

A Publication of RPO America, a Program Affiliate of NADO, and the NADO Research Foundation's Center for Transportation Advancement and Regional Development

May 5, 2009


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Innovative Ridesharing Programs in Rural Areas: An Affordable and Environmentally Friendly Mode of Transportation

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With fluctuating gas prices and an uncertain future for alternative energy sources, rural regions are taking transportation efficiency into their own hands. Emphasis is often placed on metropolitan ridesharing programs, but rural regions are just as in need if not more for alternative transportation options because of the distances rural and small metropolitan residents may have to travel for work or services. In South Carolina and Iowa, two Councils of Governments (COGs) share their success stories on bringing affordable rural ridesharing programs to life.

Santee Lynches Regional COG, headquartered in Sumter, South Carolina, helped to facilitate an alternative rideshare program for its rural region for only a \$2,500 start-up cost and less than a year of planning. Informal discussions for the program began in November 2007 and spring 2008 seven major employers joined the rideshare program discussion. Then on August 1, 2008, the official launch of the public/private rideshare program took place with participation from such regional employers as Square D, Dorn Veterans Administration, Becton, Dickinson & Co., Central Carolina Technical College and the University of South Carolina. More employers have since joined.

With its low start-up costs, the rideshare program uses a system in which everyone utilizing the service contributes. In addition, this public-private funded program functions through the participation of the Santee Lynches Regional COG, Santee Wateree Regional Transportation Authority (a local public transit provider), AlterNetRides (a private Web-based ride planning service), and VPSI (a private vanpool provider). Costs for providing the system are offset when new employers join in the venture and contribute to the monthly administrative expenses. The Santee Wateree Regional Transportation Authority is then able to pay for the riders' use of AlterNetRides' Web-based service. Recently, Santee Lynches Regional COG assisted the Santee Wateree Regional Transportation Authority in obtaining a \$100,000 grant to look at public transit routes for the rideshare program over a two-year period.

Vanpool provider VPSI does not charge a fee until the commuters select the vanpool option. The cost of the van, gas and other expenses are covered by the vanpool riders. If employers provide the federal commuter tax benefit to at least six employees using the vanpool service, all costs are covered. The federal commuter tax benefit works by providing a certain amount that employees can exclude from taxable income based on employer-provided transit benefits. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 increased the tax-free transit benefit month. Also, if the employer chooses, an additional cost can ensure a commuter's ride home in cases of emergencies by using the Santee Wateree Regional Transportation Authority. Through the rideshare program, Santee Wateree Regional Transportation Authority offers rides to cities within and outside of the region and participating company sites, including a medical center and a university.

A private partner in the rideshare program since September 2008, Santee Cooper Power and Electric Company utilizes the rideshare service for 18 of its facilities with 378 employees benefitting from the program. Santee Cooper Spokesperson Ray Smith remarks, "The rideshare program has given us creative ways to help the environment and employees. It helped create a partnership with the rural transportation authority, Tri County Link." To date, Santee Cooper ridesharing employees have saved 993,694 miles and reduced CO2 emissions by 314,559 lbs. In addition, Santee Cooper is promoting further rideshare options by sponsoring four buses for mass transit and making monthly reduced bus fares available for purchase to employees.

The successful rideshare program has also inspired other COGs to embark on similar projects. The Berkeley-Charleston-Dorchester COG in South Carolina is interested in pursuing this because, according to Senior Planner Jeff Burns, "It is a tailored service where we can help with trip routing and some of those features that enables citizens to travel more efficiently and cost effectively."

In Carroll, Iowa, Region XII COG is preparing to launch Job Jet, the state's first rural commuter van service. The COG embarked on this venture in July of 2007. Since Region XII COG operates the local public transit system and promotes economic development, it was extremely important to offer a beneficial rideshare program for local residents commuting to work. Widely fluctuating gas prices affect commuters, and employers in Crawford County and throughout the region had a fear of losing employees due to long commutes.

Much needed funding for the program came from Iowa's Congestion Management/Air Quality funds with an initial amount of \$146,000. \$118,000 was used to purchase five 15-passenger vans and \$28,000 was for a three-year operational fund. The Iowa Department of Transportation also contributed \$8,000, enabling Region XII COG to create marketing materials and to advertise Job Jet through its Web site and at local events.

The COG's recent van purchase will jumpstart the rural vanpool program, which will have a sliding scale rate per mile. There will also be an incentive for employees participating in the program through a payroll deduction. Volunteer drivers are currently being recruited and others have expressed interest in joining the program as a rider. The drivers in the program are typically employees helping transport other co-workers to their job. The driver also needs to join the drug and alcohol testing program and have a good driving record.

Job Jet is expected to launch in June 2009. Chris Whitaker, Region XII COG transportation planner, says, "Job Jet is a new and exciting program that will assist employers to increase their available labor market while also providing a reliable and economic source of transportation for employees to get to and from work."

For more information, visit Santee Lynches Regional COG's Web site at <http://www.santeelynchescog.org> and Region XII COG's Web site at <http://www.region12cog.org>.

This article is based upon work supported by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) under Agreement No. DTFH61-06-H-00029. Any opinions, findings and conclusions or recommendations in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of FHWA.



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