



Intercity Bus Report Update 2022

Prepared For:
Nebraska Department of Transportation, Public Transit
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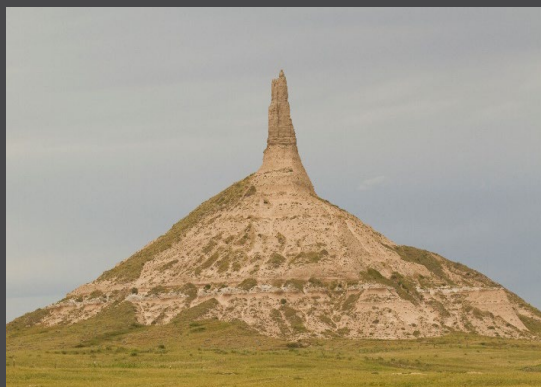


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1.0 Introduction

In early 2020, the world began experiencing a global pandemic of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19). The pandemic affected many Nebraska stakeholders including students, commuters and those seeking health-related transportation. In May 2020, the Nebraska Mobility Management Program published the *Lincoln-Omaha Intercity Bus Feasibility Study* and in June 2020 published the *Grand Island/Hastings/Kearney Intercity Bus Study*. Both these studies evaluated community profiles, demographics, travel patterns of those commuting between major communities and rural communities, intercity bus peer services, and key stakeholder information. A preferred transit service and implementation plan was completed for each of the areas, with the next steps discussing local match funding and looking for a turn-key contracted provider to begin service.

However, in March 2020, the world experienced the onset of a global pandemic of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19). The pandemic affected many Nebraska residents and visitors, including students, employees, major employers, local businesses, commuters, the elderly and disabled, and those seeking health-related transportation. The Nebraska Department of Transportation (NDOT) recognized early in the pandemic the shift in work travel patterns in Nebraska and across the country as businesses closed doors for employee and customer safety and tried to react in a virtual world.

We are slowly, over 20 months later, moving out from the peak of the pandemic. NDOT recognized the importance of re-looking at the 2020 Intercity Bus Final Reports, data, and preferred plans developed pre-pandemic. The 2020 Lincoln/Omaha Final Report and the Grand Island/Hastings/ Kearney Final Report were reviewed to see how and if the COVID-19 pandemic affected the state's economy, transportation patterns, public transit agencies, and if these changes impact the 2020 Final Reports.

The following chapters include a review of the 2020 Final Report recommendations, updated demographic data, updated travel pattern information, and analysis of the intercity bus providers and the local transit agencies. From the data presented in this report, COVID-19 had a devastating impact on public transportation across the world, the states, and Nebraska too. The recent trends show agency service trips and schedules are coming back to pre-COVID levels, which is good news for more travel opportunities for communities.

2.0 Review of 2020 Service Suggestions

2.1 Lincoln – Omaha Intercity Bus

In the 2020 Lincoln/Omaha Final Report, three distinct routes are recommended. Each route is designed to bring riders back to their origin point. Figure 1 on the following page shows all 3 routes.

- One express route for Lincoln residents going to Omaha destinations (branded as the Red Route)
- Second express route for Omaha residents destined for Lincoln (branded as the Black Route)
- Third route on U.S. Highway 6 that provides local service (branded as the Gold Route).

The Red Route was developed for residents of Lincoln traveling to Omaha with scheduled bus stops at the following areas:

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| • Innovation Campus | • UNL Engineering School (PKI) |
| • UNL Student Union | • UNMC – 42nd and Dewey |
| • Gold's StarTran Hub | • 24th and Douglas |
| • Gateway Mall Park and Ride | • 14th and Douglas |
| • 84th and Cornhusker Park and Ride | • Amtrak/Intercity Bus Station |
| • Ashland – SAC Museum | • Eppley Airport |
| • Metro Aksarben Transit Center | |

The Black Route is a separate route designed to transport Omaha residents to Lincoln destinations. The route originates at Amtrak/Intercity Bus Station, connecting with Amtrak schedules, and all trips that have a national intercity bus connection. Schedules may also originate at Eppley Airport if a national intercity bus Lincoln-Omaha connection is not available at the Amtrak/Intercity Bus Station. Stop locations for the Black route include:

- | | |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| • Eppley Airport | • La Vista Park and Ride Exit 442 |
| • Amtrak/Intercity Bus Station | • Nebraska Crossing Mall |
| • 24th and Dodge | • Gold's StarTran Hub |
| • UNMC – 42nd and Dewey | • State Capitol Office Building |
| • UNO – 70th and Dodge | • UNL Student Union |
| • Westroads Mall Park and Ride | • Innovation Campus |

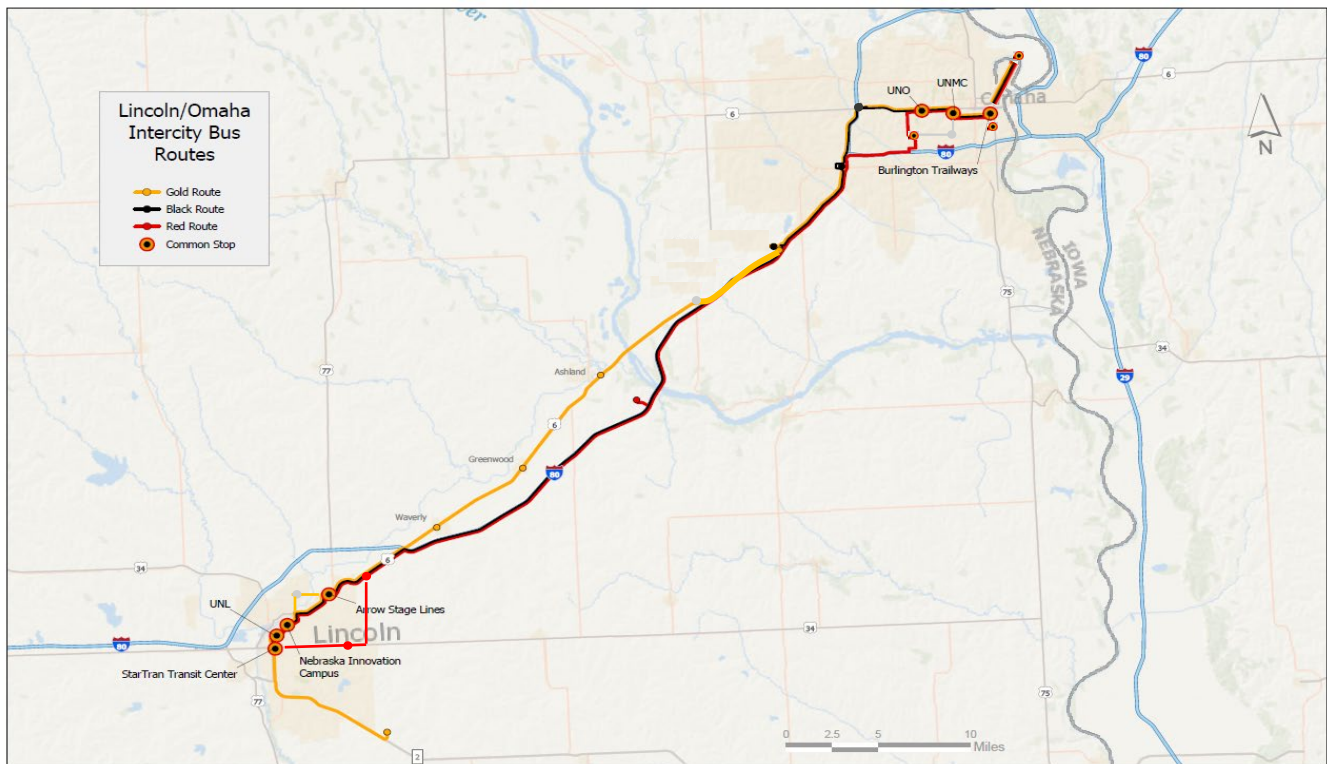


Figure 1. Lincoln-Omaha Regional Service

The Gold Route was developed to provide transit mobility services to the communities along the U.S. Highway 6 corridor. This route will have bus services operating in both east- and west-bound schedules. Route stops (listed in one direction for simplicity) include:

- Amtrak/Intercity Bus Station
- 24th and Dodge
- 40th and Dodge
- UNMC – 42nd and Dewey
- Veterans Hospital in Omaha
- UNL Engineering School (PKI)
- Aksarben Transit Center
- Walmart Super Center (Gretna)
- Nebraska Crossing Mall
- Ashland
- Greenwood
- Waverly
- Lincoln Bus Depot
- Walmart Super Center (East Lincoln)
- Innovation Campus
- UNL Student Union
- Gold's StarTran Hub

2.2 Grand Island, Hastings, and Kearney Intercity Bus

The Tri-city area has limited intercity bus service today. The Final Report included a preferred alternative including four flexible, fixed routes, with routes connecting the three regional centers – Grand Island, Hastings, and Kearney. All routes serve areas of employment density and major educational facilities, but they are designed to provide connections to the national network of intercity bus services, local public transit hubs, the Amtrak station, and the regional airports. Together these routes provide a connected regional transit network that can be used for a variety of trip purposes.



Figure 2. Grand Island, Hastings, and Kearney Regional Service

3.0 Community Impact - Demographics

The COVID-19 pandemic touched many aspects of people's lives and in their communities, not only in Nebraska, but across the world. From school closures to industries who shut down, it is an unprecedented time for the past 100 years. In Nebraska, schools shut down and moved classes to online teaching. Many businesses closed and other essential businesses learned quickly the protocol for operating in person with proper gear or online.

The NDOT Mobility Management team reviewed several factors with a direct impact on public transportation services. The Lincoln/Omaha and the Grand Island/Hastings/Kearney intercity services will have many students and many employees using the bus. The information in the following sections shows the trends and helped shape the updated service recommendations.

3.1 Enrollment Numbers for Nebraska Campuses

Several students postponed and/or cancelled their college education with the onset of COVID-19. Table 1 and Figure 3, below, displays fall enrollment numbers for the three University of Nebraska college systems, the College of Engineering with students in Omaha and Lincoln, and Central Community College in Grand Island. The University of Nebraska Omaha experienced a decline in enrollment from fall 2018 to 2019, but then displayed an increase in enrollment for fall 2020. The other four colleges all experienced declines in enrollment from 2018 to 2020.

Table 1. Enrollment Trends

<i>College</i>	<i>Fall 2018</i>	<i>Fall 2019</i>	<i>Fall 2020</i>
<i>UNL</i>	25,820	25,390	25,108
<i>UNO</i>	15,408	15,153	15,892
<i>UNK</i>	6,327	6,279	6,225
<i>College of Engineering</i>	3,077	2,929	2,894
<i>Central Community College</i>	19,621	18,567	17,258

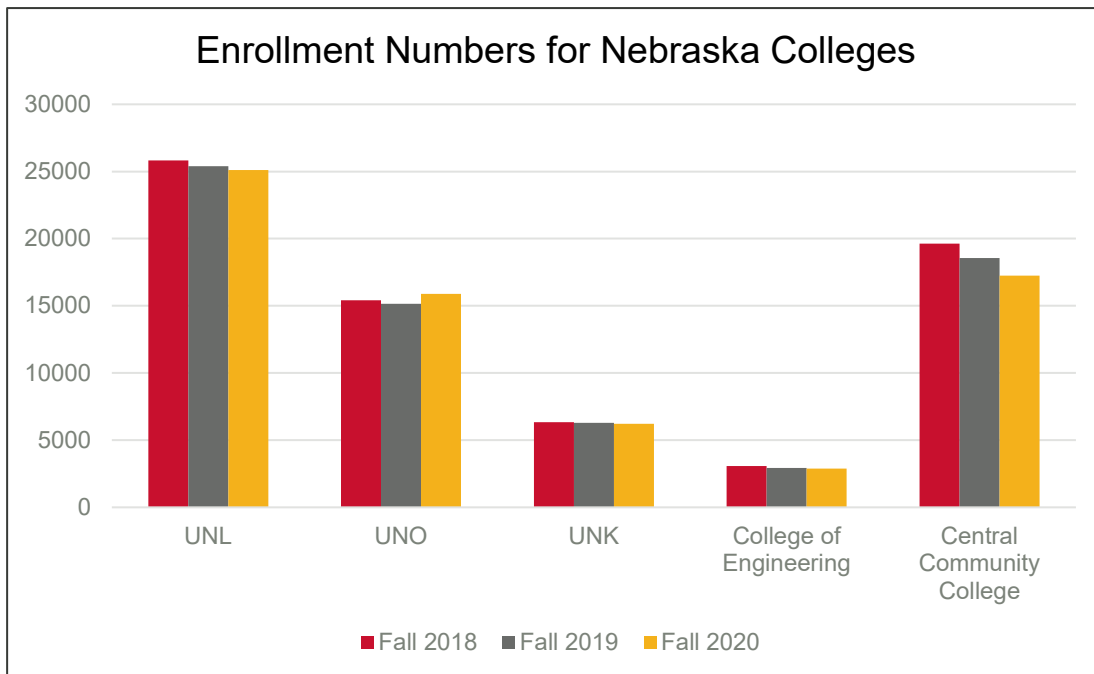


Figure 3. College Enrollment Trends

3.2 Lincoln and Omaha Area Unemployment Numbers

Unemployment rose sharply in 2020 as seen in Figure 4 with Omaha suffering the highest increases, likely due to pandemic shutdowns. Figure 5 shows the monthly unemployment numbers dropping as services open and employers are hiring through summer 2021. However, past performance indicates high unemployment rates are an anomaly and Nebraska is expected to return to average unemployment numbers as the pandemic recedes.

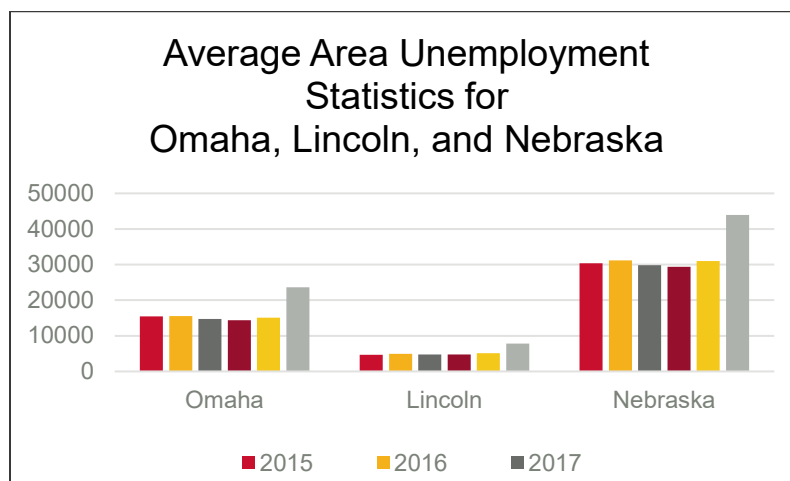


Figure 4. Annual Unemployment Trends

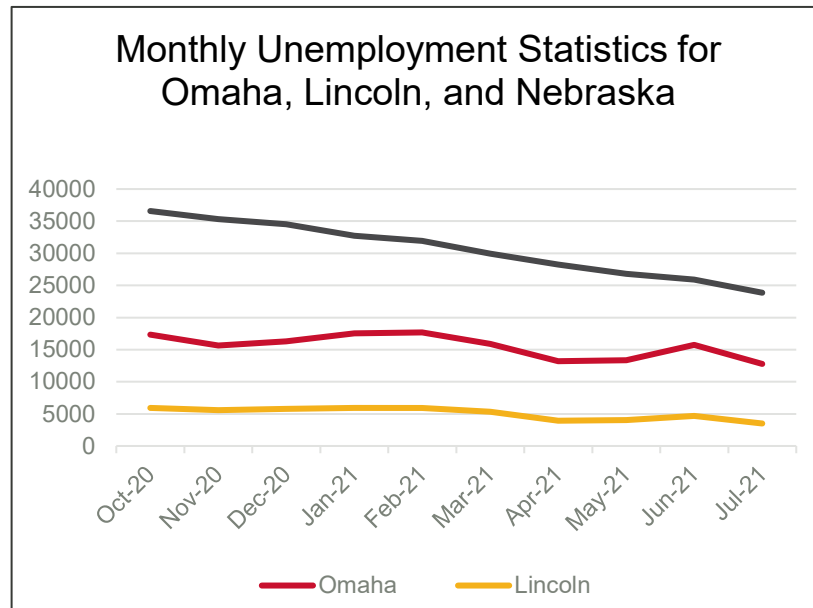


Figure 5. Monthly Unemployment Trends

3.3 Grand Island, Hastings and Kearney Area Unemployment Numbers

As seen with the Lincoln and Omaha areas, the Grand Island, Hastings, and Kearney (Tri-city) area experienced a sharp rise in unemployment during the pandemic. As seen in Figure 6 below, these numbers have recovered significantly in the first half of 2021, recording at or below the 2019 levels.

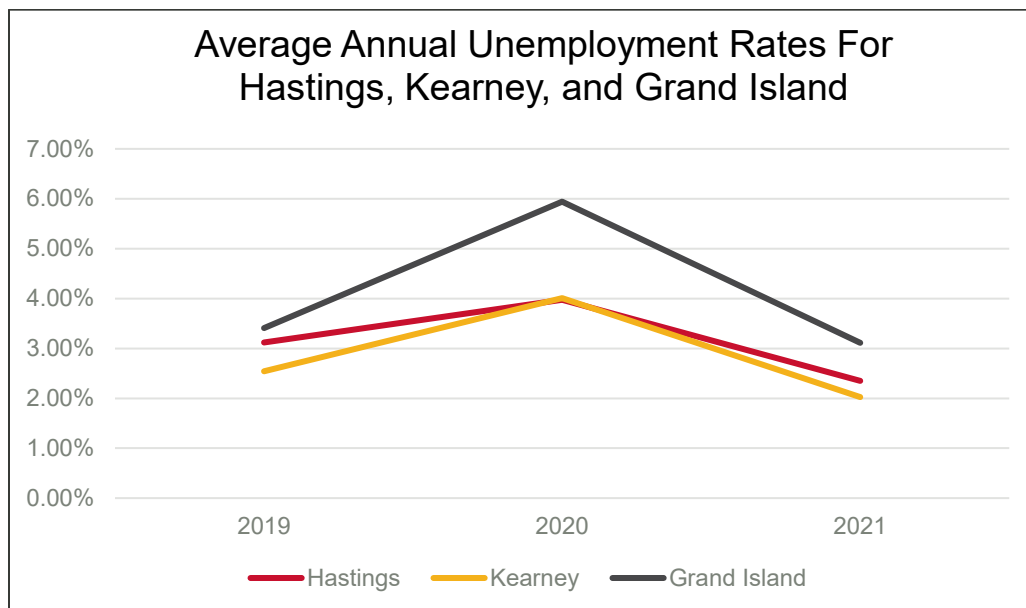


Figure 6. Tri-City Unemployment Trends

4.0 Travel Patterns

4.1 NDOT ATR Data

The Automatic Traffic Recorder (ATR) data from NDOT, published in July 2021, describes traffic patterns for sections of Interstate 80 (I-80) and Interstate 180 (I-180) spanning the proposed intercity bus route between Lincoln and Omaha. The available data at the time of this report was compared from 2018 through July 2021. Overall, there were minimal impact changes from 2018 through 2021 as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. ATR Annual Trends

ATR	Route	Location	2018 – 2019	2019 – 2020	2020 – 2021*	2018 – 2021*
55	I-80	East of Milford Interchange	-2.48%	-10.0%	19.6%	0.8%
56	I-80	West of Gretna	1.97%	-17.6%	15.7%	-4.8%
17	I-80	Northeast of N 50 Interchange	2.29%	-14.4%	17.2%	2.2%
46	I-180	City Route, Lincoln	-2.32%	-19.4%	-17.7%	-52.9%
24	I-80	42nd Street	0.94%	-17.4%	10.1%	-9.6%

* Partial is average of Jan - June of years shown

ATR 55 and 17 (East of Milford and Northeast of N 50, respectively) were relatively unchanged through this period. Decreases were reported on ATR 56 and 24 (West of Gretna and 42nd Street, respectively) suggesting a population that shifted from office to working from home, after the pandemic began. ATR 46 (I-180) showed the largest decrease in usage. These changes are shown graphically in the Appendix.

4.2 Replica HQ Data

Replica HQ is a new online software tool that uses advanced modeling techniques to simulate roadway travel patterns and trends. This software model utilizes multiple data sources, including mobile location data, demographic data, land use, real estate data, and on-the-ground data (traffic counts) to calibrate their model, providing a near real-time view on trends occurring in certain areas. These data were used for the Tri-City area to review travel patterns.

According to the Replica Trends model, when looking at Adams, Buffalo, and Hall Counties, the COVID-19 pandemic did affect the total number of daily vehicle trips that occurred in the Tri-Cities by nearly 50 percent, starting in March of 2020. However, by late-June of 2020, daily trip counts in the study area rebounded to the levels - seen earlier in 2020. Year over year, daily trip counts displayed in Figure 7, show an increase in trips from 2020 to 2021 by nearly 100 percent.

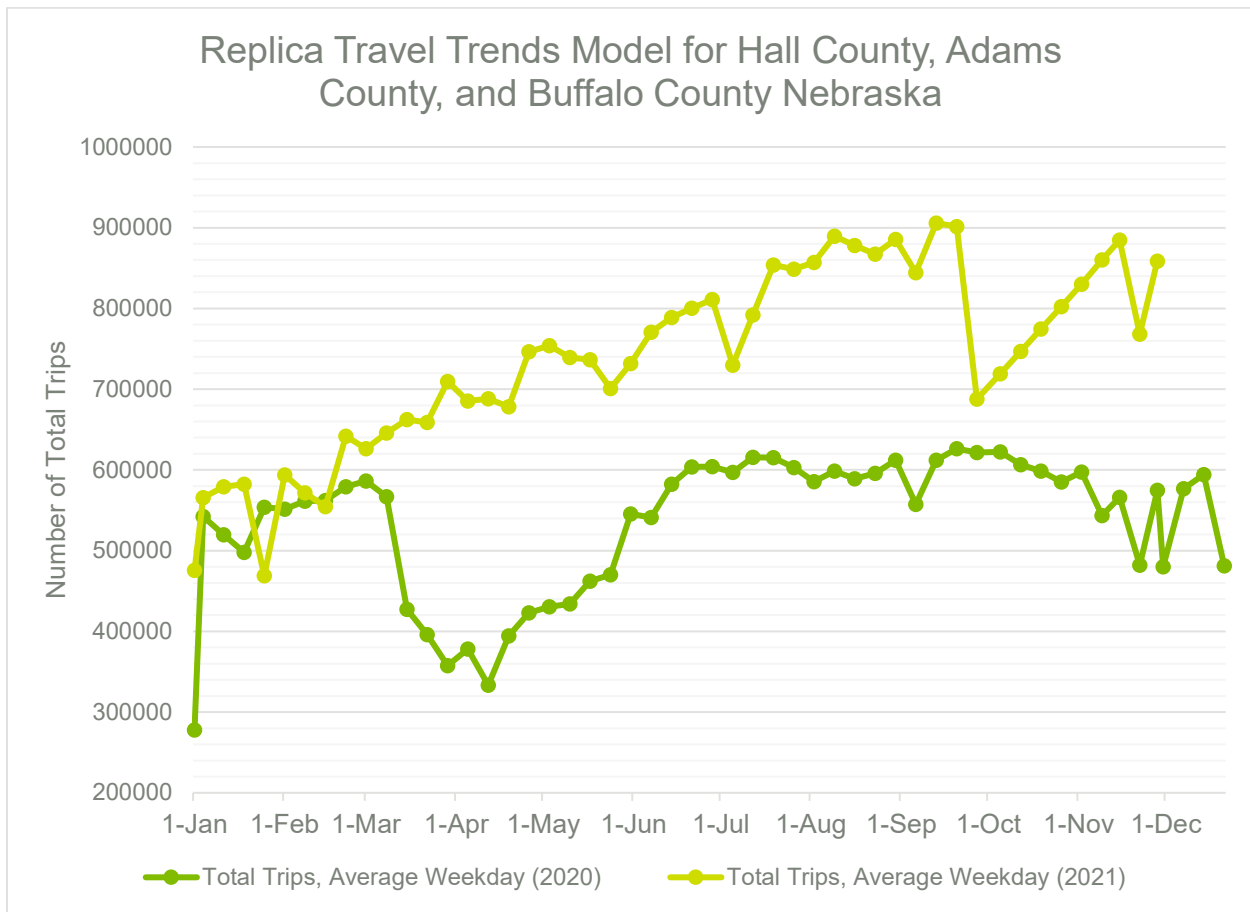
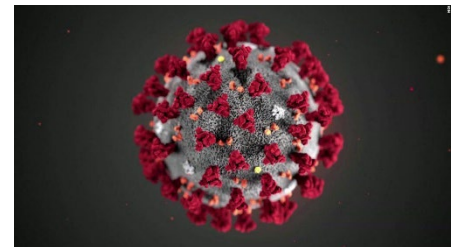


Figure 7. Tri-City Overall Travel Trends

4.3 Impact on Nebraska Public Transit Agencies

In September 2020, the UNO Center for Public Affairs Research completed a research project on the initial impact of COVID-19 on rural transit agencies in Nebraska. Surveys were distributed to transit managers across the state to determine any operational changes or an updated status of transit services in different parts of the state. The primary results of the study showed rural and urban transit agencies continued to play a vital role in many communities across Nebraska. For example, from February to May, transit agencies kept doors open and provided medical trips, grocery trips, delivered necessary supplies, and helped essential employees get to work.

In the rural areas of Nebraska, 75 percent of the agencies had returned to normal service after six months. However, in the



urban areas, this was not the case. Even though many rural agencies returned to almost pre-COVID-19 service levels, many managers expressed concerns regarding workforce safety, the length of time of the pandemic, and the financial/economic impact on their agency. Public transportation is a lifeline for many Nebraskans, both rural and urban, for those residents and visitors who do not have other mobility options.

Omaha Metro

Omaha Metro, our largest transit agency in the state, also provided vital connections for residents and visitors throughout the pandemic. In the early pandemic stages, Metro reduced service levels to modified Saturday schedules. A few exceptions were more frequency on the main routes due to overcrowding.



Current system-wide ridership is about 10 percent lower than March 2020, when the pandemic began. Metro is gradually recovering from the sharp decline in travel that persisted through the pandemic. Weekdays remain about 14 percent lower than March 2020. However, ridership on weekends has grown through the pandemic, recording an 11 percent increase in riders on Saturdays and a 12 percent increase on Sundays, largely due to ORBT ridership. Figure 8, on the following page, shows average monthly ridership during the pandemic.

These ridership numbers indicate a substantial shift in local travel patterns and mark a trend that may continue into the future. With many employers continuing to offer full- or part-time remote working arrangements, Metro has seen a decreased demand for traditional rush-hour services and increased usage during non-peak times throughout the week. Metro continues to monitor these changes in travel and identify ways to adapt the transit network to best meet the needs of our community.

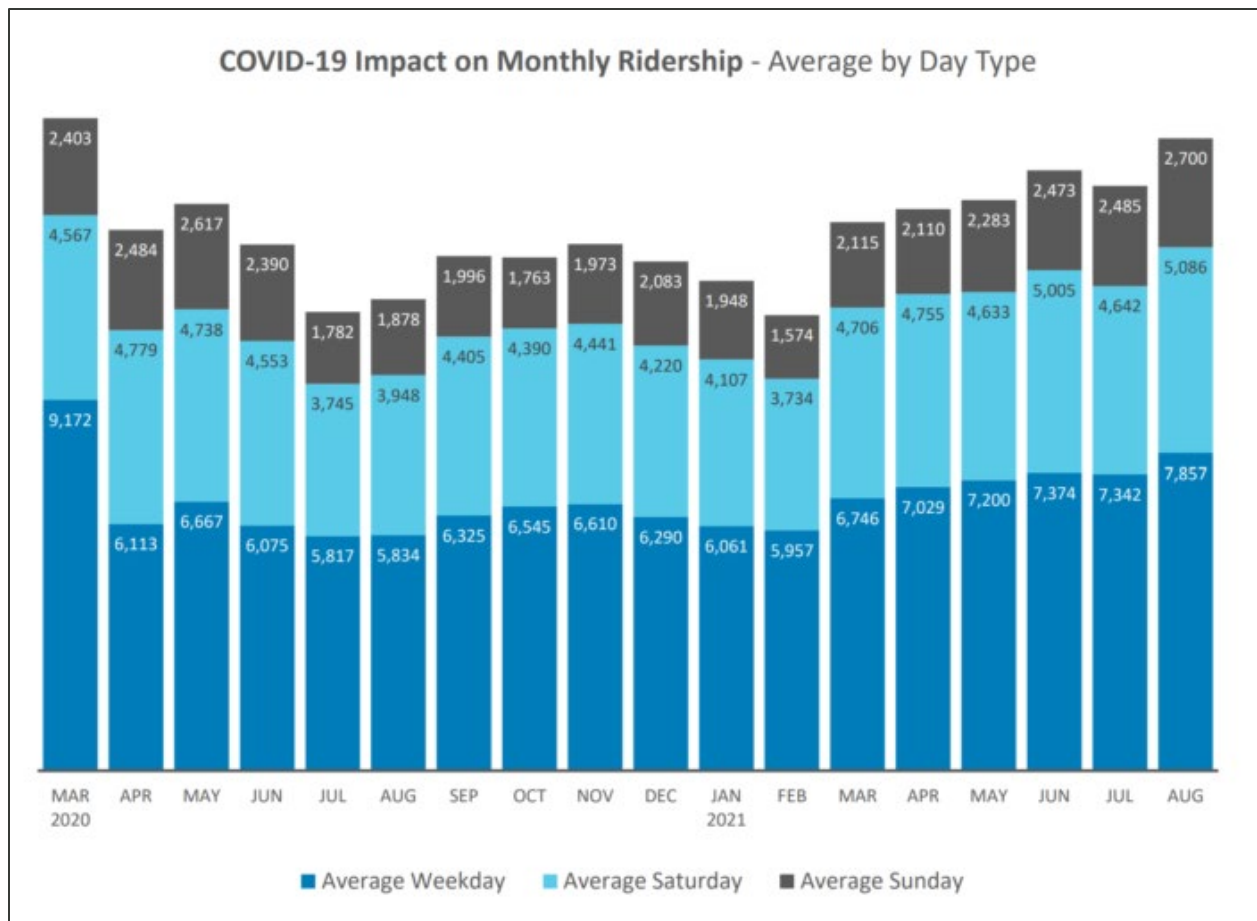


Figure 8. Omaha Metro Ridership Trends

As of October 2021, no Omaha Metro routes are back to full schedule. ORBT opened in November 2020 and reached an approximate 20-year high in ridership. All other local and community routes have stayed near 50 percent of normal levels, with slight increases in August with schools reopening with in-person classes. Express routes are only at 10-20 percent of the pre-pandemic level ridership. Many of the express riders are those who require access to essential services or work in those industries.

The growth Omaha Metro has encountered is primarily during midday and weekend hours, showing that either work trips are occurring at different hours than prior to the pandemic or people are using transit for more non-work trips (likely a combination of both).

Lincoln StarTran

The City of Lincoln's StarTran bus system has provided public transportation for many years and continued to provide essential service during the pandemic. The agency provides approximately 2.5M one-way trips per year, as shown in Figure 8, or approximately 7,000 average trips per day.



At the onset of the pandemic, StarTran suspended routes and had less frequent buses due to UNL moving to remote classes for students. In addition, city routes were changed to the Saturday, less frequent bus service, where buses generally operate hourly instead of every 30 minutes. Bus fares were free for the fixed route and paratransit services during the pandemic and will remain free until December 31, 2021.

With the reduction in service, in April 2020, StarTran began a new on-demand micro transit service that has supplemented its reduced fixed-route bus service and replaced its underperforming paratransit solution. These changes to service levels occurred in Omaha and Lincoln during the same month. Figure 9 shows the StarTran annual ridership trends.

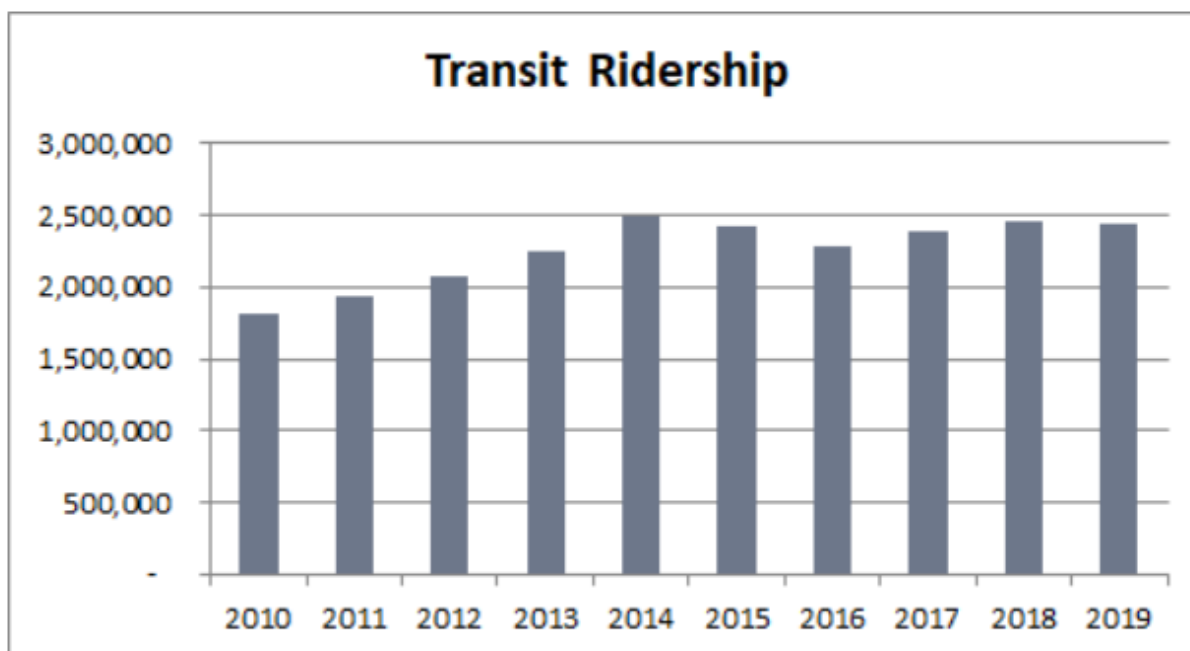


Figure 9. StarTran Pre-COVID-19 Ridership Trends

StarTran ridership was down 60 percent when the pandemic began and has now recovered to about 30 percent of the pre-pandemic levels, approximately 4,000 average daily one-way trips or approximately \$1.8M one-way trips annually. The pandemic has affected many lives and services in different ways, and the transit system is no exception. One of the greatest impacts in 2021 is the shortage of drivers and mechanics for StarTran and across the transit industry. Many agencies do not have enough drivers to meet full schedules and have missed trips or an

increasing amount of overtime. Other agencies are delaying service modifications or expansions due to drivers not available for training or not available at all.

CRANE – City of Grand Island

The City of Grand Island continued to provide transit services throughout the pandemic. However, similar to many transit agencies, CRANE's lowest monthly miles, ridership, and hours were in March and April of 2020 at the onset of the Pandemic. Once the 2020 summer months hit, the numbers slowly began to rise and have been on a slow incline since. Figures 10-12 illustrate the rise and fall of not only ridership, but correlated with monthly miles traveled, and hours served.

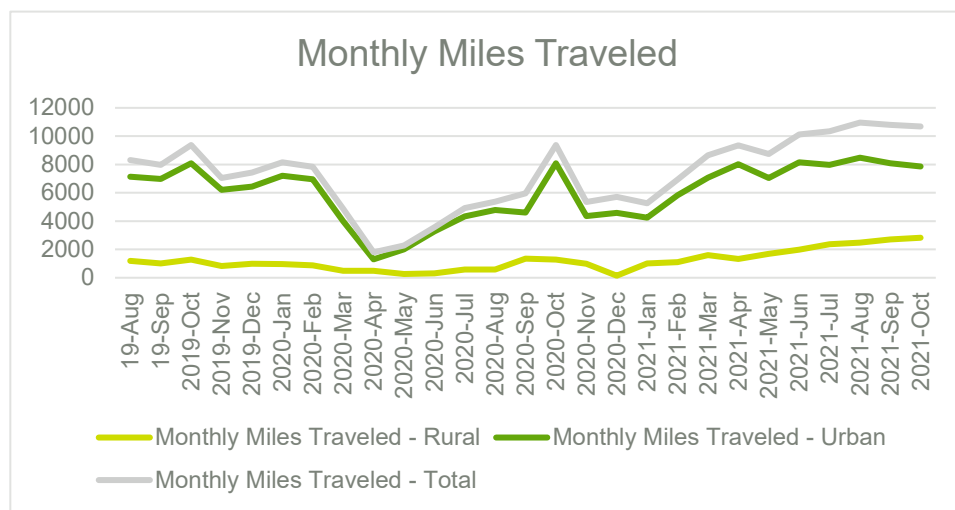


Figure 10. CRANE Monthly Miles Traveled Trends

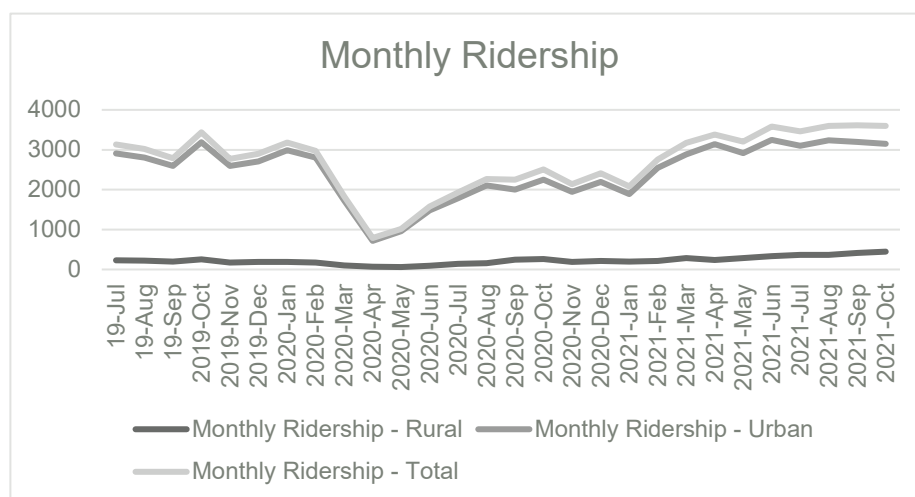


Figure 11. CRANE Monthly Ridership Trends

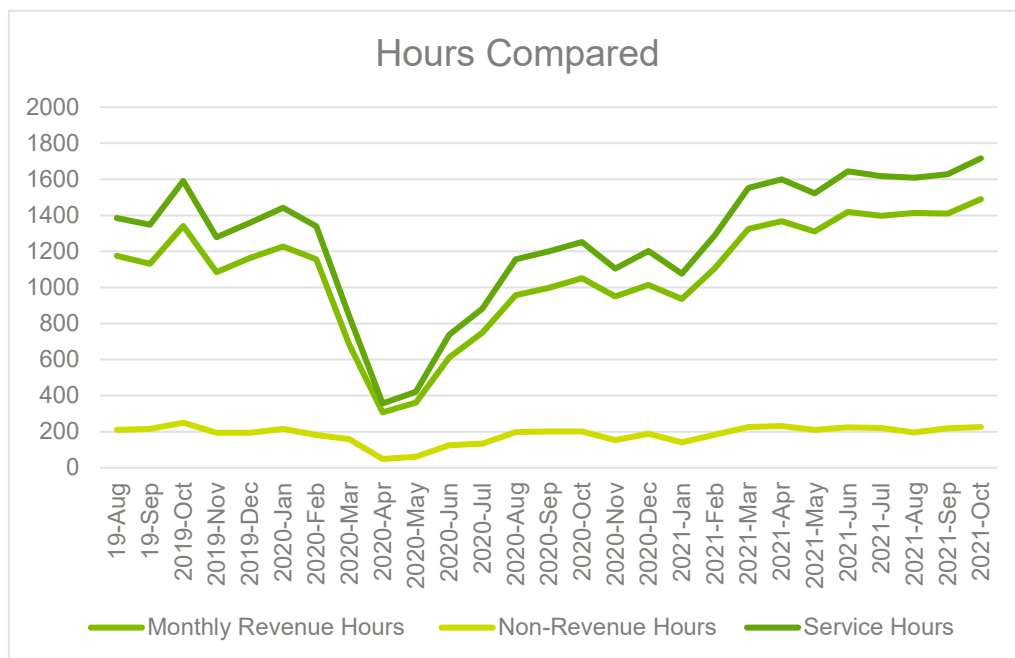


Figure 12. CRANE Monthly Hours Trend

RYDE Transit – City of Kearney

Similar to CRANE's agency data, RYDE Transit experienced the same trends associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. The lowest months for ridership occurred in April and May of 2020, then slowly rose to slightly under pre-Pandemic ridership by Summer 2021. Overall Buffalo County (BCK) based out of Kearney is seeing similar patterns as before the Pandemic. Adams County (ACH) ridership had a harder time recovering from those months, but is just under pre-Pandemic ridership at the time of this printing. Figure 13-14 show both RYDE Transit trends.

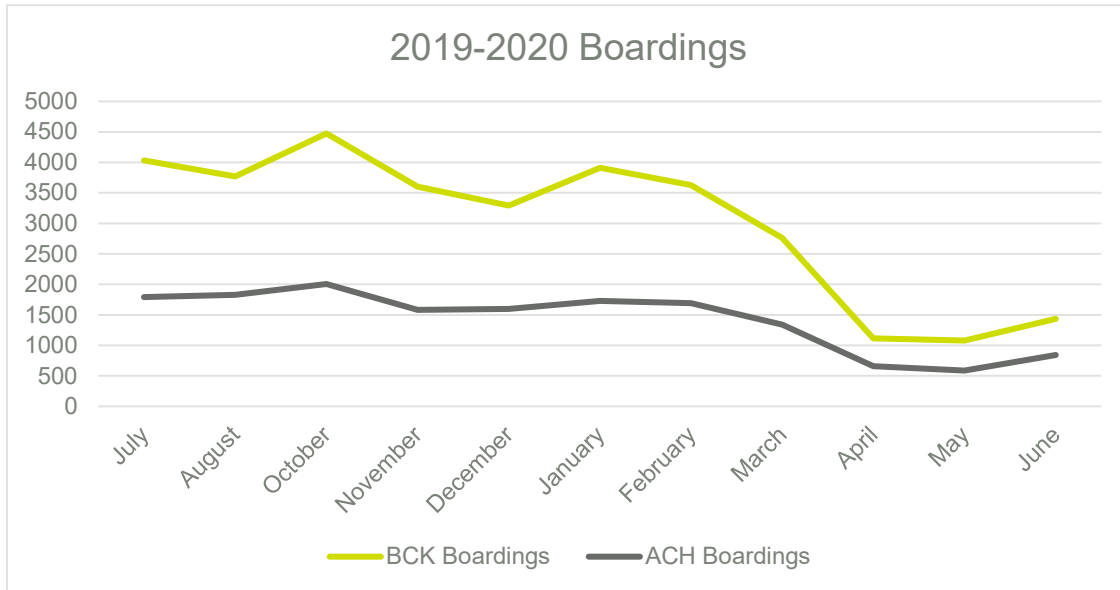


Figure 13. RYDE Transit 2019-2020 Ridership Trends

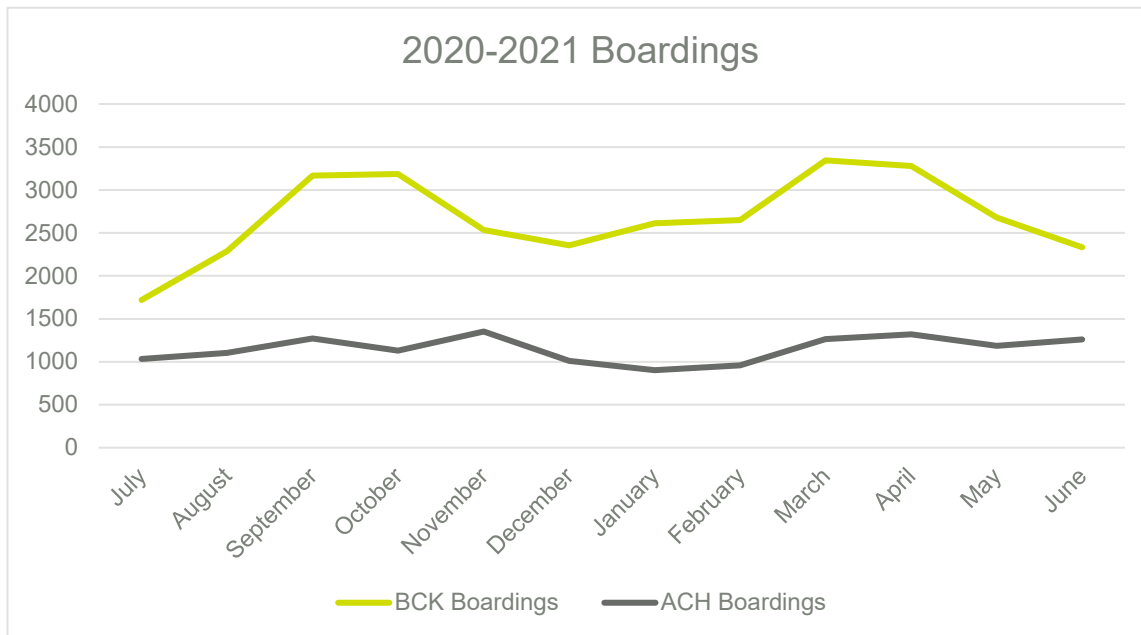


Figure 14. CRANE Monthly Hours Trend

5.0 Impact to Intercity Bus Providers

The COVID-19 pandemic affected local transit agencies as discussed in the previous section, but also hit hard by the pandemic are our nation's private intercity bus providers. The biggest challenge for carriers is staying afloat and keeping routes running as the pandemic wipes out bus travel across the nation. Intercity bus company services are considered essential — part of the infrastructure moving people across the country, often operating in areas where there may be no alternative transportation. During the pandemic, many of the companies parked their buses and canceled insurance to save money. Some federal monies have been authorized to assist the companies; however, the larger question is what happens when those monies are expended.

To understand changes in the intercity bus services, the NDOT Mobility Management team contacted several existing intercity bus providers. Three peer providers and eight additional intercity providers were interviewed. The agencies furnished information regarding the pandemic impact on existing services and the perceived future of intercity operations. Table 3 summarizes the three peer agencies, the impact, and recovery of ridership and routing. Complete responses follow in the next sections.

Table 3. Summary of Three Peer Intercity Bus Providers

Peer Provider	Ridership Changes (percent of pre-pandemic level ridership)	Service Changes
I-380 Express	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Drop in beginning with significant recovery – Change from students to hospital staff – 1st Quarter 2021: 88% of pre-pandemic ridership – 2nd Quarter 2021: 91% of pre-pandemic ridership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Little change, no stop in service – Added peak hour trips
Bustang	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Drop in beginning with slight recovery – Greatest loss in student, commuter, and leisure trips – 1st Quarter 2021: 65% of pre-pandemic ridership – 2nd Quarter 2021: 63% of pre-pandemic ridership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Service stopped- Mar 2020 – June 2020 – Reduced to 4 daily trips M-F and no weekends – Aug 2021 – six daily trips M-F and two weekend trips
K-10 Connector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Drop in beginning with slight recovery – Greatest loss in student and commuter trips – 1st Quarter 2021: 14% of pre-pandemic ridership – 2nd Quarter 2021: 14% of pre-pandemic ridership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – No stop in service – April 2020 reduced to 30% of normal service – Fall 2020 rose to 60% of normal service

5.1 Peer Communities COVID-19 Impact

5.1.1 I-380 Express (East Central Iowa COG)

I-380 Express was developed as a mitigation measure for I-380 reconstruction using federal congestion mitigation funds with a state DOT match. The Express service entered the planning phase in 2016 and went out for Request for Proposals in mid-2018 and service began in October 2018. I-380 Express is managed by East Iowa Council of Governments.

This service operates weekdays, plus Saturday services during fall football season between Cedar Rapids and Iowa City. The fares and schedule align with the Megabus services. The vehicles are new coaches owned/leased by the contractor, Windstar Lines.

COVID-19 Impacts

During COVID-19, I-380 Express implemented no significant changes in service levels, although some adjustments, such as adding peak hour trips in response to changing travel patterns, were made. Services remain at or above pre-pandemic levels.

Ridership did drop during the pandemic but has rebounded, on par with 2019 levels for the 1st and 2nd quarters of 2021, illustrated by Figure 15.

- 1st Quarter 2021: 88% of pre-pandemic levels
- 2nd Quarter 2021: 91% of pre-pandemic levels Rest of 2021: 90% of pre-pandemic levels

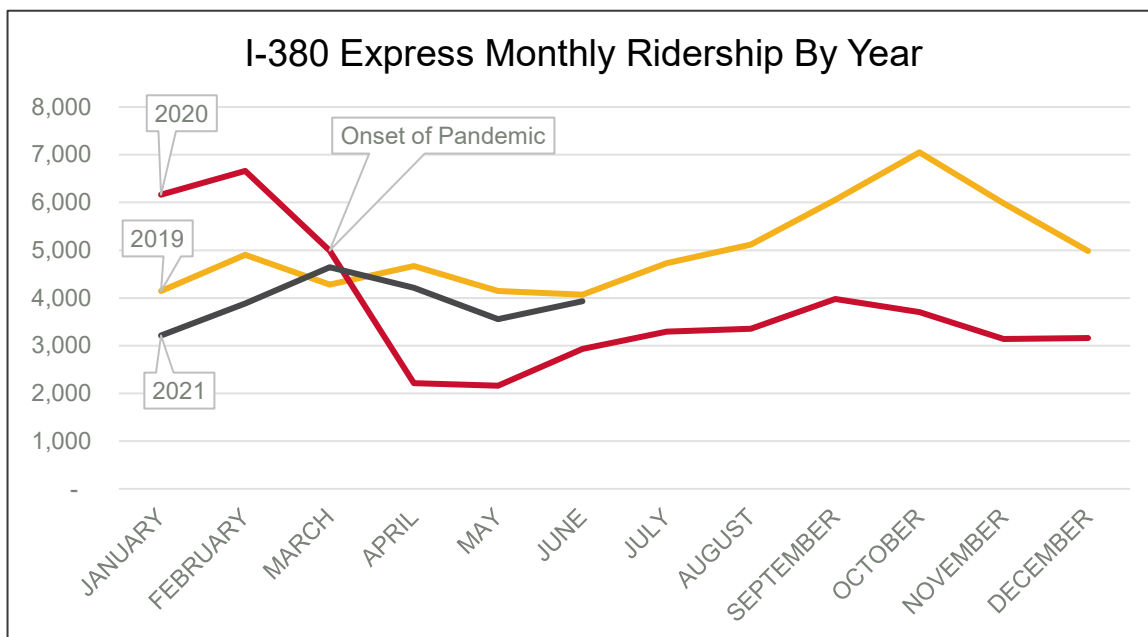


Figure 15. I-380 Ridership Trends

I-380 Express experienced demographic changes in ridership from their two largest generators, the colleges (University of Iowa and Kirkwood Community College) and the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics. The loss in the student and faculty ridership was offset to an extent by an increase in hospital ridership.

The I-380 Express did not use any federal CARES Act or other pandemic funding, because they continue to receive the five-year construction mitigation grant. This grant runs for one and half more years, after which the agency will begin to compete for other federal, state and local transit funding.

6.1.2 Bustang (Operated by Colorado Department of Transportation)

Bustang is managed by the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT), who contracts with Ace Express Coaches to run the North, South and West Lines. Bustang Outrider is operated under contracts with local providers and provides additional feeder type services. Bustang Outrider is funded by state transportation funding and Federal Transit Administration funding. CDOT provides the buses to the contractors. Bustang is the statewide brand, with the core services operating to/from the Denver metro area, while the Bustang Outrider brand is for lower frequency rural intercity services.

Four Bustang Outrider routes are funded with Section 5311(f), state funds, and in-kind match. The routes include Colorado Springs to Pueblo to Lamar; Alamosa to Pueblo; Durango to Grand Junction; and Gunnison to Denver. Each route connects with and interlines tickets with Amtrak and Greyhound. At park and rides, the service links to local transit routes.

COVID-19 Impacts

Bustang service was shut down on March 29, 2020 and remained out of service for three months. Service resumed June 28th, 2020, with four trips Monday-Friday and no service on weekends. (Prior to the pandemic, this route was growing with eight round trips per weekday and five on weekends.) In 2020, after re-opening service, ridership was down 85 percent.

In August 2021, service levels saw a return to six trips daily and two weekend trips. Service is anticipated to continue to grow, although the ridership levels are not back to pre-COVID levels. The director of CDOT would like to have more service available and is looking to increase the span of the service to 18 hours daily as workers are making decisions about returning to offices.

Ridership remains 60 percent below pre-COVID levels but is slowly growing.

- 1st Quarter 2021: 65% of pre-pandemic levels
- 2nd Quarter 2021: 63% of pre-pandemic levels
- Rest of 2021: 60% of pre-pandemic levels

Before the pandemic, Bustang ridership was showing more and more multiple trip purposes (beyond work or school). In the future, assuming public health measures allow for a return to in-person work, gatherings, and events, it is assumed the pre-COVID reach of service will yield a faster return to normal ridership. The COVID-19 related loss in ridership was greatest in work commuters and students with some in leisure trips.

Bustang typically relies on state funding but during the pandemic, both CARES and CRRSAA funds were used to continue operations.

6.1.3 K-10 Connector (Johnson County, Kansas)

The K-10 Connector is bus service traveling between the City of Lawrence, KS and Johnson County, Kansas operated by RideKC. The bus runs from the KU Campus in Lawrence to KU Edwards Campus in Overland Park, with five stops along the route—three park and ride lots and three campuses. Typically, the service operates Monday through Friday, with 19 trips per a day (between 6:00 am and 6:00 pm), with an extra two trips in the evening Monday-Thursday. K10 Connector service frequency decreases during the summer and school breaks. Much of the ridership consists of college and university students and professors, although some ridership is made of local commuters.

COVID-19 Impacts

Service was reduced to approximately 30 percent of regular service before the pandemic occurred in March/April 2020 and continued until August 2020. In the Fall 2020 school semester, service increased to approximately 60 percent of regular service. Service has remained at that level since then. During school breaks, the bus returns to a 30 percent level of service. Service was never fully suspended; though ridership diminished during the pandemic.

The K-10 Connector experienced a very large ridership drop and has been slow to recover. The April-December 2020 ridership was only 9 percent of April-December 2019 levels.

- 1st Quarter 2021: 14% of pre-pandemic levels
- 2nd Quarter 2021: 14% of pre-pandemic levels
- 2021: Only 20% of pre-pandemic levels

In summer 2021, ridership had a much higher percentage of non-students than pre-COVID.

The K-10 Connector receives no FTA 5311(f) funding, instead the route is funded with state funding, a small amount of federal FTA 5307 funds, plus fare revenue. Local funding is provided by Johnson County, with contributions from the City of Lawrence. A contribution from Johnson County Community College allows students to ride for free.

6.2 National Intercity Providers - COVID-19 Impact

6.2.1 WindStar

WindStar is primarily based in Iowa, but has eleven garages in various locations, including a facility in Lincoln, Nebraska. In Nebraska, the firm provides mostly charter services, for example - providing athletic travel for Peru College, Nebraska Wesleyan, and for inbound teams from the airport, etc. WindStar has also provided shuttles between Lincoln and Offutt Air Force Base during base reconstruction.

WindStar's only scheduled service in Nebraska was the daily roundtrip from Lincoln to Omaha and on to Chicago, operated as/for Megabus. Megabus marketed the service and completed the ticketing. Windstar began operating this service in March 2017.

COVID-19 Impacts

During the pandemic WindStar's Megabus ridership declined severely. WindStar suspended the service in March 2020, reinstated service in August 2020, and then suspended operations once more in September 2020 due to the rising infection rate. Service remains suspended at the time of this writing.

WindStar received no CARES Act funds, but has utilized Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) to continue to pay employees and prevent lay-offs. It will receive CERTS¹ funding to assist with operating costs.

With the reinstatement of college athletic events, WindStar noted these college services had a major positive effect on the recovery from the pandemic, with charter ridership levels increasing. In addition to the events, the venues began selling tickets and allowing attendees, as long as COVID-19 protocols are followed.

6.2.2 Express Arrow/Black Hills Stage Lines/Arrow Stage Lines

Express Arrow is the provider of scheduled intercity service known as Arrow Stage Lines. Arrow does the Lincoln-Omaha charter service for the University of Nebraska College of Engineering. In greater Nebraska, Express Arrow operates the service from Norfolk to Omaha (one daily round-trip pre-COVID-19) and the daytime service between Omaha and Denver, via Lincoln, Grand Island, Kearney, Lexington, North Platte, and Ogallala at a reduced frequency. Prior to the pandemic, this service operated daily. Other scheduled services include Denver-Casper-Buffalo (Wyoming) and Cheyenne-Shoshoni-Billings routes.

¹ The Coronavirus Economic Relief for Transportation Services (CERTS) Program is providing eligible transportation service companies with resources to help to maintain payroll, hire back employees who may have been laid off, and cover applicable overhead and operational expenses.

The Omaha-Norfolk route also serves Eppley Airport, Fremont, North Bend, Schuyler, Columbus, Humphrey, and Madison. All intermediate stops, except Fremont and Columbus, are “On-Call” with stops made only by advance reservation.

COVID-19 Impacts

During COVID-19, the Norfolk-Omaha service was initially suspended. The service resumed to three days per week and in the fourth quarter of 2020 went to four days per week. In June of 2021, it returned to the full schedule of daily service.

The Denver service was reduced to two-days per week in early 2020, then increased to four days per week by the end of the year, and now back to daily service. The return of ridership has been slow, with ridership flat at 25-30% of pre-COVID levels. A major factor is that ridership depends on the connections in Omaha (with Burlington Trailways and Jefferson Lines) and in Denver (with Greyhound), requiring schedule coordination.

Express Arrow was limiting capacity to 25 passengers (essentially 50%) to provide for social distancing.

6.2.3 Jefferson Lines

Jefferson Lines is an intercity bus provider, serving Nebraska, Minnesota, Iowa, South Dakota, North Dakota, Wisconsin, Missouri, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Montana, Wyoming, Idaho and Washington. In Nebraska, Jefferson Lines operates one scheduled route along the Missouri River with a stop in South Sioux City, NE and Omaha, NE. It operates seven days a week.

Currently, Jefferson Lines does not operate college shuttles or commuter service in Nebraska. The agency is working with Amtrak to have a joint terminal in Omaha. Although they do not have campus service at this time, students are an important passenger segment in their overall ridership.

COVID-19 Impacts

Due to COVID-19, Jefferson stopped operations of the Sioux Falls-Omaha-Kansas City route. The route returned and in the first quarter of 2021, ridership rose to 60 percent of 2019 levels. In June and July, some runs exceeded 60 percent of 2019 levels. The current ridership estimates anticipate 70 percent of 2019 ridership, but this could vary with the recent outbreaks. Once the pandemic ends, Jefferson Lines expects the intercity service to return to 2019 levels within a year. When universities and colleges return, Jefferson does expect their ridership to rise.

6.2.4 Burlington Trailways

Burlington Trailways currently operates scheduled intercity bus services through Colorado, Nebraska, Iowa, Missouri, Illinois, and Indiana as well a charter and tour business. However, these buses and drivers are typically based in West Burlington, IA and Davenport, IA.

COVID-19 Impacts

During COVID-19, Burlington concentrated their efforts on reducing multiple schedules versus elimination. They reduced the number of daily schedules from 19 to 14. Although, four towns in Illinois and one town in Iowa did lose all service.

Currently, passenger revenue is still down 40 percent compared to 2019 numbers:

- 2021 Quarter 1 = 57% of pre-pandemic ridership
- 2021 Quarter 2 = 71% of pre-pandemic ridership

While the ridership numbers rose during the late spring and early summer 2021, Delta variant fears and the resurgence of the virus slowed the upward trend. Burlington expected to stay in the 70-75 percent revenue range for the remainder of 2021. Transit dependent and low-income riders have made the quickest return to intercity bus ridership and have remained the most constant during the pandemic.

Burlington does not currently have plans to bring back the five removed schedules, based on current demand. However, if demand increased, Burlington would consider returning additional service. This would also be contingent on the staffing availability as there is a nationwide driver shortage.

6.2.5 Camelot

Camelot is an intercity bus operator and provides contracted services for state agencies and specialized transportation for vulnerable youth and adults statewide.

COVID-19 Impacts

Camelot experienced service reductions during the pandemic and are beginning to experience an increase in ridership (currently approximately 75 percent of 2019 levels), but costs remain high. Rider demographics and trip types have also generally remained constant.

6.2.6 Holiday Express

Holiday Express is a charter transportation service. Holiday Express operates 57 passenger coaches, 23 passenger small coaches, school buses, and several other vehicles. Several of the services they provide are listed below:

- Service for companies
- Provide school busing
- Contract routes throughout NE
- Provide charter for companies
- Private charters
- Shuttles for the Nebraska state fair
- Provide employee shuttle
- Shuttles to community college
- Shuttles between hotels and event center

COVID-19 Impacts

The pandemic shut down many of the large events, schools, and some businesses for which Holiday Express provided service causing a large dip in service offered. In 2021, they began to see these services come back, with some higher than pre-COVID-19 levels (mainly private events). Ridership types have remained relatively the same with some decline in the elderly passengers.

6.2.7 Navigator Bus

Navigator provides direct airport service from the Kearney, Lincoln, and Omaha airports, as well as employee shuttles and charter services.

COVID-19 Impacts

Navigator experienced a drop in request for rides as airports slowed services and the number of passengers traveling decreased. Employee shuttles also declined as many began working from home. Some manufacturing and production shuttles restarted in 2021 and have surpassed 2019 levels. Airport service has been dropped and most likely will not return.

Charter service has rebounded since the early pandemic. They have returned to roughly 65-70 percent of pre-pandemic levels, although eight buses remain in storage.

6.2.8 Panhandle Trails

Panhandle Trails is an intercity bus provider operating in the Panhandle region of Nebraska. It connects Chadron in the north to Sidney and Ogallala in the south. The intercity routes connect with Express Arrow and Burlington Trailways bus lines in Ogallala, NE, and regional airports (Alliance, Chadron, and Scottsbluff, NE). It operates bus stops at Chadron State College and Pine Ridge Job Corps in Chadron, NE and Western Community College in Scottsbluff, NE.

Additional expansion is planned for a route between the Nebraska Panhandle region from Ogallala, NE to Rapid City, SD, making connections with Jefferson Lines.

Panhandle Trails receives 5311 funding to operate demand response services throughout the Nebraska Panhandle region, assisting with first-mile, last-mile connection needs.

COVID-19 Impacts

Throughout the pandemic, there were no changes to scheduled services or service reductions, except those directly affected by service reductions from partnering transportation services (i.e., Express Arrow reduced the number of days they operated weekly). Panhandle Trails is currently operating all routes at pre-COVID levels, though ridership is lagging. Ridership is approximately 80 percent of what it was pre-pandemic. Panhandle Trails expects ridership to return to pre-pandemic levels by the end of 2021 and double for 2022 due to planned service expansions.

Two large users are returning to full service. Chadron State College students have a high vaccination rate for the beginning of the Fall 2021 term and the students will return to in-class instruction as normal. Pine Ridge Job Corps is slowly returning students into their program.

Many of the intercity bus rides are medically related. The increase of COVID-19 positive cases has a direct effect on the hospitals in the area and the services they provide. When they reduce or eliminate multi-specialty clinic services and surgeries, it has a direct effect on those in need of non-emergency medical transportation.

Appendix A - Automatic Traffic Recorder (ATR) data

