DRAFT Findings from Reauthorization Research

October 2006

Introduction

Cocker Fennessy, Inc., a Seattle-based public affairs firm, was retained by the Agency Council on Coordinated Transportation (ACCT) to perform stakeholder research to identify opportunities and challenges related to both ACCT—including possible sun setting of its existence in 2007—and issues faced by special needs transportation. Part of this process was to research the views of people who are familiar with the program and who represent a variety of perspectives.

The purpose of this research was to assist ACCT in answering questions such as:

- Have you heard of ACCT? What is your understanding of ACCT?
- What is your interest in special needs transportation? What are some of the priority issues for special needs transportation?
- What should ACCT do to support special needs transportation?
- In your estimation if ACCT was successful, what would that look like?
- If ACCT has not been successful with its charge do you know why?
- Is there a need for ACCT to continue in the future? If so, what issues should ACCT move forward? If not, why should ACCT terminate?
- How should the structure of ACCT change to increase the chance of success improving transportation for persons with special needs?
- ACCT members are from different organizations and have a variety of accountabilities, what should ACCT's relationship be to member organizations?

This paper reports on Cocker Fennessy's research and findings.

Methodology

Cocker Fennessy conducted 25 phone interviews with stakeholders who were identified by Cocker Fennessy and ACCT staff. Interviewees were selected from a variety of categories:

- Legislators and local elected officials
- Transit agencies, associations and brokers
- Human service agencies and providers
- Low-income service providers
- Disabled community representatives
- Senior citizen community representatives
- Education agencies and associations
- Users of special needs transportation

The telephone interviews were conducted in September 2006 by Cocker Fennessy staff. Eight open-ended questions were asked during the interviews, which lasted approximately 30 minutes. The interviewers used prompts to elicit more in-depth responses as appropriate.

To promote candor, interviewers assured participants that while their opinions would be reported to ACCT members, their names would not be associated with any specific views or quotations included in the report.

Cocker Fennessy also informed those who were interviewed that the results of the survey would be considered by ACCT members as they work with the Legislature on renewing legislation to continue, modify or eliminate the program.

Themes

The purpose of the interviews was to gather a variety of ideas and perspectives from individuals familiar with special needs transportation and ACCT. The broad ranges of responses are included in the findings section of this report. We also thought it might be useful for ACCT members to be aware that some views were held by a majority of those interviewed. The following are themes that were expressed by nearly all of the interview participants.

1. The mission of ACCT—to coordinate and improve transportation services for special needs communities—is well understood and viewed as necessary.

2. ACCT should be continued. There is support for enacting a strong legislative mandate as well as full commitment from key players—Governor, Legislature, and major agencies. Participants said that without that mandate, commitment and participation, ACCT's ability to make improvements to special needs transportation is greatly compromised.

3. ACCT is currently under-funded and under-staffed. There is a desire for providing sufficient, sustained and reliable funding for ACCT's internal operations, its grant making abilities, and for special needs transportation services generally.

4. Performance measures should be developed and implemented. Participants said that ACCT needs to develop performance measures and indicators for the work it is coordinating. They feel measures are will help inform and drive policy decisions and they will demonstrate the benefits of coordination.

5. Streamlining and improving the bureaucracy of the overall special needs transportation system is necessary. Interviews stated that the many different requirements, regulations, funding mechanisms, etc. create artificial barriers that prevent many resources from being fully used. An example used by many interview participants was the inability to utilize school buses for other types of trips.

Findings

The findings are conclusions and assessments based on what was heard in the interviews. Each finding is followed by representative statements made by the interviewees.

The interviews conducted were intended to serve as qualitative rather than quantitative research. The purpose was to gather a variety of ideas and perspectives, not to measure opinions as a public opinion survey would do.

Because the research was qualitative, the reported findings do not quantify the number of people who expressed ideas. The themes section of this report identifies observations made by a majority of the interview participants.

The findings are separated into the following categories:

- Perceptions of ACCT and its role
- Priority issues for special needs transportation
- Priorities for ACCT
- Structure and membership of ACCT
- Suggestions for increasing ACCT's success
- Future of ACCT

Perceptions of ACCT and its Role

1. All interviewees were very familiar with ACCT and its mission.

2. Nearly all interviewees stated that ACCT's role is to coordinate and improve transportation services for special needs communities. They believed that ACCT was established to better deliver efficient and effective services, which would reduce the cost of services and allow more services to be provided.

3. People stated that ACCT was created by the Legislature. Some also mentioned the role that agency staff, who had observed redundancies and opportunities for working together, played in developing ACCT.

4. Interviewees said that a focus of ACCT should be improving institutional infrastructure so that at some point in the future, ACCT will not be necessary. The issues ACCT coordinates would inherently be a part of how agencies and institutions operate.

5. Some interviewees said ACCT is viewed as a national model program and that Washington State is ahead of the rest of the country in terms of coordinating special needs transportation. However, they believe that there is still room for improvement.
6. Some stated that if ACCT could succeed in getting agencies to include efficiency and coordination as program and reporting requirements, this type of multi-jurisdictional, multi-agency effort could be modeled in other areas, e.g., health care and education.

Priority Issues for Special Needs Transportation

7. Most participants said that continued coordination and coalition building should be top priorities.

8. Many people mentioned the need for the expansion and availability of service and transportation resources, particularly in rural areas. They believed that ACCT has helped to improve this situation.

9. Many said that they want to see more flexibility and access to special needs transportation in urban areas. They believed that ACCT has had less impact on larger programs in more urban environments.

10. Many said that better access to transportation for the disabled and elderly should be a priority.

11. Some voiced concerns about preparing for the baby boomers generation. They predicted a need to increase transportation options and education about how to use the systems.

12. Interviewees wanted to eliminate the artificial barriers and restrictions for using different types of vehicles for different types of trips.

13. Interviewees felt that the ability to share information between systems is important. The special needs transportation field needs common definitions, consistent language, and software that enables them to communicate with one another.

14. A few participants expressed a need to increase safety for users.

Priorities for ACCT

15. Most interviewees felt that ACCT's number one priority should be to continue providing coordination and improving the communication and efficiencies among all the various groups involved in special needs transportation.

16. Interviewees prioritized legislative advocacy. They wanted ACCT to continue to promote legislation that removes barriers to transportation.

17. Participants hoped that ACCT will continue to provide education and technical support, especially for those organizations that don't have resources of their own. They also wanted ACCT to educate those who are not as well-versed in special needs transportation issues. ACCT should be building awareness and support about the need for these services.

18. Some stated that ACCT should be a resource contact for organizations throughout the state. They should be the single source of information for all agencies doing work that pertains to special needs transportation.

Structure and Membership of ACCT

19. Some said that changes in government structures are necessary versus structural changes to ACCT. Many expressed frustration with the way the overall system is structured. They said that there are too many different rules, requirements and regulations at many different jurisdictional levels. They said that because of these constraints, many resources are not fully being used. Territorial issues and artificial borders impede success.

20. Many mentioned that it is difficult to coordinate with school districts and that there is a need and major benefits to matching up the available resources of school buses with the needs of the elderly, disabled and others within the special needs community.

21. People expressed mixed feelings about where ACCT should be housed—within WSDOT or possibly in another state agency. Some wondered if ACCT would be more effective in the Office of the Governor.

22. Many stated that ACCT's structure fit the usual stakeholder model, which they felt was appropriate.

23. A few wanted to assign staff to specific regions.

24. Individuals suggested the following additions to the council:
    - Directors from major federal, state and local agencies
    - Washington state Transportation commissioners
    - Community, Trade and Economic Development representatives
    - Union representatives
    - Private sector representatives
    - Non-profit organizations like Goodwill who employee special needs populations

25. Some suggested looking closely at the funding sources and making sure those individuals are involved.

26. Most said that it is critical for the voting members to be the people who have decision-making authority and power within their organizations.

27. A few mentioned that the voting members should not be members of organizations being asked to make changes.

28. Some recommended that ACCT develop a rigorous orientation for new council members, including roles and responsibilities, commitment, prioritizing wider state concerns over narrow local concerns, etc.

Suggestions for Increasing ACCT's Success

29. Most interviewees said that ACCT is successful, but that they believe much more can and needs to be done.

30. Nearly all interviewees mentioned the need for a more comprehensive and powerful ACCT. They said that with the following improvements, ACCT would be much more successful:
    - A stronger legislative mandate including:
        - ✓ Major state agencies should be required to participate in ACCT and include transportation as a fundamental part of their programs.
        - ✓ Coordination should be required performance measure for agencies, and required in grant applications.
    - Full commitment and participation from a political leaders and major agency players including:
        - ✓ Governor
        - ✓ Legislators
        - ✓ WSDOT
        - ✓ DSHS
        - ✓ OSPI
        - ✓ Medicaid & Medicare

    - Adequate, sustained and reliable funding for ACCT's internal operations and its ability to pilot innovative ideas.

31. Some suggested that ACCT work hard to develop legislative champions by:
    - Encouraging local coalitions to work with their legislators directly. This would, at the very least, get more legislators familiar with the issues and the benefits of ACCT.
    - Taking legislators on field trips/tours during interim. This would allow special needs transportation advocates to make person connections with legislators and legislators would see the issues first-hand.

32. Most interviewees said that ACCT should develop better performance measures and indicators for the work it is coordinating. This information would help inform and drive policy choices, and it would demonstrate the benefits of coordination.

33. Some people said ACCT should obtain feedback from users to ensure that they are developing policies and programs that work for the users.

34. Many said that better integration of transportation planning and communication with the Medicaid/Medicare system is needed.

35. Some mentioned that ACCT needs a clearer vision and common goals.

36. Some interviewees said ACCT should show bold leadership and a willingness to shake up the system. They felt a hesitation for many to acknowledgment that the system needs major change.

Future of ACCT

37. Nearly all those interviewed expressed strong support for ACCT's continuation.

38. Although there was strong support for ACCT, some said that unless ACCT received a stronger commitment and mandate from the Governor and the Legislature, they questioned whether strides could be made.

39. A few raised questions about whether the new federal requirements (SAFETEA-LU) are duplicative of ACCT. Some voiced concerns about how the requirements will impact current efforts to coordinate special needs transportation at all levels.