

Subtask 2.4. Ridership Estimates

Requirement

Surveys have been completed by the University of Michigan, Washtenaw County, the Ann Arbor Downtown Development Authority (DDA) and the Chambers of Ann Arbor, Brighton and Howell that were used to estimate ridership. Data from the Census Transportation Planning Package has also been used to assist with the development of the ridership estimates. The contractor shall review all of this data and make an assessment of the reasonableness of the estimates and the rates of annual increase.

Discussion

Ridership is perhaps the most important single criterion in evaluating the feasibility of commuter rail service. Commuter rail service may produce several benefits such as mobility enhancement, highway congestion reduction, reduction in fuel consumption and air quality improvement. These benefits will not be attained unless the service attracts sufficient passengers to make an impact. Ridership is also critical to result in cost-effective service.

The purpose of this task is to assess the reasonableness of Wally Coalition ridership estimates. The Coalition's ridership estimates are based on responses to surveys conducted by the University of Michigan, Washtenaw County, Ann Arbor DDA and the Chambers of Commerce in Ann Arbor, Brighton and Howell. Population and employment data in Washtenaw and Livingston Counties also were used in the reasonableness estimations. In the following discussion it is important to keep in mind that "daily ridership" refers to daily weekday service since no service is contemplated on the weekends except for possible football excursions.

The single largest group of passengers expected on the Wally commuter rail line are daily commuters headed to the University of Michigan (including its medical center) in Ann Arbor. The University employs over 3,700 faculty and staff in the potential service area, not including students. Based on its review of the survey results, RLBA estimates an average daily University-related ridership of 2,200 (1,100 roundtrips) per weekday. RLBA's adjustment is based upon survey responses which said they would use the service on different numbers of days per week ranging from five to only a single day per week. (It is understood that the revenue from monthly passes will not change, no matter how many trips are taken.) From this point on ridership will be referred to in terms of single rides and not roundtrips which is industry practice.

Roughly 60 percent of projected University riders are staff at the medical center, which operates year round. The remainder are mostly staff which work twelve months each year as opposed to faculty which don't work year round. With that in mind, ridership could be higher during the normal school year if faculty and students that were not represented fully in the survey responses use the service.

The next two largest groups of potential riders were identified from a survey conducted by the Ann Arbor DDA, of parking permit holders, and an employee survey conducted by the Washtenaw County Government. Among Ann Arbor DDA parking permit holders, the survey showed that the average daily ridership would be 202 trips. The survey of Washtenaw County employees showed an average daily ridership of 82.

The Ann Arbor Chamber of Commerce survey was not included in the RLBA ridership estimate because of potential overlap with the other surveys. The Howell Chamber of Commerce survey was excluded because it was based on reverse commute train service which is not envisioned at the initial stage of Wally development. The Brighton Chamber of Commerce survey was not considered since it was deemed too general to provide a reasonable estimation of ridership.

RLBA estimated ridership from three other employers that were not included in the Coalition's surveys, but were interested parties in the formation of WALLY: the local Environmental Protection Agency office, St. Joseph Mercy Hospital and Washtenaw Community College. With roughly 4,750 employees at these three entities, RLBA estimates the average daily ridership at 194 trips.

On any given day, the passenger load may be higher or lower than the average daily ridership.

Special event ridership, such as travel to University of Michigan home football games, may be an added bonus, in particular if access is gained, for passenger trains, to the Ann Arbor Railroad track through Ann Arbor. In Iowa, rail travel to football games has proven to be a "winner".

In conjunction with implementation of new commuter rail service, RLBA recommends robust and imaginative efforts to advertise and promote the new service. This may be done in a number of ways. One way is to schedule special orientations at important downtown Ann Arbor destinations. Obviously, University of Michigan (including all its medical center and other campuses and work locations) is a prime target. Orientations should likewise be scheduled with other significant employers. The orientations should be multiple and arranged to encourage maximum attendance. Other ways to advertise and promote include television, radio, organization websites, etc.

Conclusions

RLBA estimates the average number of roundtrips at 1,300 per weekday as compared to the Wally estimate of 1,688 per weekday. The Wally Coalition estimated that 200 roundtrips a day would be "Special Riders" or non-commuter round trips. RLBA believes that since in the current plan there is no mid-day, night or weekend service, these non-commuter trips should not be included in ridership estimates, in order to be conservative. RLBA agrees that Wally should try to attract riders from the non-commuter market. However, average daily ridership of 2,600 is considered a reasonable level of starting ridership for a new service.

The Wally Coalition estimated roundtrip ridership per station as follows: Howell, 525; Chilson/Brighton, 306; and Whitmore Lake, 656. RLBA analyzed the population in the areas surrounding the proposed stations and used that data to associate ridership with stations. RLBA estimates the roundtrip ridership as follows: Howell, 350; Chilson/Brighton, 390; and Whitmore Lake, 560.

Growth in ridership over the first five years of operation was estimated at three percent per year by the Wally Coalition. In the same time period, the population and employment in the Wally service area is expected to increase by only two percent. However, factors that make commuter driving increasingly onerous, such as increasing fuel cost and highway congestion, along with provision of reliable, high quality service, make Wally's growth forecast reasonable.

RLBA believes that the surveying done up to this point has established a good and reasonable estimate of potential ridership on the Wally service. A more in-depth analysis of ridership is suggested in order to introduce travel time in the survey and to establish per station ridership. Surveys performed to date do not include an estimate of the total travel time from origin station to the destination. Total travel time may have an appreciable effect on ridership. When the survey results are calculated, the average daily ridership at each station should be determined, from the individual responses instead of estimating the breakdown in ridership between stations based on population. An in-depth analysis would, however, be time-consuming, and the Wally Coalition may be satisfied with the current basis for ridership.