

150,000 Rides at Risk: Securing the Future of Berrien County Transit

Prepared by the Berrien County Advisory Transportation Committee (BCAT)

with assistance from

The Southwest Michigan Regional Planning Commission

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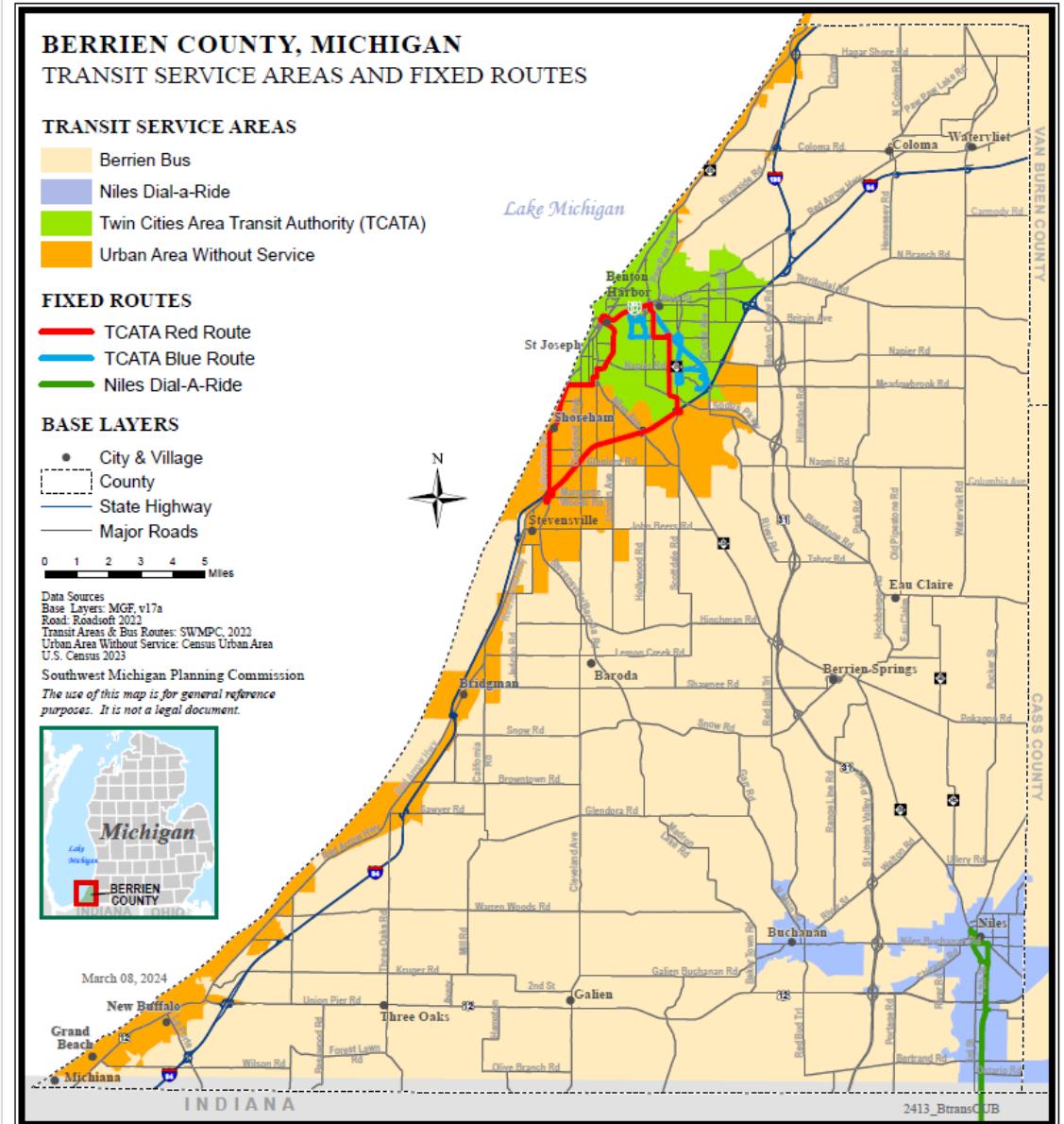
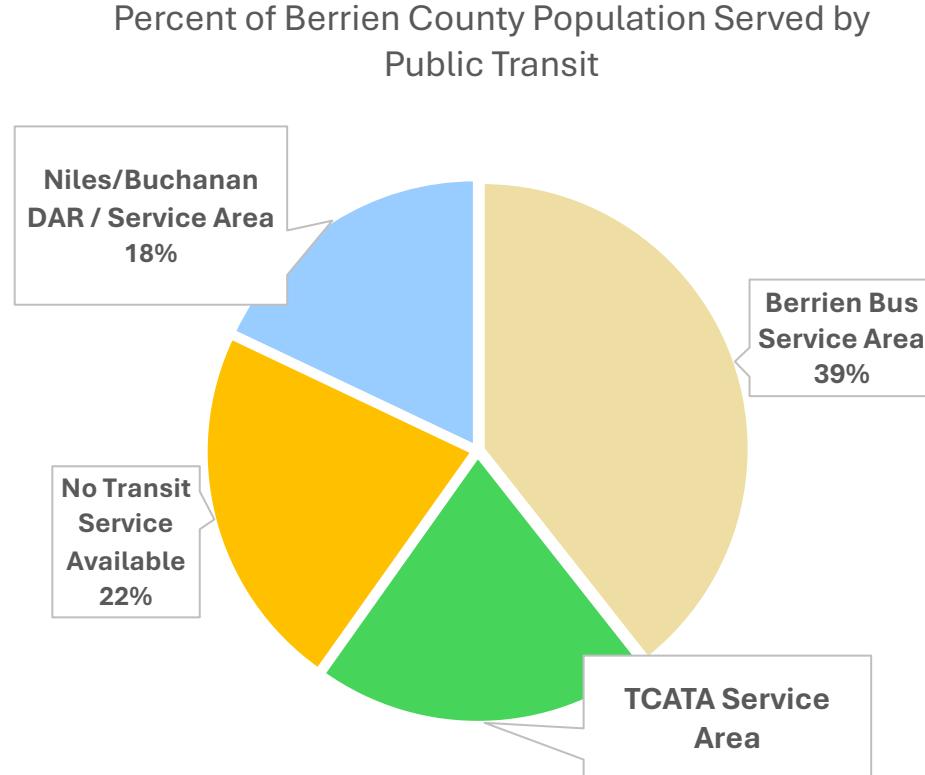
The Need for Immediate Action: A Critical Deadline

- **MDOT's Demand:** On August 15, 2025, MDOT notified Berrien County that beginning October 1, 2026, Benton Harbor Dial-a-Ride (TCATA), one of the four local public transit providers, will no longer be eligible to receive state and federal transit funding. Further, MDOT requested that the Berrien County Board of Commissioners incorporate a unified Transit Authority under Michigan Act 196 to act as the legal recipient for all future urban transit funds.
- **Funding Ineligibility:** Without a new regional authority designated to receive state and federal operating assistance, roughly half of the population in Berrien County (the urbanized area running through New Buffalo, Bridgman, Lincoln Township, St. Joseph Township, City of St. Joseph, City of Benton Harbor, and Benton Township) will be without public transportation services.
- **Current Financial Instability:** Both TCATCA and Berrien Bus are currently operating at annual deficits; without intervention, rural operations, in addition to urban service, will cease due to lack of local funding.

The Risk and the Human Cost of Inaction

- **150,000 Passenger Rides at Risk:**
 - Failure to address MDOT's request will result in the loss of federal and state urban operating assistance, eliminating 63% of the county's total current annual rides.
 - Combined operating deficits of Berrien Bus and TCATA are over \$250k per year. Without intervention, rural operations will cease, eliminating another 14% of the county's total annual rides.
- **Protecting the Vulnerable:** Approximately 55,000 of the rides at risk are currently utilized by elderly and disabled passengers who depend on these services for essential mobility.

Current Structure of Public Transit



Current Service and Operating Costs

	TCATA	Niles Dial-a-Ride	Berrien Bus	Total
Passengers	122,843	44,750	27,034	194,627
Elderly and Disabled	34,298	28,783	20,639	83,720
Operating Expenses	\$ 1,960,484	\$ 866,620	\$ 958,562	\$ 3,785,666
Vehicle Hours	31,558	12,998	14,253	58,809
Vehicle Miles	382,175	177,994	266,369	826,538
Population Served	31,512	27,662	60,681	119,855
Operating Expenses / Vehicle Hours	\$ 62.12	\$ 66.67	\$ 67.25	\$ 64.37
Operating Expenses / Vehicle Miles	\$ 5.13	\$ 4.87	\$ 3.60	\$ 4.58
Operating Expenses / Capita	\$ 62.21	\$ 31.33	\$ 15.80	\$ 31.59

Structural Deficiencies

- **Coverage Gaps:**
 - **34,461 residents (47% of the urbanized area) have limited or no service.**
 - Key areas like Bridgman, St. Joseph Township, Lincoln Township, New Buffalo remain isolated.
 - Only 66% of jobs are currently served.
- **Fragmentation:** Four distinct providers create duplicative administrative functions like HR, accounting, and procurement.
- **Inefficiency:** High overhead diverts resources away from direct transit services.
- **Financial Risk:** By fiscal year 2027, TCATA will be ineligible to receive transit funding and will no longer be able to ***directly provide*** transit services within the St. Joe/Benton Harbor/Lake Michigan Coast urban area. Berrien Bus is spending down reserves at an unsustainable rate and will cease operations in the rural area without intervention.

Complexity and Cost in the Current System: The Passenger's Burden

- **Confusing Navigation:** A single trip may require transferring between multiple providers, each with different schedules and policies.
- **Financial Inequity:** Riders often pay multiple fares for one journey, making essential trips impractical.
- **Service Barriers:** There is currently a complete lack of public transit on Sundays, hindering weekend workers and travelers.

The Choice Before Us

- **Preserve & Enhance:** Responding to MDOT's petition, create a new representative Transit Authority and begin consolidating the transit providers into a unified, efficient county-wide system with enhanced state and federal funding.
- **Manage Decline:** Accept the permanent loss of service for our most isolated residents and the continued economic drain of an inefficient, siloed system.

The Opportunity for a New Era of Regional Mobility

- **Objective:** To preserve existing transit services and transform Berrien County's public transit from a structural liability into a cohesive engine for social and economic opportunity.
- **The Solution:** A unified, hybrid service model titled "GoBerrien".
- **Foundation:** Based on over a decade of research, including the *Moving Forward* (2014) and *Connect Berrien* (2018) reports:
 - **Enhance:** Make transit a practical, reliable choice for more people and more trip types.
 - **Connect:** Link residents to jobs, healthcare, and community resources across the entire county.
 - **Simplify:** Create a single system with unified branding, one fare structure, and one point of contact.
 - **Sustain:** Establish a stable financial foundation for long-term growth.

Service Plan: The Fixed-Route Backbone with Flexible Coverage

- **Connecting Urban Centers**
 - GoBerrien proposed a hybrid model, with six high-demand fixed routes:
Benton Harbor – Niles; Niles – South Bend; St. Joseph – Watervliet;
Benton Harbor – New Buffalo; New Buffalo – Michigan City; New Buffalo – Niles
- **Coordinated Demand-Response & Expanded Hours**
- **Feeder Service:** Flexible point-to-point service will support the fixed routes and guarantee full county coverage.

Redesigning the Customer Experience: One System, One Identity

- **Unified Fare:** A single **\$2.00 one-way fare** for any trip.
- **Free Transfers:** No additional cost to switch between fixed-route and demand-response services.
- **Centralized Access:** A "one call/one click" center for all reservations and scheduling.
- **Consistent Branding:** The entire network will operate under the recognizable "GoBerrien" brand.

Probable Financial Framework: Demand-Response Expansion into Unserved Area

	TCATA	Niles DART	Berrien Bus	Unserved Area	Total
Operating Expenses	\$ 1,950,000	\$ 875,000	\$ 980,000	\$ 1,600,000	\$ 5,405,000
Operating Revenue					
Farebox	\$ 175,000	\$ 85,000	\$ 35,000	\$ 120,000	\$ 415,000
Local (Millage, Service Contracts)	\$ 165,000	\$ 115,000	\$ 185,000	\$ -	\$ 465,000
State	\$ 760,000	\$ 305,000	\$ 350,000	\$ 560,000	\$ 1,975,000
Federal	\$ 820,000	\$ 415,000	\$ 180,000	\$ 635,000	\$ 2,050,000
Total	\$ 1,920,000	\$ 920,000	\$ 750,000	\$ 1,315,000	\$ 4,905,000
Surplus / (Deficit)	\$ (30,000)	\$ 45,000	\$ (230,000)	\$ (285,000)	\$ (500,000)

The Financial Framework: Expansion of Fixed Route and Weekend Service

- **Existing Local Funding:** Initially, current transit millages (Benton Harbor, Niles, Buchanan) will need to be retained to maintain service
- **New Annual Local Funding Required:**
 - **Preserving Existing Services:** \$215,000 to offset existing deficits
 - **Expanding Services in the Unserved Area:** \$285,000 (+/-) to provide demand-response service
 - **Establishing Weekend Service:** \$500,000 (+/-)
 - **Creating High-Demand Fixed Routes:** \$500,000 (+/-)
- **MDOT Commitment:** Through the “Service Initiative Fund” MDOT will provide the new local share at 100% year 1, 80% year 2, 60 % year 3.

Implementation Roadmap

- **Form the County-Wide Transit Authority:** Establish a single public body (a Transit Authority) under Michigan Act 196 to oversee operations and ensure equitable representation.
- **Establish the Organization:** Empanel the Authority (representatives of existing systems and community at-large members) and provide for staff support. The new Authority will initially contract with existing providers to serve the urban and rural areas while it develops a long-term operating plan, asset management plan, and funding strategy.
- **Coordinate with Partners:** Work with MDOT and the FTA for a smooth funding transition. Using “Service Initiative Funds” MDOT has committed to cover the funding “gap” for a period of years (3-4) while long-term funding can be identified and secured.
- **Communications Plan:** Launch a campaign to build community support and awareness.
- **Secure Funding:** Obtain community approval for long-term funding.

Decisive Leadership Required

- We've seen the reports - *Moving Forward* in 2014 and *Connect Berrien* in 2018. We have over a decade of analysis telling us the same thing: the current fragmented system is a structural liability. But unlike previous years, the 'study' phase is officially over because the clock is running out.
- MDOT has been clear. As of October 1, 2026, TCATA is no longer eligible for the state and federal funding that keeps its doors open. This isn't a policy suggestion, it is a funding termination date. Without a unified Authority under Act 196, we lose the backbone of our urban transit overnight.
- If we do not act this fall, we are choosing to tell 150,000 riders that their transportation is gone. We are telling 55,000 seniors and persons with disabilities that they no longer have a way to reach healthcare or groceries. And we are accepting that Berrien Bus will simply run out of reserves and cease to exist in our rural communities

Decisive Leadership Required

- The alternative is GoBerrien. This isn't just about saving what we have; it's about making it work for our economy. We'll go from serving 66% of jobs to 100% of jobs in this county. We add weekend service across the County for the first time, ensuring our hospitality and service industry workers can actually get to work.
- We are asking for Berrien County to form the County-Wide Transit Authority under Act 196. MDOT has already committed to bridging the funding gap for 3 to 4 years while we transition, but that bridge only exists if we start building the Authority *now*.
- The choice is simple: We can either manage the decline of a siloed, inefficient system, or we can lead the creation of a unified engine for social and economic growth. Let's choose to keep Berrien County moving forward.