



iRide Vanpool

Prepared By: Karalyn Clouser and Natalie Villwock-Witte, Western Transportation Institute at Montana State University

Prepared For: National Association of Development Organizations and the Southern Georgia Regional Commission

Program Overview

iRide Vanpool is a vanpool program operated and administered by the Missoula Ravalli Transportation Management Association (MRTMA). iRide Vanpool was implemented to reduce congestion during planned construction on Highway 93 in the Missoula and Ravalli County area. Furthermore, the Friends of the Bitterroot, a nonprofit organization with a mission of preserving wildlands and wildlife, advocated for vanpool as a way to promote alternatives to single occupancy vehicle (SOV) commuting to help avoid future highway expansions in the region.



Photo Credit: MRTMA

The iRide Vanpool expands the multimodal transportation offerings for the region as well as meeting several regional goals including reducing parking congestion, protecting the environment, minimizing traffic, and improving quality of life.

Program Operations

MRTMA owns and operates iRide Vanpool. They have two full-time staff and two part-time staff who provide administrative support to the program.

There are three ways that a vanpool may form. First, someone desiring to join a vanpool must complete a rideshare application on the program website (<http://www.mrtma.org/rideshare-application.html>). MRTMA reviews applications to determine if an existing route will meet their needs. If not a wait list is reviewed for creation of a possible new vanpool route with potential riders or asked if they'd be interested in carpooling. Occasionally an employer or a group employees will reach out to MRTMA to have someone explain the vanpool program and its benefits at their place of employment. Employers may also sponsor a vanpool.

The program uses seven-passenger hybrid minivans (Toyota Siennas) and twelve-passenger gasoline-powered vans. To create a vanpool, at least four passengers (for the minivan) or eight passengers (for the thirteen-passenger van) must travel to work at least four days a week. Vanpool routes are created to serve passengers who live and work in close proximity to each other. Currently, iRide Vanpool serves 16 routes throughout Ravalli, Mineral, Lake, and Missoula Counties. Routes are designed to best accommodate riders' needs.

The vanpools riders typically meet at one of the 27 park-n-ride lots in the area which are located along the main corridors. The vans are generally parked at the park-n-ride lot at the end of the trip, except during the winter when MRTMA allows the vanpool driver to take the van home to ensure that frost does not develop on the windows as a result of riders entering a cold vehicle. It allows for routes to keep on-time schedules, as the driver can defrost and warm up the van before taking on riders.



Photo Credit: MRTMA

Vanpool fares vary based on distance traveled and the total number of days traveled per week. On average, it costs \$0.09 per mile to ride the vanpool. The monthly fare from Hamilton to Missoula (47.1 miles one-way) is \$140/month. A basic fare schedule is provided on the iRide Vanpool frequently asked questions website: <http://www.mrtma.org/faqs.html>.

While still adhering to Federal Transit Administration (FTA) regulations, MRTMA allows vanpools to have some level of flexibility on the route as long as the riders agree. For example, one vanpool asked permission to travel to a movie as a group before heading home one month. With permission from MRTMA, drivers have also been able to utilize the van to travel to medical appointment during their workday.

MRTMA handles the maintenance of the vehicles and adheres to the manufacturer recommended preventative maintenance schedule. Van maintenance is performed while the riders are at work so as not to cause lost work time for the driver or the riders. MRTMA manages a fleet of spare vehicles for instances where vehicle maintenance will take longer than normal (e.g. parts are unavailable). The vans are equipped with an in-vehicle monitoring system from T Mobile which records when the driver speeds, brakes hard, or takes a corner at a high speed. This allows MRTMA to proactively handle any driver safety issues and provides a reduced insurance rate for the vanpools. MRTMA provides studded snow tires or all-season tires in the winter.

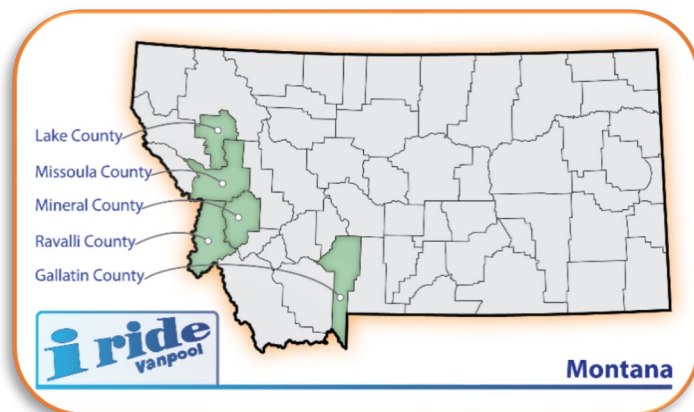
A primary driver and at least one backup driver are required to initiate a vanpool. If a driver operates the van two full days per week, their fare is covered for the entire week. Generally, the primary drivers will drive the van three days a week and a backup driver will cover two days. The

driving schedule is agreed upon between the drivers. An individual must be 25 years old and agree to a motor vehicle record check to serve in this capacity. If someone younger than 25 years old has a commercial driver's license (CDL), MRTMA's insurer will allow them to serve as a driver. For example, employees who had CDLs to drive buses for the university were also able to drive vanpools. Vanpool riders can be under the age of eighteen; however, MRTMA requires that riders who do not possess a driver's license or are under 16 must be accompanied by a parent or guardian. MRTMA enacted this policy in response to safety concerns when children were not picked up at the park-n-ride at the end of the day and to remove any perceived conflicts with school bus regulations.

The vanpool provides a guaranteed ride home (GRH) program which allows vanpool users to be reimbursed for trips home in case of emergency once monthly. The GRH program allows vanpool riders to utilize local taxi services, public transportation, Uber, or Lyft. Previously, MRTMA previously contracted with a local taxi company, but due to changes in FTA regulations have changed the program. MRTMA noted that while provided, the GRH program is rarely utilized.

Current Ridership

Currently, iRide Vanpool serves 16 routes and 67 riders throughout Ravalli, Mineral, Lake, and Missoula Counties. Routes are designed to best accommodate riders' needs. Recently, a route serving commuters in Gallatin County was implemented through a partnership with the state Voc-Rehab Program to provide transportation to workers traveling from Manhattan to Three Forks to work at a popular local bakery/restaurant.



MRTMA has found that manufacturers utilize the program the most as these employers are generally located in rural counties. Most vanpool members are over the age of thirty-five; however, iRide Vanpool reported losing a lot of older members post-COVID as many of these individuals either permanently switched to telework or retired.

Each vanpool generally has a core group of members who utilize the vanpool all week and individuals that blend telework and in-office two to three days a week. MRTMA has found that people who vanpool like to know who they are riding with so generally riders will recruit additional vanpool members. MRTMA offers an Ad-Vantage program to members that provides free vanpool fares to members if they recruit new riders. In cases where vanpool ridership drops below the requirement, MRTMA will also reach out to employers in the area to help recruit additional members.

"The opportunity to be a driver on the iRide system has made it possible and feasible for me to have regular and reliable transportation to and from work on a daily basis. I am so grateful for this means of transportation. It is nice to have a ride on iRide!" - S. Tintinger

Program Funding

MRTMA utilizes FTA Section 5311 Formula Funding and Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) funds from the local metropolitan planning organization (MPO) to fund the service. MRTMA structures their budget to take advantage of the lowest match rates. Their Section 5311 funds are used for administrative costs and preventative maintenance. CMAQ funding is used to cover vanpool operations, rather than 5311 since those funds require 47% match compared to the 20% local match rate of CMAQ. Thus, the entire program operates on a 20% local match requirement.

The first vanpool vehicle was leased from a local FTA Section 5307 fleet. Three years later MRTMA received earmarked funds from a state senator to purchase vehicles and build a transit facility for the program. Recently, MRTMA was approached by a third-party vanpool operator, but the third-party vanpool operator opted not to move forward as they found that they could not operate the vanpools at the same cost or convenience as offered by MRTMA to their vanpoolers.

The hybrid minivans (Toyota Siennas) utilized by iRide Vanpool would qualify for the Low or No Emission Vehicle Program through FTA. This program provides funds to state or local governments to purchase or lease zero or low emission transit vehicles.¹

On average, a minivan costs MRTMA around \$550 per month and the twelve-passenger vans cost around \$750 per month. These costs include insurance, fuel cards for the vanpool riders, a cell phone, and vehicle maintenance.

Vanpool drivers are required to mail in vanpool fares and required reports (mileage – riders fill out a paper form letting the driver know which days they will be riding). MRTMA has offered a "tap" or cellphone log-in technology option; however, vanpool members reported a preference to remain with the current approach.

Insurance for the vanpool program is provided through Philadelphia Insurance. This company has a good understanding of volunteer driver programs. Coverage for the vanpool program currently costs around \$72,000 per year. This policy covers riders and workers compensation for the vanpool drivers.

¹ FTA Low or No Emission Vehicle Program – 5339(c): <https://www.transit.dot.gov/lowno>

Marketing

iRide Vanpool is marketing using vinyl lettering, radio advertisements, and brochures. The website (<http://www.mrtma.org/>) provides basic information on how to utilize the program and a link to apply to become a rider. MRTMA has reported, however, that their best marketing is word-of-mouth.



Photo Credit: MRTMA

MRTMA participates in local employer, job fairs, and has targeted outreach to promote the program and recruit potential members. They have found that vinyl lettering vehicles is cost effective compared to vehicle wraps. It costs about \$850 to letter a vehicle, a similar wrap would be approximately \$6,000 to \$7,000. It is also cheaper to replace a few letters due to animal strikes as opposed to having to replace an entire wrap. Both are noticeable as people drive on the road or past worksites and are guaranteed for 10-years not to fade.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Create Rider and Driver Policies:

Conflicts between vanpool members do occur. MRTMA has Rider and Driver Policies in place to help manage any challenges that may arise. When MRTMA becomes aware of conflicts, they offer to meet with the individuals involved at a coffee shop to discuss options. Traditionally, MRTMA has found that one rider typically drops out. Regarding drivers, in-vehicle monitoring systems help notify MRTMA of any driver issues. If MRTMA is notified that a driver is speeding, braking hard, or taking corners too fast, the driver is contacted by MRTMA to request a change in their driving practices. Upon a second infraction driving privileges may be suspended. If MRTMA contacts a driver for a third time, their driving privileges are revoked.

Reduce Requirements on Drivers:

For the iRide Vanpool program routes commuting from Missoula drivers must collect and send fares and rider logs into MRTMA. For routes commuting into Missoula MRTMA staff does collections from the vans on the 10th of each month. MRTMA handles any vehicle maintenance while the vanpool members are at work. This approach removes the responsibility of maintenance from the driver and gives MRTMA staff to inspect vehicles on a regular basis for any unreported issues.

Learn More

To learn more about the iRide Co-Op Vanpool Program, please visit the program website at:
<http://www.mrtma.org/>

Contact Information

Lyn Hellegaard, Executive Director, Missoula Ravalli Transportation Management Association,
mrtma2@montana.com

This work is supported by the U.S. Department of Agriculture under a cooperative agreement. USDA is an equal opportunity provider. Any opinions, findings and conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the funders.