PUBLIC POLICY FORUM

IMPARTIAL RESEARCH. INFORMED DEBATE.

For more information:
Rob Henken
President, Public Policy Forum
414-276-8240 or 414-708-4392 (c)
rhenken@publicpolicyforum.org

Report says flexible and on-demand transit services could help address the "last mile" problem in metro Milwaukee

A report released today by the Public Policy Forum suggests that flexible forms of transit service – and perhaps new strategies linked to partnerships with ride-hailing companies like Lyft and Uber – could help address the region's elusive "last mile" problem, which can arise when fixed-route transit services stop short of bringing commuters all the way to their job sites.

"The rise of smart phones, mobile applications, and new private transportation service providers has ushered in a highly experimental period in which transit systems are testing new ways of providing on-demand transportation services," says Forum Senior Researcher Joe Peterangelo, the report's author. "Our research indicates there are a number of innovative solutions that local elected officials and transit system leaders should consider that could offer last mile solutions while also improving general transit access, coverage, and quality in the Milwaukee area."

The last mile challenge is particularly common in suburban areas, where jobs are more dispersed and difficult for the Milwaukee County Transit System (MCTS) and suburban transit systems to serve efficiently.

The new report analyzes options for improving last mile transportation connections in metro Milwaukee, with a particular focus on reducing transportation barriers for City of Milwaukee residents seeking employment opportunities throughout the region. It considers last mile

strategies used in other metro areas and explores their potential costs and benefits if tried in Milwaukee. The report also includes "local area studies" of Milwaukee's Menomonee Valley and New Berlin to illustrate possible application of flexible and on-demand transit services.

The report cites two last mile strategies that have "several unique strengths that merit a closer look" for metro Milwaukee. One is *flexible transit*, which typically involves utilizing 14-passenger buses or vans that are allowed to make diversions from set routes to serve dispersed businesses in suburban areas by request; and the other is *ride-hailing*, which offers on-demand, point-to-point transportation to and from transit stops through partnerships with taxi companies and transportation network companies, such as Lyft and Uber.

"While no last mile strategy would be a perfect, comprehensive solution in all areas of the region, each may be effective in certain contexts and/or in combination with other services," says Peterangelo. "It is also critical to recognize that implementation of any of these strategies will require additional public funding and/or an employer subsidy for each trip."

The report concludes with several policy recommendations, including the following:

- **Build on recent efforts to improve transportation connections in the Milwaukee area through shared-ride taxi services and bicycle services and amenities.** For example, the recent expansion of Ozaukee County's shared-ride taxi service to serve bus stops in Milwaukee County could help bridge a divide for Milwaukee County residents who commute to work in Ozaukee County. If successful, Ozaukee and Washington counties could expand their shared-ride taxis services to additional Milwaukee County bus stops.

- **Develop and implement an official MCTS mobile application with robust capabilities.** An official MCTS mobile application could allow users to add value to their fare cards, get point-to-point transit directions, and track bus arrivals in real-time using their mobile devices, while also paving the way for on-demand transportation services. Waukesha County's transit and Ozaukee County's share-ride taxi services also could be integrated into the app.

- **Pilot a flexible transit and/or on-demand transportation service in metro Milwaukee.** Case studies in the report show that both flexible and on-demand transportation services can improve access and coverage in lower-density areas where fixed-route bus services often are not feasible. MCTS and Waukesha Metro Transit should consider piloting a flexible transit or on-demand transportation service in one or two priority areas.

- **Consider how benefits provided by innovative last mile strategies can extend to broader populations of transit users.** While the report's focus is on improving access to employment for Milwaukee residents, last mile services also can improve mobility for other populations. For example, Boston is partnering with ride-hailing companies to provide more convenient transportation services to paratransit riders while reducing costs for the transit system.

- **Cultivate intergovernmental collaboration and private sector involvement to address last mile challenges in lower-density areas of metro Milwaukee.** The opportunity to form partnerships around innovative, technology-driven last mile solutions may represent a promising opportunity for local governments to break through past barriers and work together to plan and fund effective services that cross county and municipal borders. Private sector involvement in designing and funding transportation services also is essential.

"Overall, our research provides important insights into the steps being taken elsewhere to integrate new technologies and new ways of thinking into public transit offerings," says Peterangelo. "It is important to remember, however, that taking such steps in Milwaukee would be difficult given the financial challenges facing our transit system, which makes preservation of existing service levels a daunting task."

The full report – which was commissioned by Metro*GO!* – can be downloaded at the Forum's web site, www.publicpolicyforum.org.

Milwaukee-based Public Policy Forum, established in 1913 as a local government watchdog, is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to enhancing the effectiveness of government and the development of southeastern Wisconsin through objective research of public policy issues.