



Planning Today for Tomorrow's Rural Transportation



As communities continue to change, so do the transportation needs of the people who live in them. At OATS Transit, planning for the future means looking beyond today's schedules and preparing for the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

As we look to the future, our Board of Directors and staff are shifting from a traditional five-year strategic plan to a more focused two-year business plan. This shorter planning cycle will allow us to remain flexible, respond to changing funding and service needs, and make informed decisions that position OATS Transit for success over the next two or three years.

Across rural Missouri, more people rely on transportation to reach medical appointments, jobs, grocery stores, senior centers, and other essential destinations. At the same time, transportation providers face rising operating costs, an aging workforce, increasing demand for service, and uncertainty surrounding future funding. These challenges make long-term planning more important than ever.

Over the past twenty years, Missouri's population has shifted, making it important for OATS Transit to take a closer look at how these changes are affecting the communities we serve. Some rural counties are experiencing population declines, making it increasingly difficult to sustain essential transportation services for residents who depend on public transit. The most significant population declines in Missouri in the last twenty years have occurred in the Southeast Bootheel region (which isn't in OATS service area), parts of Northwest Missouri, and the independent City of St. Louis.

Northwest Missouri, a region that is largely rural, has experienced a steady population decline, with the area's overall population decreasing by 7% over the past 20 years. The independent City of St. Louis has declined approximately 13.4% over the last 20 years. On the flip side though, rural Webster County and Lincoln counties have seen the largest growth in population in Missouri. (Earlier this year, we did a story on Rogersville Missouri, which is located in Webster County and is the fastest growing city in Missouri.) Growth in Webster and Lincoln counties has been attributed to "suburban spillover" from the neighboring metropolitan hubs. Lower taxes, more land, and more affordable housing contribute to their growth.

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A strong transportation system does not happen by chance. It requires partnerships, thoughtful planning, and investment from local communities. Local funding plays a vital role in helping maintain and expand rural transportation services. Local funding comes in many forms- cities, counties, hospitals, businesses, social service agencies, individuals and the state.

In many areas, local support allows OATS Transit to provide additional service hours, increase trip availability, and better meet the unique needs of each community. Without those local investments, it becomes increasingly difficult to keep pace with growing demand or respond to changing community needs.



As we update our business plan, we are looking ahead with a focus on sustainability, innovation, and service excellence. We are evaluating how we can better serve riders, strengthen partnerships, improve efficiency, and continue providing the safe, caring, and reliable transportation our communities depend on.

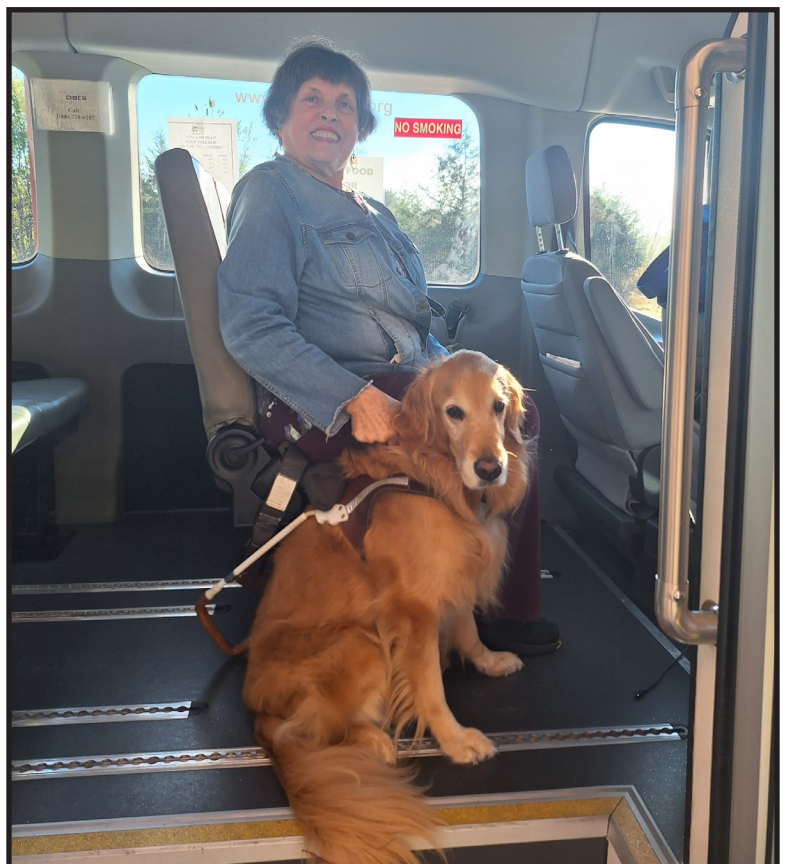
While the future brings uncertainty, one thing remains clear: reliable transportation is essential to the health, independence, and quality of life of rural Missourians. By working together with local governments, community organizations, businesses, and funding partners, we can help ensure that rural transportation remains available for future generations.

Planning for tomorrow begins today, and with continued community support, we can build a stronger, more connected future for the people and communities we serve. We need you!

Source for numbers used in story: U.S. Census Bureau and Missouri Small Business Development Center

Photo above right: Cass County Missouri Riders

Photo below right: Branson Missouri Rider Marilyn with service dog Zest



Business Spotlight

Our Business Spotlight this month is on **Daddy Ray's** in Moscow Mills MO. The business was opened by Ray and Darlene Henry in 1998 with the production of fig cookies. Later, they were acquired by J&J Snack Foods, however they still operate as Daddy Ray's today.

Daddy Ray's is a large commercial manufacturer of baked goods including Nutra Fruit Bars, pretzels and various other products. This company truly makes a meaningful impact by creating employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities and demonstrating the importance of an inclusive workforce where everyone has the opportunity to contribute and succeed.

The company has 52 employees. OATS Transit currently has four riders that we take to work there every day. Employment transportation in Lincoln County is made possible, in part, by the **Lincoln County Commission** and other funding partners.

We thank Daddy Ray's for leading by example, creating meaningful employment opportunities, and showing the positive impact businesses can have when they embrace inclusion and recognize the talents of every individual.

Pictured going into work is rider Fernandez L., who works at Daddy Ray's five days per week and rides OATS Transit to get there. *Photo taken by driver Ann Schrader.*



THE WHEEL

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