

FINAL REPORT – JUNE 2025

# Southeast Minnesota TMO Feasibility Study



# Acknowledgments

This study was initiated by SE MN Together and facilitated by the City of Chatfield. It was informed by numerous individuals, and organizations. In addition to the individuals and organizations acknowledged on this page, many people and organizations contributed by sharing their transportation needs and priorities for the region.

## Steering Committee

Al Roder

*City of Byron*

Timothy Ibisch

*City of Kasson*

Mathias Hughey and Mikayla Schmidt

*City of Northfield*

Scott Arneson

*Goodhue County*

Stephanie Hurt, Tony Spaulding, and Aaron Buckley

*Mayo Clinic*

Kenneth Reid and Heather Conley

*Riverland Community College*

Mark Nelson, Kathy Schultz, James Wolter, and

Lynell Popowski

*MnDOT*

Will Schroeer

*Northfield Transportation Advisory Committee*

Allison Sosa

*Olmsted County*

Jon DeVries

*Preston EDA*

Linda Driessen and Kerri Leucuta

*Region X Quality Council*

Galen Malecha and Shari Noll

*Rice County*

Joe Jacobson

*Rochester City Lines*

Sheila Kiscaden and Mike Thorsteinson

*SE MN Together*

Laurie Brownell

*SEMAAA*

Bill Spitzer

*SEMCAC Transportation/Rolling Hills Transit*

Kirk Kuchera and Christine Thompson

*SMART Transit*

Amy Grover

*Southeast Service Cooperative*

Brenda Johnson

*Southeastern Minnesota League of Municipalities*

Dianne Ford

*Three Rivers / Hiawathaland Transit*

Kathryn Leys

*University of Minnesota Extension*

Frank Douma

*University of Minnesota Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs*

Kati Carpenter

*Veterans Services (SE MN Transportation Program - Disabled Veterans of Minnesota)*

Matthieu Lynch

*We Bike Rochester*

James Goblirsch and Sausann Al-Jawhar

*Winona State University*

## Southeast MN Together

Brian Carlson, Jon DeVries, Amy Grover, Joe Jacobson, Brenda Johnson, Sheila Kiscaden, Natalie Siderius, Bill Spitzer, and Mike Thorsteinson

## City of Chatfield

Alison Bentley and Michele Peterson

## Consultant Team

Joel Young

*Community and Economic Development Associates (CEDA)*

Joddie Gray, Ulla Hester, Robby Long, Amy Johnson, and Chris Cannon

*Alta Planning + Design*

Mark Nolan and Adrian Diaz

*SEH*

# Table of Contents

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>Charting a Course for Regional Mobility in Southeast Minnesota .....</b> | <b>1</b>  |
| Study Goals .....   | 2         |
| <i>What is a TMO?</i> .....   | 2         |
| <b>Assessing the TMO Feasibility Framework .....</b>                        | <b>3</b>  |
| 1. Area Characteristics.....  | 5         |
| <i>Land Use</i> .....   | 5         |
| <i>Demographic</i> .....  | 5         |
| <i>Population Density</i> .....   | 5         |
| <i>Economic Development</i> .....   | 6         |
| 2. Transportation Challenges.....   | 7         |
| <i>Fragmented and Undercoordinated Transportation Services</i> .....        | 7         |
| <i>Limited Regional Coverage and Service Gaps</i> .....                     | 7         |
| <i>Current Riders are Reliant on Transit</i> .....                          | 7         |
| <i>Lack of Centralized Information and Trip Planning Support</i> .....      | 7         |
| <i>Technology and Booking Integration Gaps</i> .....                        | 7         |
| <i>Underutilized Transit Services and Financial Inefficiencies</i> .....    | 8         |
| <i>Mismatch Between Travel Patterns and Service Models</i> .....            | 8         |
| <i>Employer Needs and Opportunities</i> .....                               | 8         |
| 3. Stakeholder Commitment.....  | 8         |
| <i>Regional Collaboration in Southeast Minnesota</i> .....                  | 8         |
| <i>Importance of Regional Champions</i> .....                               | 8         |
| 4. Organizational and Financial Viability .....                             | 9         |
| <i>Securing Financial Sustainability</i> .....                              | 9         |
| Key Insights into Economic Benefits .....                                   | 9         |
| <i>Transit as a Lifeline</i> .....  | 9         |
| <i>Substantial Economic and Social Return</i> .....                         | 10        |
| <i>Positive Return on Investment</i> .....                                  | 10        |
| <i>COVID-19 Impact and Opportunity for Recovery</i> .....                   | 10        |
| <i>Potential for Growth</i> .....   | 10        |
| <b>What Will a TMO Look Like? .....</b>                                     | <b>11</b> |
| Host Organization.....  | 12        |
| Governance Model.....   | 13        |
| Staffing.....   | 13        |
| <i>Key Functions of the TMO Program Manager</i> .....                       | 13        |
| <b>Advancing the TMO .....</b>  | <b>15</b> |
| TMO Activities .....  | 16        |
| 1. Improve Transit Through Regional Coordination.....                       | 17        |
| 2. Build a Regional Transportation Information Hub .....                    | 17        |
| 3. Communicate Travel Options and Promote Transit Ridership .....           | 18        |
| 4. Create a Unified Transit Voice .....                                     | 18        |
| <b>What is Next?.....</b>   | <b>19</b> |
| <b>Technical Appendices.....</b>  | <b>21</b> |

# Charting a Course for Regional Mobility in Southeast Minnesota

---



In 2024, Southeast Minnesota Together (SE MN Together) launched a study to explore solutions to the transportation challenges impacting access to employment, education, healthcare, and other essential services across Southeast Minnesota.

Recognizing the need for a more coordinated and sustainable approach, SE MN Together wanted to explore whether a Transportation Management Organization (TMO) would be a feasible and effective structure to facilitate improved mobility and connectivity throughout the region.

The study assessed how a TMO could improve transportation for workforce needs, quality of life, and access to services across the 11-county area. The evaluation included a review of existing plans and data, engagement with regional stakeholders, and an analysis of organizational models and funding options.

---

**SE MN Together** is a regional network of community leaders, organizations, and institutions committed to building regional collaboration and community capacity throughout Southeast Minnesota. The coalition brings together stakeholders from across the 11-county region—including local governments, nonprofits, businesses, and educational institutions—to address shared challenges and pursue collaborative solutions in workforce development, economic opportunity, and regional planning.

---

## Study Goals

The study aimed to “determine an organizational structure that can deliver resources to address the region’s transportation needs related to workforce transportation, access to healthcare and education, access to services, and quality of life”.

To achieve that goal, the project team set the following study parameters:

- Build on and advance the region’s successful transit systems, services, and facilities.
- Engage with leaders throughout the 11-county area to affirm the TMO approach meets regional needs and priorities.
- Identify barriers, gaps, redundancies and efficiencies in the region’s transit, mobility, and ridesharing services.
- Coordinate with and complement the regional transportation coordinating council efforts in Region 10.

## Study Area

The study area included the 11 counties of Southeast Minnesota: Dodge, Fillmore, Freeborn, Goodhue, Houston, Mower, Olmsted, Rice, Steele, Wabasha, Winona.

## What is a TMO?

A TMO is an entity formed to coordinate and manage transportation services and initiatives within a defined geographic area. TMOs typically provide services such as:

- Educate and promote sustainable transportation options and services
- Convene stakeholders to find collaborative solutions
- Facilitate and advocate for improved services, such as transit, shuttle operations, and bike-share/bike library programs

Successful TMOs operate with a collaborative, member-based governance structure, involving both public and private partners. Their missions reflects the unique needs of their members and service areas.

# Assessing the TMO Feasibility Framework

---



**SE MN Together**

The Southeast Minnesota Transportation Management Organization (TMO) Feasibility Study used a structured framework to assess its viability. The study aimed to determine if a TMO was feasible, what its functions should be, whom it should serve, and how it should operate.

The feasibility framework drew from national best practices and insights from over 100 existing TMOs, and focused on evaluating the following core elements:

1. **Area Characteristics:** Reviewing demographic, economic, and land use factors that influence travel behavior and transportation needs.
2. **Transportation Challenges:** Identifying current barriers to access and service gaps for workers, residents, employers, and institutions.
3. **Stakeholder Commitment:** Assessing interest, capacity, and leadership from regional partners to champion and sustain a TMO.
4. **Financial Sustainability:** Evaluating funding mechanisms and the feasibility of a multi-year, regionally supported TMO.

To apply this framework, the project team used a comprehensive planning process that combined technical analysis with extensive stakeholder engagement. Activities included:

- Reviewing more than a dozen regional, state, and local transportation and workforce development plans to understand and build on past work and related efforts.
- Analyzing regional travel behavior using data from Replica (Fall 2019 and Fall 2023), Census information, and transit ridership data. This analysis provided valuable insight into where people are traveling and how travel patterns are shifting.
- Engaging stakeholders through interviews with employers; focus groups including transit providers, human services organizations, cities, towns, and higher education providers; a regional survey; virtual engagement; and one-on-one conversations.
- Facilitating a Steering Committee, which served as the primary strategic advisory group and a driving force behind the study's development. Members represented a wide range of sectors, geographic areas, and community perspectives across the 11-county region. The Committee was structured to include both conventional decision-makers and underrepresented voices, ensuring that recommendations reflected the full diversity of regional needs.
- Calculating the economic benefits of public transit in the region.

The findings from this process are presented in the following sections, organized by the four elements of the feasibility framework.

# 1. Area Characteristics

A TMO is designed to be flexible and responsive to the unique needs of its service area, so its geographic scope and structure can vary significantly. To assess the feasibility of a regional TMO in Southeast Minnesota, the study reviewed key area characteristics—specifically land use, demographic, and economic factors—that influence travel behavior and transportation needs. These characteristics provide important insight into where and how a TMO could deliver the most value across the region.

## Land Use

Many TMOs form in major activity centers that combine commercial, retail, entertainment, and residential uses, such as central business districts, urban redevelopment sites, or suburban activity centers. These areas are ideal for TMO formation, especially when there is existing density and diverse land uses or plans to increase them. Some TMOs serve major highway or transit corridors with a common set of issues or a cohesive sense of community along the length of the corridor. Often, land uses are spread out along the corridor, with concentration at major interchanges, intersections, or transit stations.

Southeast Minnesota is a geographically diverse region encompassing 11 counties characterized by a mix of rural communities, small towns, and several mid-sized cities. While the region is predominantly rural—with agriculture and natural landscapes shaping much of the land use—it also includes urban centers such as Albert Lea, Austin, Faribault, Northfield, Owatonna, Red Wing, Rochester, and Winona, which serve as regional hubs for employment, healthcare, education, and commerce. A TMO spanning 11 counties will need to balance the need for regional coordination and service with the needs of subregional activity centers.

## Demographic

Understanding Southeast Minnesota’s demographics is essential for identifying transportation needs and designing effective solutions. Demographic trends help pinpoint which populations are most likely to face mobility barriers and where targeted interventions could have the greatest impact.

Southeast Minnesota is experiencing modest population growth and increasing diversity, with a rising share of older adults and foreign-born residents. These demographic shifts, combined with the region’s dispersed geography and changing travel patterns, create distinct challenges in providing and communicating transportation options in the region.

Data show that older adults average just 2.76 trips per day—far below the regional average of 4.17, potentially indicating unmet transportation needs. Other transit-reliant groups, including individuals without a driver’s license or access to a vehicle, or those with disabilities, also face constrained mobility.

These findings emphasize the need for equitable, coordinated transportation strategies.

## Population Density

Southeast Minnesota’s population is unevenly distributed across a large geographic area. While the region includes a few mid-sized cities with moderate to high population densities—such as Albert Lea, Austin, Faribault, Northfield, Owatonna, Red Wing, Rochester, and Winona—the majority of the 11-county area is made up of low-density rural communities and small towns.

This dispersed settlement pattern, meaning people and businesses are spread out over a large area rather than concentrated in dense cities, challenges efficient public transportation (transit) service delivery and regional coordination. In these low-density areas, there often are not enough riders living close together to make traditional fixed-route service financially viable. Fixed-route service refers to buses or trains that run on set schedules and routes, like a typical city bus line. Because of this, these areas are more reliant on flexible transportation options, such as demand-response services, which operate more like a taxi or ride-share, where vehicles pick up and drop off riders when and where they're requested, rather than following a fixed schedule or route. Coordinated transportation solutions involving different providers working together to share resources and offer more seamless rides across a region, also provide opportunities in rural areas (as discussed below).

A future TMO would need to balance urban and rural needs by promoting scalable transportation options that operate efficiently across varying population densities.

### Economic Development

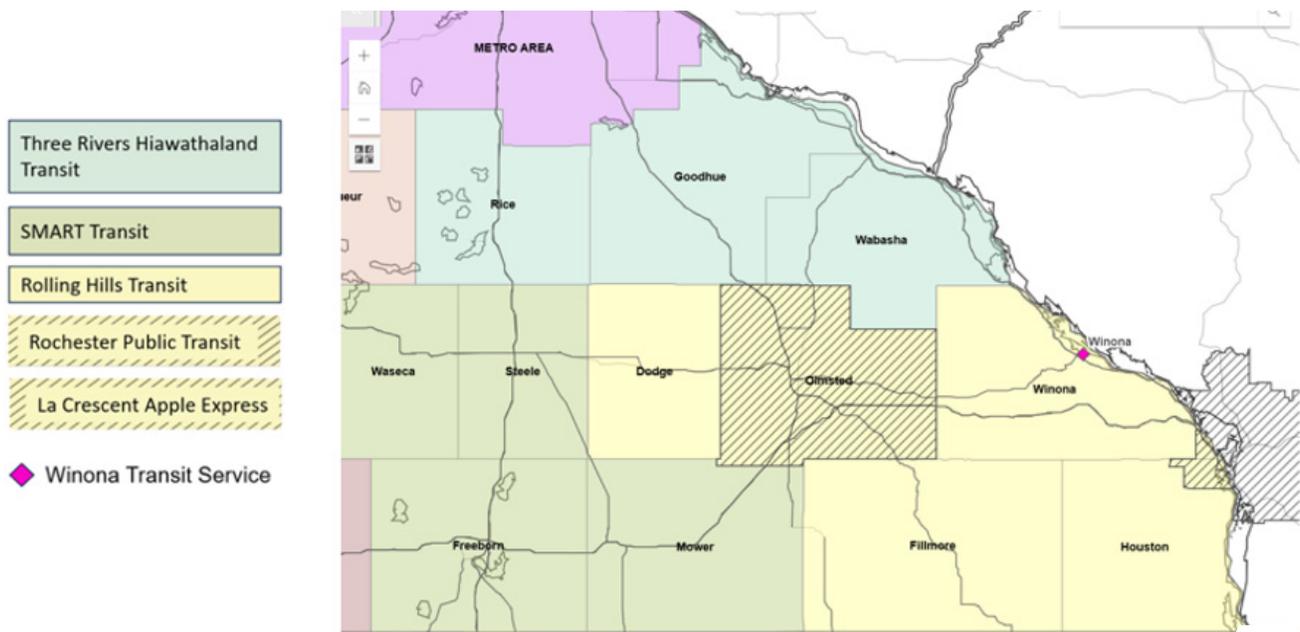
For a TMO to thrive, it needs to operate in an area with a strong economic pulse. This section examines Southeast Minnesota's economic landscape, focusing on job density and growth, to understand where a TMO can deliver the most value. Understanding these economic factors is crucial because TMOs tend to be most effective in regions experiencing significant development or strong business activity. They are typically less suitable for areas with stagnant growth or economic decline—unless the primary challenge is access. Analyzing these characteristics helps

determine how a TMO can best support workforce access, economic mobility, and regional prosperity by connecting residents to job opportunities.

A primary indicator of economic development is an area's job density relative to the region and the change in the total number of primary jobs over time. In Southeast Minnesota, job density is highest in the region's urban centers, which serve as economic hubs for surrounding rural areas.

- **Rochester** is the clear **anchor of regional employment**, with the highest job density in Southeast Minnesota. Driven largely by Mayo Clinic and related healthcare and research industries, Rochester has both a high concentration of primary jobs and steady job growth over time.
- **Winona, Austin, Albert Lea, and Red Wing** also exhibit **moderate job densities**, supported by sectors such as education, manufacturing, healthcare, and local government. These cities function as subregional employment centers, drawing workers from nearby rural communities.
- The **surrounding rural areas**, while geographically expansive, have **low job densities** and are more likely to be home to agricultural, small business, or home-based employment. Workers in these areas often commute to job centers, underscoring the need for reliable regional transportation connections.

The distribution of job density highlights the importance of connecting rural residents to employment opportunities in regional hubs. A TMO can facilitate coordinated transportation services to enhance job access, workforce retention, and economic mobility across the region.



**Figure 1.** Transit Service Providers across Southeast Minnesota. Source: Minnesota Department of Transportation (June 2025). Find your transit provider. <https://www.dot.state.mn.us/transit/find-your-transit-provider.html>

## 2. Transportation Challenges

A key factor in TMO success is the presence of **clearly defined and widely recognized transportation challenges**—issues that neither the public nor private sector can fully address alone but could be meaningfully solved through collaboration. A lack of consensus around the transportation problem or the absence of an actionable role for the TMO is often a key reason why emerging TMOs struggle. To inform the understanding of transportation challenges, the project team built on findings from previous studies and conducted stakeholder engagement throughout the feasibility study. More than 150 stakeholders participated through interviews, focus groups, surveys, and virtual input. Insights into transportation challenges identified by stakeholders are documented below.

### Fragmented and Undercoordinated Transportation Services

More than 40 transportation providers operate in Southeast Minnesota, including transit agencies, human service providers, intercity carriers, and private shuttles. However, these services often operate in silos, leading to inefficient coverage, service duplication, and rider confusion. Providers also cited difficulty coordinating schedules and service boundaries due to incompatible booking systems and limited collaboration between agencies.

### Limited Regional Coverage and Service Gaps

Many rural and small-town areas lack adequate transit coverage, as providers report insufficient funding and staffing to expand services into low-density regions. This leaves significant geographic gaps, especially for trips between counties or across transit agency service boundaries. The barriers are compounded by inadequate evening and weekend service, a lack of first/last-mile connections (connections between where people live or work and main transit stops), and unclear information on how to access services across jurisdictions.

### Current Riders are Reliant on Transit

A survey of transit riders showed that:

- 60% of riders lack a driver’s license
- 60% do not have access to a personal vehicle
- 64% have a disability

Riders expressed that more reliable schedules, expanded hours, and better geographic coverage would improve their ability to get around.

### Lack of Centralized Information and Trip Planning Support

Transit riders and regional stakeholders frequently cited the lack of centralized, user-friendly information about available services as a major challenge. Transit operators confirmed that many Southeast Minnesota residents are unaware of the full range of services available. Without a regional resource or travel navigator, many potential

riders will remain unaware of their options. Stakeholder engagement made it apparent that some available transportation services are promoted by “word of mouth” due to undercoordination or lack of resources. This included school transportation for children and commuter vans/shuttles for apartments.

### **Technology and Booking Integration Gaps**

Separate scheduling systems across providers prevent seamless trip planning and transfers. Riders must often call or navigate multiple websites to arrange complex trips, which discourages use and limits access, especially for cross-county travel or multi-leg journeys.

### **Underutilized Transit Services and Financial Inefficiencies**

Though public transit service levels have largely rebounded post-COVID, ridership has not. In 2023, Southeast Minnesota providers delivered 1.1 million passenger trips—well below 2019 levels—resulting in an estimated \$35 million in lost benefits and higher per-trip costs. Without coordination or promotion, transit services risk becoming increasingly unsustainable. Privately supported commuter bus service, such as the routes sponsored by Mayo Clinic serving many of the communities in the region, were paused when the pandemic began. This service is just being revived in early 2025 in limited pilot form for Mayo Clinic employees.

### **Mismatch Between Travel Patterns and Service Models**

Trip data analysis shows travel is increasingly localized, especially in smaller communities. However, most services remain fixed-route or reservation-only dial-a-ride, limiting flexibility for workers with irregular schedules or those making short, spontaneous trips.

### **Employer Needs and Opportunities**

Several employers, especially those requiring in-person work, reported recruitment and retention challenges in part due to limited transportation options for their workers. Most employers are interested in facilitating and promoting carpooling and vanpooling but lack the internal resources. This highlights the need for regional coordination and technical assistance that a TMO could provide.

These challenges reinforce the need for a dedicated entity to coordinate services, advocate for improvements, and raise awareness about available transportation options.

## **3. Stakeholder Commitment**

Successful TMO formation depends on a shared recognition of regional transportation challenges, a willingness to contribute to collective solutions, and a clear understanding of the TMO’s potential role.

The process is significantly smoother when stakeholders have a history of working together on local or regional issues—whether transportation-related or not – and when specific coordination gaps and needs have been identified that existing organizations are not addressing.

### **Regional Collaboration in Southeast Minnesota**

While Southeast Minnesota has a track record of successful public and private sector collaboration, the region currently lacks a regional transportation coordinating council (RTCC) or similar organization to bring together transportation providers, businesses, workforce development, human services agencies, and local and regional governments. Stakeholders consistently pointed to the lack of formal coordination among providers as a barrier to efficient service delivery. This study echoed previous findings which also identified a clear need for structure to facilitate and sustain transportation collaboration and coordination in the region.

### **Importance of Regional Champions**

A frequently cited factor in early TMO success is the presence of a committed local champion—such as a community leader, influential employer, or developer—who advocates for the initiative and helps catalyze action. Even more effective is the involvement of multiple champions: a small group of respected and invested advocates who are willing to lead the initial steps, promote the concept broadly, and guide early implementation.

In Southeast Minnesota, SE MN Together has been a vocal champion for transit. Through this study, a larger group of champions is emerging including transit providers, human services organizations, local municipalities, and large employers, who have expressed strong support for a regional TMO and a willingness to stay engaged.

Several organizations also indicated willingness to host or support the TMO, laying the groundwork for implementation, and a host organization has been identified.

## 4. Organizational and Financial Viability

A regional TMO’s long-term viability depends not only on stakeholder support but also on securing sustainable and diversified funding. Successful TMOs typically maintain a balanced mix of funding sources—supplementing government grants and local contributions with membership dues or service fees—to reduce over-reliance on any single stream and enhance resilience over time.

### Securing Financial Sustainability

While some financial questions remain, preliminary analysis found that a regional TMO is organizationally and fiscally feasible. Launching a TMO as a program under an existing regionally operating organization will reduce administrative expenses, start-up time, and costs. Potential funding sources are being explored in collaboration with MnDOT and local and regional partners. Continued exploration of these models will be a critical next step for implementation.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that a well-structured, locally supported TMO could enhance transportation access, foster economic growth, and build on the region’s existing assets to deliver lasting impact.

## Key Insights into Economic Benefits

The feasibility study included a detailed economic benefits analysis that quantifies the social and economic value generated by public transit services in Southeast Minnesota. This analysis highlights transit’s critical role in supporting individual opportunity, community stability, and regional economic vitality.

### Transit as a Lifeline

Transit services in Southeast Minnesota provide essential access to employment, healthcare, education, shopping, and social connections, especially for those without access to a personal vehicle. For many, transit is not just a convenience, but a lifeline that enables independence and reduces reliance on public assistance. Many riders expressed that if transit services were no longer available, they would have to leave their community.

Transit agencies included in the transit benefit analysis:

- Hiawatha Transit / Three Rivers Community Action
- Rolling Hills Transit / SEMCAC
- SMART Transit (Southern Minnesota Area Rural Transit)
- Rochester Public Transit (RPT)
- Winona Transit Service

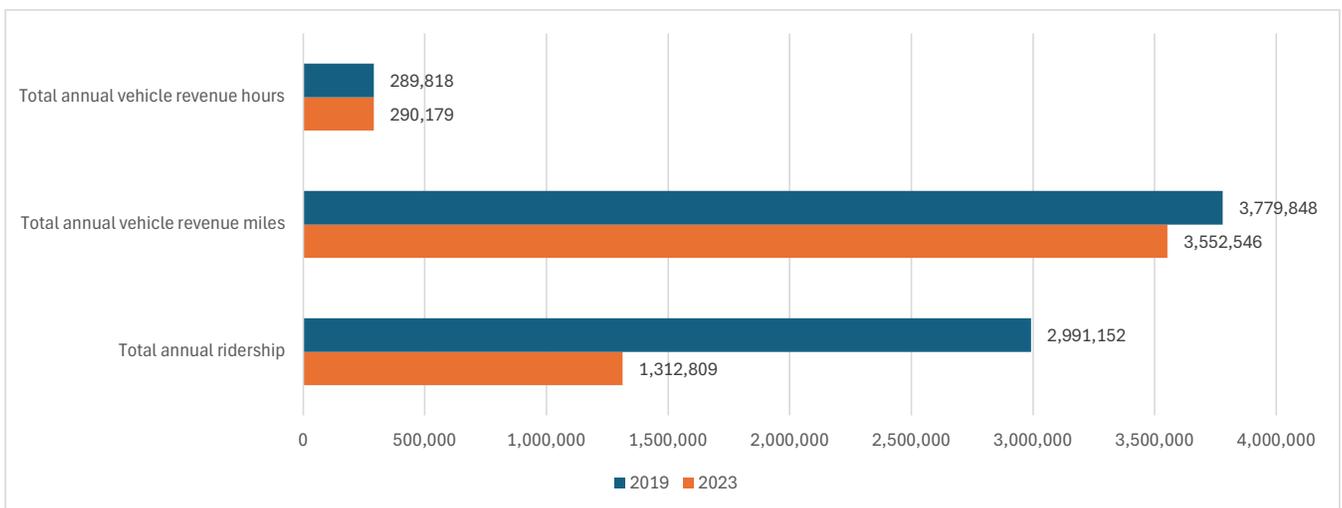
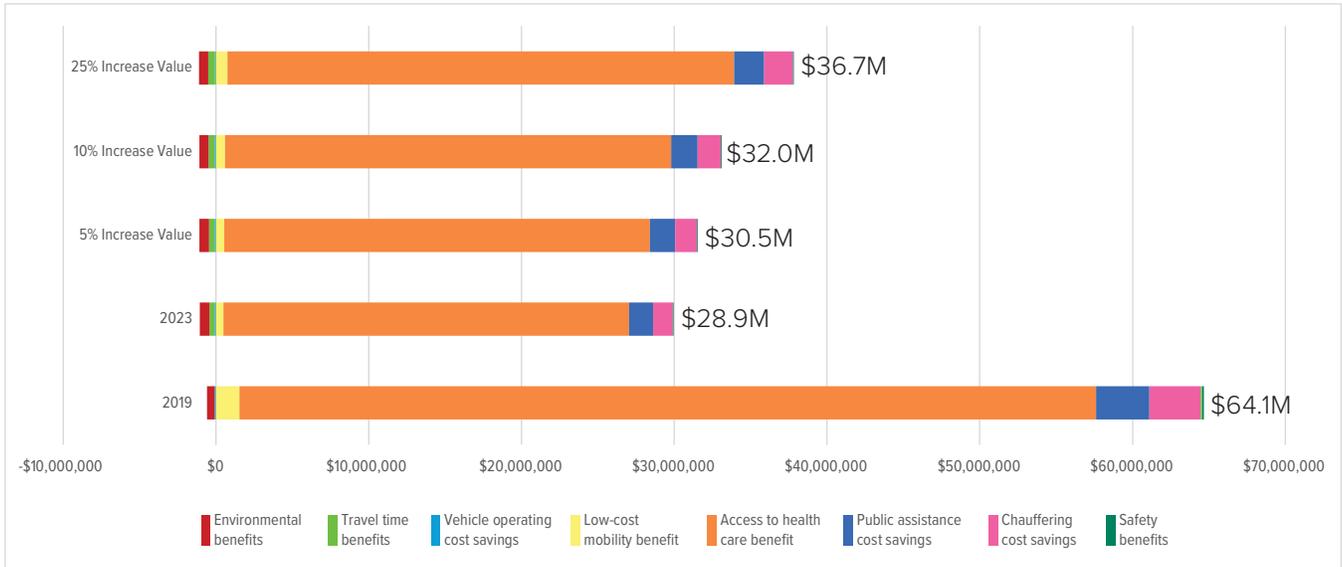


Figure 2. Regional Transit Ridership vs. Service Hours, 2019–2023



**Figure 3.** Projected Transit Benefits in Southeast Minnesota Under Ridership Growth Scenarios

### Substantial Economic and Social Return

In 2023, the five primary public transit systems in the region generated approximately **\$29 million** in societal benefits—including healthcare savings, reduced vehicle operating costs, and public assistance cost savings. Additionally, transit riders spent an estimated **\$3 million** locally, supporting small businesses and community vitality.

### Positive Return on Investment

Nearly all agencies demonstrated a positive cost-benefit ratio, averaging **1.4** across the five systems, indicating that every \$1 invested in transit services yields \$1.40 in economic and social returns.

### COVID-19 Impact and Opportunity for Recovery

Public transit ridership in Southeast Minnesota declined **56%** from 2019 to 2023, resulting in a \$35 million loss in benefits. As shown in **Figure 2**, while service levels have largely rebounded, ridership has not kept pace. This suggests an opportunity for a future TMO to restore ridership through better coordination, promotion, and service integration. Additionally, private transit services, such as commuter service sponsored by Mayo Clinic that was halted during the pandemic, had not restarted in 2023 and presents an economic loss and opportunity not reflected in the economic benefits analysis.

### Potential for Growth

Modeling of ridership growth scenarios shows that benefits increase at a compounding rate. For example, a 25% increase in ridership would result in a 27% increase in benefits. If the region restores pre-pandemic ridership levels, annual benefits could more than double to \$64 million (see **Figure 3**).

The review demonstrated that the concept of a regional TMO is feasible and well-aligned with ongoing planning efforts and policy goals. It confirmed that the TMO could play a critical role in closing gaps between transit, workforce needs, and service delivery across Southeast Minnesota. Building on these findings, the following section outlines the TMO’s proposed roles and responsibilities, detailing how it can deliver value to the region through coordinated action, improved access, and strategic growth.

# What Will a TMO Look Like?

---

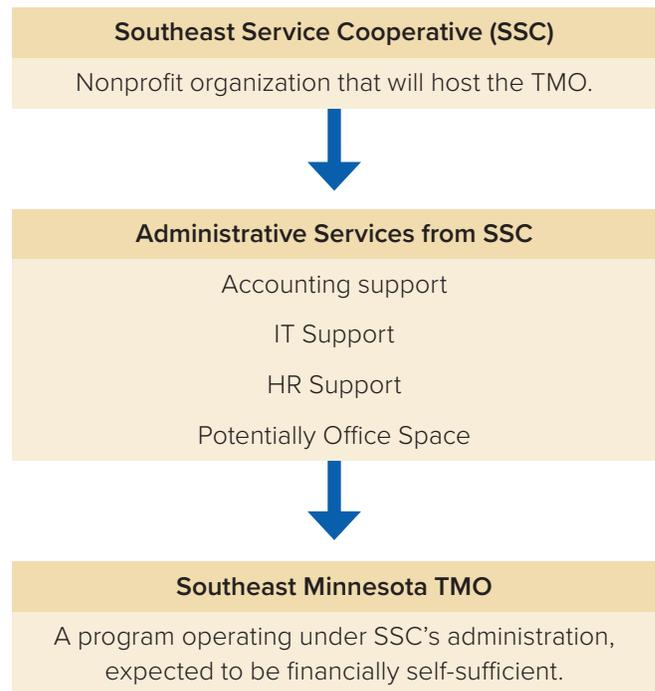


**SE MN Together**

Establishing the right organizational model is critical to ensuring the TMO can deliver services effectively, collaborate across jurisdictions, and remain financially sustainable. The proposed organizational structure for the Southeast Minnesota TMO is designed to be cost-effective, collaborative, and scalable. Based on feasibility analysis and stakeholder input, a hosted model was identified as the most appropriate path forward, allowing the TMO to launch within an established organization while minimizing startup costs and administrative burden.

## Host Organization

The Southeast Service Cooperative (SSC) has agreed to serve as the host agency for the TMO. SSC is a non-profit agency that works across all 11 counties in the Southeast Minnesota region, providing services to public and private schools, local governments, and other community-based organizations. As host, SSC will provide key administrative services such as human resources, IT, and financial management, in exchange for an administrative fee. The TMO will operate as a financially self-sufficient program within SSC (see **Figure 4**).



**Figure 4.** Southeast Service Cooperative (SSC) Hosting Southeast Minnesota TMO: Administrative Support Structure

## Governance Model

To ensure inclusive representation and effective decision-making, the TMO will operate under a three-tiered governance model as depicted in **Table 1**.

## Staffing

A full-time Program Manager will lead the TMO, responsible for day-to-day operations and executing the TMO work plan. The Manager will coordinate with governance bodies, lead employer and partner engagement, oversee outreach and data collection, and develop sustainable funding sources. **Figure 5** shows the proposed organizational structure featuring the host organization at the top providing administrative support and oversight for the TMO. The four blue

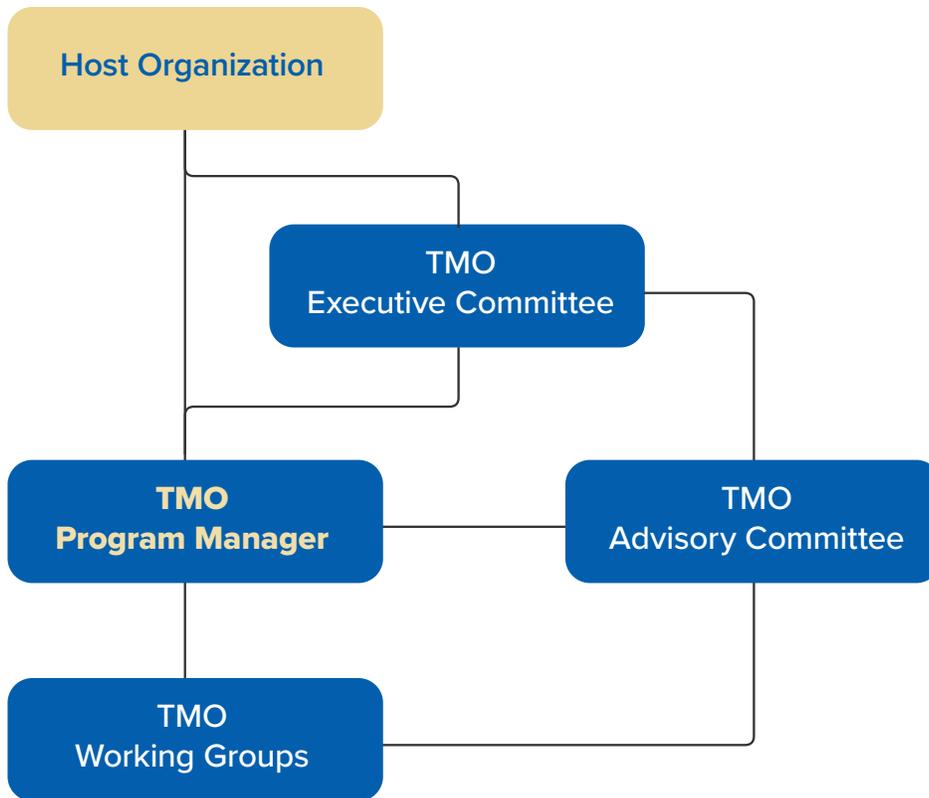
components sit below the host organization with clear lines of communication stemming from the host organization. The TMO Program Manager will serve as the operational lead of the TMO, reporting to the Executive Committee and coordinating with the Advisory Committee. Additional key functions of the TMO Program Manager are listed below.

### Key Functions of the TMO Program Manager:

- Deliver priority services, including a regional transportation coordination working group and trip-planning tools.
- Build relationships with employers and community partners to promote sustainable commute options.
- Oversee program performance using data-driven strategies.
- Secure and manage diverse funding streams, including grants, memberships, and sponsorships.

**Table 1.** TMO Governance Model

| Governance Body     | Role & Responsibilities   | Membership & Meeting Frequency  |
|---------------------|---|---|
| Executive Committee | Acts as the TMO's Board of Directors, providing strategic oversight, fiscal guidance, and leadership. Approves work plans, budgets, and staffing decisions. | 7–9 members representing diverse sectors and geographies; monthly       |
| Advisory Board      | Offers regional insight and strategic advice. Supports program alignment with community needs and serves as a sounding board for initiatives.               | Open membership, building on Steering Committee participants; bimonthly |
| Working Groups      | Issue- or geography-specific groups that advance key initiatives such as transit coordination and rural mobility.   | Approx. 15 members per group, drawn from relevant sectors; quarterly    |



**Figure 5.** Proposed Organizational Structure for the Southeast Minnesota TMO

## Working Group Focus Areas

Working groups serve as collaborative forums within the TMO structure, bringing together stakeholders and partners to focus on specific topic areas that support the TMO’s overall goals. Each group will address a key area of need or opportunity, providing recommendations, supporting project implementation, and helping to align regional efforts.

For instance, the first working group will focus on Transit Coordination, bringing together stakeholders from transit agencies, municipalities, employers, and human services to improve regional service alignment and efficiency. Additional working groups may be established over time based on emerging priorities and stakeholder interest.

# Advancing the TMO

---



**SE MN Together**

The Southeast Minnesota TMO has the opportunity to serve as a coordinating and capacity-building entity that improves access to transportation, increases awareness of transportation options, and strengthens regional collaboration.

## TMO Activities

The TMO’s work plan will be guided by the ideal outcomes stakeholders identified for a TMO during this study:

- Transportation services and multimodal options that better serve the community
- TMO provides a productive and safe space for regional coordination
- Better utilization and coordination of existing transportation services
- Widely available information on how to use transit and other options in the region
- Platform of support that will lead to sustainable long-term funding for the TMO

Initial priorities focus on four major functions:

1. **Coordinating** transportation providers and services
2. **Promoting** transit and travel options
3. **Serving** as a regional information hub
4. **Creating** a unified voice for transit advocacy in the region.

**Figure 6** summarizes these core roles and the key activities.



**Figure 6.** Summary of Key Roles and Functions of the Southeast Minnesota TMO

## 1. Improve Transit Through Regional Coordination

The TMO will play a central role in coordinating transit agencies, local governments, employers, and other partners to streamline services and expand access across Southeast Minnesota. This includes:

- **Form a Transit Coordinating Committee** to address schedule alignment, streamline transfers, and explore operational efficiencies like vehicle sharing.
- **Facilitate partnerships between transit agencies and employers** to address workforce transportation needs.
- **Identify opportunities to coordinate specialized transportation services** (e.g., non-emergency medical transportation) to reduce duplication and improve coverage.
- **Establish a coordinated advocacy strategy to promote transit's regional value**, including shared messaging and resources. Engage in legislative sessions to advocate for investment in a connected, regional transit network.
- **Support intercity, rural, and first/last-mile connections**. First/last-mile connections refer to how people get from their home to a main public transportation stop, and from that stop to their final destination. This includes **microtransit** (on-demand shared rides, often booked through an app, that serve a specific small area) and **Park & Ride connections** (places where people can park their cars and transfer to public transportation).

## 2. Build a Regional Transportation Information Hub

The TMO will develop and maintain a **Regional Transportation Tool/Website** to provide residents and workers with a single, trusted source for transportation information. The tool and its resources should be ADA accessible and multilingual. Features may include:

- An interactive trip planner with information about fixed-route, on-demand, and vanpool services.
- Maps of Park & Ride locations and connections to local employers.
- Integration with platforms like Transit App and MnDOT's statewide transit planner for real-time route and fare information.
- Investigate opportunities to integrate transit provider information into other digital platforms to improve user access to route information and payment.
- Single platform to purchase fares online for transit services within the region.

### 3. Communicate Travel Options and Promote Transit Ridership

The TMO will lead inclusive and strategic outreach to raise awareness, promote existing services, and shift how people get around the region. Initial strategies include:

- **Create Travel Options Resources** that are multilingual, accessible, and printable for distribution at community events or work sites.
- **Lead a “Try Transit” Campaign** offering free transit rides in partnership with transit operators.
  - Work with transit operators to secure free transit passes or a week of free transit for a regional “Try Transit” campaign.
  - Create and widely distribute promotional materials through employers and community groups, local governments, chambers, and other TMO partners.
  - Maximize awareness using social media, public events, and targeted outreach to underserved communities.
- **Launch a regional outreach and education strategy** to build broad awareness, trust, and understanding of regional transit services and other travel options among residents and workers of all abilities.
  - Build a regional membership of employer partners, starting with large worksites requiring in-person staff. Leverage TMO services and resources to address workforce transportation challenges.
  - Deliver tailored on-site engagement to host commute information sessions, share educational materials, and deliver “Try Transit” or similar campaigns.
  - Engage in community-based education, including presentations, tabling at local events, and travel training workshops for seniors, youth, and individuals with disabilities.

### 4. Create a Unified Transit Voice

The TMO will take the lead in amplifying Southeast Minnesota’s transit story with a cohesive advocacy strategy that elevates the visibility, value, and impact of transit. The TMO will serve as a convener, messenger, and policy influencer to drive investment and support for a more connected regional system. Through this initiative, the TMO will:

- Develop compelling, data-backed messaging that positions transit as essential to economic competitiveness, health equity, and regional resilience.
- Coordinate legislative engagement and advocacy efforts to ensure the region’s voice is heard at the Capitol and beyond.
- Deploy regional campaigns and roadshows that align stakeholders on shared priorities and increase public understanding.
- Equip providers with branded toolkits and unified messaging, enabling them to speak with one voice.
- Influence funding decisions and policy conversations by ensuring transit is always part of the regional planning agenda.

#### → Explore Future Services and Build Capacity

Building on the initial four recommended roles for the TMO, the next phase of growth positions the TMO to expand its impact and support long-term regional mobility goals. As the TMO establishes itself as a trusted convener and service provider, it can begin to offer additional services that address persistent operational and funding challenges. These may include support for driver recruitment and retention through partnerships with workforce agencies, grant-writing assistance to help providers secure new funding streams, and the development of shared data systems to enable regionwide performance tracking. Over time, the TMO can also explore fare integration and unified payment systems to enhance the rider experience, while continuing to lead policy advocacy to remove barriers and support service innovation. These future services will allow the TMO to evolve in step with regional needs, reinforcing its role as a catalyst for coordinated, equitable, and effective transportation solutions in Southeast Minnesota.

# What is Next?

---



Launching a TMO in Southeast Minnesota will require continued education and outreach to gain broad support, secure partnership agreements from local and regional governments, transportation providers, human services organizations, employers, and other partners, and secure funding. To maintain the study's momentum, next steps include:

---

- **Continue engaging with interested steering committee members to maintain momentum and leverage their collective knowledge and expertise.**  
Steering committee members can help facilitate the next steps to gain support for a TMO, assist with advocacy and funding applications, and further guide TMO service priorities.
- **Develop and launch a compelling roadshow presenting study findings.** This study confirmed what many stakeholders in the region intuitively knew: there is a great need and opportunity to create an organization that will improve transit and other transportation options in the region. This step involves creating materials and scheduling presentations at existing meetings of city councils, regional governmental and non-profit organizations, MnDOT representatives, and employers to share study findings and gain support.
- **Create resolutions to obtain commitments from transit agencies, municipal partners, and others.**  
Create sample resolutions that formalize an organization's commitment to supporting a regional TMO.
- **Develop a hosting services agreement** with Southeast Service Cooperative to formalize the partnership.
- **Develop funding requests and applications:**
  - A funding request to the state legislature based on the work plan developed as part of this study to fund employer/commuter-focused work.
  - Apply for 5310 funding in early 2026 to support work plan items serving seniors and people with disabilities.

# Technical Appendices

---



**SE MN Together**

**Appendix A: Past Plans and Studies Review**

**Appendix B: Transportation and Behavior Analysis**

**Appendix C: Economic Benefits Analysis**

**Appendix D: Organizational Structure**

**Appendix E: Funding Sources**

**Appendix F: Engagement Summary**

**Appendix G: Implementation Plan**



*Southeast Minnesota  
TMO Feasibility Study*