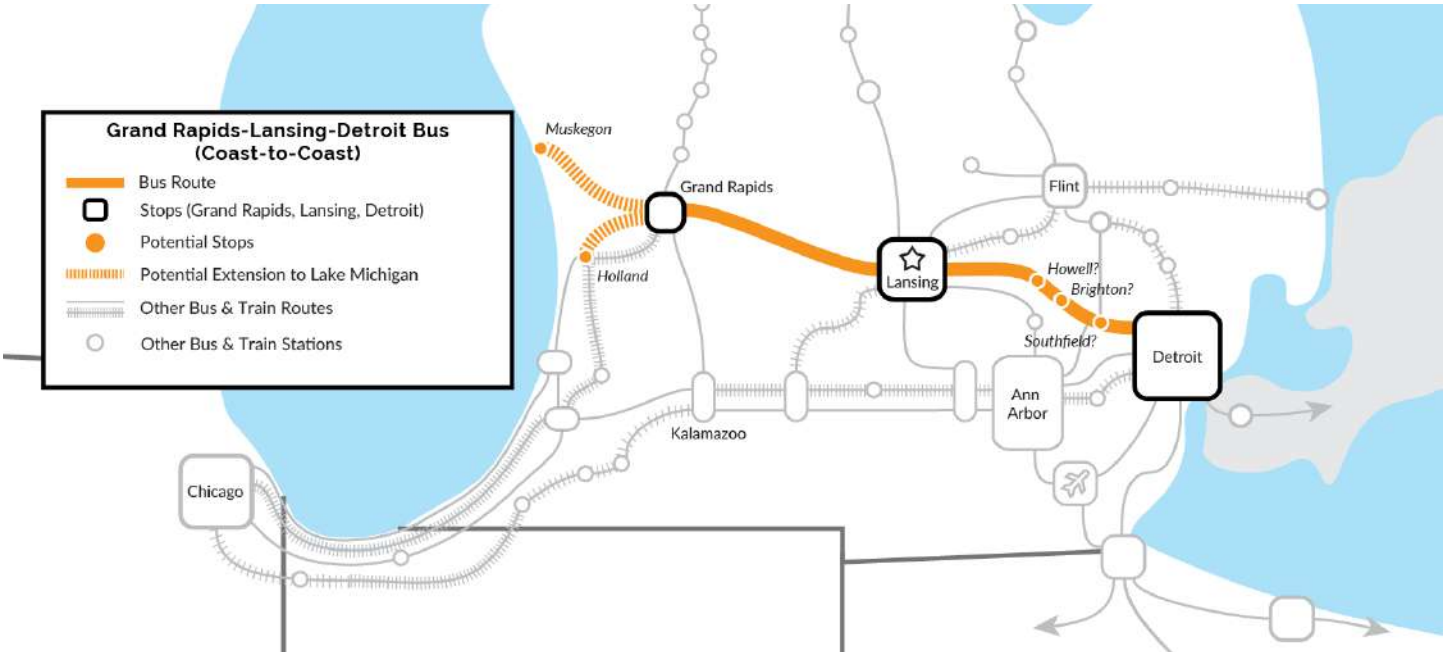
Throughout our tour, we continually heard desires for better connect across our state. One of the most key missing transit links in our state transportation network is a robust express passenger transport connection along our I-96 corridor that would serve Detroit, Lansing, and Grand Rapids. Many people are shocked to find out there is no direct way to connect between our state's two largest cities using transit. An express bus route could not only connect Detroit and Grand Rapids, but could add a park-and-ride stop near Brighton, connect our state capitol, Lansing, and potentially continue onward to Muskegon. This could likely begin operating within 1 year for under $10 million. With at least six daily round trips, Michigan could greatly improve cross state connectivity needs.

"One of the most key missing transit links in our state transportation network is a robust express passenger transport connection along our I-96 corridor that would serve Detroit, Lansing, and Grand Rapids.

Expand Michigan's Intercity Rail Network

While it will take longer, the Detroit to Grand Rapids corridor is ideal for passenger rail service, given the existing track infrastructure and the size of the communities along the route. MDOT is studying this rail route; we look forward to the study's results and urge state leaders to take next steps. We could follow Colorado's model, where their Front Range intercity bus service precipitated the Colorado Connector Passenger Rail Project.

At present, Michigan's passenger rail infrastructure is solely operating in the south of our state, with our northernmost station served being Lapeer. Northern Michigan deserves better when it comes to passenger rail. Groundworks Center for Resilient Communities has been working for several years to advance a North+South Passenger Rail Line that could prove instrumental in delivering on that need. The route would connect Detroit, Ann Arbor, Mount Pleasant, Cadillac, Traverse City, and Petoskey, and include stops in a number of communities between them. With such a service, northern and southern Michigan will be connected to one another and the rest of the national rail network like never before. We eagerly await the comple-



Map of proposed express Coast-to-Coast bus.

tion of the study for this service, and urge the state government to incorporate this service into MDOT's planning processes.

Additionally, studies are underway for rail service to Windsor, Toledo, Cleveland, and further. Many other cities want passenger rail too, and should be evaluated. Some of these include the Pontiac-Flint-Saginaw corridor, Sterling Heights to Detroit, and towards northern communities, including Marquette to Green Bay and Milwaukee.

Increase Regional Connections

Not all intercity travel means long trips across the state. Community members throughout the tour kept raising the same idea: more connections between neighboring regions. In Flint, Strong Towns' transit committee discussed a Detroit–Ann Arbor (D2A2)-style bus between Flint and Detroit and folding Genesee County into the RTA. Kamazoo residents bemoaned the lack of regular transit connections with Grand Rapids, despite a great deal of work and entertainment trips between the two. In Port Huron, there was similar interest in a direct to Detroit via Mount Clemens. In Saginaw, STARS is actively developing a regional link to Flint.These consistent requests point to a statewide gap in cross-county service that leaves regional hubs like Flint, Saginaw, Port Huron, Kamazoo, and Traverse City disconnected from each other and from Detroit despite clear, expressed demand.

Where these regional connections do exist, they tend to rely on creative funding structures rather than a single agency footing the bill. Flint MTA's regional routes to Great Lakes Crossing, Brighton, and Howell are employer-funded but open to the public, showing one model for extending service beyond an agency's core tax base. In Berrien County, MDOT is pushing local agencies toward a new countywide authority to coordinate service and stabilize financially struggling TCATA. In Saginaw, STARS is hoping MDOT's Corridor ID study will help fund a Wolverine line extension north to Flint and Saginaw. MDOT should do more to support and supplement funding between different transit systems in different regions. Formalizing these kinds of state–local funding partnerships, rather than leaving them to emerge case by case, would make regional connections more replicable statewide.



Ryan Tallmadge conducted a study on bringing passenger rail to Marquette as part of his Northern Michigan University capstone. This survey received over 1,500 responses.[33] Image from Facebook.[34]



Ensure Workable Schedules

Workable Timing for Amtrak, the U.P. and Northern Michigan

Transit only really works if it travels at times that work for riders. Sadly, too few of Michigan's cross-state transit routes do so. The Upper Peninsula and northern Lower Peninsula showed the sharpest version of this problem, where sparse and awkward scheduling forced riders into repeated overnight and pre-dawn transfers. Getting to Marquette meant being rerouted through St. Ignace and Escanaba in the middle of the night, arriving at 5:00 am to a town where no local transit was yet running. Coordinating timetables across key U.P. hub points like St. Ignace, Escanaba, and Mackinaw City — so that transfers align in daylight hours and connect with local service on arrival — would drastically improve the ridership experience and reliability for the region's riders, many of whom (seniors, Mennonite families, students) depend on these routes as their only option.

Just as northern Michigan's bus schedules are oriented around travel from southern Michigan, Amtrak's schedules are all oriented around Chicago rather than serving in-state travel patterns between Michigan's own cities. Riders in Kalamazoo and elsewhere all pointed to this struggle when asking for better connections to Detroit and Grand Rapids.



Every town should have an integrated intercity bus, train and transit hub, just like Kalamazoo. Thankfully, some cities and towns get this right.

"Getting to Marquette meant being rerouted through St. Ignace and Escanaba in the middle of the night, arriving at 5:00 am to a town where no local transit was yet running … [and] stranded in an unwalkable, highway adjacent area.



Port Hurons once a day train leaves early, and arrives at almost midnight. This schedule does not work for Michiganders.

Ensure Intercity Transit Stops Have Local Transit Connections

In addition to improving the schedule of intercity trips, local transit connections need to be aligned with intercity transit schedules. The tour saw both the cost of getting this wrong and a model for getting it right. Arriving in Marquette at 5:00 am left our group stranded in an unwalkable, highway-adjacent area with no local transit running, forcing a cab ride to a hotel. East Lansing likewise has no CATA crosstown route linking the Amtrak station to downtown Lansing. By contrast, Traverse City's BATA Transit Center is deliberately timed so several local buses, including the free BayLine, depart just after the Indian Trails bus pulls in. Kalamazoo's Greyhound drops riders directly at Kalamazoo Metro's combined train-and-bus Transportation Center. Designing every intercity stop around Traverse City's and Kalamazoo's models — local service timed to meet intercity arrivals — should be a statewide standard.

Get the Basics Right

Fight to Improve Reliability for Rail

Amtrak's reliability problems had real consequences for riders on this trip. The 6:00 am train out of Grand Rapids was cancelled outright due to weather. With no functioning contingency, our group had to scramble for a rental car and other passengers were left stranded. Separately, freight delays pushed the East Lansing arrival to nearly 11:00 pm, well past when most restaurants and shops had closed. For riders like the senior traveler in Grand Rapids trying to reach grandchildren, or the Mennonite families rerouted at the last minute, or the people relying on making connections in East Lansing, an unreliable schedule isn't an inconvenience but a real crisis.

Amtrak needs to improve contingencies for weather related delays. Additionally, state leaders need to push Amtrak and freight partners to truly prioritize passenger on-time performance rather than treating delays as an unavoidable cost of shared track.



Due to how infrequent trains are, a cancelled trains leaves riders stranded for a day. More trains running means fewer people left stranded.

Develop Intercity Bus Stop Infrastructure

Intercity bus infrastructure varied wildly from stop to stop, and the spots with the deepest needs stood out. Alpena's Indian Trails stop has no shelter, bench, sign, or pavement marking — riders' only options are to stand or sit on the ground. The Traverse City–to–Grand Rapids leg's "stops" were mostly unmarked gas stations and retail lots. Even Marquette's relatively well-appointed stop (portico, benches, bike racks) had its indoor area closed during the early-morning window when the bus actually arrives. Basic, consistent amenities — shelter, seating, signage — at every stop are critical to make intercity bus travel feel like a legitimate, respected transportation option.

> **"Alpena's Indian Trails stop has no shelter, bench, sign, or pavement marking**



Intercity Branding and Marketing

It was consistently challenging to find Intercity bus stops and to recognize them as part of a statewide system. Temporary construction-related pick-up points in Ann Arbor left our group unsure where to catch their outbound Indian Trails bus. Similar uncertainty came up at multiple junctions throughout the trip where signage was minimal or nonexistent.

A consistent, recognizable brand and signage system for Michigan's intercity bus network — similar to how MTA, BATA, or SMART each have a clear local identity — would help riders unfamiliar with a given town recognize a stop, trust the schedule, and know where to stand, reducing the kind of confusion that dogged multiple stops on this tour.

Developing a cohesive brand across all of Michigan's state-supported intercity bus lines could also improve the reputation of intercity bus travel and attract more riders, especially if combined with a state-supported marketing campaign. Colorado's Bustang system provides a great example of cohesive branding and marketing that Michigan can learn from.



MDOT and Indian Trails used to brand some buses together (Image: Indian Trails, Inc, "Indian Trails and MDOT Roll out Eight 'Pure Michigan' Buses.")



Colorado's Bustang service shows what an integrated, state transit system can look like. (Image: Butzer, "Travel Around Colorado for a Few Bucks: Bustang Fares to Be Cut in Half in August, September.")

Local Transit

Expand Service to Meet Local Needs

Expand Route Hours and Frequencies for Rider Convenience

Most bus routes in the state run only every 30 minutes or every hour. That leaves riders having to schedule their lives around the bus routes and makes a missed bus a major crisis. Frequency of transit service is one of the best ways to serve Michiganders and improve ridership.

Additionally, local service across the state also frequently ended well before residents' needs did. MarqTran service ends at 6:00 pm on weekdays, forcing our group to arrange rides through personal contacts rather than transit for evening travel. Grand Rapids community members flagged that outlying suburban areas struggle with frequency even where core routes run well. Ride Calhoun's plans to restore weekend service in Battle Creek as part of its countywide expansion point toward the kind of investment needed elsewhere: frequencies that match when people actually need to travel, not just standard weekday business hours.

Expand Nonemergency Medical Transportation (NEMT) Programs

A critical and growing transit need is taking people to medical appointments that aren't emergencies but are important. Some transit agencies are developing programs specifically targeted at serving this need, and in some cases getting funding from partners to do so. In Alpena, TBTA Mobility Manager, Brandi Anderson, spoke at length about the opportunities and gaps in NEMT and broader social-service transportation, particularly for veterans. Kalamazoo Metro highlighted its own partnerships with social-service and outreach organizations as a core part of its operations. Our conversations suggest drastically uneven capacity across the state to get riders — especially older adults and people with disabilities — to medical appointments. Expanding and standardizing NEMT partnerships between transit agencies and health systems statewide would fill a documented gap.

> **"Frequency of transit service is one of the best ways to serve Michiganders and improve ridership.**



Countywide transit expansion, like in Calhoun County, means every community can be served, including small rural towns.



Rural transit agencies use dial-a-ride services to provide NEMT services, a vital service for rural residents of our state.









Encourage More Countywide Transit Expansion Elections

Municipal boundaries repeatedly determined which agencies could expand and which couldn't. STARS in Saginaw receives funding only from Saginaw City rather than countywide, unlike SMART or BWAT, which draw from multiple municipalities. STARS has struggled to maintain service amid a 50% population decline. Berrien County's TCATA neared dissolution over long-term financial struggles, prompting MDOT to push for a new countywide authority. Ride Calhoun's recent transition from a city department to a countywide agency — enabled by new millage funding — is already letting it expand its fleet, restore weekend service, and plan a new transfer center. Every county should so more agencies can follow Ride Calhoun's path instead of STARS' or TCATA's.

Useful solutions to common challenges

Adopt Tap-to-Pay and Simple Payment Mechanisms Statewide

Payment technology varied enormously by agency. Port Huron still requires passengers to carry a bunch of coins, even if it's only 80-cents. With Kalamazoo's ticket counter closed, the only way out team was able to pay fare was via a vending machine that dispensed tokens but accepted nothing smaller than a $20 bill. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Flint MTA already allows passengers the option to pay their fare by credit card with a quick tap-to-pay system or reloadable tap-to-pay fare cards comparable to Chicago's system. STARS in Saginaw and others are actively working toward debit card acceptance. Standardizing modern, low-friction payment options like tap-to-pay across all of Michigan's transit agencies would remove a real, avoidable barrier to spontaneous ridership.

Clean Fuels Can Drive Major Cost Savings

Several agencies visited on this tour are already proving out the case for alternative fuels, which not only put out less pollution but also save them from drastic leaps and swings in diesel prices.

- Port Huron's BWATA has run a diesel-free fleet since the 1990s, producing its own Compressed Natural Gas on-site — insulating it from fuel-price swings and even generating revenue from surplus sales.
- Also diesel-free, Flint MTA features a mix of hydrogen, CNG, and electric buses.
- TheRapid in Grand Rapids runs almost entirely on compressed and renewable natural gas.
- Ann Arbor Public Schools' new electric buses, charged from 40% to 80% in an hour via a solar canopy, were reported as cost-comparable to gas buses because the district stacked multiple grants.

These examples suggest that with meaningful upfront state and federal investment to cover conversion costs, alternative fuels can pay for themselves in operational savings while cutting emissions — a case Michigan should be making loudly to agencies still running conventional diesel fleets. That said, several agencies struggled to make effective use of the fully electric buses they got a few years ago when the manufacturer went out of business and buses lacked reliable ability to run the long trips and long days buses often need. New technologies need consistent support, which is often beyond the capabilities of the transit agencies by themselves.

Utilize "Trolley" Service in Transit-Resistant Communities

Knowing that some communities aren't fans of traditional buses, several transit agencies gave those buses a nostalgic face lift. Flint MTA's Davidson Trolley, Port Huron's Blue Water Trolley — a 10-cent, narrated loop around the city — and the Shop & Shore trolley connecting St. Joseph and Benton Harbor all stood out as beloved, distinctive services in communities that have sometimes been skeptical of buses. Locals in both Mackinaw City and Marquette specifically suggested they'd wel-





Develop Programs for Youth Riders

come a similar trolley, pointing to unconnected attractions (like the Mackinac Point Lighthouse and Fort Mackinac) or a desire for a similar downtown circulator. Given how well-received these services already are, and how well they translate to tourist-heavy or car-centric towns, expanding trolley-style circulators to more communities looks like a high-return, low-controversy investment. That said, they still need the best features of effective transit, like good frequency and reliability, since even Shop & Shore's advocates want it doubled.



Promote Ridership Through Targeted Programs

MarqTran's free summer rides for youth came up specifically and favorably in Marquette's community conversation. Ann Arbor Public Schools' new electric school bus fleet, developed with the Ecology Center, shows a related investment in getting kids to and from school more cleanly and safely. Programs like these build transit familiarity and habits early, which matters given how many community conversations on this tour raised cultural unfamiliarity with transit as a barrier for adults. Expanding free or reduced-fare youth programs beyond the few systems currently offering them would help build the next generation of riders statewide.

Multiple community conversations on this tour, including Kalamazoo's, pointed to a "cultural" barrier as much as a service one: many residents simply don't know what transit options exist, where they go, or how to use them. Traverse City Senior Center Director Lacey Edgecomb rides BATA herself to become a better advocate and works with the senior center on outreach programs to help older residents move past car-centric habits. Structured ridership-promotion programs — in the vein of TheRapid's West Michigan Rides or TheRide's GetDowntown — extended to more regions would help translate existing service into the ridership community members clearly want to see.

West Michigan Rides grew out of a carpooling program that Grand Rapids' TheRapid started back in 2006, that aimed to get more drivers to use alternative methods of transportation when heading downtown, with an emphasis on carpooling. As the program grew and evolved, TheRapid modified it to focus on getting around without a personal automobile more generally, instead by walking, rolling, biking, transit, or carpooling. This change came with a gamification; participants earn points for every trip they take without a car that can be redeemed for gift cards at retailers like Apple, Home Depot, and Starbucks, among other prizes.

getDowntown is a program run by a joint venture of Ann Arbor's TheRide, the Ann Arbor Downtown Development Agency, and the City of Ann Arbor that works to promote using transit to get to downtown Ann Arbor, particularly for those coming in from the suburban/outskirts of the city. Founded in 1999, it serves as an arms-length civic partnership solely focused on increasing transit ridership while decreasing the need for parking and automobile infrastructure more widely, through its go!pass, a number of annual challenges around commuting using transit, and acting as a general informational resource.

Integrate cohesively with community needs

Create Visions in Transit Master Plans

STARS in Saginaw is currently developing a transit master plan alongside its push toward modernized payment and a regional Flint connection, and The Rapid in Grand Rapids is simultaneously working through BRT planning, a DASH redesign, and an upcoming millage renewal as part of its own long-term system design conversations. These processes work best when they're ambitious rather than purely maintenance-oriented — Ride Calhoun's shift from a city department to an expanding countywide agency, with plans for a new combined multimodal transfer center, shows what's possible when a masterplanning process is paired with real vision and new funding. Encouraging every agency undertaking a master plan to build toward that kind of expansion, rather than just preserving current service, would raise the ceiling statewide.

Safe Streets & Mixed-Use Development at Transit Centers

When done right, transit centers have lots of people walking to and from them throughout the day - so it's especially important that the streets around them are well-designed for the safety of pedestrians. Slowing speed limits, adding bike lanes, and providing clearly marked cross-walks are a few of the ways to make transit centers more attractive and riders safer. Traverse City's Grand Traverse Safe Streets Alliance conversation, and the group's own observation that infrastructure quality dropped sharply on one side of the street near the senior center, underscored how uneven street design can undercut transit investment right next door.

Transit centers can also serve as great locations for a mix of development, providing passengers more amenities and drawing nonriders into the area. The strongest example of this type of mixed-use development came from Saginaw, where STARS, the city, and local advocates are redeveloping the historic Potter St. train station into a mixed-use district combining expanded STARS facilities, a daycare, and apartments alongside a new transfer hub within walking distance of downtown. Grand Rapids is taking a related approach with a commuter-focused daycare opening at Rapid Central Station itself.

Pairing transit investment with adjacent housing, services, and safe pedestrian infrastructure — as Saginaw and Grand Rapids are attempting — should be the standard approach, not the exception.



Saginaw has big visions, including moving their HQ to the old Potter St train station and working towards bringing train service back here (Image: Dfcoe, "Flint & Pere Marquette Union Station, East Saginaw, Michigan.")

Recommendations

Resolving the challenges we faced and the struggles we heard about can't be done with one silver bullet solution, nor is it the job of just transit agencies.But with concerted focused efforts at the state and local levels, great improvements are possible.

What Legislators Need to Do

The tour kept running into the same root cause behind uneven service: insufficient funding. A lot of these limitations are structural and caused by underfunding at the state level, so there are legislative opportunities to expand funding at the local level as well.

- Double funding for the Comprehensive Transportation Fund (CTF) and fully fund the Local Bus Operating (LBO), so agencies across the state, rural and urban, can expand their service to meet growing service demands. At one point, LBO covered half the costs of operating local transit services. Due to stagnant budgets and increasing costs, now LBO covers barely 30%. Michigan leaders need to restore that full funding by increasing the LBO budget by 20% each year. This could come from a new auto sales tax or a new surcharge on transportation and delivery services.
- Budget now to order new passenger trains, as train cars, as train cars are on a back order.



- Authorize or expand regional transit authority boundaries so multi-county regions like the Upper Peninsula, northern Lower Peninsula, Flint–Detroit, Grand Rapids-Holland-Muskegon, Berrien-Kalamazoo-Battle Creek and Port Huron–Detroit can build and fund shared services.
- Tie state Intercity Bus Program dollars to a funded, statewide intercity bus branding, station infrastructure, and wayfinding standard.
- Actively grow the new Infrastructure Projects Authority Fund (IPAF) to fund "transformational" projects like new regional connections, not just one-off capital purchases.
- Expand dedicated capital funding for alternative-fuel fleet conversions, so agencies aren't left stacking one-off grants the way many agencies around the state have, and so it's not cost-prohibitive for new agencies to seek these cleaner modern options.

> **"Michigan leaders need to restore that full funding by increasing the LBO budget by 20% each year.**





MDOT needs to work towards achieving their vision of Michigan's future passenger rail.[35]



What MDOT Needs to Do

MDOT is the connective tissue between these local systems, and the tour heard feedback regarding both its potential and its current gaps, from the still-hoped-for Corridor ID extension of the Wolverine line to Flint and Saginaw, to the disconnected timetables that stranded riders in St. Ignace and Marquette at odd hours.

- Accelerate Corridor ID studies for the Wolverine, Blue Water, and Pere Marquette lines and prepare to quickly implement likely recommendations such as doubling frequencies, extending to Canada, and increasing service speed/reducing delays. MDOT should also advance as quickly as possible its study of a Detroit to Grand Rapids/Muskegon line and the existing study of Detroit-Traverse City. Potential ridership should be be developed on these new routes with well-promoted, high quality coach bus demonstration routes.
- Set, and fund as a condition of Intercity Bus Program dollars, a statewide minimum standard for intercity bus stop infrastructure: shelter, seating, and signage. Work collaboratively with intercity bus providers to engage with local communities to local and build intercity bus stop infrastructure that serves both residents and riders.
- Coordinate published, aligned timetables across Indian Trails, Amtrak, and local agencies at key transfer points (St. Ignace, Escanaba, Mackinaw City, Traverse City) so connections land at reasonable hours instead of the middle of the night; doubling of frequencies should simplify this without adding too much complexity.
- Serve as the state's voice pressing Amtrak on reliability and rider communication, since MDOT already administers the state's passenger rail funding relationship.
- MDOT should also modernize and de-silo it's decisions making proceess, transparently evaluating major projects to not just consider pavement improvements, but also on safety, access, pollution, and cost effectiveness.

What Our Next Governor Needs to Do

As Michigan heads into a gubernatorial transition, the next administration's budget priorities and MDOT leadership appointments will set the tone for whether transit is finally treated as core infrastructure or just an afterthought to roads.

- Appoint a new MDOT Director with significant multimodal experience and direct them to focus significant attention on these glaring transportation gaps.
- Make transit funding growth (LBO, CTF, IPAF) a stated budget priorit, and consider new funding mechanisms for the state and local regions.
- Champion Amtrak reliability and expanded in-state frequency as an economic development and workforce access issue, not just a transportation one.
- Use the office's visibility to support local countywide millage campaigns the way Oakland, Macomb, and now Wayne County have successfully run them, encouraging other regions to pursue similar ballot measures.
- Support MDOT toward a single, coordinated statewide transit vision that connects individual agency plans: STARS' master plan, TheRapid's BRT and millage work, Ride Calhoun's countywide expansion, instead of leaving each to plan in isolation.

What Local Transit Agencies Ought to Do

The tour's strongest examples of improvements came from agencies with the ambition to plan past their current constraints and try new things.

- Build master plans that explicitly address funding structure, frequency, regional connections, and modernized payment, not just preservation of current routes.
- Time schedules and physical stop placement around intercity connections, the way Traverse City's BATA aligns several local departures with the Indian Trails bus's arrival.
- Pursue employer-and institution-funded partnerships to help fund regional routes, following Flint MTA's model of employer-funded but publicly open service to Great Lakes Crossing, Brighton, and Howell.
- Apply for grants like IPAF and the FTA Low or No Emission Grant Program, for new "transformational" projects.
- Invest in alternative fuels where feasible, following BWATA's self-produced CNG and TheRapid's renewable natural gas fleet as proof that upfront investment pays for itself over time.





What Local Leaders Can Do

City and county officials shape whether transit investment gets reinforced or undercut by everything built around it, the infrastructure they develop, and the attitudes they foster, which goes a long way toward creating a transit-friendly culture.

- Dream big! Envision great service, and treat transit as core infrastructure rather than a service funded only after roads.
- Fully incorporate transit into master planning — as Saginaw is doing by redeveloping the historic Potter St. train station into a mixed-use district anchored by expanded STARS facilities, a daycare, and apartments.
- Prioritize mixed-use development and safe streets, especially near transit and transfer centers, so investment on one side of a street isn't undercut by neglect on the other.
- Pursue and support countywide millage campaigns where state law allows, following Oakland, Macomb, and Wayne counties' lead in southeast Michigan.
- Partner with transit agencies on NEMT, youth ridership, and other targeted programs, the way Kalamazoo Metro and MarqTran already do.

What Riders and Community Members Can Do

Riders and residents throughout the state are enthusiastic to help make their local transit systems great, including the 15 community members at the St. Clair County Library in Port Huron to 92-year-old Nancy in Traverse City, who has ridden BATA's Link service for years and has developed a deep appreciation for its effectiveness.

- Show up to community conversations and public comment periods! Develop an understanding of how decisions are made, build relationships with leaders and planners, and make your voice heard on the issues that matter to you.
- Ride transit, even occasionally, to build first-hand familiarity and to become a more effective advocate.
- Support local and countywide millage campaigns at the ballot box, as voters have recently done in 28 communities around Michigan this year.
- Build relationships with your local legislators, and talk to them about transit!
- Report specific, fixable problems: missing signage, unclear construction detours, poor stop conditions, directly to agencies, and agitate for change.
- Help spread awareness of existing programs and services in communities.

Conclusion

Two weeks of travel through seventeen cities made it unmistakably clear: While Michigan's transit network works in places, it fails Michiganders far too often. Local agencies, intercity carriers, and Amtrak each provide valuable service, yet too often they operate on separate schedules and separate plans with major gaps in between. A train station without a connecting bus, a sidewalk that ends after a strip mall, or a local route that stops running at 6:00 p.m. can undermine the rest of the trip.

Today, many of those gaps are bridged by improvisation rather than design; residents leaning on family and neighbors when they can. That flexibility speaks well of Michigan's communities, but reliable transit should never depend on luck, goodwill, or who a rider happens to know. That leads to too many stranded connections and trips never taken - trips that could have led to degrees, new job opportunities, medical breakthroughs, and deepened family connections. That lack of reliable options leads to more young people leaving our state and businesses following.

Michigan does not lack the ideas to do better. Agencies across the state are already producing their own fuel, offering tap-to-pay fares, timing local buses to meet intercity arrivals, building transit-anchored development, expanding countywide, and partnering to get riders to medical care.

Likewise, the recommendations in this report are not aspirational; rather, they are specific, achievable, and overdue. State leaders need to make transit funding growth a budget priority and hold Amtrak to real standards for reliability and rider notification. The Legislature needs to double the Comprehensive Transportation Fund and fully fund Local Bus Operating. MDOT should double route frequencies, set and fund real standards for intercity stops, and pro-actively advance passenger rail. Transit agencies need to plan boldly around the connections their riders depend on; local leaders should build the sidewalks, crossings, and mixed-use neighborhoods that make transit work; and riders can be even louder in making their voices heard through public comment, outreach to legislators, and support for local millages. These ideas are not new, but the political will to achieve them may be.

Our state is at a decision point. A new administration and new legislative leaders will set transportation priorities for the years ahead, and how Michigan Mobility 2050 is implemented will shape the next quarter century of investment.

The path forward is clear, and TRU and our allies in the Move Michigan Transportation Alliance stand ready to mobilize the public voice needed to support state leaders in doing the right thing. We'll keep pushing until the next statewide transit tour, and the next Michigan traveler, can truly depend on a convenient affordable transit network that connects all Michigan's vibrant cities, charming towns, and natural treasures. Michigan truly can become a place where everyone can get where they need and want to go, regardless of whether they drive.



Appendix A: Transit Agencies

Transit agencies are listed in order of appearance. All transit agencies are public, providing service at either the city, county, or regional level unless otherwise noted:

- Suburban Metropolitan Agency on Regional Transportation (SMART)
  - Urban transit system offering fixed-route, paratransit, and dial-a-ride transit system
  - Service Area: Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb Counties
- Blue Water Area Transit (BWAT, or BWATA)
  - Urban transit system offering fixed-route, paratransit, dial-a-ride, and regional bus service
  - Service Area: City of Port Huron; Marysville, Fort Gratiot, Burtchville and Port Huron Townships. Regional services have stops along M-23 and Chesterfield Township
- Amtrak
  - National passenger railroad company providing intercity train and intercity bus service. Amtrak operates three routes in Michigan: the Wolverine, Pere Marquette, and Blue Water
  - Service Area: United States, parts of Canada
- Mass Transportation Authority (MTA)
  - Urban transit system offering fixed-route, paratransit, dial-a-ride, and regional bus service
  - Service Area: Genesee County (Flint). Regional services go to Brighton, Howell, and Auburn Hills
- Indian Trails
  - Private intercity bus company based in Michigan, with some rural Up North routes funded by the State of Michigan and US federal government
  - Service Area: Michigan, parts of Wisconsin and Minnesota
- Regional Transit Authority of Southeast Michigan (RTA)
  - Independent public agency that assists transit agencies in Southeast Michigan with planning, and operator of the QLine light-rail train in Detroit
  - Service Area: Wayne, Oakland, Macomb, and Washtenaw Counties
- Saginaw Transit Authority and Regional Services (STARS)
  - Urban transit system offering fixed-route, paratransit, dial-a-ride, and regional bus service
  - Service Area: Saginaw City, Parts of Kochville, Saginaw, Carrollton, Bridgeport, and Buena Vista townships. Regional services go to Delta College in Bay County, Frankenmuth, Hemlock, and Pigeon in Huron County
- Bay Metro
  - Urban transit system offering fixed-route, paratransit, and dial-a-ride service
  - Service Area: Bay County (Bay City)
- Thunder Bay Transportation Authority (TBTA)
  - Rural transit system offering paratransit and dial-a-ride service
  - Service Area: Alpena, Alcona, Montmorency, and Presque Isle Counties
- Straits Regional Ride (SRR)
  - Rural transit system offering deviated fixed-route, paratransit, and dial-a-ride service
  - Service Area: Cheboygan, Emmet and Presque Isle Counties
- Shelper's Ferry
  - Publicly regulated private ferry company operating ferries and shuttle services
  - Service Area: Mackinaw City, Mackinac Island, St. Ignace
- Arnold Transit Company
  - Publicly regulated private ferry company operating ferries and shuttle services
  - Service Area: Mackinaw City, Mackinac Island, St. Ignace
- Delta Area Transportation Authority (DATA)
  - Rural transit system offering paratransit and dial-a-ride service
  - Service Area: Delta County (Escanaba)
- MarqTran
  - Rural transit system offering deviated fixed-route, paratransit, and dial-a-ride service
  - Service Area: Marquette County
- Bay Area Transportation Authority (BATA)
  - Urban transit system offering fixed-route, paratransit, and dial-a-ride service
  - Service Area: Grand Traverse and Leelanau Counties
- WexExpress - Cadillac/Wexford Transit Authority
  - Rural transit system offering paratransit, dial-a-ride, and regional bus service
  - Service Area: Wexford County
- The Rapid
  - Urban transit system offering fixed-route, paratransit, dial-a-ride, and regional bus service
  - Service Area: Cities of Grand Rapids, East Grand Rapids, Grandville, Kentwood, Walker, and Wyoming.
- Shop & Shore Trolley
  - Free tourist trolley operated by Visit Southwest Michigan, a business community promoting tourism to Southwest Michigan
  - Service Area: Cities of St. Joseph and Benton Harbor
- Twin Cities Area Transportation Authority (TCATA)
  - Urban transit system offering fixed-route, paratransit, and dial-a-ride service
  - Service Area: Cities of St. Joseph and Benton Harbor, Village of Shoreham; parts of St. Joseph, Lincoln, and Sodus Townships, and Benton Township including Benton Heights and Fair Plain
- Greyhound
  - Private intercity bus company that operates across

the United States. Greyhound is owned by FlixBus, an international intercity bus company based in Germany.
    - Service Area: United States, Parts of Mexico
- Kalamazoo Metro
    - Urban transit system offering fixed-route, paratransit, and dial-a-ride service
    - Service area: Kalamazoo County
- Ride Calhoun
    - Urban transit system offering fixed-route, paratransit, and dial-a-ride service
    - Service Area: Calhoun County (Battle Creek)
- Capital Area Transportation Authority (CATA)
    - Urban transit system offering fixed-route, paratransit, and dial-a-ride service
    - Service Area: Ingham County, Cities of Lansing and East Lansing; Lansing Township, and Parts of Bath, DeWitt, Watertown, and Delta townships
- Michigan Flyer
    - Publicly funded intercity bus route running between East Lansing, Ann Arbor, and Detroit Metro Airport. Operated by Indian Trails.
- TheRide
    - Urban transit system offering fixed-route, paratransit, and dial-a-ride service
    - Service Area: Cities of Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti; Superior, Ypsilanti, Pittsfield Townships; Parts of Scio, Ann Arbor townships
- Jackson Area Transit Authority (JATA)
    - Urban transit system offering fixed-route, paratransit, and dial-a-ride service
    - Service Area: Jackson County
- D2A2
    - Publicly funded intercity bus route connecting Ann Arbor and Detroit. Operated by Indian Trails

Endnotes

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11 Currently, the RTA covers Macomb, Oakland, Wayne, and Washtenaw counties, covering most of Metro Detroit and the Ann Arbor area.

12 MTA’s Route 10 Richfield goes to the Flint Amtrak station at request only. If you are taking this trip, make sure to let your driver know you need the train station.

13 Find Disability Network of Mid-Michigan online at dnmm.org

14 Bay City’s Indian Trails bus stop is serviced once daily: 1:10 pm southbound, 5:25 pm northbound

15 The Alpena Indian Trails bus stop is serviced once daily: 9:45 am southbound, 8:45 pm northbound.

16 Thankfully, Mackinaw City has three Indian Trails buses to St. Ignace, meaning a missed connection doesn’t result in delaying travel until tomorrow.

17 Website: miunited.org

18 Current schedules mean arriving before sunset from the southeast but departing at 12:45am to return

19 Find MPTA at mptaonline.org

20 Head to gtcountymi.gov/2742/Senior-Center for the Traverse City Senior Center Network

21 Traverse City’s dial-a-ride service, covering Grand Traverse and Leelanau Counties.

22 Traverse City is served by Indian Trails once daily, 10:15 am southbound and 6:50 pm northbound

23 Website: downtowngr.org

24 Website: dakc.us

25 Website: strongtownsgr.org

26 Website: entfkent.org

27 Website: openroadsbike.org

28 Giles, Lisa. 2026. “Round-the-Mitten Transit Tour Makes Stop in Flint.” ABC 12 WJRT-TV, June 4. https://www.abc12.com/news/round-the-mitten-transit-tour-makes-stop-in-flint/article_1eee578d-

f89e-420f-99a3-a7c53248e789.html.

29 Zadrails. 2026. “Royal Oak, MI Amtrak Station (ROY): Dining & Live Departures.” ZadRails, January 6. https://www.zadrails.com/amtrak/royal-oak-station/.

30 Experience Grand Rapids. 2025. “Exploring Grand Rapids on the DASH.” Experiencegr.Com, Experience Grand Rapids, July 15. https://www.experiencegr.com/articles/post/dash-route/.

31 https://www.mlive.com/news/kalamazoo/2023/01/city-of-kalamazoo-hires-firm-to-help-convert-one-way-streets-to-two-way-traffic.html

32 WOODTV.com staff. 2021. “Amtrak to Increase Train Speeds Between Kalamazoo and Albion to 110 MPH.” WOODTV.Com, May 17. https://www.woodtv.com/news/michigan/michigan-amtrak-route-first-to-increase-travel-speeds-to-110-mph/.

33 .Number comes from Ryan Tallmadge, provided on April 22, 2026 in personal correspondence.

34 Tallmadge, Elizabeth. 2025. “My Brother in Law is working on his capstone project for NMU. He is collecting interest data on returning passenger rail service to the UP from Chicago to Marquette via Green Bay! He needs more locals to reply so if you could take a moment to complete his survey he’d appreciate any feedback. Thanks!” Facebook, November 1. https://www.facebook.com/groups/whatsupmarquette/permalink/25919336127655811/.

35 MDOT. 2016. “Michigan Passenger Rail Future.” Michigan.Gov. https://www.michigan.gov/mdot/travel/mobility/rail/michigan-passenger-rail-future.

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