August 15, 2025

Rio Metro Board

Update on the Rio Metro / ABQ RIDE Transit Consolidation Study

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Agenda

- **Introduction**
  - List of PM team members
  - Summary of previous presentation
  - Where we're at in the process
- **What we've learned**
  - High level conclusions from existing conditions
- **Goals and Evaluation Criteria**
  - Strengths and weaknesses – *feedback and discussion*
- **Where we're going**
  - What outcomes make change worth it – *feedback and discussion*
  - Recommendations
  - Next Steps

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Introduction

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Project Management Team

- **Rio Metro**
  - Tony Sylvester
  - Danny Holcomb
  - Karen Mullins
- **ABQ RIDE**
  - Andrew de Garmo
  - Chris Payton
  - Mike Davis
- **Huitt-Zollars**
  - Madeleine Pelzel
- **Nelson/Nygaard**
  - Bethany Whitaker
 - Suzie Birdsell
  - Sam Ergina

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At the last meeting, we discussed…

Council Resolution
- This study was initiated by the City of Albuquerque City Council in 2023.
- It directed the City of Albuquerque and Rio Metro Regional Transit District to conduct a study for consolidation.

Scope of Study
- This study began by identifying the project purpose, needs, and goals, and studying peer transit agency organization models
- We have evaluated the current services and spoken to many stakeholders
- We created and evaluated scenarios
- We are creating recommendations
- We will produce a final report with implementation information
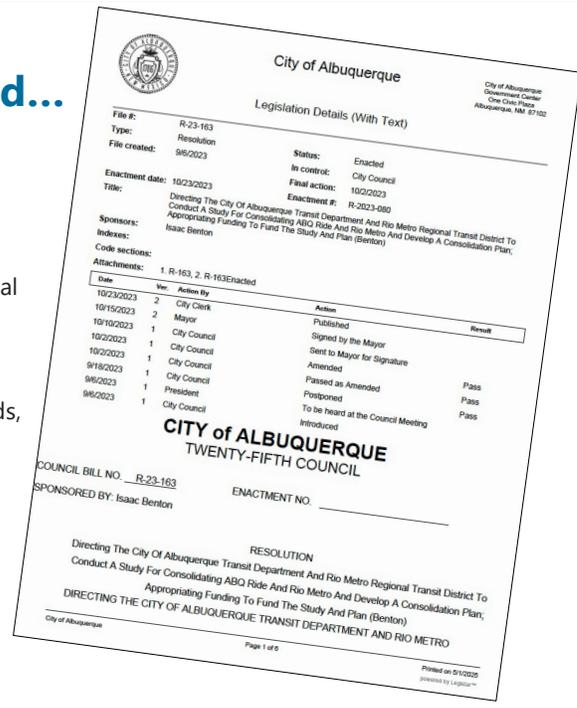
5

At the last meeting, we discussed…

Case Studies
- There is a lot Rio Metro and ABQ RIDE can learn from agencies and cities like Valley Metro, Greater Portland, rabbittransit, San Bernardino County, and Chicago, but none of them are a direct match for what will work best for your systems and riders.

Challenges solved by changes in governance
- Consolidation can produce unified passenger information, convenient connections, broader regional funding base, and some efficiencies if there are currently overlapping services
- Many challenges can be solved by changes in governance outside of consolidation

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At the last meeting, we discussed...

Goal Areas
- We established six Goal Areas for the project: Service, Funding, Staffing, Accountability/Transparency, Coordinated Vision, and Efficiency

Scenario Strategy
- A simple view of the study could show two agencies merging into one, but we know there are many more entities involved.

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THE STUDY

This project has included three primary phases

Understanding	Best Models	Best Scenario
- What are the current needs? - What are the future goals? - Who are the stakeholders for this decision? - How is service and governance working today?	- What is working well for our peer organizations? - How can current operations be improved? - What is the best model to meet our goals?	- What are the possible scenarios? - What are the opportunities and obstacles? - Which is the best scenario?

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THE STUDY

At the most recent workshop, we showed five scenarios and their evaluation

Workshop 1: project purpose, needs, goals, background

Workshop 2: opportunities and obstacles, draft scenarios

Workshop 3: scenarios and evaluation discussion

Understanding	Best Models	Best Scenario
• What are the current needs? • What are the future goals? • Who are the stakeholders for this decision? • How is service and governance working today?	• What is working well for our peer organizations? • How can current operations be improved? • What is the best model to meet our goals?	• What are the possible scenarios? • What are the opportunities and obstacles? • Which is the best scenario?

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THE STUDY

Through both the evaluation and workshop discussion, we are moving forward into developing recommendations and compiling the final report.

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THE STUDY

Today, we're going to bring you all up to speed on the major takeaways we've learned throughout the project, present the goals and evaluation criteria, and get some feedback from you.

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What We've Learned

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The issues outlined in the resolution are not what we have found as the primary issues facing Rio Metro and ABQ RIDE.

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The following is a high-level overview of some of our findings, with more details available in the report included in your board packet.

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SERVICE

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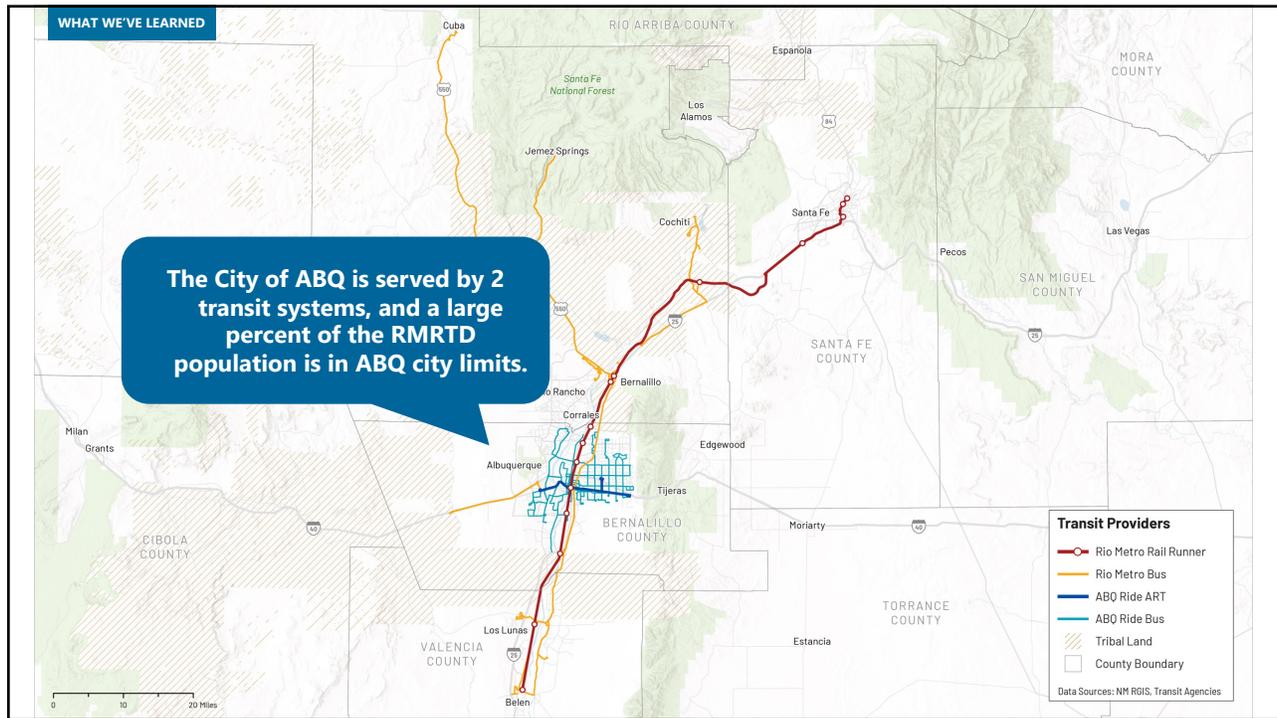**Albuquerque and ABQ RIDE are a significant part of Rio Metro RTD, and Rio Metro and ABQ RIDE already coordinate service.**

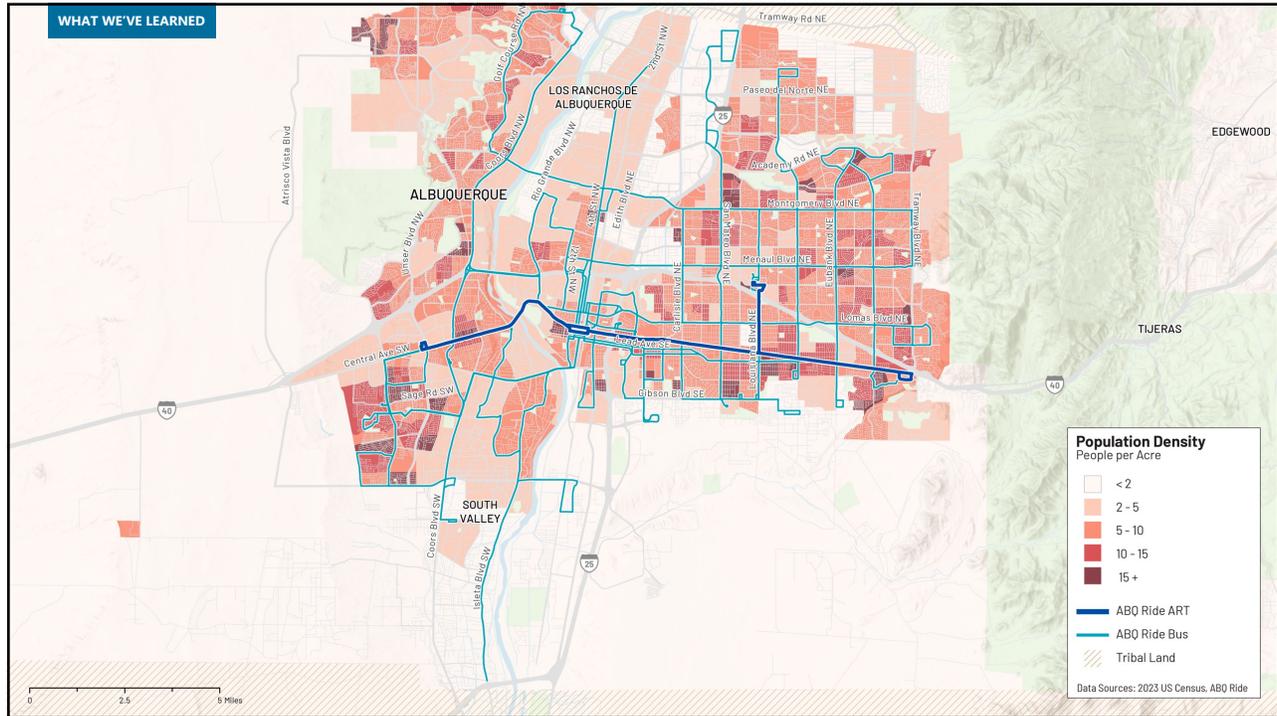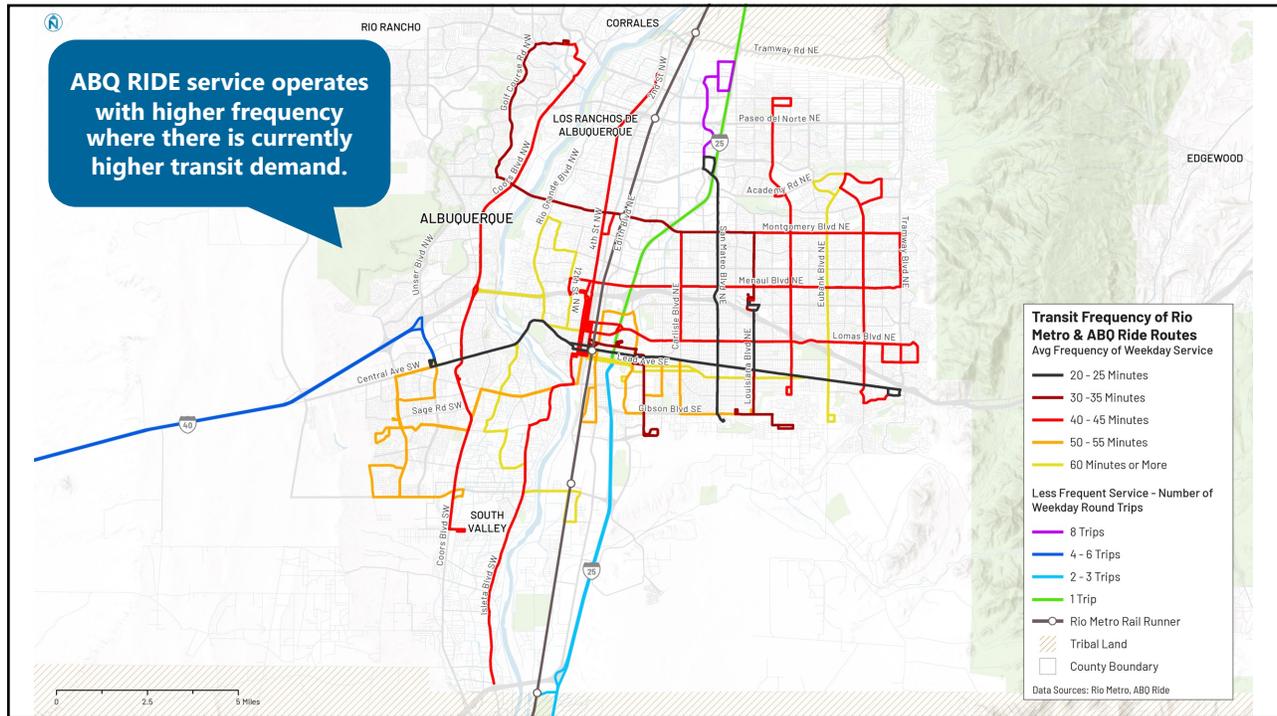What we've learned

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ABQ RIDE's service footprint generally matches population patterns

What we've learned

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Security is an issue in Albuquerque for riders at stops, riders on board, operators, and maintenance personnel.

What we've learned

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ABQ RIDE is currently operating 60% of pre-pandemic service, while Rio Metro is operating fully restored service.

What we've learned

22
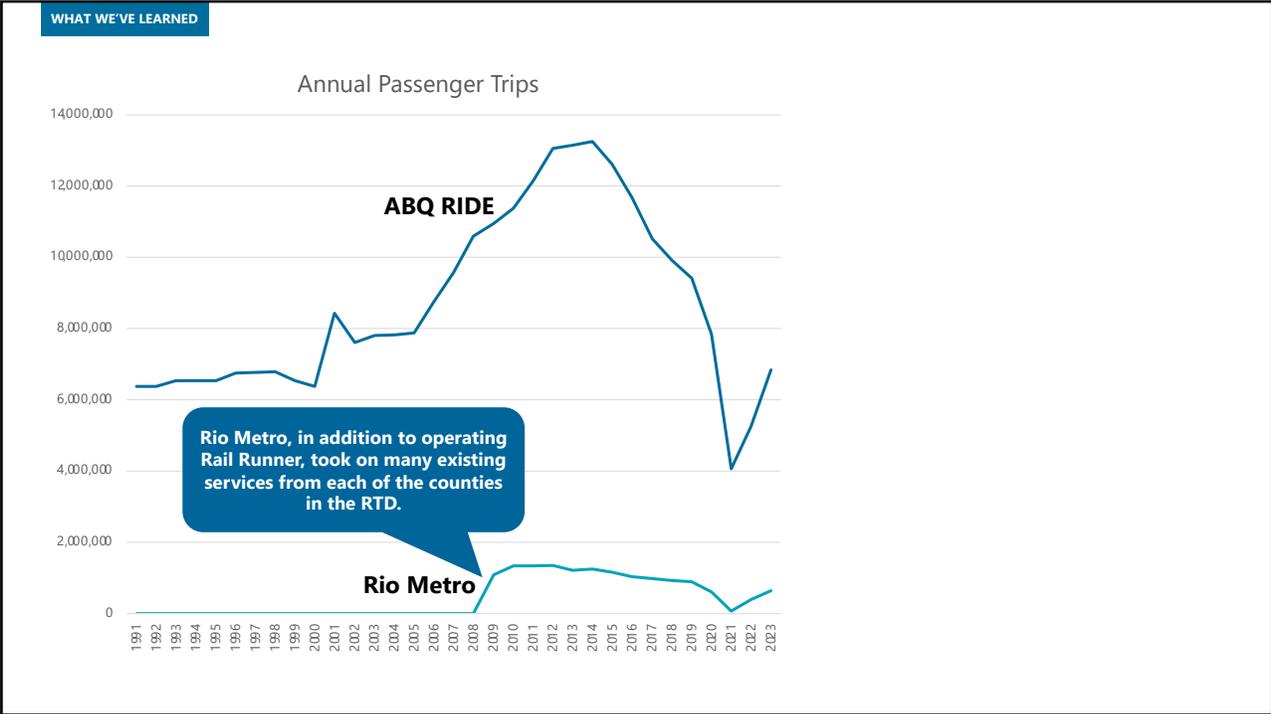
22

ABQ RIDE ridership is down dramatically from its 2015 peak, but ridership is growing now even as service isn't.

What we've learned

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23

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

Annual Passenger Trips

ABQ RIDE

Rio Metro, in addition to operating Rail Runner, took on many existing services from each of the counties in the RTD.

Rio Metro

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Rio Metro's service is expansive due to the nature of how it was established, but it is generally low frequency and limited in span of service.
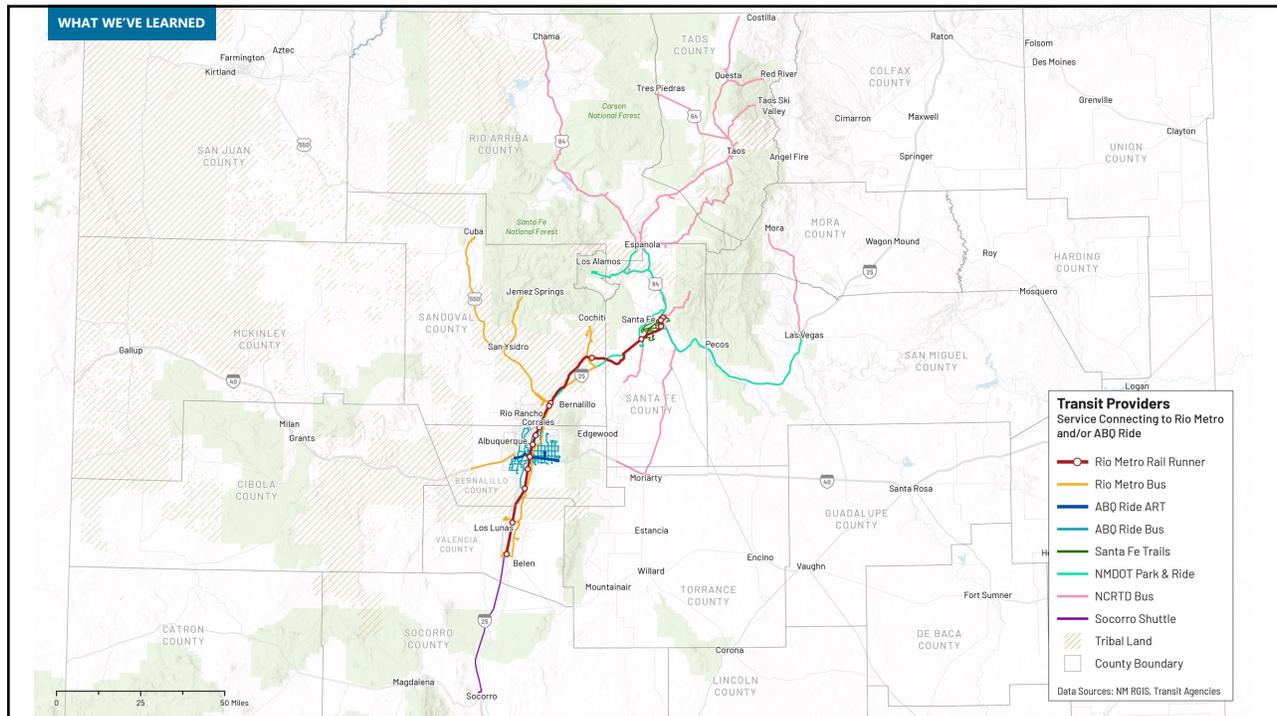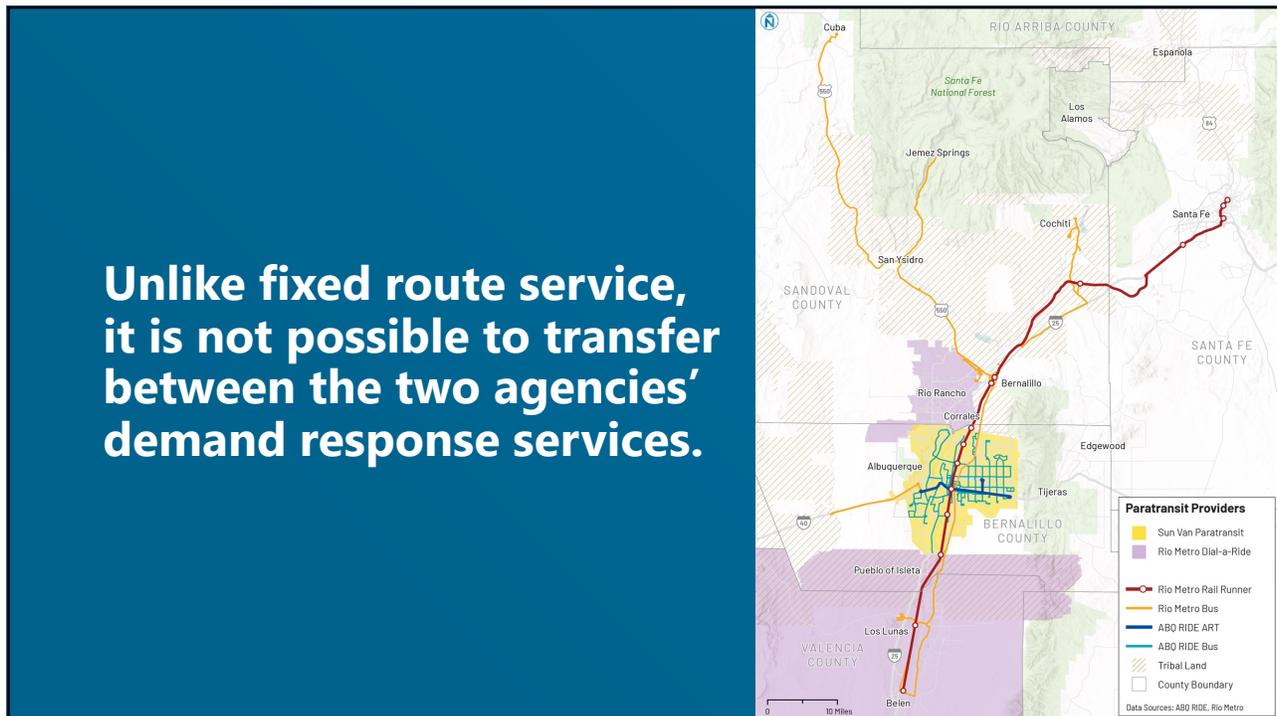

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Rio Metro overlaps with five other transit agencies, all of which have planned for transfers to Rio Metro service.

What we've learned

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Unlike fixed route service, it is not possible to transfer between the two agencies' demand response services.
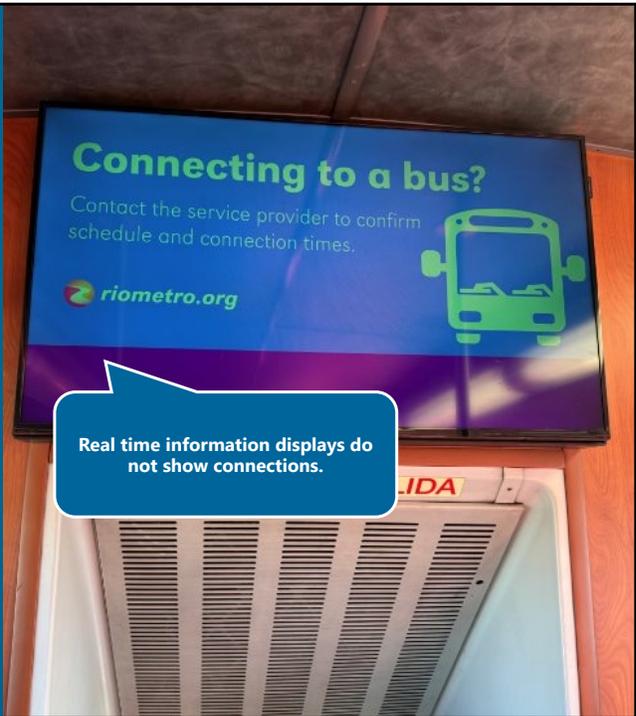
While services physically connect, passenger information isn't always clear, and Rio Metro's mix of service models and method of communicating services make the rider experience more difficult.

Connecting to a bus?
Contact the service provider to confirm schedule and connection times.
riometro.org

Real time information displays do not show connections.

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STAFFING

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ABQ RIDE is a large department within the City of Albuquerque that uses multiple full-time staff time from other City departments.

What we've learned

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ABQ RIDE is suffering from an operator and maintenance shortage.

Percentage of ABQ RIDE Vacant Positions by Position Type

100%
90%
80%
70%
60%
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%

Maintenance   Operations   Planning   Other

■ Filled or Partially Filled ▨ Vacant

32

Transit vehicle maintenance workers are classified with all other vehicle maintenance workers at the City.

What we've learned

33

33

ABQ RIDE has some of the most complete in-house abilities in the country to maintain specialized transit vehicles, making it difficult to contract out work without paying large premiums.

What we've learned

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Rio Metro is housed within the Mid-Region Council of Governments (MRCOG), and transit makes up a significant part of the workload of many MRCOG staff members.

What we've learned

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Despite big differences in total staff numbers, planning capacity is limited at both agencies.

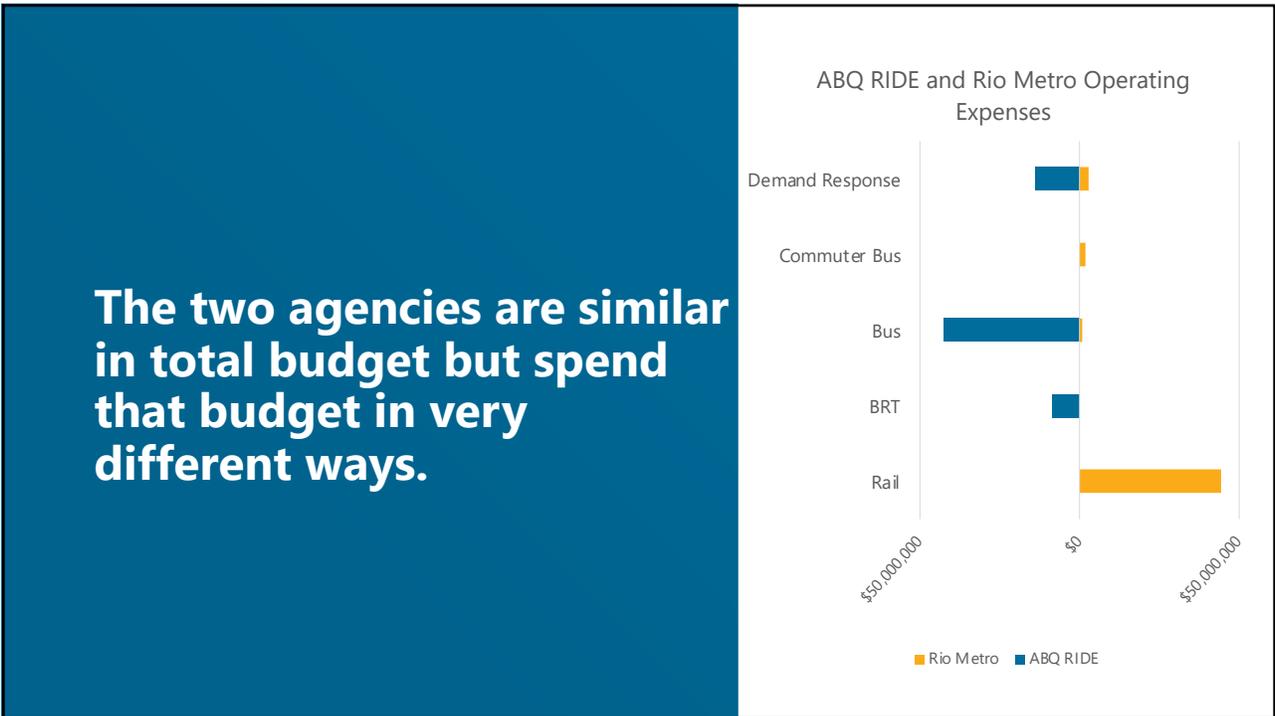Filled Full Time Employees by Position Type

Agency	Maintenance	Operations	Other FTE	Planning
ABQ RIDE	68	236	55	3
Rio Metro	7	78	29	1

■ Maintenance ■ Operations ■ Other FTE ■ Planning

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FUNDING

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The two agencies are similar in total budget but spend that budget in very different ways.

ABQ RIDE and Rio Metro Operating Expenses

Demand Response

Commuter Bus

Bus

BRT

Rail

$50,000,000 $0 $50,000,000

Rio Metro   ABQ RIDE

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ABQ RIDE's funding is a mix of dedicated sources and the general fund.

What we've learned

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WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

ABQ RIDE Funding

- Advertising
- Federal Grants, Other
- Rio Metro
- Transportation Infrastructure Tax
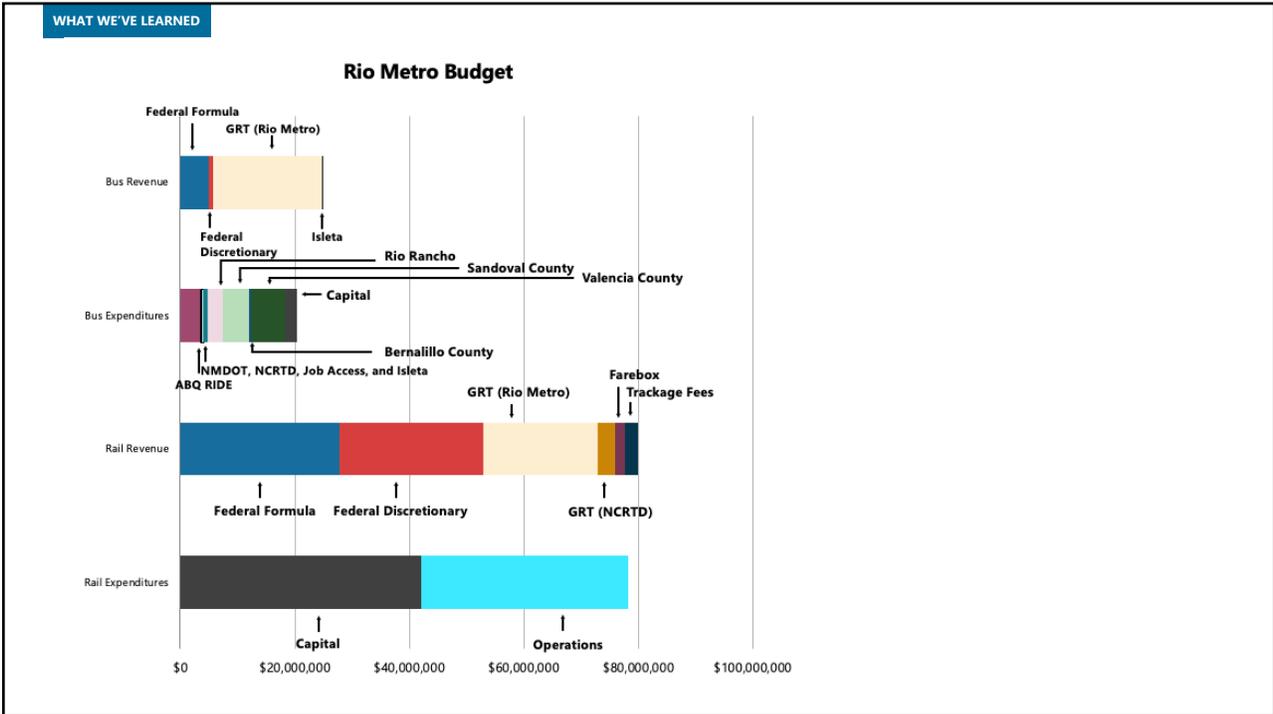- General Fund
- Demand Response
- Bus
- BRT

Revenue | Expenditures
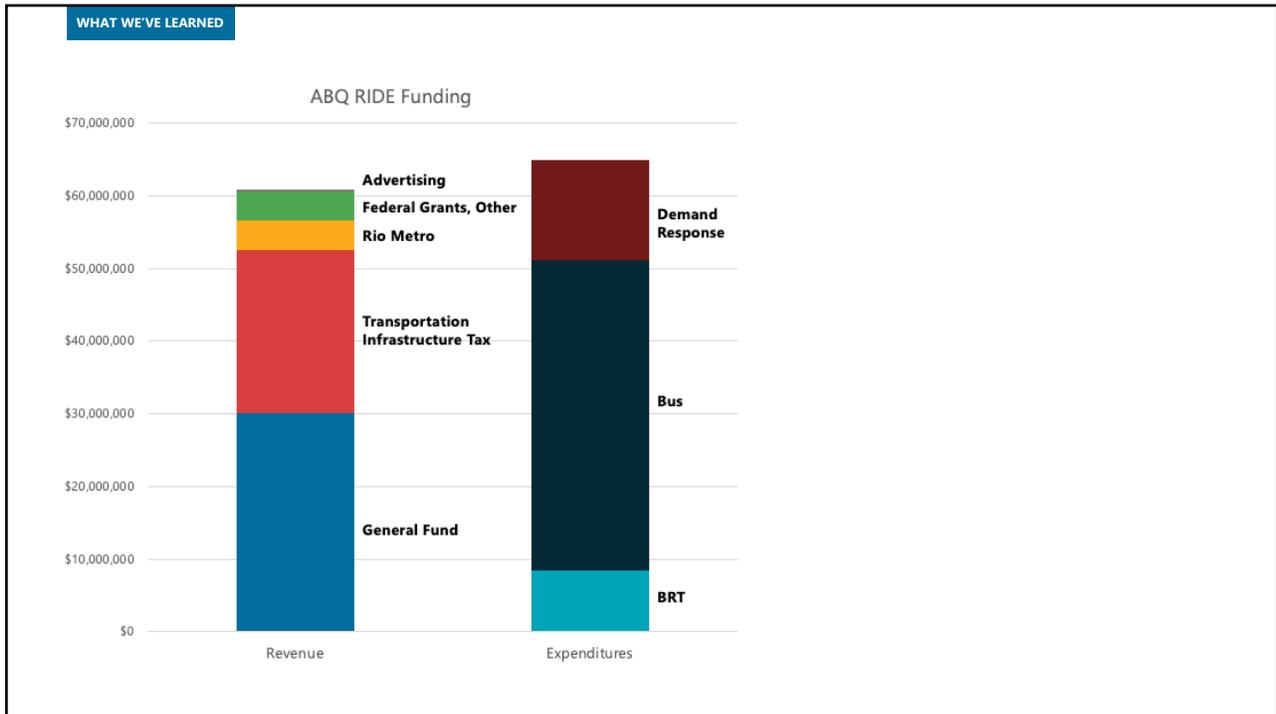
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Rio Metro has a complex mix of local and federal funding tied to specific rural and urban operations.

What we've learned

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WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

Rio Metro Budget

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Rio Metro funds service provided by three other transit operators – ABQ RIDE, NMDOT, and NCRTD. It also receives funding from NCRTD.

What we've learned

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GOVERNANCE

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Rio Metro depends on agreements with NMDOT and NCRTD.

What we've learned

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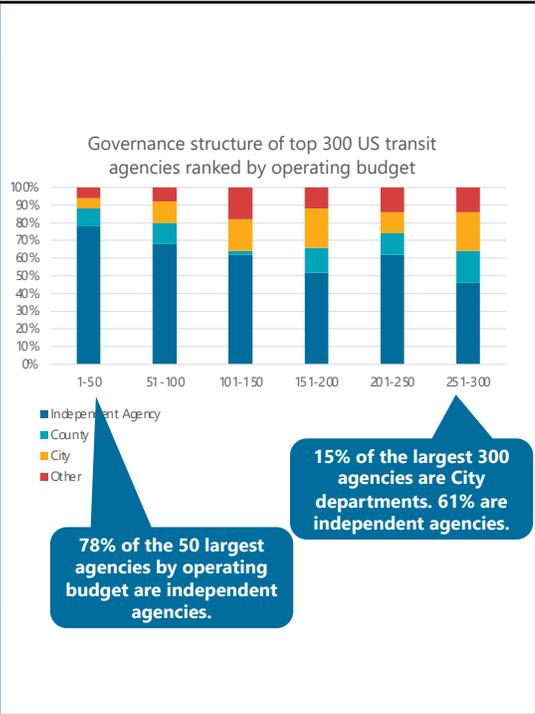## As a city department, ABQ RIDE competes for funding, resources, and attention against other city departments.

City of Albuquerque FY2025 Budget

Police
Human Resources
Solid Waste
Finance and Administrative...
Transit
Municipal Development
General Services
Technology & Innovation
Senior Affairs
Animal Welfare
Council Services
Chief Administrative Office
Economic Development
Mayor's Office Department
Office of Inspector General

$- $100,000,000 $200,000,000 $300,000,000

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Slide 47

Most big cities have independent transit agencies with dedicated funding sources.

Governance structure of top 300 US transit agencies ranked by operating budget

- Independent Agency
- County
- City
- Other

78% of the 50 largest agencies by operating budget are independent agencies.

15% of the largest 300 agencies are City departments. 61% are independent agencies.
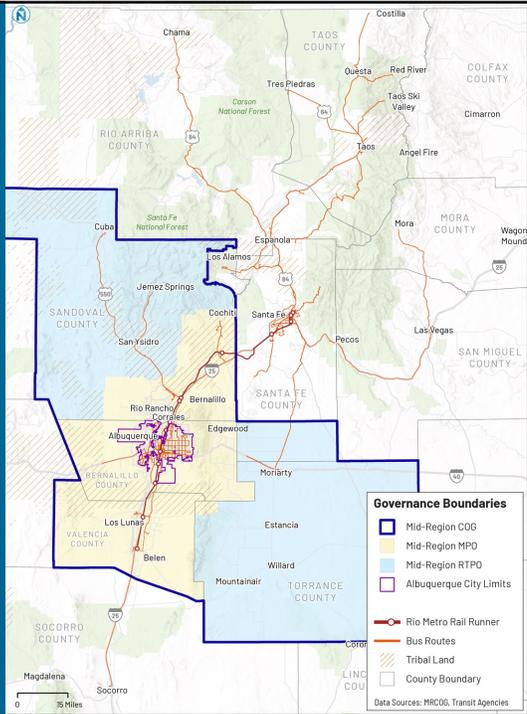
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Slide 48

Rio Metro and ABQ RIDE already both share functions with other agencies.

What we've learned

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There is no agency clearly responsible for creating a regional transit vision.

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Goals and Evaluation Criteria

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GOALS

There are things about this system that are working well:

- Distinct services and service areas.
- ABQ RIDE's service footprint generally matches population patterns.
- Rio Metro is operating fully restored pre-pandemic service.
- Ridership – both ABQ RIDE and Rio Metro - is growing, even if service isn't (increased productivity).
- Rail Runner has 15 stations and serves as the spine. The Rail Runner ties the state's transit network together and connects major destinations in the state.

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GOALS

Challenges impacting transit riders and agency staff:

- ABQ RIDE is suffering from an operator and maintenance shortage and is operating 60% of pre-pandemic service.

- Rio Metro serves an expansive geographic area, but it is generally low frequency and limited in span of service.

- While services physically connect, systems and information aren't always clear.

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GOALS

Many of the issues facing ABQ RIDE and Rio Metro face other agencies, but some are unique to their governance structures.

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GOALS

ABQ RIDE is in a different position than Rio Metro. Not having enough operators to run service is a major hurdle that outweighs other issues and goals presented today and in the existing conditions report.

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GOALS

ABQ RIDE's position as a city department is in the minority for an agency of its size. Most large transit agencies operate independently with dedicated funding sources.
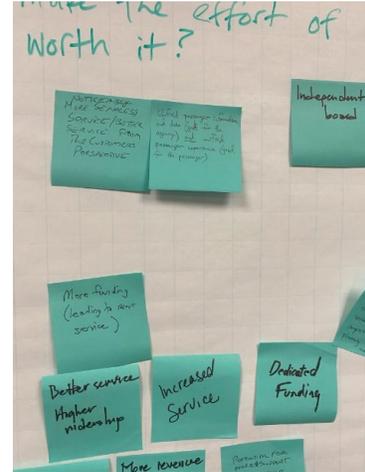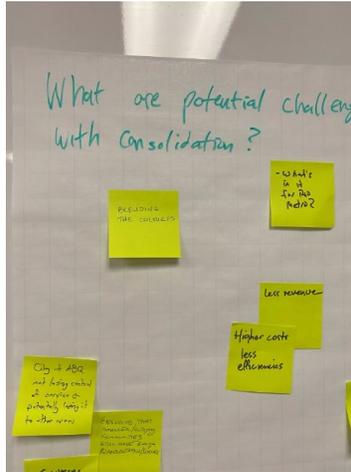
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GOALS

We see immediate crises that governance changes could address. We also see opportunities for positive change throughout the region.

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At the first workshop, we discussed the strengths and weaknesses of the current agencies and their governance structures and challenges and benefits related to possible consolidation.

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Strengths and weaknesses

Questions – Menti Poll

- **What are the strengths of the current agencies and structure?**

- **What are the weaknesses of the current agencies and structure?**

Please scan the QR Code to join the Menti poll and respond to the questions:

Or go to menti.com and enter the code: **2262 5632**

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ACTIVITY

Strengths and weaknesses

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GOALS

In creating goals, we address problems we heard from both agencies...

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GOALS

...we built on what is going well now...

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GOALS

...and took into account the original City of ABQ Council Resolution...

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GOALS

...and have taken into account other good transit planning principles from across the country.

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GOALS

The goals fall into six areas:

1 **Service**

2 **Funding**

3 **Staffing**

4 **Governance**

5 **Efficiency**

6 **Level of Effort**

66

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Slide 67

1 Service: **Provide a useful, reliable, and connected regional transit service for people of all abilities**

What we heard from the first workshop:

What are the weaknesses of the current transit network and services/agencies and structures?

- No Rio Rancho Service
- Some areas under/unserved
- Not Enough Service
- Rural areas not as well covered
- Not Frequent Enough
- Limited network off of Central Corr
- Poor Coordination from RM & ABQ RIDE
- Need more fixed routes in Rio Metro

What we learned from the Existing Conditions study:

- Rio Rancho has the comparable density to many areas of the City of Albuquerque, but it does not have fixed route service.
- ABQ RIDE service operates with higher frequency where there is currently higher transit demand, but staff shortages are a challenge in delivering more frequent service.
- ABQ RIDE ridership is down dramatically from its 2015 peak, but ridership is growing now even as service isn't.
- Security is an issue in Albuquerque for riders at stops, riders on board, operators, and maintenance personnel.
- ABQ RIDE is currently operating 60% of pre-pandemic service, while Rio Metro is operating fully restored service.
- Rio Metro serves an expansive geographic area, but it is generally low frequency and limited in span of service.
- Unlike fixed-route service, it is not possible to transfer between the two agencies' paratransit services.
- While services physically connect, passenger information isn't always clear.
- Rio Metro's mix of service models and method of communicating services make the rider experience more difficult.

How we defined the evaluation criteria:

SERVICE
Criteria – How easy is it to:

- Implement the ABQ RIDE Full Recovery Network
- Realize items from the Rio Metro 2015 Vision Plan
- Serve Rio Rancho with bus service
- Make the regional network more uniform and organized
- Provide seamless demand response
- Provide seamless non-fixed route service
- Provide clarity for riders
- Implement ABQ RIDE Safety and Security Plan
- Implement zero emissions plans – ABQ RIDE and Rio Metro

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Slide 68

2 Staffing **Hire and retain the staff needed to operate service**

What we heard from the first workshop:

What are the weaknesses of the current transit network and services/agencies and structures?

- Staffing Shortage
- Some areas under/unserved
- Unions cover too many depart-ments
- Unions – multiple depart-ments
- Rio Metro HR needs more experience

What we learned from the Existing Conditions study:

- ABQ RIDE is a large department within the City of Albuquerque that uses multiple full-time staff time from other City departments.
- ABQ RIDE is suffering from an operator and maintenance shortage.
- Transit vehicle maintenance workers are unionized with all other vehicle maintenance workers at the City.
- The hiring process for transit employees is slow, and frequently a potential hire accepts another job before the onboarding process is completed with ABQ RIDE.
- ABQ RIDE has some of the most complete in-house abilities in the country to maintain specialized transit vehicles, making it difficult to contract out work without paying large premiums.
- Rio Metro is housed within the Mid-Region Council of Governments (MRCOG), and transit makes up a significant part of the workload of many MRCOG staff members.
- Despite big differences in total in-house staff numbers, planning capacity is limited at both agencies.

How we defined the evaluation criteria:

STAFFING
Criteria – How easy is it to:

- Hire and retain operators and mechanics
- Have dedicated planning staff
- Have dedicated support/admin staff (finance, legal, procurement)

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Slide 69

3 Funding Create a sustainable sufficient funding stream

What we heard from the first workshop:

What are the weaknesses of the current transit network and services?

Lack of dedicated funding	Political support not strong
Not enough funding	Need additional funding from city budget
ABQ RIDE too intertwined w/ rest of city budget	Lack of state funding
Lack of political support	Funding Support

What we learned from the Existing Conditions study:

- The two agencies are similar in total budget but spend that budget in very different ways.
- ABQ RIDE's funding is a mix of dedicated sources and the general fund.
- Rio Metro has a complex mix of local and federal funding tied to specific rural and urban operations.
- Rio Metro has a complex mix of local and federal funding tied to specific rural and urban operations.
- As a city department, ABQ RIDE competes for funding, resources, and attention against other City departments, but there are some benefits.
- Most big cities have independent transit agencies with dedicated funding sources.

How we defined the evaluation criteria:

FUNDING
Criteria – How easy is it to:

Build political will

Have dedicated steady funding – ABQ RIDE

Have dedicated steady funding – Rio Metro

Approach regional grants

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Slide 70

4 Governance Have an accountable and transparent process internally and to the public

What we heard from the first workshop:

What are the weaknesses of the current transit network and services?

Where are we headed? Existential issue	Too many decision makers
Limited long term vision, plans	Lengthy decision making process
ABQ RIDE competes for attention & resources w/ other departments	ABQ RIDE budgetary battles

What we learned from the Existing Conditions study:

- Most big cities have independent transit agencies with dedicated funding sources.
- As a city department, ABQ RIDE competes for funding, resources, and attention against other City departments, but there are some benefits.
- Rio Metro and ABQ RIDE already both share functions with other agencies.
- Rio Metro serves and represents a multitude of jurisdictions.
- There is no agency clearly responsible for creating a regional transit vision.
- Rio Metro depends on agreements with NMDOT and NCRTD.

How we defined the evaluation criteria:

GOVERNANCE
Criteria – How easy is it to:

Build transit-focused internal leadership – ABQ RIDE

Build transit-focused internal leadership – Rio Metro

Prioritize transit-focused board members – ABQ RIDE

Prioritize transit-focused board members – Rio Metro/Regional

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Slide 71

5 Efficiency — **Prioritize long term planning to grow transit service to meet current and future needs**

What we heard from the first workshop:

What are potential challenges associated with consolidation?

- Higher costs – less efficiencies
- Duplic-ative staff

What we learned from the Existing Conditions study:

- ABQ RIDE maintains some Rio Metro vehicles at the Ken Sanchez Center, with Rio Metro funding one mechanic at the facility.
- Neither agency has the typical amount of in-house planning staff for transit agencies and regions of this size.
- When looking at the two systems and their routes, there is little to no duplication in services. The two systems serve distinct markets from one another.
- Many ABQ RIDE employees have difficult schedules, required overtime, low pay, and safety concerns. These issues span many different divisions including operators, mechanics, call center, and paratransit providers.
- Rio Metro, by comparison to ABQ RIDE, is a small agency with very few staff—in part because so much of the operation is contracted out, especially the Rail Runner.

How we defined the evaluation criteria:

EFFICIENCY
Criteria – How easy is it to:

- Avoid having duplicative FTEs
- Avoid having duplicative maintenance facilities and other facilities
- Avoid having duplicative technical software
- Avoid having duplicative service
- Avoid having duplicative staff specializations

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Slide 72

6 Level of Effort — **Use public tax dollars efficiently to provide the most benefit to the public**

What we heard from the first workshop:

What are potential challenges associated with consolidation?

- General climate for "transit"
- Aligning priorities
- Consolidat-ing driver workforce
- Lack of a compell-ing reason why
- Merging different operating services
- Unions
- Often results in layoffs

What we learned from the Existing Conditions study:

- Not in Existing Conditions

How we defined the evaluation criteria:

LEVEL OF EFFORT
Criteria – How easy is it to:

- Avoid disruption
- Minimize level of effort to implement
- Build political capital and public support
- Implement without a change in state law
- Implement without a public vote (increase GRT)

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GOALS

All criteria were scored from 1-5 based on how easy a given governance scenario made the criteria to accomplish.

1 2 3 4 5

Most Difficult   Least Difficult

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Where we're going

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ACTIVITY

In the first workshop, we asked what would make consolidation or a change in governance worth it

More political support	Addition-al planning staff	Full staffing	More seamless service	More competiti ve for fed funding
Indepen -dent board	Better service higher ridership	Speed up decision making	Require agencies to consider land use	More funding
Dedicated funding	More funding leading to more service	More support from other agencies	Lower costs more efficiency	Transit growth to meet future needs
In-creased service	Transit that can shape land use policy	Unified pax info, data, & experience	More transit service	
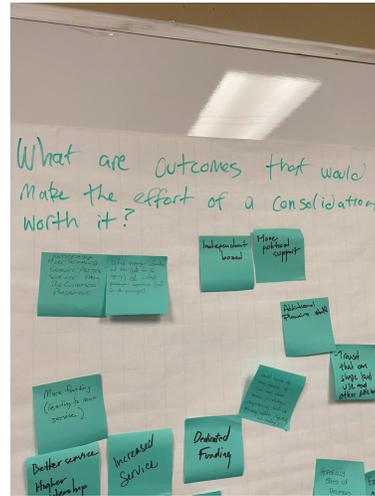
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ACTIVITY

Strengths and weaknesses

Questions – Menti Poll

- **What are outcomes that would make the effort of significant changes worth it?**

- **What are potential challenges associated with making significant changes to the agency structures?**

Please scan the QR Code to join the Menti poll and respond to the questions:

Or go to menti.com and enter the code: **2262 5632**

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Strengths and weaknesses

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RECOMMENDATIONS

At Workshop 2, over a dozen different governance scenarios were created.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

At Workshop 3, we presented 5 new governance scenarios, based on the Status Quo and ranging through Full Consolidation.

1) **Significant Coordination**
   – Additional shared passenger info, grant writing, call center

2) **Regional Demand Response**
   – Status Quo + Demand Response becomes a shared function

3) **Independent Agencies**
   – ABQ RIDE with own board, Rio Metro moves outside MRCOG

4) **Regional Board**
   – Regional Transit Board oversees both independent agencies

5) **Full Consolidation**
   – Agencies merge into one

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RECOMMENDATIONS

At Workshop 3, we presented 5 new governance scenarios, based on the Status Quo and ranging through Full Consolidation.

1) **Significant Coordination**
   – Additional shared passenger info, grant writing, call center

2) **Regional Demand Response**
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3) **Independent Agencies**
   – ABQ RIDE with own board, Rio Metro moves outside MRCOG

4) **Regional Board**
   – Regional Transit Board oversees both independent agencies

5) **Full Consolidation**
   – Agencies merge into one

The unique scenarios outside of consolidation are tailored specifically to respond to the issues and benefits we have learned about the current governance model.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Our final report will include governance recommendations and implementation steps that address agency challenges and will make it easier to reach the goals.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

We will present the recommendations in more detail later this fall.

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Next Steps

Recommendations – "Preferred Scenario"
- While we will recommend a specific governance scenario that most aligns with the goals and objectives, all scenarios and their benefits will be included in the final report
- Recommendations will be operational, procedural, and structural

Implementation Steps
- These will be high-level guiding steps that will be a roadmap for implementing the recommendations

Final Report
- The final report will summarize and synthesize the whole study and process, with an emphasis on the recommendations

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Thank You!

HZ HUITT ZOLLARS

N NELSON NYGAARD

Bethany Whitaker   Suzie Birdsell

Madeleine Pelzel   Sam Ergina

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