

Thumb Area Transit Facility Study

Community Needs Analysis

December 11, 2021





**PUBLIC SECTOR
CONSULTANTS**

Prepared by

Public Sector Consultants
www.publicsectorconsultants.com

Prepared for

NSA Architecture
Nsa-ae.com

Table of Contents

OVERVIEW	4
RIDERSHIP AND DEMOGRAPHICS	5
TAT Ridership Trends.....	5
HURON COUNTY PROFILE	6
Ridership and Demographics Assessment.....	11
COMMUNITY INPUT AND INTERVIEWS	11
Meeting Client Needs and Accessing Services	12
Transportation Trends.....	13
RECOMMENDATIONS TO ADDRESS CURRENT AND FUTURE NEEDS	14

Overview

Thumb Area Transit (TAT) is conducting a study to inform the development of a new facility to house bus fleets, maintenance bays, administrative and dispatch offices, community and organizational training spaces, and potential transfer sites for riders. As part of the study, Public Sector Consultants (PSC) was contracted to engage stakeholders to capture information on how well TAT is currently serving community members and what can be done to better serve them in the future. This information will be combined with census and TAT ridership data to create a full picture of community need. The analysis will serve as support to a broader facility study that includes engineering, design, site selection, and environmental recommendations.

Currently, TAT is the region's sole public transportation provider. TAT provides transportation services to riders primarily through prescheduled, on-demand rides. Additionally, TAT provides or has provided transportation services through contractual agreements with school districts, healthcare providers, and employers. TAT does not operate traditional routes with bus stops. The rural nature of Huron County makes it unlikely that other transportation options, such as taxis and rideshare programs, will be developed in the region.

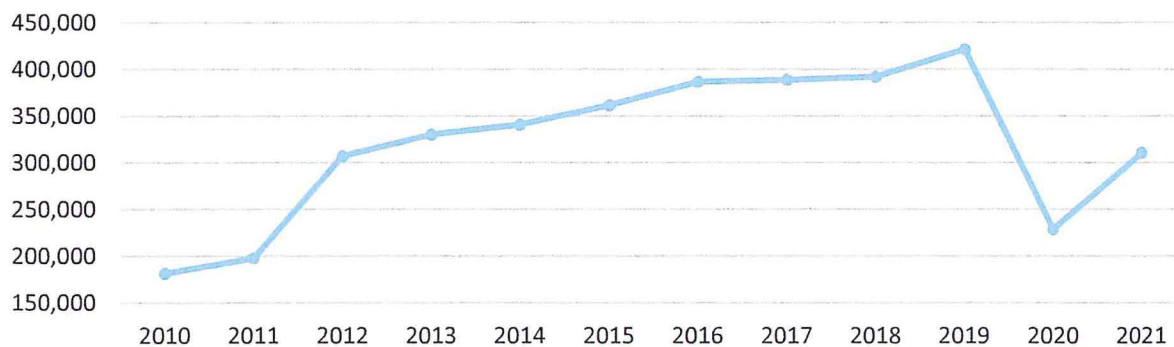
Ridership and Demographics

PSC analyzed ridership data and demographics to assess the growth and estimated demand for TAT services in the future. TAT provided ridership reports from 2010 to 2021 and PSC analyzed census data from 2010 to 2019 and 2020. These data provide insights into past trends and help to estimate key factors that will impact future trends.

TAT Ridership Trends

TAT ridership rates have increased significantly from 2010 to 2019 (132 percent), but dropped 45 percent from 2019 to 2020, due primarily to COVID-19 impacts. The 2021 ridership rate has increased at a much faster pace than prior years as the region rebounds from the pandemic (Exhibit 1), and is currently 71 percent higher than in 2010. The substantial increase in ridership between 2011 and 2012 can be attributed to additional contracts with North Huron School District to provide student transportation.

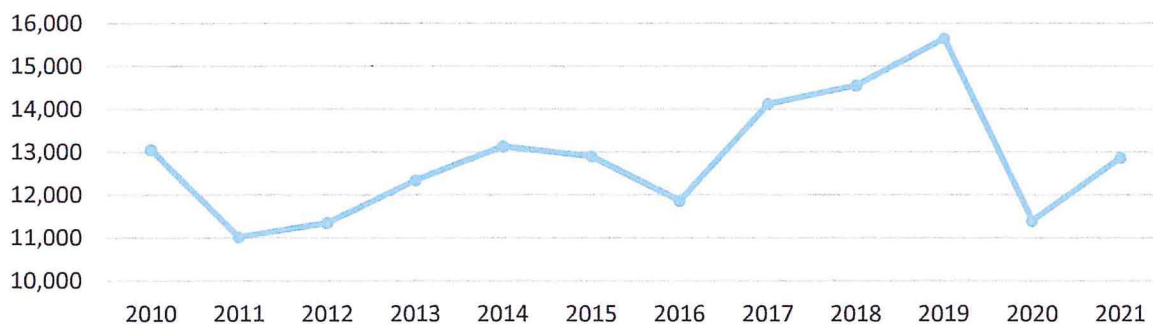
EXHIBIT 1. Annual Ridership Data 2010–2021



Source: Thumb Area Transit Michigan Public Transit Facts Ridership Report

Ridership among elderly citizens (as defined by the TAT Ridership Report), has increased at a flatter rate than general ridership. After a small dip due to the pandemic, rates have rebounded to numbers similar to those found in 2010 (Exhibit 2). This increase is likely due to an overall increase in the elderly population.

EXHIBIT 2. Ridership of Elderly Population



Source: Thumb Area Transit Michigan Public Transit Facts Ridership Report

Ridership rates among individuals with disabilities have been on a downward trend for most of the past ten years, with a significant drop in ridership in 2020. Rates have stayed steady in 2021 (Exhibit 3).

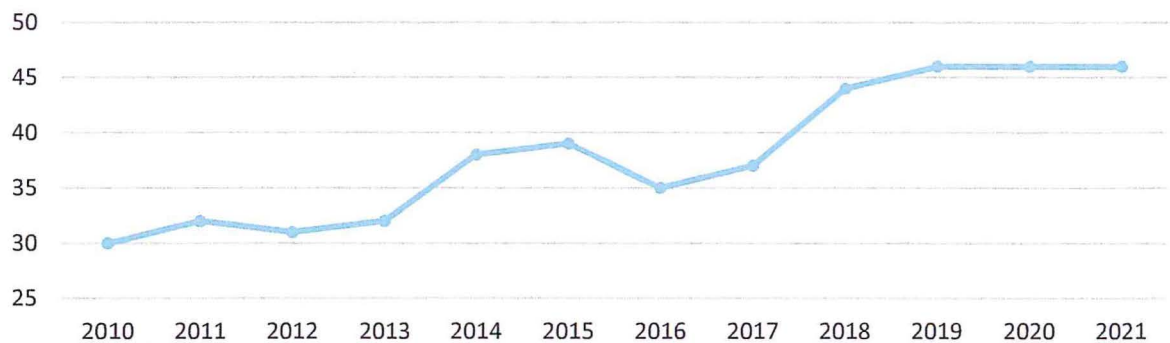
EXHIBIT 3. Ridership of Individuals with a Disability



Source: Thumb Area Transit Michigan Public Transit Facts Ridership Report

TAT has expanded its fleet over the years to address increasing ridership demands. The number of vehicles in the fleet has increased from 30 in 2010 to 46 in 2021, an increase of 53 percent (Exhibit 4).

EXHIBIT 4. Number of TAT Vehicles over Time



Source: Thumb Area Transit Michigan Public Transit Facts Ridership Report

Huron County Profile

To better understand the landscape in which TAT operates, PSC also reviewed county-level data provided by the American Community Survey from 2010 and 2019, and total population data from the most current census. These data, coupled with ridership information, will help TAT estimate future demand and ridership, as well as to understand broader economic and demographic trends that might result in ridership impacts.

Between 2010 and 2020, Huron County's total population declined by approximately 5.2 percent, from 33,118 in 2010 to 31,407 in 2020 (Exhibit 5).

EXHIBIT 5. Huron County's Total Population, 2010–2019

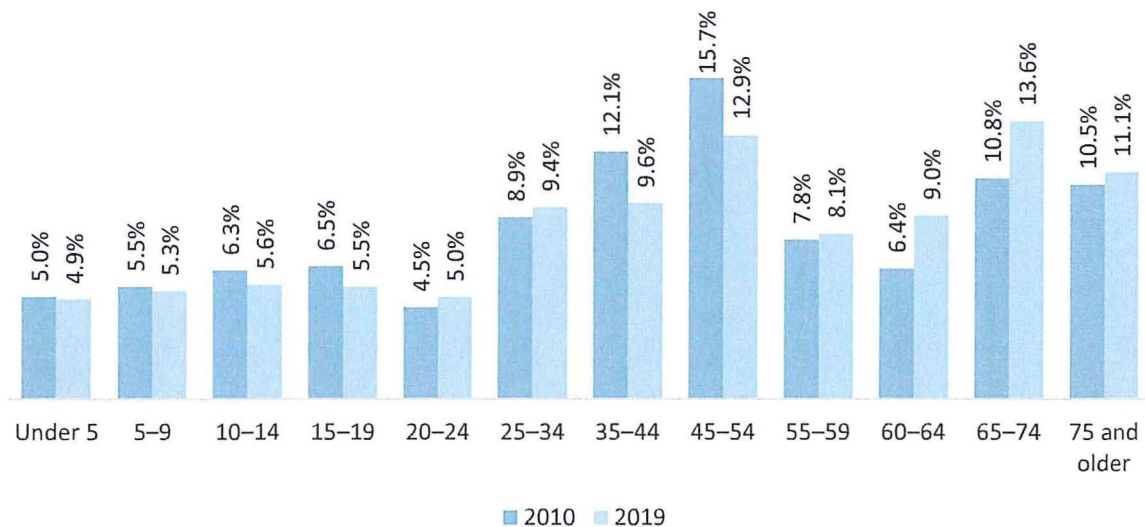


Source: U.S. Census Bureau. Decennial Census Data. Table P1.

<https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=huron%20county,%20michigan&y=2020&tid=DECENNIALPL2020.P1>

Between 2010 and 2019, the older population (ages 60 and up) in Huron County—a key ridership demographic—has continued to increase. While the populations of younger age groups have maintained similar levels, there has been a decline in the 35- to 54-year-old age group (Exhibit 6).

EXHIBIT 6. Age of Population, 2010–2019



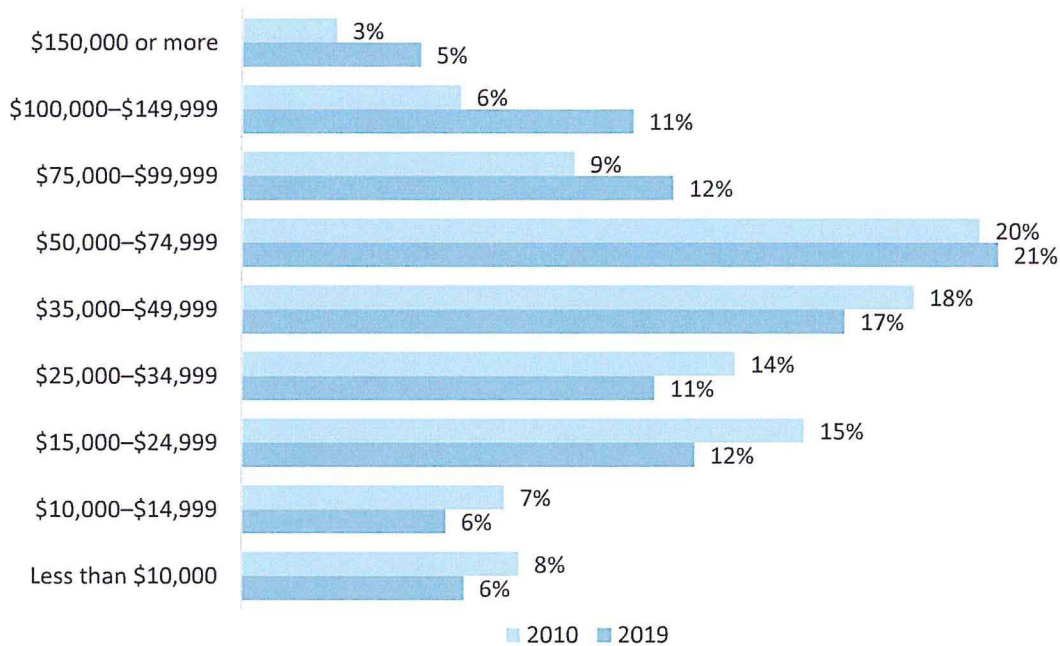
Note: Percentages may not total to 100 due to rounding.

Source: American Community Survey. 5 Year Estimates. DP05.

<https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?g=0500000US26063&tid=ACSDP5Y2019.DP05&hidePreview=false>

Annual household income has also increased across all income categories between 2010 and 2019. Incomes above \$50,000 per year have increased, while income levels below \$50,000 have decreased. Incomes reported between \$100,000 and \$149,999 saw the largest change, with an 83 percent increase between 2010 and 2019 (Exhibit 7). However, over half the county's households earn less than \$50,000, making car ownership a challenge and public transit an important service.

EXHIBIT 7. Annual Household Income, 2010–2019



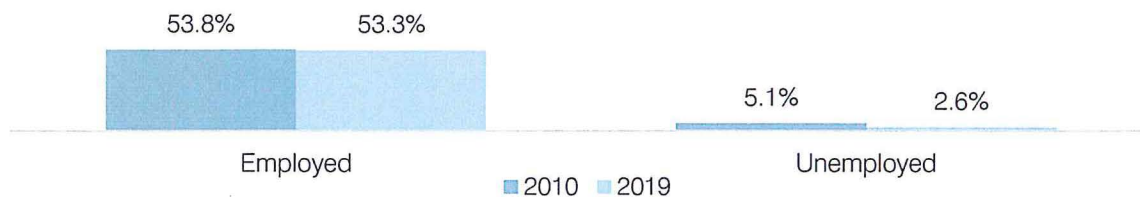
Note: Percentages may not total to 100 due to rounding.

Source: American Community Survey. 5 Year Estimates. S1901.

<https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=0500000US26063&tid=ACST5Y2019.S1901&hidePreview=false>

Employment rates, or the number of people employed out of the total labor force, has only slightly decreased (1.8 percent), while the unemployment rate has declined from 5 percent to 3 percent (Exhibit 8). Employees and employers who rely on TAT effectively remains steady.

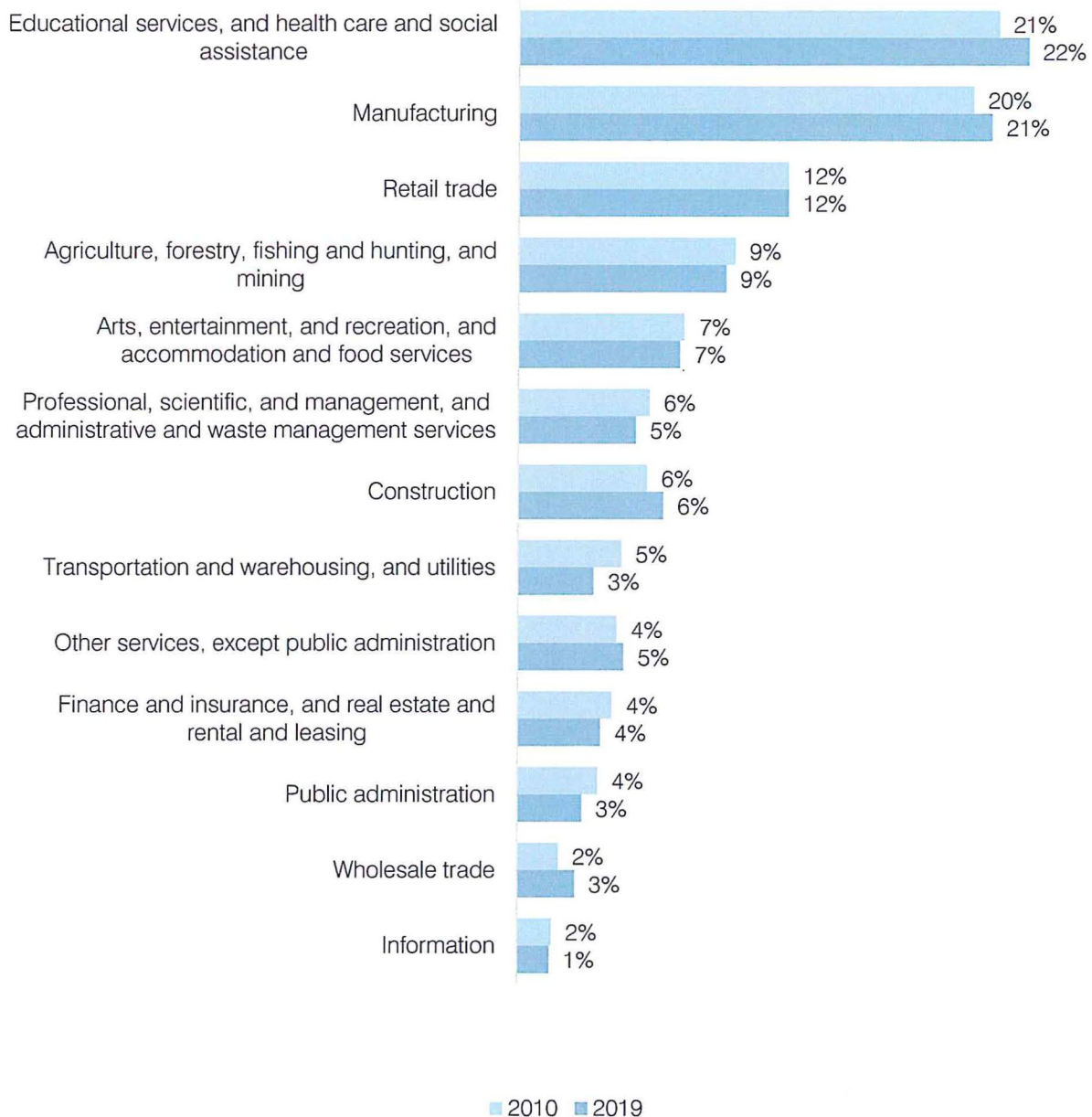
EXHIBIT 8. Employment Rates, 2010–2019



Source: ACS 5-Year Estimates. DP03. <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=&t=Employment&g=0500000US26063&tid=ACSDP5Y2010.DP03>

Employment in educational services, the healthcare and social assistance industries, and manufacturing slightly increased between 2010 and 2019 (Exhibit 9). Most other industries, including retail, agriculture, arts and entertainment, and construction experienced no changes in employment rates.

EXHIBIT 9. Employment by Industry, 2010–2019



Note: Percentages may not total to 100 due to rounding.

Source: ACS 5-Year Estimates. DP03. <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=&t=Employment&g=05000000US26063&tid=ACSDP5Y2010.DP03>

The median age of public transportation users went from 46 years old in 2010 to 26 years old in 2019 (Exhibit 10). The percentage of public transportation users living below the poverty level increased by 9 percent between 2010 and 2019, while the number of users working outside the county increased by 3 percentage points.

EXHIBIT 10. Characteristics of Public Transportation Users, 2010–2019

Characteristics of Public Transportation Users	2010	2019	Percent Change
Median age	46	26	-44%
Median annual household earnings	\$4,194	\$12,875	207%
Below the poverty level	35%	38%	9%
No vehicle available	0%	48%	48%*
One vehicle available	34%	26%	-24%
Two vehicles available	42%	7%	-84%
Three or more vehicles available	24%	19%	-20%
Worked in county of residence	100%	98%	-3%
Worked outside county of residence	0%	3%	3%*

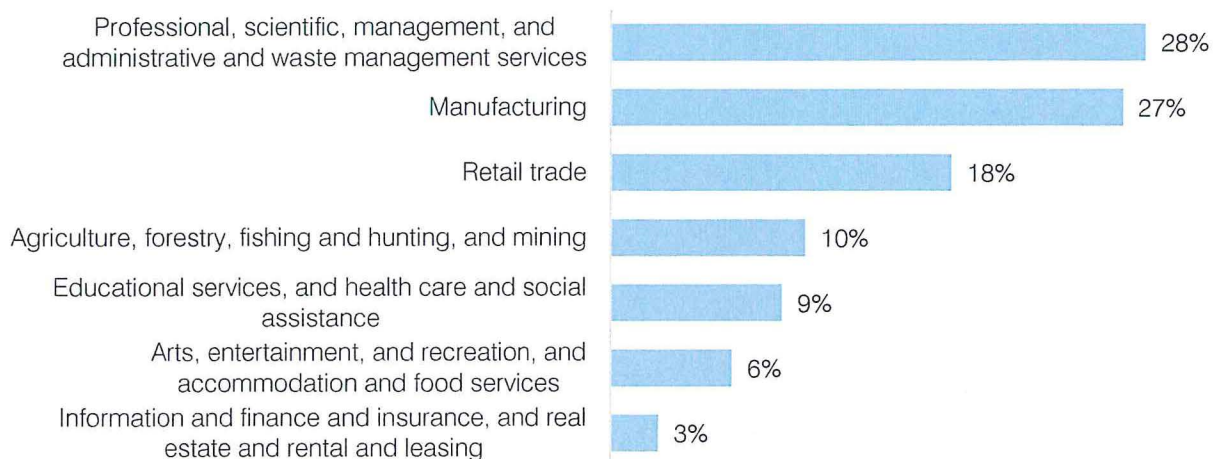
(*): Notes a change in percentage points.

Source: American Community Survey, 5 Year Estimates. S0802.

<https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=0500000US26063&tid=ACST5Y2019.S0802&hidePreview=false>. Analyzed by PSC.

Of all public transportation users, 28 percent worked in the professional, scientific, management, administrative, and waste management services industries, while 27 percent worked in manufacturing (Exhibit 11).

EXHIBIT 11. Public Transportation Use by Industry of Employment, 2019

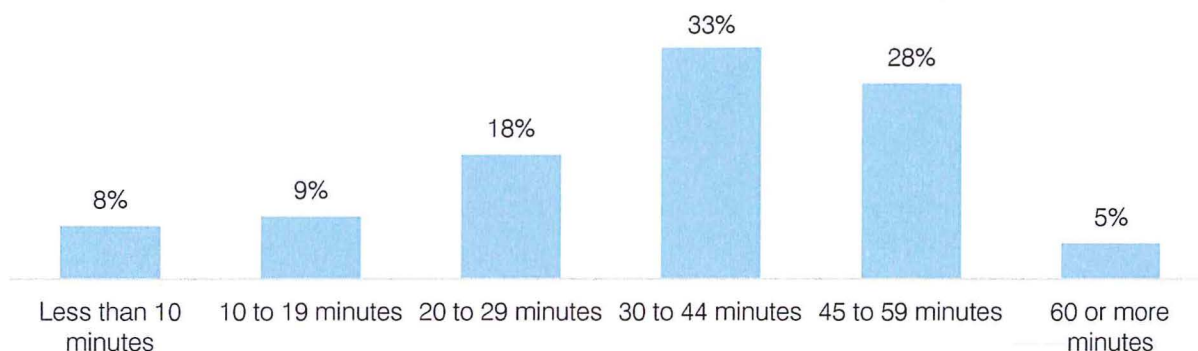


Source: American Community Survey, 5 Year Estimates. S0802.

<https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=0500000US26063&tid=ACST5Y2019.S0802&hidePreview=false>.

The majority of public transportation users had a daily work commute of more than 30 minutes, and 5 percent had a commute of one hour or more (Exhibit 12).

EXHIBIT 12. Length of Time Spent Commuting Using Public Transportation, 2019



Source: American Community Survey, 5 Year Estimates, S0802.

<https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=0500000US26063&tid=ACST5Y2019.S0802&hidePreview=false>.

Ridership and Demographics Assessment

Ridership trends have shown continued growth for TAT over the past decade. This has been driven by increased demand from the general population and filling a critical need for local school districts. The decline in service to individuals with special needs is the lone notable exception.

TAT's potential for increased ridership is largely dependent on the growing need within the existing population base rather than overall population growth. More specifically, with the total population declining slightly, TAT's ongoing and future demand will be primarily driven by residents ages 60 and older and possibly additional school district services. It is estimated that there is a potential for at least eight additional K-12 school routes that could be absorbed by TAT.

At the very minimum, these trends point to TAT maintaining a ridership level in 2021 and beyond that is significantly higher than historic ridership, as further evidenced by the need to increase its fleet in recent years.

Community Input and Interviews

PSC collected community stakeholder input to determine not only how TAT meets current transportation needs in Huron County, but also how it can do so in the future. PSC interviewed key stakeholders from Huron County, the City of Bad Axe, and other organizations as identified by TAT, including local school districts and community agencies. The one-on-one virtual meetings provided the opportunity for in-depth conversations and feedback on the relationship between TAT and the agencies and riders they support. PSC conducted interviews with the following organizations:

- Huron Intermediate School District
- North Huron School District
- Huron County Board of Commissioners
- Huron County Economic Development Corporation
- City of Bad Axe

Meeting Client Needs and Accessing Services

Overall, interviewee feedback on TAT was positive. Each interviewee stressed TAT's importance in assisting community members to meet their basic needs, including access to employment, groceries, medical care, and education. TAT is often the only available transportation for individuals in need of medical services. TAT routinely provides transportation services to riders travelling to locations outside Huron County, most frequently to Flint, Detroit, and Ann Arbor for medical appointments and airport transfers.

Interviewees noted that TAT has been very responsive and innovative in the expansion of its services to meet the evolving needs and demands of the region, including:

- Forging unique partnerships with rideshare organizations
- Expanding beyond traditional on-demand rides and service areas
- Demonstrating willingness to problem solve and find solutions for each rider
- Being a responsive partner and consistently meeting and/or exceeding the terms of their contracts

Interviewees also noted that TAT positively impacts the economic viability of the region. TAT transports employees from worker housing to job sites through contracts with employers, and regularly provides individual transportation to and from employment. TAT services have expanded to include regional festival transportation as well as Safe Ride and after-hours options during holidays to reduce drunk driving-related incidences. These services have had a positive impact on the tourism and travel industries in the Thumb region.

School Transportation

TAT serves as the primary transportation provider for the North Huron School District (130 square miles) and Huron Intermediate School District (ISD) (836 square miles), transporting 700 students a day for the two districts. TAT transportation is vital to ensuring these students in these large rural districts have access to education. PSC interviewed representatives of the districts where TAT provides primary transportation, but it should be noted that other interviewees also described the important contribution that TAT has on the districts. In fact, provides some level of transportation of all other districts in the ISD, with the exception of Caseville Public Schools.

The North Huron School District enrolls approximately 350 students and TAT provides over 500 rides to and from school each day. During COVID-19 school closures, TAT delivered food and school supplies to students and regularly conducted well-being checks with families, relaying important information back to the school district when necessary. The district felt that drivers were well trained in addressing behavioral or medical issues that might arise during school busing, and that there are open lines of communication with TAT.

TAT also provides transportation for over 500 Huron ISD students. Transportation is provided for students with special needs, pre-K students, and for students who attend the ISD career and technical center. The ISD described a positive relationship with TAT and reported that its services are very important in meeting the educational needs of their students, especially among students with special needs whose families may not have appropriate vehicles to transport their children. The ISD estimated

that 85 percent of students attending the career and technical center rely on TAT for transportation to and from their home school.

Areas for Improvement

ISD interviewees noted that drivers receive training to appropriately serve and transport students with special needs, but also identified that turnover makes it difficult to maintain consistency. The ISD recommended that TAT drivers receive ongoing training to ensure consistency among TAT drivers. Additionally, ISD interviewees identified a need for additional routes or drivers to minimize student time spent on buses and as well as the impact of delayed start or on-demand rides to school scheduling.

Transportation Trends

One of the trends cited by multiple interviewees is the decreased number of young adults who obtain a driver's license, which causes an increase in this demographic's ridership. From 2010 to 2019, the number of licensed drivers in Michigan declined by 6.9 percent for drivers under age 30.

Current plans to advance the use of electric or autonomous vehicles was supported by most of the interviewees. Interviewees seemed excited for the opportunity to adopt new technologies that would allow an expansion of services while decreasing carbon footprints. Any hesitation expressed was attributed to a perceived lack of public support for these new technologies.

A few interviewees noted that, in TAT's attempt to serve the transportation needs of the county as best it can, there seems to be an increase in ride times. Census data confirms that 33 percent of riders spend at least 45 minutes of their work commutes on public transit in Huron County. These times are largely attributable to the large service territory and low population density of the service area, but also create challenges for users needing timely service for work, medical appointments, and similar engagements.

TAT Feedback

In addition to discussions with community stakeholders, PSC also interviewed staff at TAT to gather feedback on their future plans for services and expansion. TAT staff indicated that data suggests a minimal or flat increase in traditional ridership over time. PSC's analysis of the data supports this assessment. However, TAT also indicated a number of areas where they could expand in the future, including:

- Increasing student ridership with districts in the ISD
- Providing non-emergency medical transportation
- Creating dedicated routes to transport riders to post-secondary educational options (no colleges or universities are located in Huron County)

TAT also noted that if ridership stays the same, or even declines in the future, the facility is grossly inadequate for their current needs. Staff cited several issues with the current facility that could be remedied by a larger facility, including:

- Garage space provides storage for only 50% of current vehicle fleet
- Office space is only available for three out of eight administrative staff
- Maintenance facilities are dispersed throughout two separate buildings

- Current leased space is occupied to its fullest capacity

Recommendations to Address Current and Future Needs

Ridership and census data point to, at the minimum, steady demand for TAT in the foreseeable future. However, the decline in licensed drivers, aging of the overall population, and potential for TAT to expand its services to other local school districts highlight a strong potential for ridership growth that will more than likely offset the overall population decline.

As TAT explores the construction of a new transportation facility, interviewees made the following recommendations:

- Increase the number of buses and routes to minimize ride time for on-demand and student customers
- Expand transportation services to other school districts in the county
- Provide continuous training to drivers to ensure they are equipped to meet the unique needs of special populations
- Maintain the location within the City of Bad Axe, but be mindful of the impact of the facility on surrounding residential areas
- Explore facility locations located north of the train tracks, that are located between the current facility and the downtown Bad Axe area, to prevent potential traffic bottle necks associated with bus stop requirements at train tracks.
- Consider creating standing routes with bus stops to allow access to frequently visited locations, such as grocery stores, medical offices, etc.
- Expand TAT facility to include more space for rider transfers
- Expand the use of electric and autonomous vehicles



**PUBLIC SECTOR
CONSULTANTS**

230 N. Washington Square
Suite 300
Lansing, MI 48933