

Improving Public Transit Options for Michigan Tech Students and Others

Preliminary information
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Brief History of Recent Public Transit Issues

In 2011, the staff at the Western Upper Peninsula Planning and Development Region office (WUPPDR¹) prepared a *Coordinated Human Services – Public Transit Plan and Accessibility Study for Baraga, Houghton and Keweenaw Counties* (BHK, 2011). Their concerns extend over the three county region and focus on the needs of many constituencies, including university students in Houghton/Hancock. They did a SWOT analysis (strengths-weaknesses-opportunities-threats) on four proposed alternatives:

1. No change in public transport in the three-county area
2. Expand public transport within the existing framework
3. Seek the establishment of Mass Transportation System Authorities
4. Develop a Regional Transportation Authority

The report outlines a five-year recommendation that proposed to expand services within the existing framework and allows for progression towards building a Regional Transit Authority. The part of its recommendations that were carried out include:

(<http://www.getaroundwup.org/education/history/>)

1. WUPPDR established the website www.getaroundwup.org, which is a central place to get public transportation information in the Western UP.
2. City of Houghton revised its routes and service hours to better fit consumer needs.

In 2013, the Michigan Tech Transportation Enterprise (advised by George Dewey) recommended a comprehensive revision/expansion of the Houghton/Hancock public transportation offerings (Enterprise, 2013). The estimated cost was \$1.32 million (an increase of \$700,000 over the 2013 transit expenditures by the two cities) and would have required student fees and considerable University/community funding. Fixed routes to Hancock (including Portage Hospital) were proposed as were late evening and weekend services.

¹*State Designated Planning and Development Regions* are voluntary organizations comprised of local governments dedicated to serving the regional planning needs of multi-county areas in all parts of Michigan. They are a form of local government voluntarily created by their members, which are largely representative of local governments in the region; although membership also includes road authorities, nonprofit organizations and representatives of the business community in many regions. (<http://www.miregions.com/about-mar/>)

Recommendations in the 2011 WUPPDR report that were not implemented include:

1. Creation of a regional transit brand; use as a recognizable icon to mark designate bus stops; use to promote the use of public transportation.
2. Establish a Hancock fixed route.
3. (year 2) Implementation of appropriately planned and funded feeder routes to the Houghton/Hancock fixed routes. (no Hancock fixed routes at this time)
4. (year 3) Implement a multi-county transit authority, supported by a millage.

Current Public Transit in Houghton

Fixed Routes

1. *(Houghton Transit) Downtowner Shuttle* which serves downtown, Econo/Shopko, Wal-Mart and Aspirus; does not come to campus (M-F 10am-2pm).
2. *(Houghton Transit) MTU Afternoon Shuttle*, MUB, downtown, Econo/Shopko, Wal-Mart (M-F, 1pm-7pm).
3. *(Houghton Transit) MTU Morning Shuttle*, which serves MUB, SDC, Daniel Heights (M-F 7am-1pm).
4. *(Michigan Tech Transportation Services)*, which also serves MUB, SDC, Daniel Heights (M-F 1:06pm-9:18pm)

On Demand

1. Houghton, M-F, 7am-5pm
2. Hancock, M-F, 7am-5pm

Funding

In the Enterprise report (2013, Table 5), the 2013 budgets of the Houghton (\$416,000) and Hancock (\$260,000) transit operations were given. Similar numbers with more details are given in the KFH Group report to the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT, 2016) in their table 6-2 (data include in Table 1). Data supplied by VP Ellen Horsch (2016) indicate that Michigan Tech currently pays \$50,000 to the City of Houghton for transit services (MTU Morning (campus shuttle) and MTU Afternoon (off-campus shuttle)) and spends an additional \$50,000 per year on its own shuttle operations.

The *MTU Morning* (on campus) and *Afternoon* (off-campus) shuttles run by the City of Houghton are free to Michigan Tech students, staff, and faculty due to the subsidy paid above. The Michigan Tech Transportation Services route is also free for students/staff/faculty. The Houghton Transit *Downtowner Shuttle* is \$2 for adults and students.

Houghton's on-demand service is \$5(\$3) for adults/students within the city and \$6(\$4) outside the city. Hancock's on-demand service is \$5(\$3).

Table 1: from MDOT, 2016, Table 6-2;
Data on Hancock and Houghton Transit from 2014

2014	Hancock	Houghton
Total passengers	21,038	91,910
Total eligible expenses	\$227,163	\$420,824
Total miles	63,435	108,899
Total vehicle hours	5,610	11,694
Federal revenues	\$30,836	\$71,512
Local revenues	\$40,034	\$87,022
Farebox revenues	\$47,635	\$110,449

Open Questions

Current ridership

Anecdotally, we have heard: a) last bus back from Wal-Mart at 7pm fills; b) infants cannot be accommodated on the shuttles. **How full are the current routes?**

Late evening and weekend services

Heard at the League of Women Voters of the Copper Country transit meeting (LWVCC, 2016) that late evening services were dropped by Houghton Transit due to lack of demand. **Unclear if weekend services were ever piloted. Are there data on ridership?**

Unified transit brand/Bus stop signage

A unified transit brand was proposed in the BHK report (2011); **were there obstacles to this? Were there obstacles to proceeding with installing bus stop signs?**

Hancock fixed route

What is known about the obstacles to establishing a fixed route in Hancock?

Funding obstacles

Heard at the League of Women Voters of the Copper Country transit meeting (LWVCC, 2016) that funding sources limit the structure of local transit (each city must serve its own citizens; the two transit systems cannot be combined.) **Can we gather more information on this?**

Millages

Heard at the League of Women Voters of the Copper Country transit meeting (LWVCC, 2016) that Gogebic County recently passed a millage for public transportation. **Can we gather more information on this?**

References:

- (BHK, 2011). *Coordinated Human Services – Public Transit Plan and Accessibility Study for Baraga, Houghton and Keweenaw Counties*, www.wuppd.com/pdf/BHKtransitWEB.pdf, Accessed 5 Dec 2016.
- (Enterprise, 2013). *Transportation Enterprise, Financial Analysis of Houghton/Hancock Bus Transit System Expansion*, February 13, 2013.
- (Horsch, 2016) *History of Transportation at Michigan Tech*, provided by V. P. for Administration Ellen Horsch; prepared by Gina Sayen, Assistant to the VP for Administration. (gmsayen, misc\2016\Transportation_Costs_103116.xlsx, October 31, 2016)
- (LWVCC, 2016) League of Women Voters of the Copper Country, *LWVCC Sponsors Transit Panel*, article in the LWVCC newsletter, *Copper Country Voter*, October 2016, <http://www.lwvccmi.org/files/voter201610.pdf>, accessed 5 December 2016. Panel was held at Portage Lake District Library on October 6, 2016.
- (MDOT, 2016) KFH Group, Inc. Report prepared for Michigan Department of Transportation, "Coordinated Mobility Plan: Prosperity Region 1," May 2016, <http://www.kfhgroup.com/michigan/region1.html>, accessed 5 December 2016. Has data on commuting patterns in Houghton County, Table 5-5, pg 5-20.
- (www.getaroundwup.org). WUPPDR sponsored website that provides public transportation information in the Western UP. See also <http://www.getaroundwup.org/education/history/>.