NEBRASKA
RURAL TRANSIT

GAP ANALYSIS

Panhandle Region

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA AT OMAHA
CENTER FOR PUBLIC
AFFAIRS RESEARCH

NEBRASKA
Good Life. Great Journey.
DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Center for Public Affairs Research (CPAR) at the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) conducted a comprehensive analysis of rural transit in Nebraska's Panhandle region at the request of the Nebraska Department of Transportation (NDOT). This region encompasses 12 counties in western Nebraska and is served by eight transit providers. By analyzing data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, NDOT records, and local transit providers, the study provides insights into ridership by agency, identifies common rider destinations, and examines service gaps and overlaps across the region. Based on this analysis, we propose opportunities for coordination and strategies to enhance the reach of rural transit services in Nebraska.

A key finding of the analysis highlights the critical importance of rural transit in meeting the needs of the region's population, particularly its growing transit-dependent population. Over 20% of the region's residents are aged 65 or older, more than 15% live with disabilities, and 5.2% of households lack access to private vehicles. These statistics point to an increasing demand for accessible and reliable transit services. Fortunately, rural transit coverage is extensive, with over 96.4% of the Panhandle's population residing within areas served by at least one provider.

Transit providers in the Panhandle serve a diverse range of destinations, including healthcare facilities, housing developments, grocery and discount stores, schools, and workplaces. This underscores the vital role transit plays in connecting residents to essential services. While the geographic expanse of the region is significant, a substantial majority of trips — 88.7% of drop-offs — occur within the Panhandle's largest cities, including Scottsbluff, Gering, Alliance, Sidney, Chadron, Valentine, and Kimball. Most providers drop riders off at unique destinations, indicating minimal overlap in service areas. However, many providers follow similar routes, particularly along U.S. Highways 26 and 385, to reach these destinations.

Based on the data and analysis, the study offers several actionable recommendations. Expanding local transit options within the larger cities of the Panhandle would enhance mobility and allow residents to access multiple destinations more easily once in the city. Maintaining reliable connections to medical facilities, housing, and grocery stores is especially critical for the region's transit-dependent populations. Additionally, improving coordination among transit providers operating in overlapping areas could increase efficiency and reduce redundancy.

Overall, the analysis does not identify significant service gaps in the Panhandle region. On the contrary, it reveals an increasingly transit-dependent population successfully using rural transit to access essential services and a network of agencies that have grown to meet this demand. This study underscores the importance of continued investment in rural transit to support the Panhandle's residents. Strategic enhancements in local services, regional coordination, and integrated planning will ensure that transit-dependent populations have reliable access to the resources and opportunities they need.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

This analysis examines the gaps and overlaps in Nebraska's rural transit services to help ensure reliable access to transit across rural areas of the state. By identifying areas where service can be optimized, the study aims to improve the efficiency, reach, and effectiveness of rural transit. This work is supported by the Nebraska Department of Transportation (NDOT), which administers funding from the Federal Transit Administration's Formula Grants for Rural Area Programs (49 U.S.C. 5311) to public transit providers in areas with populations under 50,000. NDOT has contracted with the Center for Public Affairs Research (CPAR) at the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) to conduct this gap analysis as part of its commitment to strengthen Nebraska's rural transit system.

This gap analysis has several key components:
- An overview of Section 5311 rural transit providers in the region, including their reported coverage area.
- A summary of the most common drop-off destinations served by these providers.
- An assessment of gaps and overlaps across providers in each region.
- Evidence-based recommendations to support and expand efficient, effective rural transit across Nebraska.

The analysis is conducted using data from the U.S. Census Bureau and data about coverage areas, drop-off and pickup locations provided by service providers across Nebraska receiving Section 5311 funds as described in the About the Analysis section.

NEBRASKA MOBILITY MANAGEMENT REGIONS

As part of the management of Federal Transit Administration funding, NDOT divides Nebraska into six Mobility Management regions. A distinct analysis for each region is provided.

Figure 1. Nebraska Mobility Management regions, 2023
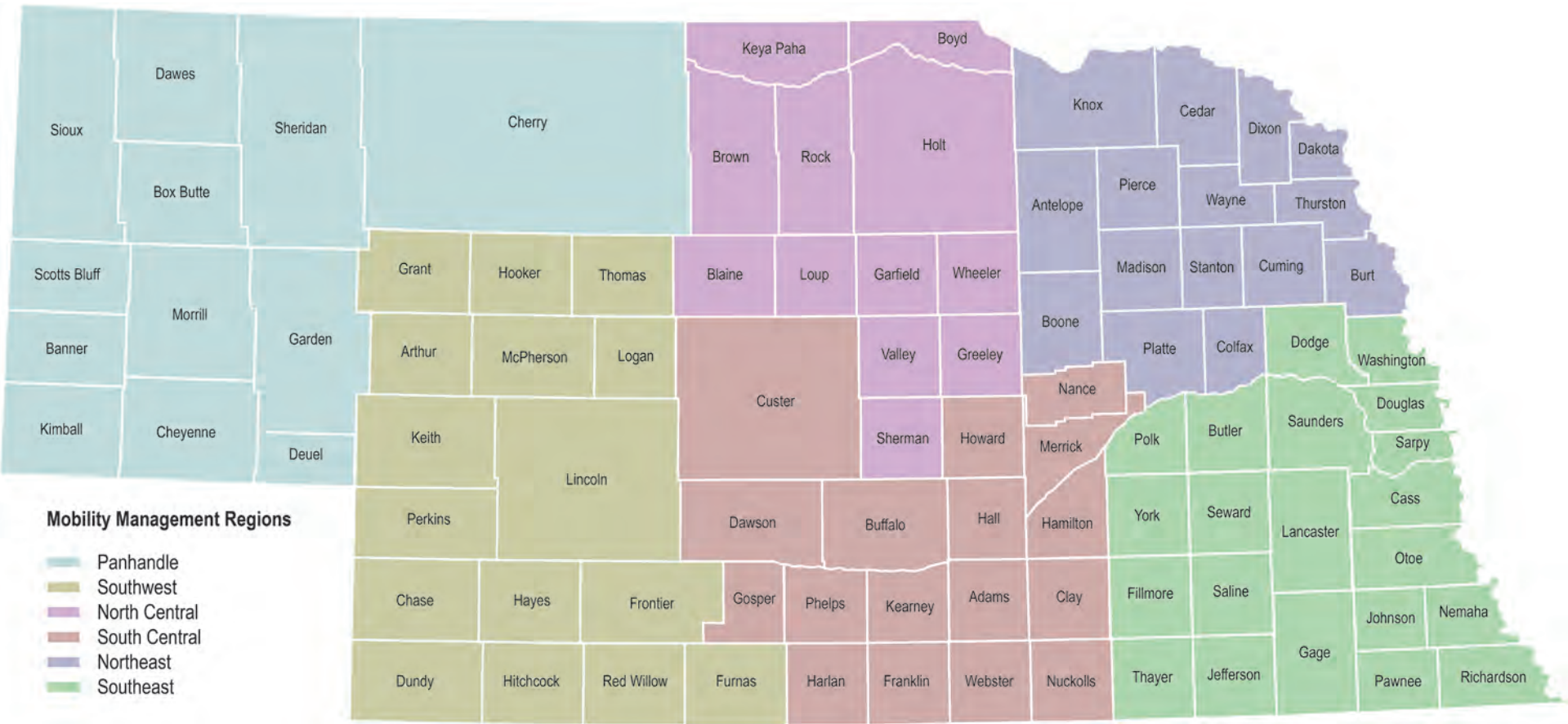
Source: (1) Nebraska Public Transit website, retrieved 2024

NORTH CENTRAL REGION

- Avera St. Anthony's Hospital
- Community Memorial Health Center
- Loup City Public Transportation
- Valley County Transit System

NORTHEAST REGION

- Avera Creighton Hospital
- Cedar County Transit
- City of Neligh Dial-A-Ride Public Transit
- City of Plainview Handivan
- Columbus Area Transit System
- Good Samaritan Society-Albion Public Transit
- JoyRide Public Transit
- North Fork Area Transit
- Oakland Public Transit
- Ponca Express
- Schuyler Public Transit
- Wayne Public Transit

PANHANDLE REGION

- Alliance Public Transit
- Chadron City Transit
- City of Sidney Transportation System
- Crawford Public Transportation
- Garden County Public Transportation
- KCTS
- Open Plains Transit
- Tri-City Roadrunner

SOUTH CENTRAL REGION

- Callaway District Hospital Public Transit Service
- Hall County Rural Transportation
- Harlan County Public Transportation
- Midland Public Transit
- Nance Trans, Inc.
- Phelps County Public Transit
- RYDE Transit

SOUTHEAST REGION

- Blue Rivers Transportation System
- Butler County Rural Transit Service
- City of Tecumseh/Johnson County Public Transit
- Fillmore County Rural Transit Service
- Fremont Transit Program
- Lancaster County Public Rural Transit
- Saline County Area Transit
- Saunders County Public Transportation
- Seward County Public Transit
- Southeast Nebraska Community Action
  - Cass County Transit
  - Pawnee County Transit
  - Richardson County Transit
- York County Public Transportation

SOUTHWEST REGION

- Chase County Transportation System
- City of Benkelman Handi Bus
- City of McCook Transit
- City of Ogallala Public Transit
- Grant Arthur Handi Bus
- Hitch & Hay Public Transit
- Hooker County Handi Bus
- North Platte Public Transit System
- Perkins County Public Transit
- Tri Valley Public Transportation

ABOUT THE ANALYSIS

Our analysis uses a range of data and methods to examine rural transit services in each mobility region. We built this approach by drawing on existing rural transit analyses from other states (e.g., DRPT, 2023 [Source 2]; MCDOT, 2020 [Source 3]; MOOver, 2022 [Source 4]; SWRPC, 2022 [Source 5]; Wave Transit, 2023 [Source 6]) and leveraging our own expertise.

Data for this analysis comes from three primary sources.
- The first is the 2022 American Community Survey 5-year estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau. These estimates provide detailed information about population characteristics and help us estimate transit demand for each region.
- The second source is data from rural transit agencies, provided through the Nebraska Transit Invoice Portal. This data enabled us to analyze transit offerings, ridership, and geographic service coverage.
- Third, we requested samples of completed rides from transit providers. Not all agencies provided samples over the same time periods or same length of time. However, they are all illustrative of agency service. These samples included pick-up and drop-off locations in 2024. Using the U.S. Census Geocoder (Source 7), we geocoded these locations to generate latitude and longitude coordinates, which were key in creating visual representations like heatmaps and coverage maps.

The metrics we examine for each agency include: provider coverage area (e.g., city-specific, county-wide, regional), boardings per vehicle per fiscal year, miles per vehicle per fiscal year, miles per boarding per fiscal year, drop-offs at or near reported locations in the sample, observed coverage area in square miles, vehicles per square mile of the observed coverage area, and boardings per square mile of the observed coverage area.

The analysis begins with an exploration of the population characteristics and transit demand in each region. This step uses demographic and socioeconomic data to understand the needs of rural transit users. Next, we profile each transit agency's services, detailing ridership statistics, geographic coverage, and operational metrics. These profiles offer insights into the capacity of existing transit systems.

To illustrate the state of rural transit services, we present maps derived from the geocoded ride sample data. Heatmaps highlight the density of drop-off destinations, while polygon maps delineate the observed coverage areas. These visual tools help convey the extent and uses of transit services. In addition to visual analysis, we conduct a detailed review of trip destinations and service patterns to identify gaps in coverage and overlaps between agencies. This helps assess how well current transit services meet regional needs and highlights opportunities for improvements.

Finally, we synthesize these findings into a regional summary that evaluated transit availability, accessibility, and coverage gaps. The report concludes with a set of actionable recommendations aimed at enhancing rural transit services in the region.

PANHANDLE REGION OVERVIEW

This document focuses on rural transit agencies in the Panhandle Mobility Management region, comprised of the 12 westernmost counties of Nebraska, bordering Colorado, Wyoming, and South Dakota. Nebraska's Panhandle is a perfect example of the challenges of providing rural transit — the population is low, widely dispersed, and services and amenities are concentrated in cities and towns.

**Figure 2. Panhandle Mobility Management region**
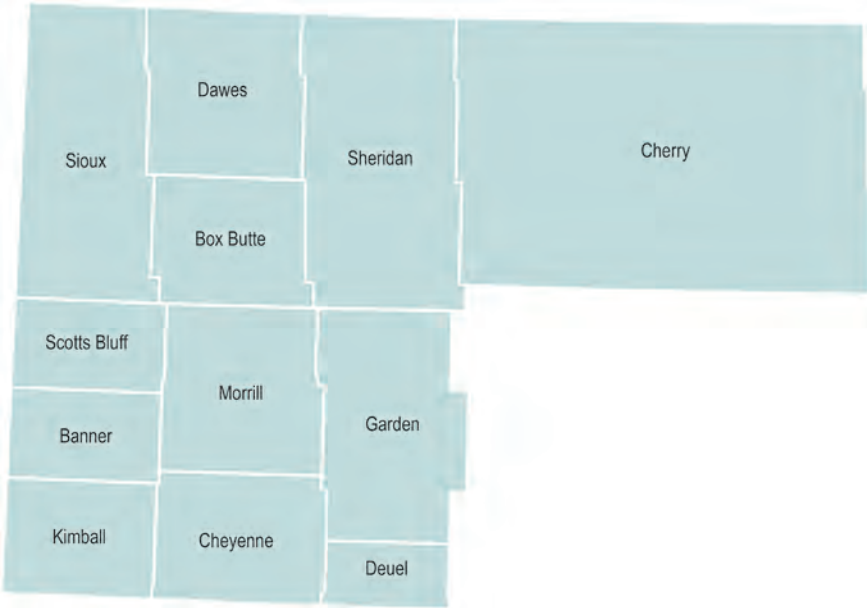
Source: (1) Nebraska Public Transit website, retrieved 2024

The Panhandle also provides some unique challenges for transit providers with regards to NDOT's mission of managing transit in Nebraska, as the services required by the residents of this part of the state are often located in other states, particularly in Denver, Colorado; Cheyenne, Wyoming; or Rapid City, South Dakota. Many of the transit providers in the Panhandle offer services to those out-of-state destinations, further increasing the distances their drivers and vehicles need to travel.

POPULATION TRENDS

The Panhandle has experienced a decline in its total population in recent years. In 2010, the region population was 93,428 and decreased to 88,594 in 2022, a decline of 5.2%.

Figure 3. Total population in Panhandle, 2010-2022
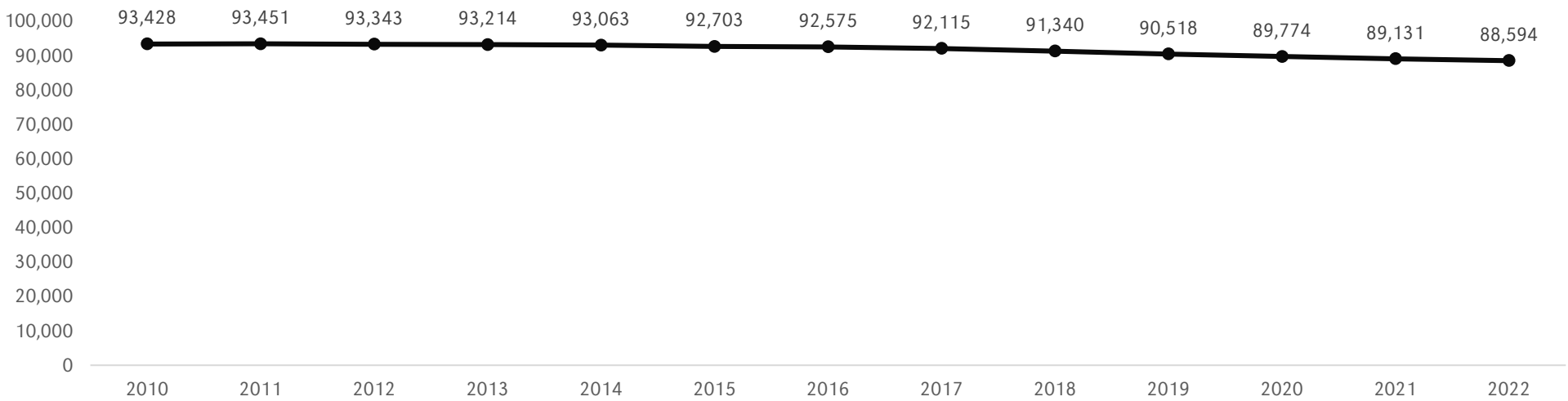
Source: (8) U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey, 5-year Estimates 2010-2022

TRANSIT DEPENDENT POPULATION

In addition to evaluating the overall population, we analyzed the transit-dependent population in the region. The transit-dependent population includes those who cannot drive due to age, lack financial resources to own a vehicle, or have physical disabilities (Jiao & Dillivan, 2013; Jiao & Wang, 2021). Reports from other state DOTs, such as those in Arkansas, Iowa, Vermont, and New Hampshire, as well as local reports from agencies like DuPage County in Chicago, Illinois, and the Northwest Arkansas Regional Planning Commission, consider the following groups as transit-dependent:

a. Individuals aged 65 or older.
b. Individuals below the poverty level.
c. Individuals with hearing, vision, ambulatory, or other physical difficulties.
d. Households without access to a private vehicle.

Table 1. Transit-dependent population in Panhandle, 2022

Region	Total Population	Percent of Population 65 Years or Older	Percent of Population Below Poverty	Percent of Population with a Disability	Occupied Housing Units	Percent of Occupied Housing Units with No Private Vehicle
Nebraska	1,958,939	16.2%	10.4%	12.0%	776,379	5.1%
Panhandle	88,594	20.9%	11.7%	15.2%	37,402	5.2%
Banner	670	30.3%	7.4%	14.8%	249	2.4%
Box Butte	10,778	19.1%	12.0%	13.3%	4,573	5.4%
Cherry	5,473	20.8%	9.8%	12.1%	2,110	6.4%
Cheyenne	9,489	20.8%	11.7%	15.1%	4,311	6.0%
Dawes	8,279	18.9%	13.0%	13.4%	3,484	3.5%
Deuel	1,858	25.9%	7.1%	19.2%	861	1.6%
Garden	1,778	28.6%	9.6%	20.1%	829	2.4%
Kimball	3,395	25.9%	10.0%	19.1%	1,501	3.2%
Morrill	4,562	20.8%	9.5%	14.3%	1,814	3.9%
Scotts Bluff	36,048	19.9%	12.5%	15.5%	15,119	6.0%
Sheridan	5,102	26.0%	10.8%	18.1%	2,101	4.5%
Sioux	1,162	22.8%	17.4%	13.9%	450	5.3%

Source: (8) U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey, 5-year Estimates 2022

As shown in Table 1, the Panhandle region has a higher estimated percentage of transit-dependent residents compared to the state overall. This is largely due to the region's relatively older population and a higher percentage of individuals with hearing, vision, cognitive, ambulatory, or other difficulties. Several of these metrics are also on the rise in this region. For example, the percentage of the Panhandle region's population aged 65 or older has increased relative to the total population.

Figure 4. Percent of population age 65 or older in Panhandle, 2010-2022
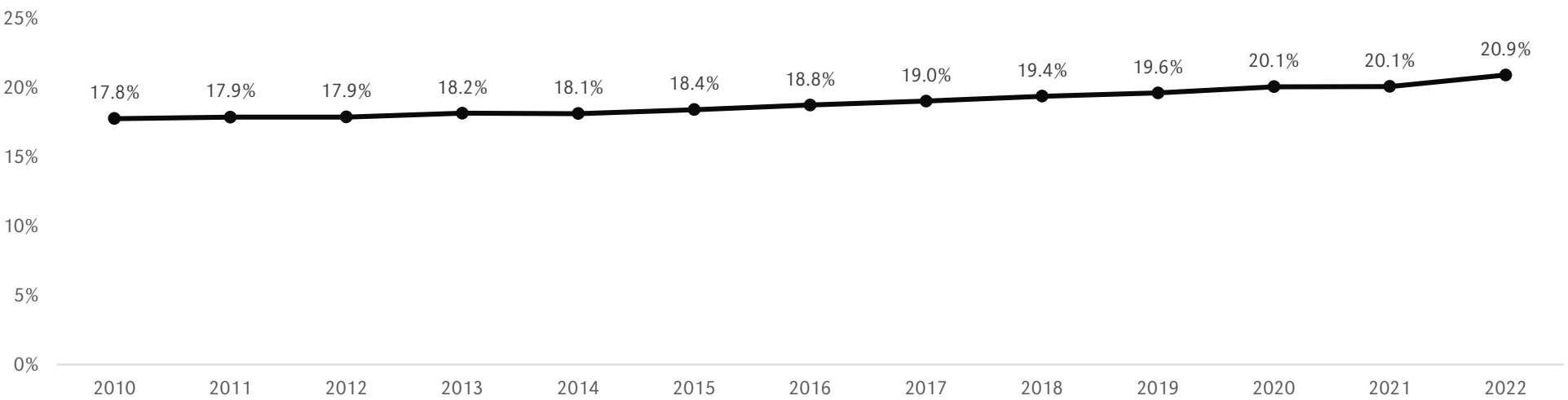
Source: (8) U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey, 5-year Estimates 2010-2022

Along with the aging population of the region, the percentage of the Panhandle's population with physical difficulties has also been growing in recent years, rising from a low point of 12.8% in 2015 to an estimated 15.2% in 2022.

Figure 5. Percent of population with difficulties in Panhandle, 2012-2022
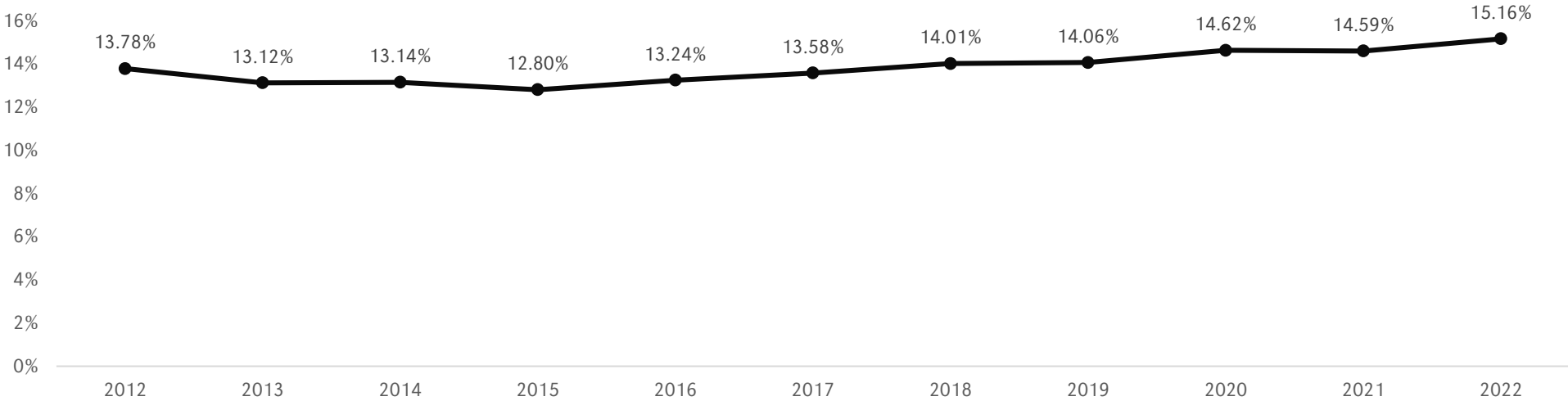
Source: (8) U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey, 5-year Estimates 2012-2022

Based on these estimates, **the population of the Panhandle is more dependent on public transit than the population of Nebraska as a whole**. The relative percentage of transit dependent population is also growing in the Panhandle, meaning the need for public transit will likely continue to increase.

PANHANDLE TRANSIT PROVIDERS

To respond to the growing transit needs of the region, the Panhandle region is currently served by eight rural transit providers. Four of these providers are operated by city governments, three by counties, and one by a private 501(c)3 non-profit organization. This section provides an overview of the service provided by each of those providers.

ALLIANCE PUBLIC TRANSIT

Alliance Public Transit offers demand response and non-emergency medical transit to riders within the City of Alliance and to/from the nearby Alliance Municipal Airport.

Figure 6. Map of Panhandle region with Alliance Public Transit service area shown as red dot
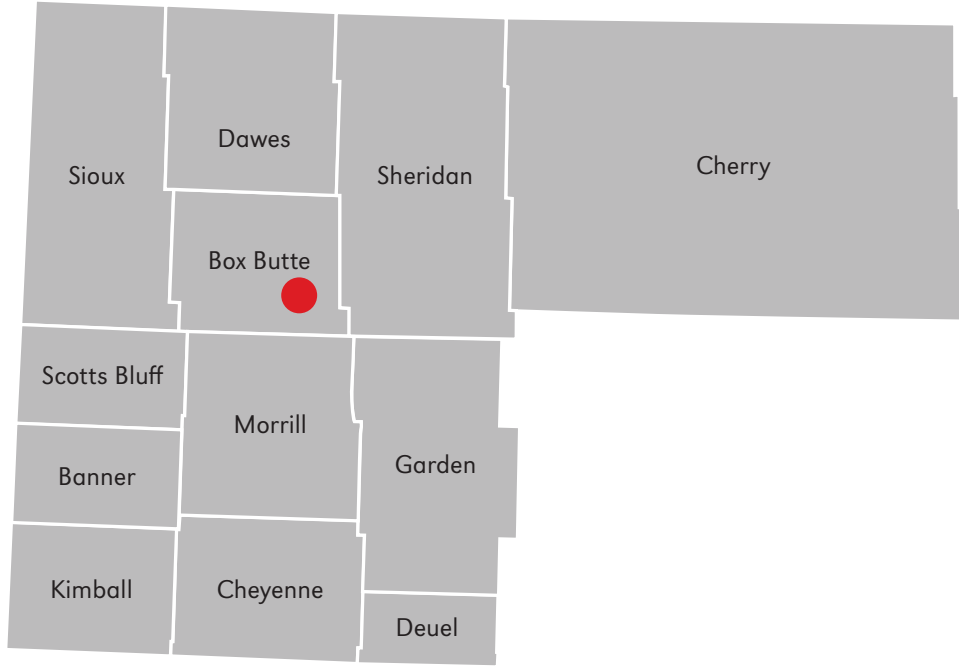
Source: (1) Nebraska Public Transit website, retrieved 2024

Rides are provided Monday through Friday from 6:30 A.M. to 4:30 P.M., with rides on Saturday or Sunday by appointment.

Source: (17) Alliance Public Transit website, retrieved 2024

According to data reported to the Nebraska Transit Invoice Portal, Alliance Public Transit operates five vehicles and provided an average of approximately 31,000 rides per year from FY 2022 to FY 2024. These rides are typically short, with an average trip length ranging from 1.8 to 2.7 miles per boarding during the past three fiscal years.

Between FY 2022 and FY 2024, boardings increased by 27.4%, while total miles traveled grew by 5.5%. As a result, the average miles per boarding — a measure of mean trip length — decreased by 17.2%. This suggests that in FY 2024, Alliance Public Transit provided more rides, but those rides were shorter in distance compared to FY 2022.

Table 2. Ridership statistics for Alliance Public Transit, FY 2022 to FY 2024

|	FY 2022	FY 2023	FY 2024	Percent Change FY 2022 to FY 2024
Vehicles	5	5	5	0.0%
Boardings	29,633	25,963	37,751	27.4%
Mileage	63,835	71,266	67,354	5.5%
Boardings Per Vehicle	5,926.60	5,192.60	7,550.20	27.4%
Miles Per Vehicle	12,767.00	14,253.20	13,470.80	5.5%
Miles Per Boarding	2.15	2.74	1.78	-17.2%

Source: (9) Nebraska Transit Invoice Portal

Alliance Public Transit provided a sample of 6,090 trips taken between April 2024 and June 2024 which we used to analyze the most common destinations/drop-offs and to approximate the coverage area.

Figure 7 shows a heatmap of all drop-offs by Alliance Public Transit and lists the top five most frequent destinations. The trip destinations in the sample were all within the area immediately surrounding the City of Alliance.

Box Butte General Hospital was the most frequent destination, accounting for 10.6% of the trips in the sample data (646 drop-offs). Rosewood Estates — the second most frequent destination with 342 drop-offs — is a senior living development on the north side of Alliance, near the hospital. The other three most common destinations are located "downtown" along Nebraska Highway 2. Safeway and the Grocery Kart are both large grocery stores, and the intersection of Box Butte Ave and West 3rd Street (Nebraska Highway 2) is a central destination for activities such as shopping and banking.

Figure 7. Drop-off locations for Alliance Public Transit, April 2024 to June 2024
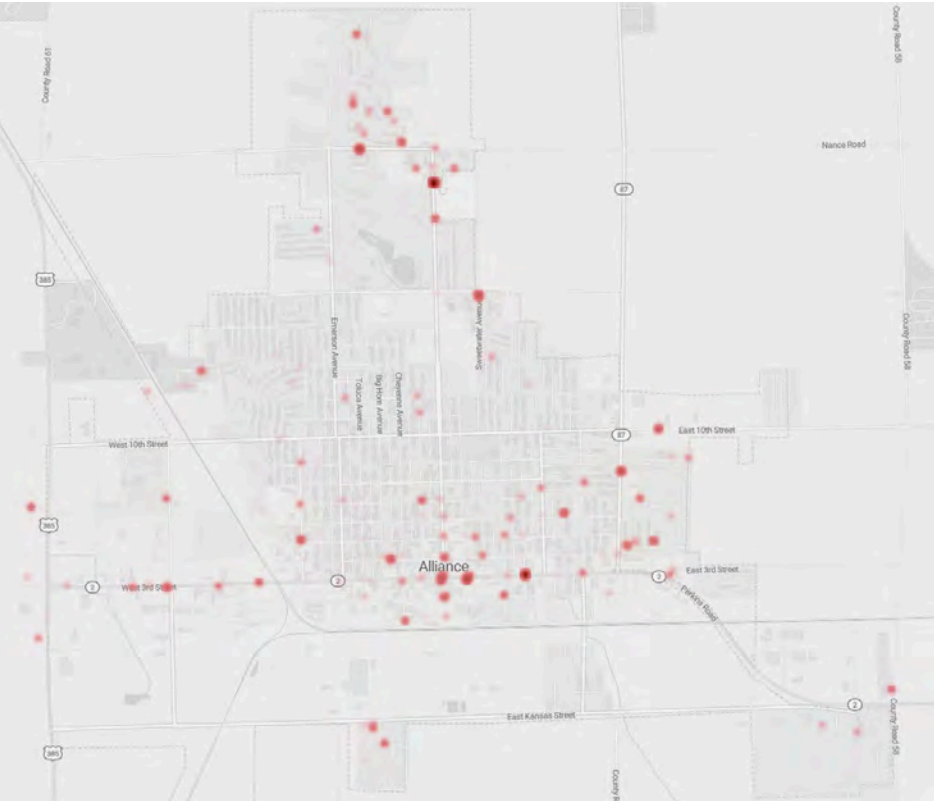
Top Five Drop-off Locations	City/Town	Number of Drop-offs
Box Butte General Hospital	Alliance	646
Rosewood Estates	Alliance	342
Safeway	Alliance	338
Grocery Kart	Alliance	277
Box Butte Ave and West 3rd Street	Alliance	238

Source: (10) Alliance Public Transit reported ride data, April 2024 to June 2024

The observed coverage area for Alliance Public Transit is an estimated 6.2 square miles, comprising most of the city limits of Alliance and extending toward the Alliance Municipal Airport.

Figure 7. Observed pick-up area for Alliance Public Transit, April 2024 to June 2024

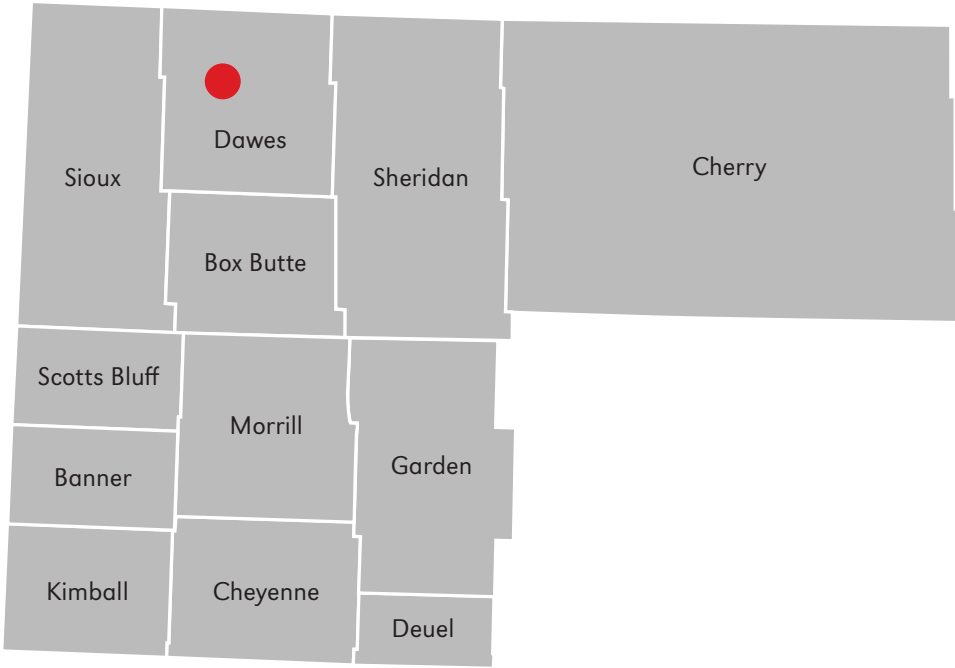Source: (10) Alliance Public Transit reported ride data, April 2024 to June 2024

Alliance Public Transit has expanded its service over the reported time period. This growth is reflected in increases across most ridership metrics, suggesting a rising demand for rural transit in the area. **This demand appears to be effectively met, as demonstrated by the provider's consistent operation within the documented coverage area.**

CHADRON CITY TRANSIT

Chadron City Transit is a service of the City of Chadron providing demand response and non-emergency medical transit to residents of Chadron and the surrounding region. Rides cover the City of Chadron; the Chadron Municipal Airport; the nearby communities of Crawford and Hay Springs, Nebraska; Rapid City, South Dakota; and nearby attractions including Chadron State Park and the Chadron City Dam.

Figure 9. Map of Panhandle region with Chadron City Transit service area shown as red dot

Source: (1) Nebraska Public Transit website, retrieved 2024

Rides are provided
Monday through Friday
8 A.M. to 4 P.M.

Source: (18) Chadron City Transit
website, retrieved 2024

According to data reported to the Nebraska Transit Invoice Portal, Chadron City Transit operates two vehicles and provided over 16,000 rides annually as of FY 2024. Boardings increased by 208.7% between FY 2022 and FY 2024, likely due to the extended service hours implemented during FY 2023.

At the same time, the average trip length decreased by 47.1%, from 2.8 miles per boarding in FY 2022 to 1.5 miles per boarding in FY 2024. This indicates a shift toward providing more frequent, shorter rides.

Table 3. Ridership statistics for Chadron City Transit, FY 2022 to FY 2024

|	FY 2022	FY 2023	FY 2024	Percent Change FY 2022 to FY 2024
Vehicles	2	2	2	0.0%
Boardings	5,403	9,379	16,679	208.7%
Mileage	14,907	23,697	24,339	63.3%
Boardings Per Vehicle	2,701.50	4,689.50	8,339.50	208.7%
Miles Per Vehicle	7,453.50	11,848.50	12,169.50	63.3%
Miles Per Boarding	2.76	2.53	1.46	-47.1%

Source: (9) Nebraska Transit Invoice Portal

Chadron City Transit provided a sample of 3,338 trips taken between April 2024 and June 2024 which we used to analyze the most common destinations/drop-offs and to approximate the coverage area.

Figure 10 shows a heatmap of all drop-offs by Chadron City Transit and lists the top five most frequent destinations. The trip destinations in the sample were all within the area immediately surrounding the City of Chadron, generally matching the reported service area. No drop-offs were reported near the Chadron Municipal Airport during the sample period, however, despite its mention on the Chadron City Transit website.

The most frequent destinations were the Prairie Pines Retirement Community (433 drop-offs, 13.0%) and the Walmart Supercenter in Chadron (355 drop-offs, 10.6%). Other common destinations were the Chadron Community Hospital and two of Chadron's public schools.

### Figure 10. Drop-off locations for Chadron City Transit, April 2024 to June 2024
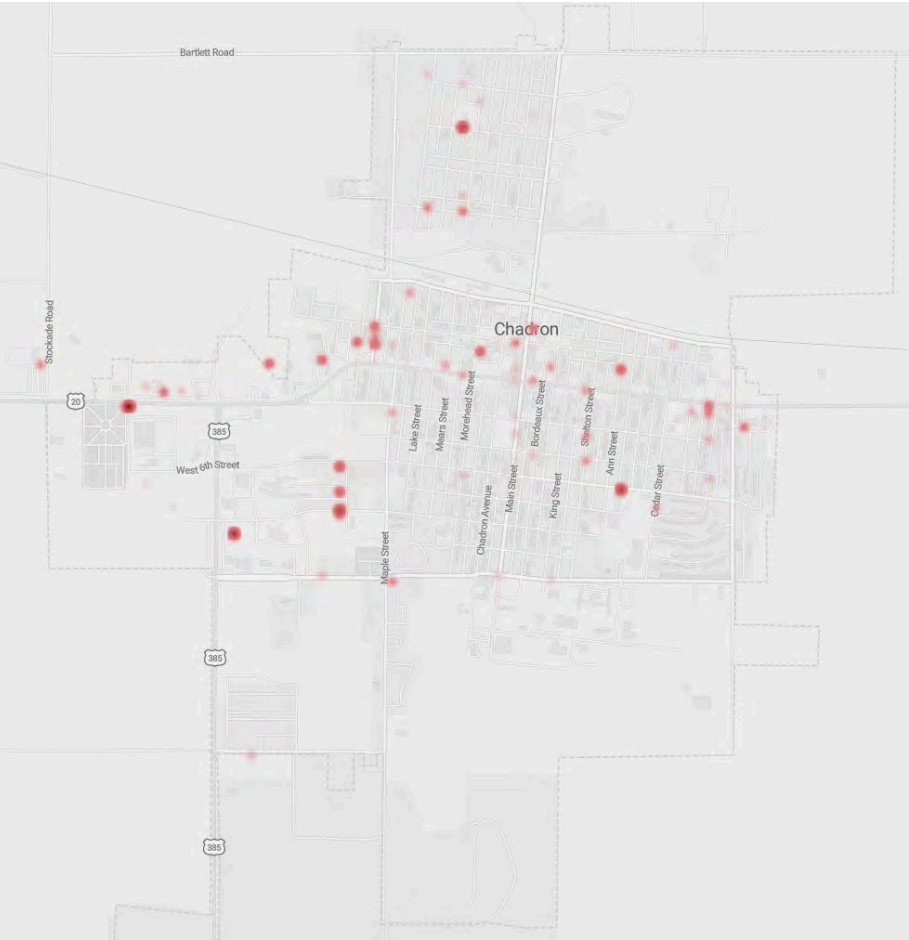
Top Five Drop-off Locations	City/Town	Number of Drop-offs
Prairie Pines Retirement Community	Chadron	433
Walmart Supercenter	Chadron	355
Chadron Community Hospital	Chadron	252
Chadron Middle School	Chadron	209
Chadron Intermediate School	Chadron	194

Source: (11) Chadron City Transit reported ride data, April 2024 to June 2024

The observed coverage area for Chadron City Transit covers an estimated 11.2 square miles, covering the City of Chadron and the area immediately to the west toward the Chadron Municipal Airport including (at the extreme western edge of the coverage area) the Trunk Butte Ranch House, a guest house to the west of Chadron along Trunk Butte Creek.

Figure 11. Observed pick-up area for Chadron City Transit, April 2024 to June 2024
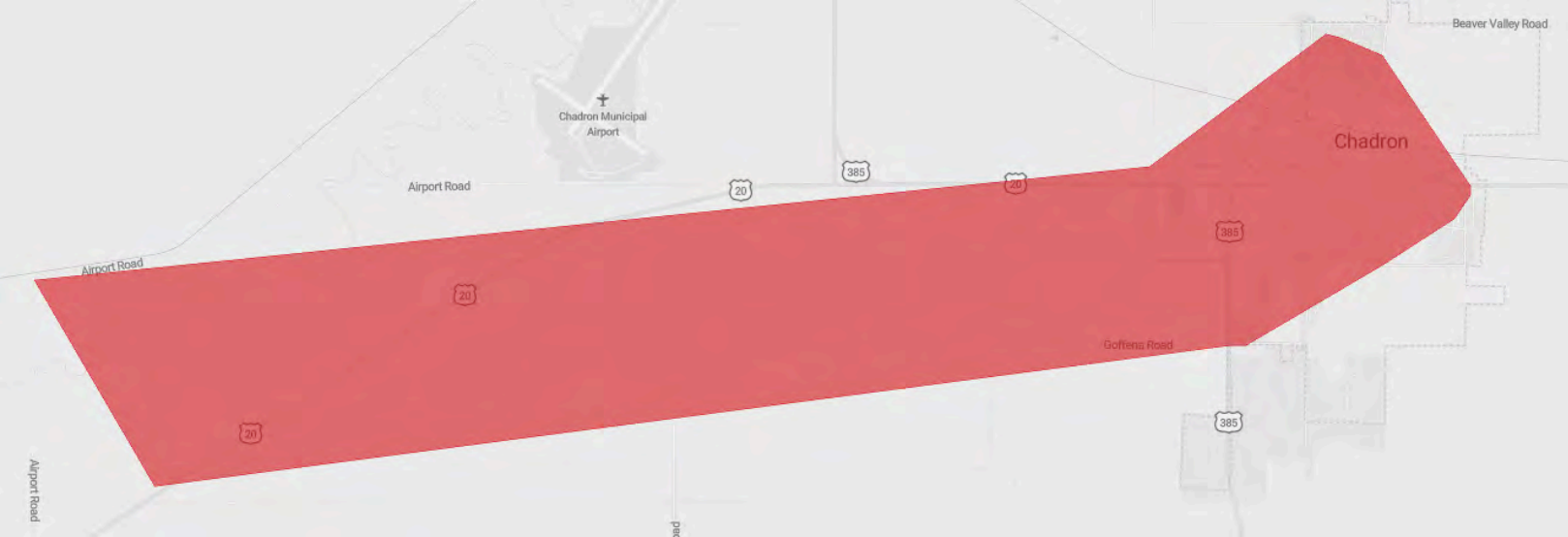
Source: (11) Chadron City Transit reported ride data, April 2024 to June 2024

Chadron City Transit has significantly increased boarding since 2022 despite not adding new vehicles. The trips in the **reported agency data suggest Chadron City Transit provides service primarily within the City of Chadron, aligning with its documented mission**. The sample rides do not include any rides to Rapid City, South Dakota, a possible destination reported on their website. Even without that destination, we do not see any apparent gaps in service at this time.

CITY OF SIDNEY TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM

The City of Sidney Transportation System operates four 12-passenger buses which provide demand-response service inside the city limits of Sidney.

Figure 12. Map of Panhandle region with City of Sidney Transportation System service area shown as red dot
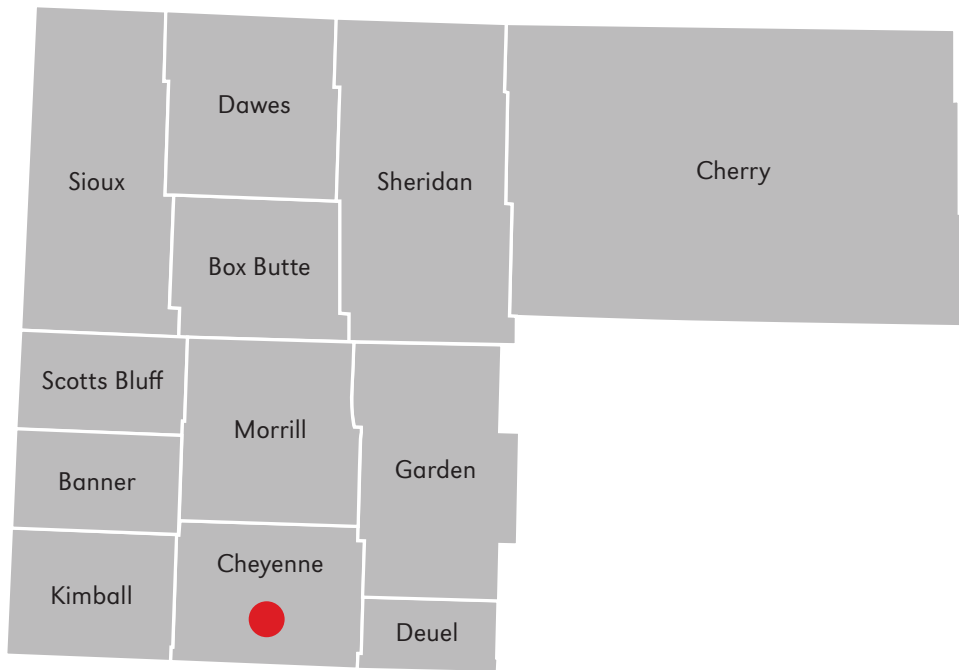
Rides are provided Monday through Friday from 7 A.M. to 5 P.M. and Saturday from 9 A.M. to 2 P.M.

According to data reported to the Nebraska Transit Invoice Portal (Table 7), the City of Sidney Transportation System operates four vehicles as of FY 2024, doubling its fleet size since FY 2022. It now provides 25,843 rides annually, more than doubling the 11,712 boardings reported in FY 2022 (a 120.7% increase). With the addition of the new vehicles, the average number of miles traveled by each vehicle has decreased slightly since FY 2022, falling by 3.4%. As a result, we conclude that increasing capacity was pivotal to increasing ridership.

On average, City of Sidney Transportation System's rides are longer than those offered by other city-specific providers, consistently averaging around 3.4 miles per boarding over the past three fiscal years. However, the average trip length decreased by 12.5% compared to FY 2022, indicating a shift toward providing more frequent, shorter rides.

Table 4. Ridership statistics for City of Sidney Transportation System, FY 2022 to FY 2024

|	FY 2022	FY 2023	FY 2024	Percent Change FY 2022 to FY 2024
Vehicles	2	3	4	100.0%
Boardings	11,712	16,415	25,843	120.7%
Mileage	42,560	54,171	82,216	93.2%
Boardings Per Vehicle	5,856.00	5,471.67	6,460.75	10.3%
Miles Per Vehicle	21,280.00	18,057.00	20,554.00	-3.4%
Miles Per Boarding	3.63	3.30	3.18	-12.5%

Source: (9) Nebraska Transit Invoice Portal

The City of Sidney Transportation System provided a sample of 9,351 trips taken between April 2024 and July 2024 which we used to analyze the most common destinations/drop-offs and to approximate the coverage area.

Figure 13 shows a heatmap of all drop-offs by City of Sidney Transportation System and lists the top five most frequent destinations. The trip destinations in the sample were all within the area immediately surrounding the City of Sidney. This aligns very closely with the reported service area.

The most frequent destinations were near the Walmart Supercenter in Sidney (974, 10.4%); the Western Nebraska Community College and/or the Here Wee Grow daycare in Sidney (860 drop-offs, 9.2%); and Sidney City Sioux Villa, a public housing development (590 drop-offs, 6.3%). The Walmart Supercenter and a variety of other businesses are located very near the Sidney exit on Interstate 80, indicated by the cluster of drop-offs occurring in that area (the bottom right corner of the map).

### Figure 13. Drop-off locations for City of Sidney Transportation System, April 2024 to July 2024
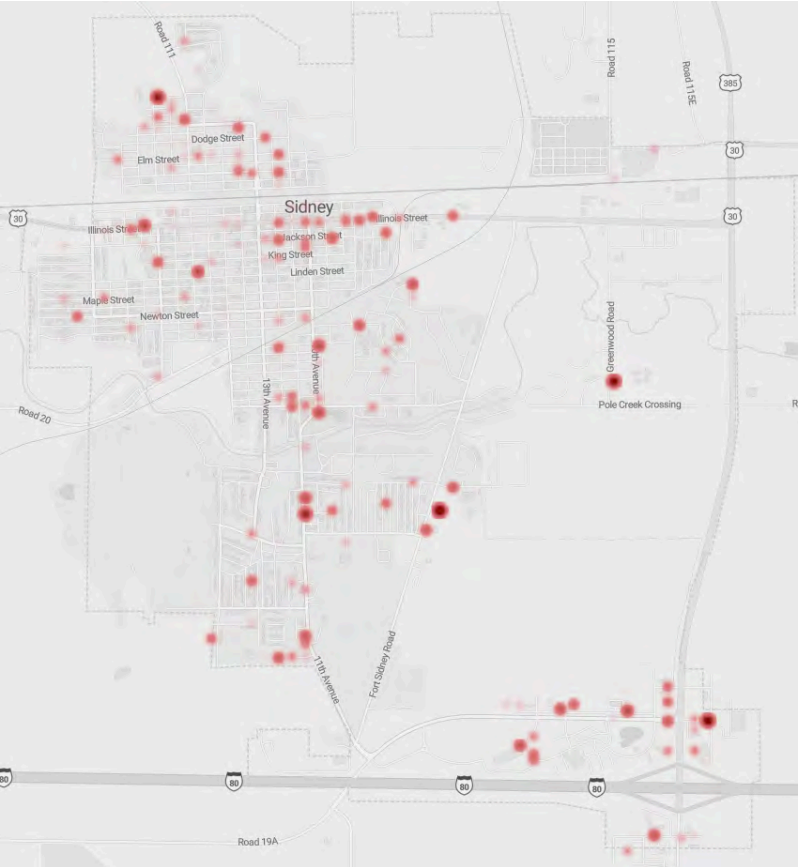
Top Five Drop-off Locations	City/Town	Number of Drop-offs
Walmart Supercenter / I-80	Sidney	974
Western Nebraska Community College / Here Wee Grow	Sidney	860
Sidney City Sioux Villa	Sidney	590
Sidney Regional Medical Center	Sidney	486
Sidney City Western Heritage	Sidney	368

Source: (12) City of Sidney Transportation System reported ride data, April 2024 to July 2024

The observed coverage area for City of Sidney Transportation System covers an estimated 3.0 square miles, the smallest coverage area in our analysis. This covers a large portion of the city limits of Sidney and extends southeast toward the Sidney exit on Interstate-80, but notably does not include the Sidney Municipal Airport to the south.

Figure 14. Observed pick-up area for City of Sidney Transportation System, April 2024 to July 2024
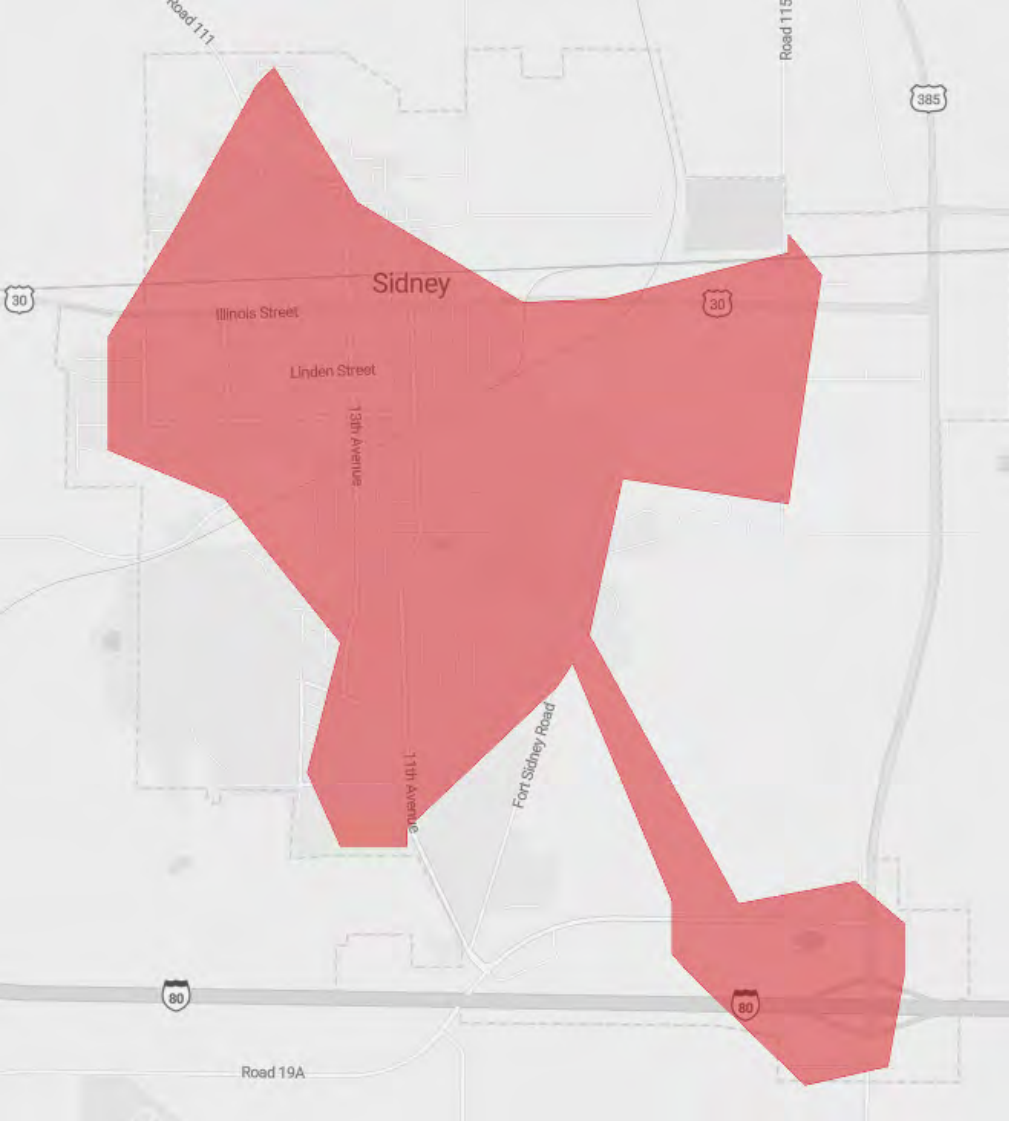
Source: (12) City of Sidney Transportation System reported ride data, April 2024 to July 2024

The City of Sidney Transportation System has increased capacity and ridership since 2022. Based on the coverage area and reported agency data, **the most common destinations reported by City of Sidney Transportation System align with the provider's documented coverage area**. It is interesting to note that while the City of Sidney Transportation System has the smallest coverage area among providers in this analysis, the distance of rides is, on average, longer than rides provided by other city-specific providers.

CRAWFORD PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

The City of Crawford operates the Crawford Public Transportation service which provides demand response transit services to residents of Crawford within the city and the rest of Dawes County. With prior arrangements, residents can also travel to other cities in the region, including Alliance, Chadron, Scottsbluff, and Rapid City, South Dakota.

Figure 15. Map of Panhandle region with Crawford Public Transportation service area shown as red dot

Out of State Destination
Rapid City, South Dakota

Source: (1) Nebraska Public Transit website, retrieved 2024

Rides are provided Monday through Friday from 7:30 A.M. to 4:15 P.M.
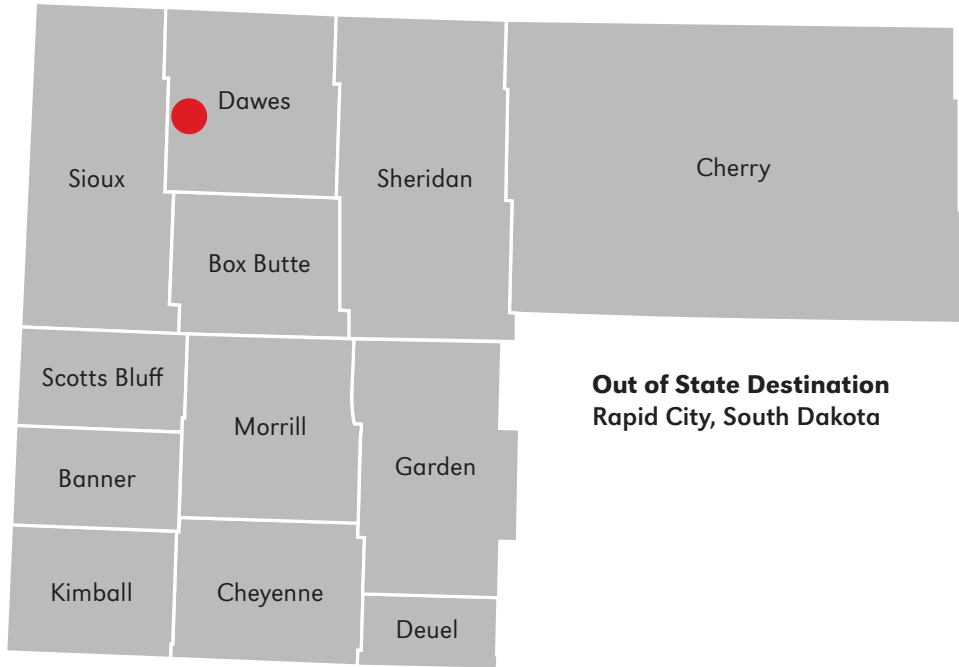
Source: (20) Crawford Public Transportation website, retrieved 2024

According to data reported to the Nebraska Transit Invoice Portal (Table 9), Crawford Public Transportation operates three vehicles and provides an average of approximately 4,970 rides annually from FY 2022 to FY 2024. During this period, trip lengths averaged between 2.0 and 2.7 miles per boarding.

Unlike other providers in the region, Crawford Public Transportation's ridership declined slightly, decreasing by 2.2% from FY 2022 to FY 2024. Total miles traveled dropped by 28.2%, suggesting that the decrease in ridership primarily involved longer trips rather than shorter ones.

Table 5. Ridership statistics for Crawford Public Transportation, FY 2022 to FY 2024

	FY 2022	FY 2023	FY 2024	Percent Change FY 2022 to FY 2024
Vehicles	3	3	3	0.0%
Boardings	5,343	4,343	5,226	-2.2%
Mileage	14,261	10,191	10,233	-28.2%
Boardings Per Vehicle	1,781.00	1,447.67	1,742.00	-2.2%
Miles Per Vehicle	4,753.67	3,397.00	3,411.00	-28.2%
Miles Per Boarding	2.67	2.35	1.96	-26.6%

Source: (9) Nebraska Transit Invoice Portal

Crawford Public Transportation had a slight decrease in ridership between 2022 and 2024. Crawford Public Transportation did not provide any detailed ride data for this analysis, as they do not currently use any software to track their rides.

GARDEN COUNTY PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

Garden County Public Transportation provides demand-response and non-emergency medical transportation to residents of Garden County as well as the communities of Belmar and Lemoyne — in Keith County — on the north side of Lake McConaughy (as far east as Nebraska Highway 61). Garden County contains the City of Oshkosh, the Village of Lewellen, and Lisco, a census-designated place on the western edge of the county.

Figure 16. Map of Panhandle region with Garden County Public Transportation service area county shaded in red
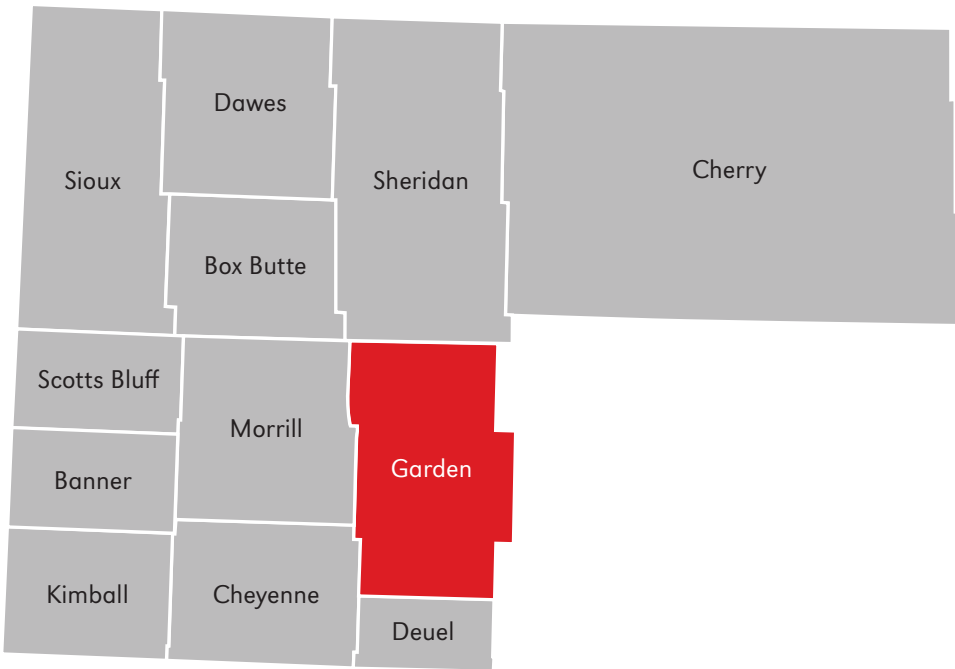
Source: (1) Nebraska Public Transit website, retrieved 2024

Rides are provided Monday through Friday from 7 A.M. to 5 P.M., with the latest pickups available at 4:30 P.M.

Source: (21) Garden County Public Transportation website, retrieved 2024

According to data reported to the Nebraska Transit Invoice Portal, Garden County Public Transportation operates four vehicles and provides 5,645 rides annually as of FY 2024. This represents a near doubling of boardings compared to FY 2022, when 2,954 rides were recorded.

As a county-wide service, Garden County Public Transportation typically covers longer distances per trip than city-specific providers. However, the average miles per boarding decreased by 29.8% between FY 2022 and FY 2024, reflecting a shift toward providing more frequent, shorter trips.

Table 6. Ridership statistics for Garden County Public Transportation, FY 2022 to FY 2024

	FY 2022	FY 2023	FY 2024	Percent Change FY 2022 to FY 2024
Vehicles	4	4	4	0.0%
Boardings	2,954	4,363	5,645	91.1%
Mileage	71,311	98,860	95,690	34.2%
Boardings Per Vehicle	738.50	1,090.75	1,411.25	91.1%
Miles Per Vehicle	17,827.75	24,715.00	23,922.50	34.2%
Miles Per Boarding	24.14	22.66	16.95	-29.8%

Source: (9) Nebraska Transit Invoice Portal

Garden County Public Transportation provided a sample of 54 trips taken between May 2024 and July 2024 which we used to analyze the most common destinations/drop-offs and to approximate the coverage area.

Figure 17 shows a heatmap of all drop-offs by Garden County Public Transportation and lists the top five most frequent destinations. The trip destinations in the sample covered an area much larger than Garden County's reported service area, ranging from Scottsbluff in the west to North Platte in the east.

The most frequent destination in the sample was the Garden County Health Service in Oshkosh (64 drop-offs, 11.8%), but other top destinations are outside Garden County — passengers were frequently delivered to Sidney, Ogallala, and North Platte. Three of the five top destinations are regional medical facilities, along with the Walmart Supercenter in Ogallala and the Oshkosh Superette (the main grocery store in Oshkosh).

**Figure 17. Drop-off locations for Garden County Public Transportation, May 2024 to July 2024**

Top Five Drop-off Locations	City/Town	Number of Drop-offs
Regional West Garden County / Garden County Health Services	Oshkosh	64
Shady Rest Motel/Oshkosh Superette	Oshkosh	47
Regional West Physician's Clinic	Sidney	20
Walmart Supercenter	Ogallala	18
Great Plains Health	North Platte	16

Source: (13) Garden County Public Transportation reported ride data, May 2024 to July 2024

The observed coverage area for Garden County Public Transportation covers a much larger area than Garden County itself, at an estimated 2,755.5 square miles. Apart from trips initiated in Oshkosh, passengers were picked up in North Platte, Ogallala, Sidney, Alliance, and Scottsbluff. Notably, no pickups were made in northern Garden County; all the pickup locations within the county fell in Oshkosh, Lewellen, and Lisco.

Figure 18. Observed pick-up area for Garden County Public Transportation, May 2024 to July 2024
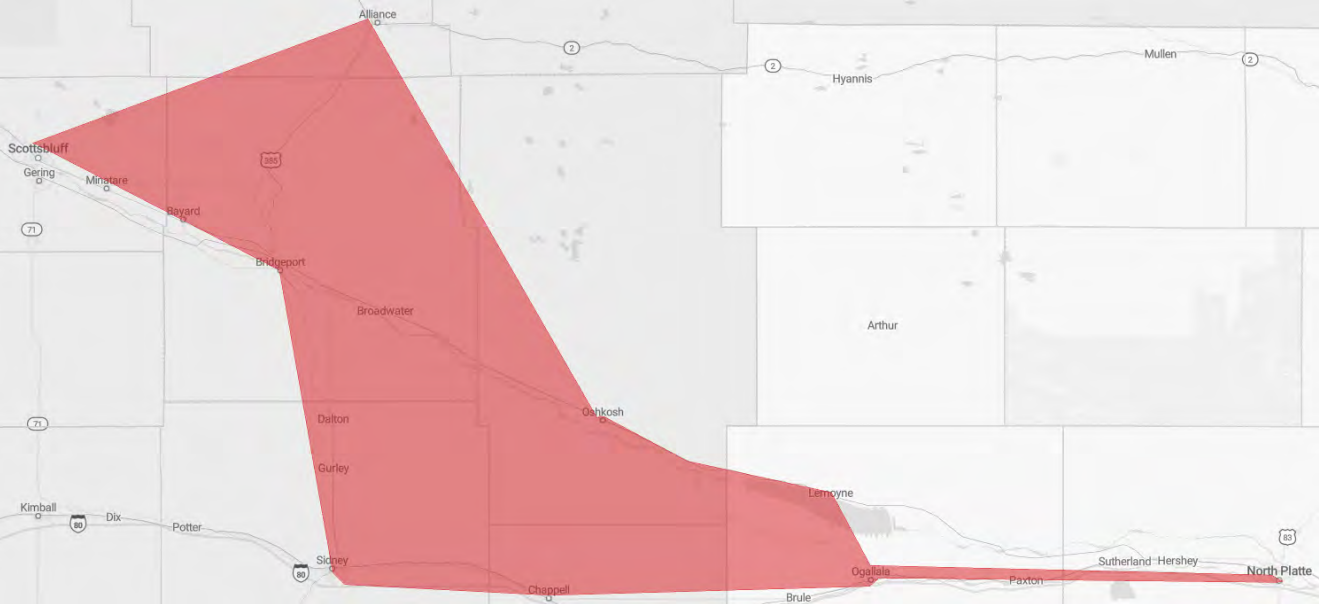
Source: (13) Garden County Public Transportation reported ride data, May 2024 to July 2024

Garden County Public Transportation has notably increased boardings since 2022, despite having the same number of vehicles. Based on this observed coverage area, **Garden County Public Transportation is better classified as a regional provider rather than county-wide;** their claimed coverage area under-reports the area they serve.

KCTS

KCTS offers a wide variety of transit services in the region, comprising demand-response services, non-emergency medical transit, fixed and flex-routes, and intercity bus service to destinations within and outside Nebraska. KCTS serves passengers in Banner, Cheyenne, Deuel, Kimball, Morrill, and Scotts Bluff counties as well as passengers headed to and from Scottsbluff, Chappell, Ogallala, and North Platte, Nebraska; Cheyenne, Wyoming; and Fort Morgan, Fort Collins, Loveland, and Denver, Colorado.

Figure 19. Map of Panhandle region with KCTS service area counties shaded in red and Southwest region service area cities shown as black dots

Out of State Destinations
Colorado:
- Denver
- Fort Collins
- Fort Morgan
- Loveland
Wyoming:
- Cheyenne
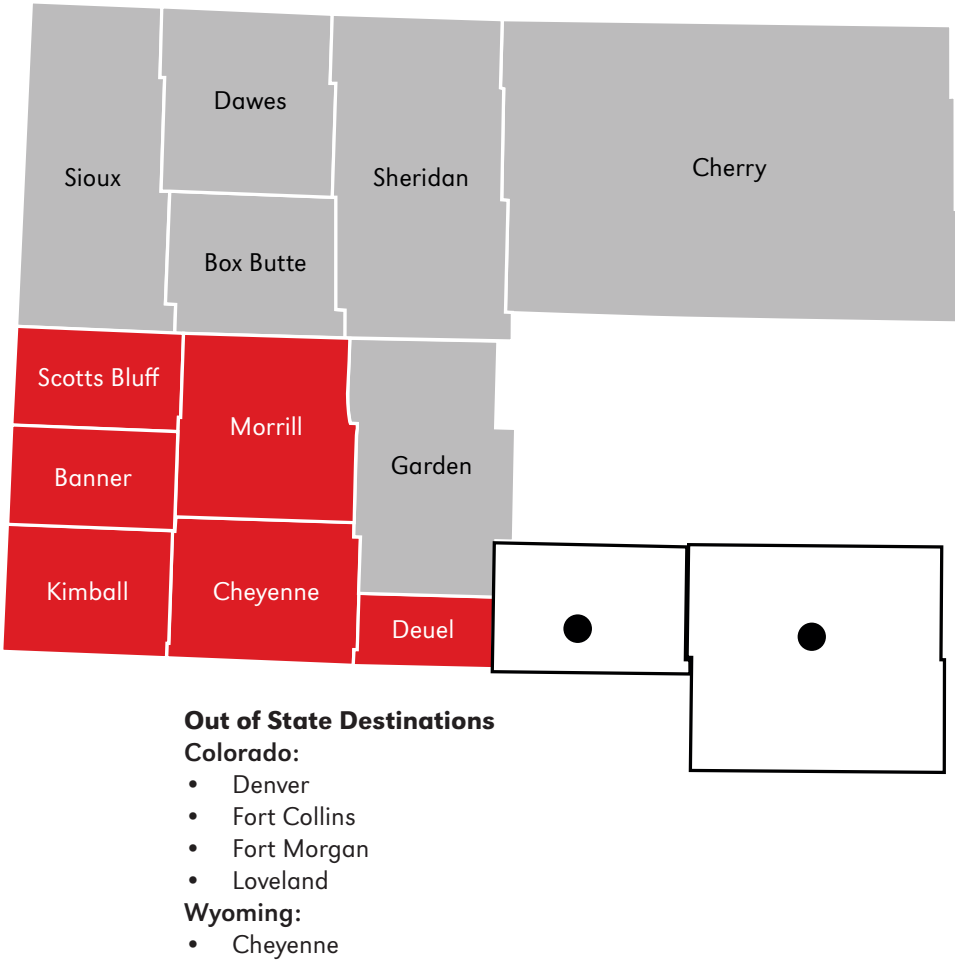
Source: (1) Nebraska Public Transit website, retrieved 2024

Demand response rides are available by appointment with reservations available Monday through Friday from 8 A.M. to 4 P.M. Bus route times differ per line. Local routes in Kimball run Monday through Friday from 7-7:25 A.M. and from 3:50-4:20 P.M.

Extended routes typically run Monday through Friday from 7:30 A.M. to 5:30 P.M., with most providing two round-trip departures during the day (one in the morning and one in the afternoon).

Additional "express" routes are offered seven days a week for limited hours, typically between 2:45-7 A.M. and 4:15-7:35 P.M.

Source: (22) KCTS website, retrieved 2024

Figure 20. Maps of KCTS flex routes

Source: (22) KCTS website, retrieved 2024

According to data reported to the Nebraska Transit Invoice Portal, KCTS operates 21 vehicles as of FY 2024, a 50% increase since FY 2022. Over the past two years, boardings have grown by 49.3%, rising from 26,446 to 39,484. KCTS also traveled the most miles of any provider in the region, covering 778,882 miles in FY 2024.

Unlike other providers in the region, KCTS experienced an increase in miles per boarding, which rose from 12.9 miles in FY 2022 to 19.7 miles in FY 2024. This change is likely due to the introduction of the Red Line in late 2022. The Red Line offers long-distance bus service from Scottsbluff to Denver International Airport, significantly increasing both the total miles traveled and the average trip length.

Table 7. Ridership statistics for KCTS, FY 2022 to FY 2024

|	FY 2022	FY 2023	FY 2024	Percent Change FY 2022 to FY 2024
Vehicles	14	16	21	50.0%
Boardings	26,446	32,247	39,484	49.3%
Mileage	341,796	502,791	778,882	127.9%
Boardings Per Vehicle	1,889.00	2,015.44	1,880.19	-0.5%
Miles Per Vehicle	24,414.00	31,424.44	37,089.62	51.9%
Miles Per Boarding	12.92	15.59	19.73	52.6%

Source: (9) Nebraska Transit Invoice Portal

KCTS also provided a sample of 12,032 trips taken between February 2024 and June 2024 which we used to analyze the most common destinations/drop-offs and to approximate the coverage area.

Figure 21 shows a heatmap of all drop-offs by KCTS and lists the top five most frequent destinations. The trip destinations in the sample covered a large area including Cheyenne, Wyoming, and the area near the Denver International Airport. This aligns with the reported service area for KCTS, closely mirroring their bus routes.

The most frequent destinations are all within the City of Kimball, with the top three comprising Mary Lynch Elementary School (1,487 drop-offs, 12.4%); George Risk Industries (740, 6.1%); and the KCTS Transfer location near the Kimball County Extension Office (725, 6.0%). KCTS differs from the other agencies in the region in that their top five drop-offs did not include any medical facilities — the list comprises primarily public schools and includes George Risk Industries, a large local employer.

Figure 21. Drop-off locations for KCTS, February 2024 to June 2024
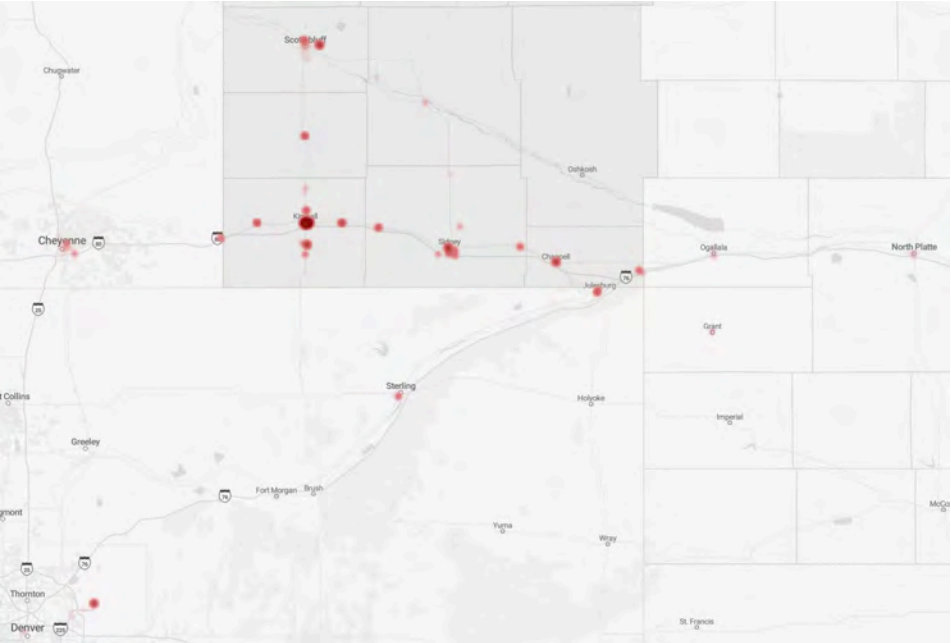
Top Five Drop-off Locations	City/Town	Number of Drop-offs
Mary Lynch Elementary	Kimball	1,487
George Risk Industries	Kimball	740
KCTS Transfer - Kimball	Kimball	725
Kimball Public Schools	Kimball	357
Kimball County Manor	Kimball	302

Source: (14) KCTS reported ride data, February 2024 to June 2024

The observed coverage area for KCTS covers the largest area of all providers in the Panhandle, covering an estimated 14,985.2 square miles reaching from Alliance to Denver, Colorado and North Platte to Cheyenne, Wyoming. KCTS thus serves the entire southwestern portion of the Panhandle region, including being the only provider for passengers in Kimball, Banner, and western Cheyenne Counties.

Figure 22. Observed pick-up area for KCTS, February 2024 to June 2024
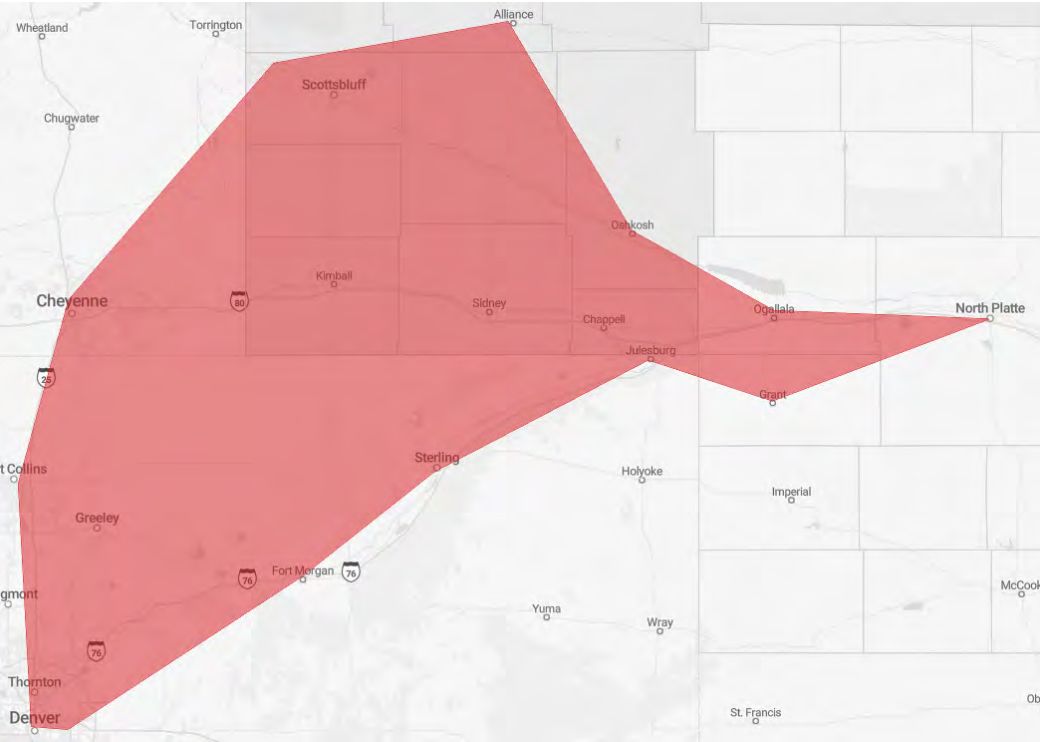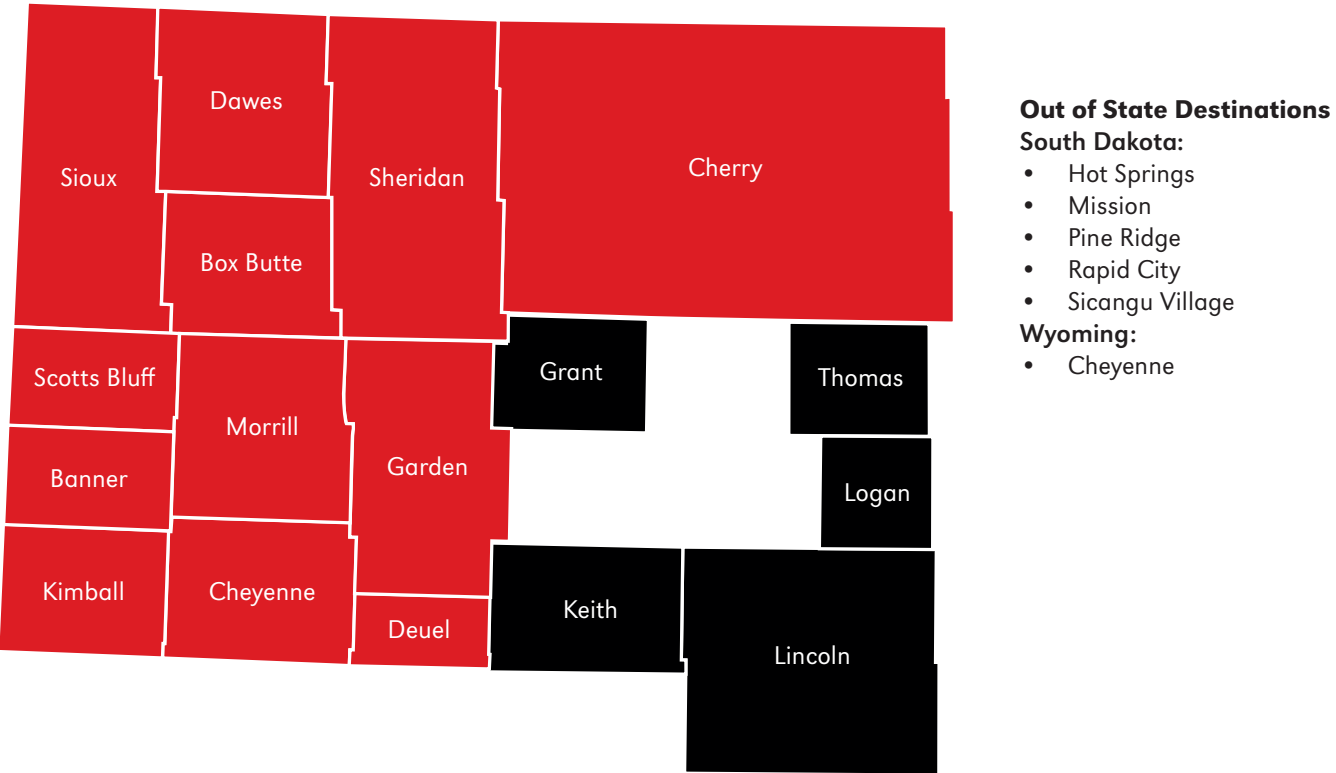

Source: (14) KCTS reported ride data, February 2024 to June 2024

Based on coverage area and reported data, **KCTS serves the largest area of all providers in the region. Not only does KCTS have a wide coverage area, but ridership data shows significant increases in passenger boardings and miles traveled in recent years**. These increases justify KCTS' myriad transit offerings and connote the importance of rural transit as a connector for the region. Also of note, KCTS' top destinations are schools and workplaces. This is in contrast to the region's other providers, who mainly take riders to medical facilities and supermarkets or discount stores. KCTS' routes and policy of providing free rides to children under the age of 18 likely create this difference and could serve as a model for other providers hoping to increase ridership.

OPEN PLAINS TRANSIT

Open Plains Transit operates a demand response and flex-route intercity bus service that covers all of the Panhandle region, extending as far east as Valentine in Cherry County.

Figure 23. Map of Panhandle region with Open Plains Transit service area counties shaded in red and Southwest region service area counties shaded in black

Out of State Destinations
South Dakota:
- Hot Springs
- Mission
- Pine Ridge
- Rapid City
- Sicangu Village

Wyoming:
- Cheyenne

The demand response service operates Monday through Friday from 7 A.M. to 4 P.M.

The hours for the intercity bus lines differ, but typically run Monday through Saturday between 6 A.M. and 6 P.M.

Source: (23) Open Plains Transit website, retrieved 2024

Source: (1) Nebraska Public Transit website, retrieved 2024

Figure 24. Maps of Open Plains Transit intercity bus routes

Source: (23) Open Plains Transit website, retrieved 2024

According to data reported to the Nebraska Transit Invoice Portal (Table 14), Open Plains Transit operates 12 vehicles and provided 6,016 rides in FY 2024 — a dramatic 210.4% increase from the 1,938 rides reported in FY 2022. This growth coincided with the rebranding from Panhandle Trails to Open Plains Transit a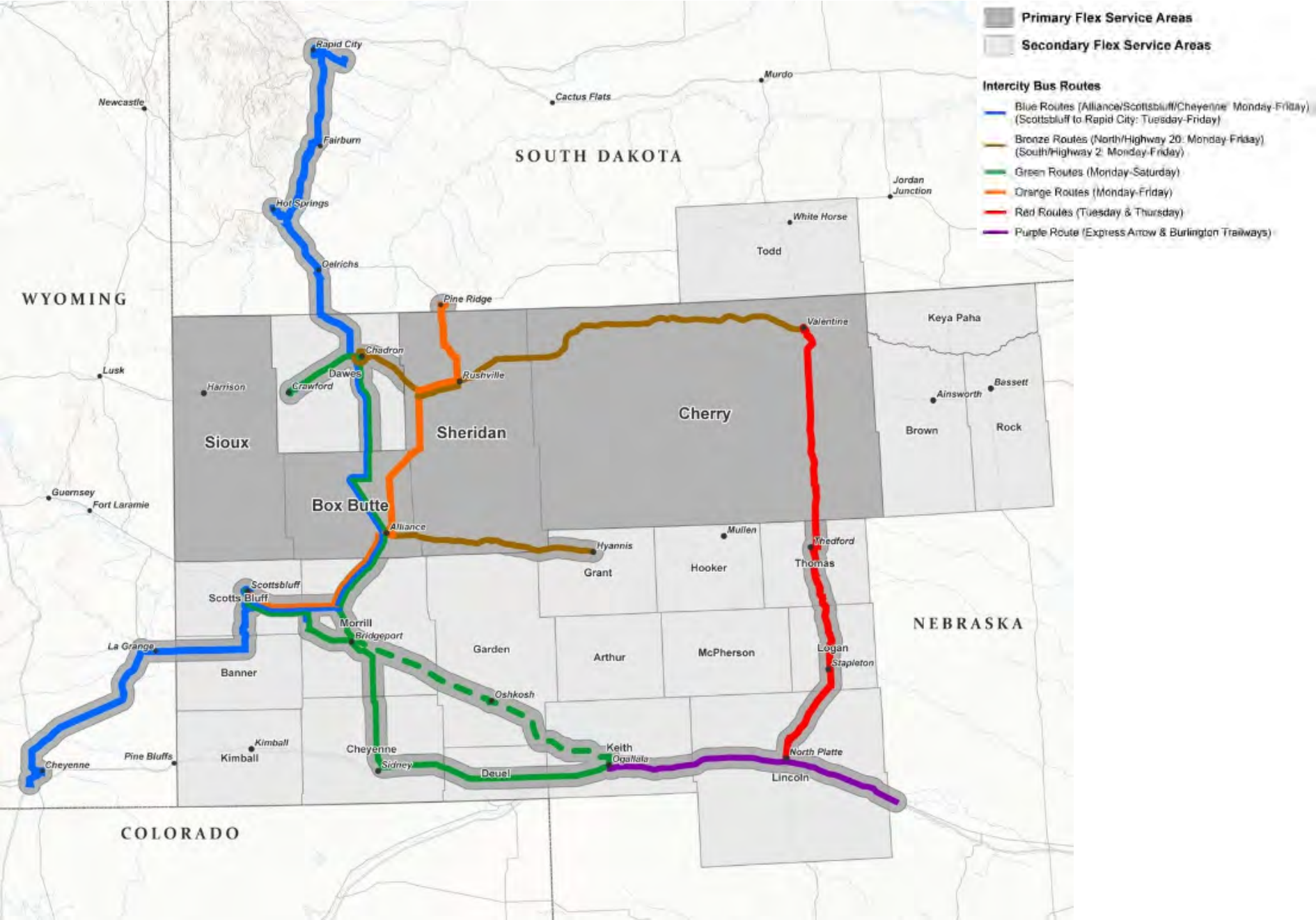nd the expansion of service to include Valentine and Cherry County. Additional services are planned for Cherry County in FY 2025. The increase in ridership does not seem to be related to the increase in capacity, as the number of boardings increased significantly more than the number of vehicles in service.

Like other providers in the region, Open Plains Transit reported a significant decrease in average trip length, which dropped by 44.6% from FY 2022 to FY 2024 despite an increase in total miles traveled.

Table 8. Ridership statistics for Open Plains Transit, FY 2022 to FY 2024

|	FY 2022	FY 2023	FY 2024	Percent Change FY 2022 to FY 2024
Vehicles	9	12	12	33.3%
Boardings	1,938	3,338	6,016	210.4%
Mileage	50,472	58,540	86,789	72.0%
Boardings Per Vehicle	215.33	278.17	501.33	132.8%
Miles Per Vehicle	5,608.00	4,878.33	7,232.42	29.0%
Miles Per Boarding	26.04	17.54	14.43	-44.6%

Source: (9) Nebraska Transit Invoice Portal

Open Plains Transit provided a sample of 4,610 trips taken between January 2024 and June 2024 which we used to analyze the most common destinations/drop-offs and to approximate the coverage area.

Figure 25 shows a heatmap of all drop-offs by Open Plains Transit and lists the top five most frequent destinations. The trip destinations in the sample (Figure 26) covered nearly all the northern Panhandle region, including the cities of Valentine, Chadron, Alliance, and Scottsbluff. This generally aligns with the reported service area, although the sample does not include any trips within Sioux County or to Rapid City, South Dakota, both of which are listed by Open Plains Transit as possible destinations.

The most frequent destinations are spread across the entire area, with the most drop-offs taking place near the Open Plains Transit offices in Alliance (472 drop-offs, 10.2%). The other most-frequent destinations are in Valentine, primarily including health and elder care facilities such as the Cherry County Hospital (435, 9.4%), the Valentine Senior Citizens Center (240, 5.2%), and the Cherry Hills Estates Assisted Living facility (174, 3.8%).

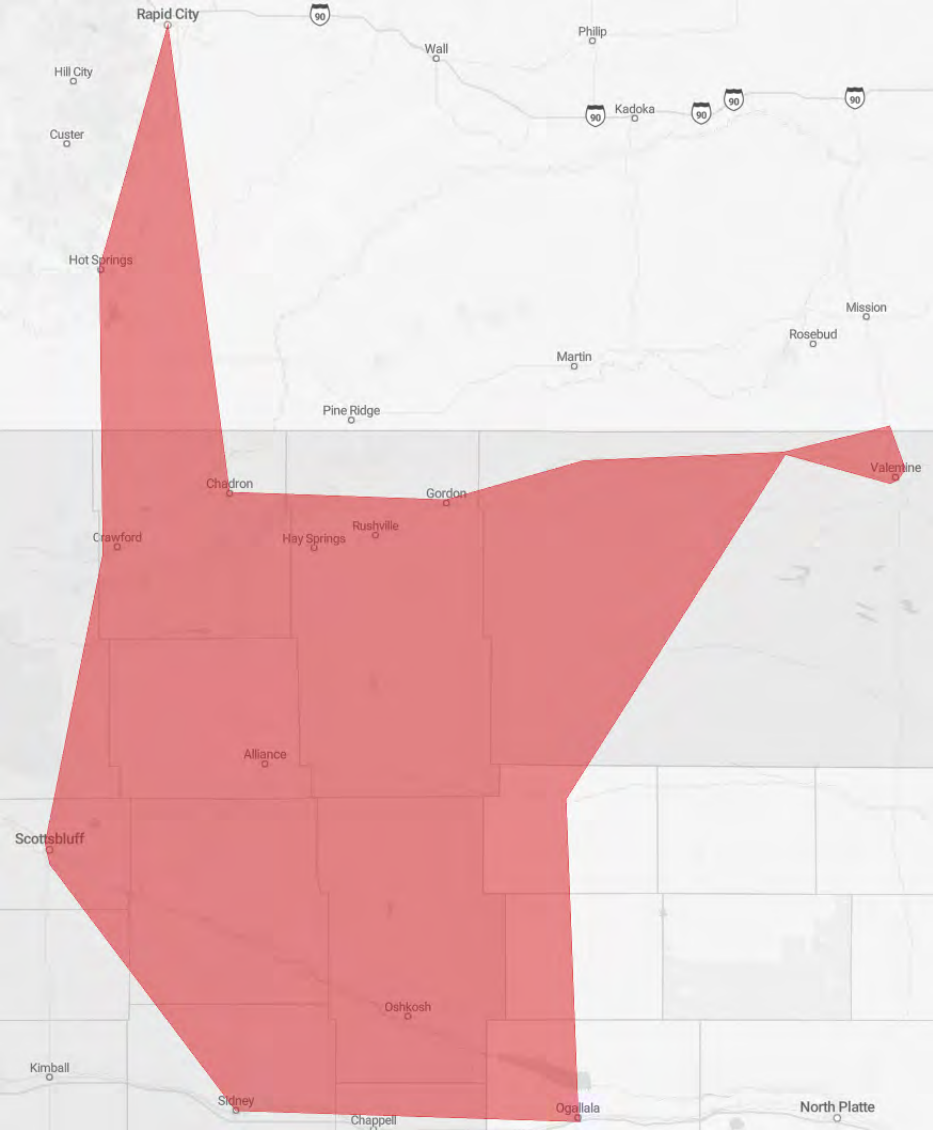**Figure 25. Drop-off locations for Open Plains Transit, January 2024 to June 2024**
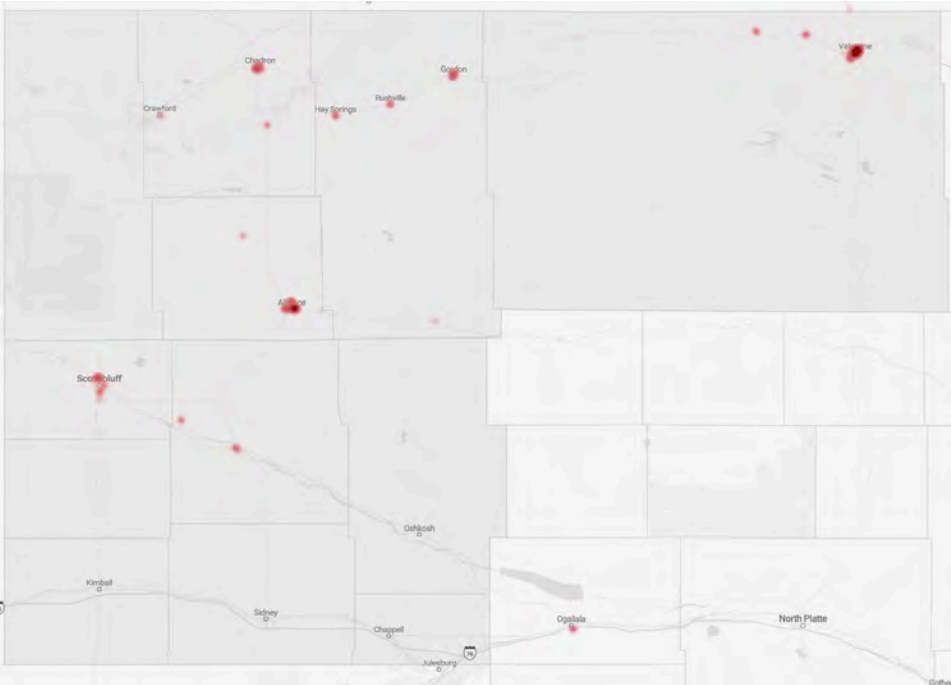
Top Five Drop-off Locations	City/Town	Number of Drop-offs
Open Plains Transit	Alliance	472
Cherry County Hospital	Valentine	435
Valentine Senior Citizens Center	Valentine	240
Cherry Hills Estates	Valentine	174
The Prairie Club	Valentine	133

Source: (15) Open Plains Transit reported ride data, January 2024 to June 2024

Open Plains Transit's observed coverage area is second only to KCTS, covering an estimated 13,092.8 square miles. The reported pickup locations closely track the main highways in the Panhandle region, specifically U.S. Highway 20 along the northern border of Nebraska (passing through Hay Springs, Merriman, etc., along the way from Chadron to Valentine) and Nebraska Highway 20 traveling east from Alliance. Open Plains Transit also provides service into South Dakota, indicated by the reported pickups in Rapid City and Hot Springs.

Figure 26. Observed pick-up area for Open Plains Transit, January 2024 to June 2024

Based on the coverage area and reported data, **Open Plains Transit has the second-largest coverage area in the region and, as a result, the destinations are somewhat dispersed. Given Open Plains Transit's recent rebranding and expansion of coverage, the provider has experienced a significant increase in ridership.** As such, Open Plains Transit is addressing gaps in service that previously existed within the region and notably Cherry County.

Source: (15) Open Plains Transit reported ride data, January 2024 to June 2024

TRI-CITY ROADRUNNER

Tri-City Roadrunner is a service operated by Scotts Bluff County to provide demand response and two flex-route services (Figure 28) to residents of Scotts Bluff County, especially those in the cities of Scottsbluff, Terrytown, and Gering.

Figure 27. Map of Panhandle region with Tri-City Roadrunner service area county shaded in red
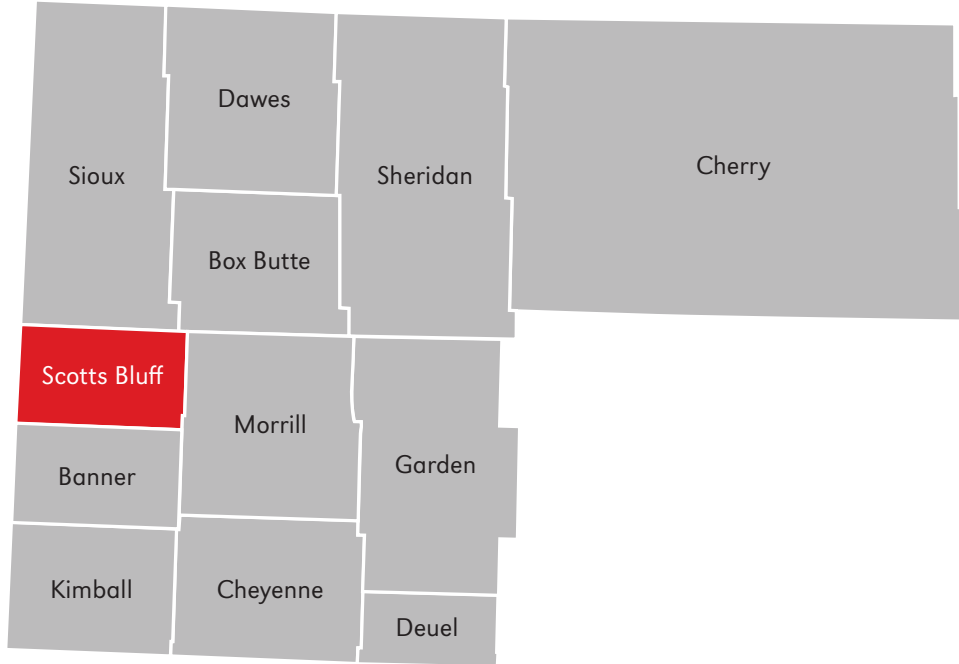
Source: (1) Nebraska Public Transit website, retrieved 2024

The demand response service is available from 7 A.M. to 4 P.M. Monday through Friday.

The blue and orange flex routes run Monday through Friday every 60 minutes allowing riders to board at any designated bus stop along the route. They also offer a 3/4 mile deviation from the route, with prior reservations, on a first-come, first-serve basis from 6:30 A.M. to 6:30 P.M.

Source: (24) Tri-City Roadrunner website, retrieved 2024

Figure 28. Maps of Tri-City Roadrunner flex routes
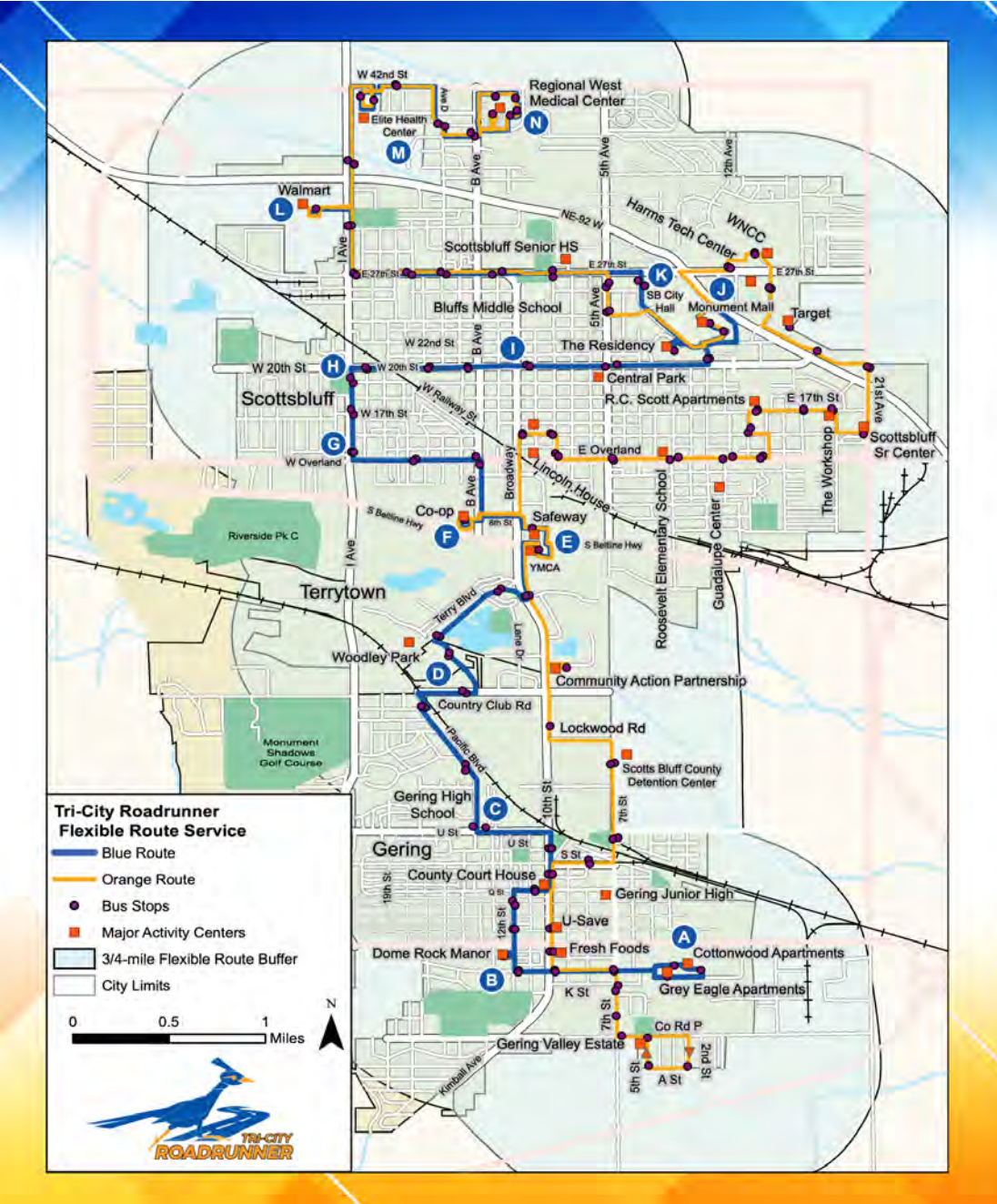
Source: (24) Tri-City Roadrunner website, retrieved 2024

According to data reported to the Nebraska Transit Invoice Portal, Tri-City Roadrunner operated nine vehicles in FY 2024, providing 36,700 rides and traveling a total of 261,985 miles. Ridership has remained consistent over the past three fiscal years, with boardings increasing by 8.2% and miles traveled rising by 3.3% from FY 2022 to FY 2024.

Throughout this period, Tri-City Roadrunner reported significantly shorter average trip lengths compared to other county-wide or regional providers in the area. This suggests that trips were primarily concentrated in and around Scottsbluff and Gering rather than spanning the entirety of Scotts Bluff County. The average trip length decreased by 4.5% from FY 2022 to FY 2024, reflecting the regional trend toward more frequent, shorter trips.

Table 9. Ridership statistics for Tri-City Roadrunner, FY 2022 to FY 2024

	FY 2022	FY 2023	FY 2024	Percent Change FY 2022 to FY 2024
Vehicles	9	9	9	0.0%
Boardings	33,911	34,293	36,700	8.2%
Mileage	253,463	248,421	261,895	3.3%
Boardings Per Vehicle	3,767.89	3,810.33	4,077.78	8.2%
Miles Per Vehicle	28,162.56	27,602.33	29,099.44	3.3%
Miles Per Boarding	7.47	7.24	7.14	-4.5%

Source: (9) Nebraska Transit Invoice Portal

Tri-City Roadrunner provided a sample of 5,420 trips taken between January 2024 and March 2024 which we used to analyze the most common destinations/drop-offs and to approximate the coverage area.

Figure 29 shows a heatmap of all drop-offs by Tri-City Roadrunner and lists the top five most frequent destinations. The trip destinations in the sample are all within the limits of Scotts Bluff County, highly clustered within the cities of Scottsbluff, Gering, and Terrytown. This aligns with Tri-City Roadrunner's reported service area (Scotts Bluff County).

The most frequent destination by far is the Regional West Medical Center in Scottsbluff (789 drop-offs, 14.6%). Other frequent destinations are also in the northern part of Scottsbluff, specifically near the Walmart Supercenter (273, 5.0%) and the Western Nebraska Veterans Home (166, 3.0%).

Figure 29. Drop-off locations for Tri-City Roadrunner, January 2024 to March 2024
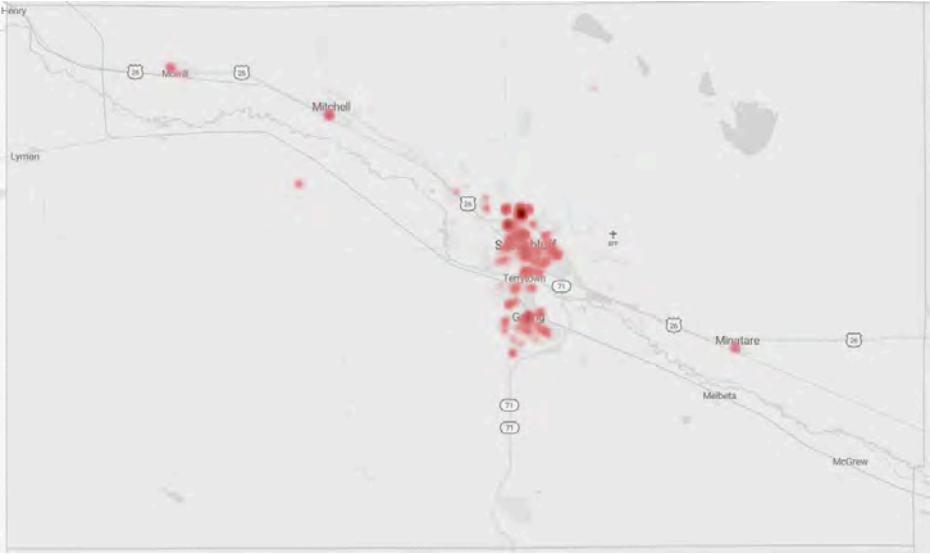
Top Five Drop-off Locations	City/Town	Number of Drop-offs
Regional West Medical Center	Scottsbluff	789
Walmart Supercenter	Scottsbluff	273
Western Nebraska Veterans' Home	Scottsbluff	166
Region 1 Office of Human Development	Scottsbluff	108
Village at the Regional West	Scottsbluff	103

Source: (16) Tri-City Roadrunner reported ride data, January 2024 to March 2024

Tri-City Roadrunner's observed pickup area also falls entirely within Scotts Bluff County, stretching from Minatare on the east to Lyman in the west and generally tracking U.S. Highway 26. The total estimated area in which trips were initiated covers 78.6 square miles.

Figure 30. Observed pick-up area for Tri-City Roadrunner, January 2024 to March 2024
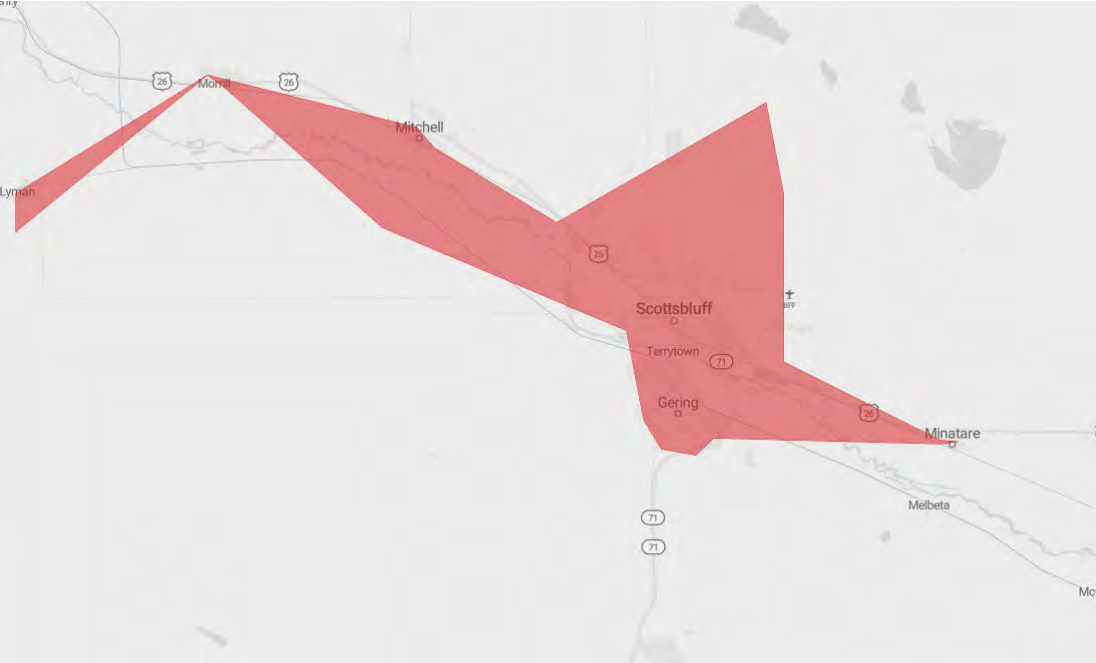
Source: (16) Tri-City Roadrunner reported ride data, January 2024 to March 2024

Based on the coverage area and reported agency data, **the most common destinations reported by Tri-City Roadrunner align with the provider's documented coverage area**. It is interesting to note that Tri-City Roadrunner reported a high number of boardings and miles per vehicle in contrast to their relatively small coverage area. This may indicate riders are frequently using the flex route service for short trips throughout town.

REGIONAL OVERVIEW

This section summarizes the overall services these providers offer, including miles traveled, passenger boardings, and vehicle usage. Additionally, it analyzes service changes across all eight providers and offers insights into regional trends.

The eight transit providers in the region collectively serve all 12 counties, as well as several locations outside the state of Nebraska, as shown in Figure 31. The four city-specific providers operate in the cities marked with a black dot.

Figure 31. Service area of Panhandle region transit providers
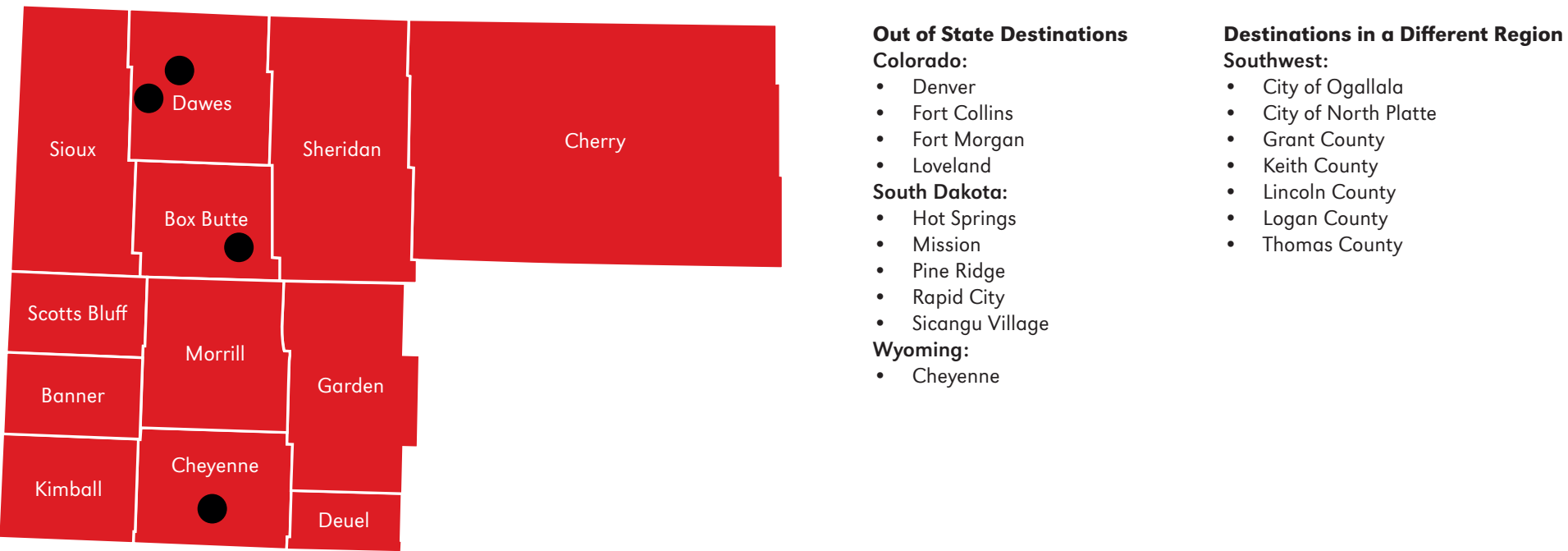
Out of State Destinations
Colorado:
- Denver
- Fort Collins
- Fort Morgan
- Loveland

South Dakota:
- Hot Springs
- Mission
- Pine Ridge
- Rapid City
- Sicangu Village

Wyoming:
- Cheyenne

Destinations in a Different Region
Southwest:
- City of Ogallala
- City of North Platte
- Grant County
- Keith County
- Lincoln County
- Logan County
- Thomas County

Source: (1) Nebraska Public Transit website, retrieved 2024

Each fiscal year, Nebraska's rural transit providers report the total number of passenger miles traveled. This metric is critical for evaluating rural transit services, as the Panhandle region served by these providers spans a vast 19,401 square miles. Table 10 highlights the miles traveled by each provider in FY 2024, along with the total coverage area determined by the pick-up locations recorded in the sample ride data.

Table 10. Summary of total miles traveled and observed coverage area

Provider	Service Category	Total Miles (FY 2024)	Percent Total Miles	Observed Coverage Area (Square Mile)
Alliance Public Transit	City-specific	67,354	4.8%	6.2
Chadron City Transit	City-specific	24,339	1.7%	11.2
City of Sidney Transportation System	City-specific	82,216	5.8%	3.0
Crawford Public Transportation	City-specific	10,233	0.7%	N/A*
Garden County Public Transportation	County-wide	95,690	6.8%	2,755.5
KCTS	Regional	778,882	55.3%	14,985.2
Open Plains Transit	Regional	86,789	6.2%	13,092.8
Tri-City Roadrunner	County-wide	261,895	18.6%	78.6
Totals		**1,407,398**	**100%**	

*Note: Crawford Public Transportation did not provide any sample ride data for this analysis.
Source: (9) Nebraska Transit Invoice Portal, (10-16) provider reported ride data

In FY 2024, KCTS recorded the highest mileage by far, traveling 778,882 miles, which accounted for more than half of the total miles traveled by all providers in the Panhandle region. This aligns with its extensive coverage area, the largest among the region's providers, spanning 13,092.8 square miles.

The City of Sidney Transportation System traveled an unexpectedly high 82,216 miles despite its very small coverage area of just 3.0 square miles. This is likely because the City of Sidney Transportation System operates buses continuously throughout each weekday, resulting in frequent, short trips.

On the other hand, Open Plains Transit, which covers a large area of 13,092.8 square miles, accounted for only 6.2% of the total miles traveled by all providers in the region. This is because trips are concentrated within smaller sub-areas rather than covering widely separated locations across its expansive region.

In summary, the data reveals two key findings about the relationship between miles traveled and coverage areas for these providers:
- The total miles traveled by a provider did not correlate with the size of its coverage area.
- County-wide and regional providers generally traveled more miles than city-specific providers.

Nebraska's transit providers also report annual boarding figures. Table 11 summarizes the number of boardings reported in FY 2024, the percentage of the region's total boardings, the miles traveled per boarding (calculated using the total miles reported earlier), and the boardings per square mile of observed coverage area.

Table 11. Summary of passenger boardings and trip length

Provider	Service Category	Number of Boardings (FY 2024)	Percent Total Boardings	Miles Per Boarding	Boardings Per Covered Square Mile
Alliance Public Transit	City-specific	37,751	21.8%	1.8	6,063.3
Chadron City Transit	City-specific	16,679	9.6%	1.5	1,487.5
City of Sidney Transportation System	City-specific	25,843	14.9%	3.2	8,612.6
Crawford Public Transportation	City-specific	5,226	3.0%	2.0	N/A*
Garden County Public Transportation	County-wide	5,645	3.3%	17.0	2.0
KCTS	Regional	39,484	22.8%	19.7	2.6
Open Plains Transit	Regional	6,016	3.5%	14.4	0.5
Tri-City Roadrunner	County-wide	36,700	21.2%	7.1	467.2
Totals		**173,344**	**100%**	**8.1**	

*Note: Crawford Public Transportation did not provide any sample ride data for this analysis.
Source: (9) Nebraska Transit Invoice Portal, (10-16) provider reported ride data

Compared to miles traveled, boardings are distributed more evenly among the providers. Alliance Public Transit, Tri-City Roadrunner, and KCTS each accounted for slightly more than 20% of the region's total boardings. This occurred despite significant differences in their coverage areas and fleet sizes. For example, KCTS operates in an area nearly 15,000 square miles larger than Alliance Public Transit and has over four times the number of vehicles but recorded fewer than 2,000 additional boardings. The providers with the fewest boardings — Crawford Public Transportation, Garden County Public Transportation, and Open Plains Transit — also vary in terms of miles traveled and coverage area. Open Plains Transit and Garden County Public Transportation, which serve the second and third largest coverage areas, respectively, reported some of the lowest boarding numbers for FY 2024.

In addition to total boardings, we analyzed the average miles traveled per boarding, which reflects the typical trip length. Unsurprisingly, city-specific providers had much shorter average trip lengths than county-wide and regional providers.

From this data, we identified two key trends:
- Providers within each classification (city-specific, county-wide, and regional) reported similar numbers of boardings.
- City-specific providers typically had shorter average trip lengths compared to county-wide and regional providers.

In addition to tracking miles traveled and boardings, NDOT monitors the vehicles each transit provider uses in their services. Table 12 lists the number of vehicles in service for each provider in FY 2024.

Table 12. Summary of provider vehicles and vehicle usage

Provider	Service Category	Number of Vehicles (FY 2024)	Percent Total Vehicles	Boardings Per Vehicle	Miles Per Vehicle	Covered Square Mile Per Vehicle
Alliance Public Transit	City-specific	5	8.3%	7,550.2	13,470.8	1.2
Chadron City Transit	City-specific	2	3.3%	8,339.5	12,169.5	5.6
City of Sidney Transportation System	City-specific	4	6.7%	6,460.8	20,554.0	0.8
Crawford Public Transportation	City-specific	3	5.0%	1,742.0	3,411.0	N/A*
Garden County Public Transportation	County-wide	4	6.7%	1,411.3	23,922.5	688.9
KCTS	Regional	21	35.0%	1,880.2	37,089.6	713.6
Open Plains Transit	Regional	12	20.0%	501.3	7,232.4	1,091.1
Tri-City Roadrunner	County-wide	9	15.0%	4,077.8	29,099.4	8.7
Totals		**60**	**100.0%**	**2,889.1**	**23,456.6**	

*Note: Crawford Public Transportation did not provide any sample ride data for this analysis.
Source: (9) Nebraska Transit Invoice Portal, (10-16) provider reported ride data

KCTS and Open Plains Transit, the two regional providers serving the Panhandle, reported the highest number of vehicles in service, with 21 and 12 vehicles, respectively. Tri-City Roadrunner, which operates in Scotts Bluff County — the most populated county in the region — reported nine vehicles in service. All other providers reported five or fewer vehicles for FY 2024.

The data indicate that city-specific providers generally operate fewer vehicles than county-wide and regional providers, with Garden County Public Transportation (four vehicles) being an exception. Interestingly, city-specific providers had more boardings per vehicle compared to county-wide and regional providers.

Miles per vehicle showed a more varied distribution. While larger county-wide and regional providers generally recorded higher miles per vehicle, Open Plains Transit was an outlier, reporting the second fewest miles per vehicle (7,232.4) among the eight providers.

In summary:
- County-wide and regional providers typically operate more vehicles than city-specific providers.
- County-wide and regional providers also tend to travel more miles per vehicle than city-specific providers.

Table 13 summarizes ridership changes across the region from FY 2022 to FY 2024. Overall, boardings increased by 47.7%, and total miles traveled rose by 65.1%. Nearly all providers saw growth in both metrics, with the exception of Crawford Public Transportation, which reported a 2.2% decrease in boardings and a 28.2% reduction in miles traveled. Open Plains Transit and Chadron City Transit experienced the largest increases in ridership, with gains of 210.4% and 208.7%, respectively. For Open Plains Transit, this growth is likely due to the addition of service to Cherry County in late 2022. Chadron City Transit expanded its hours during FY 2023, enabling rides to and from work or school, which likely contributed to its ridership increase. The City of Sidney Transportation System also reported significant growth in boardings, potentially influenced by its partnership with ModivCare for non-emergency medical transportation, which began in late 2022.

Table 13. Summary of changes in service from FY 2022 to FY 2024

Provider	Vehicles	Boardings	Miles Traveled	Boardings Per Vehicle	Miles Per Vehicle	Miles Per Boarding
Alliance Public Transit	0.0%	27.4%	5.5%	27.4%	5.5%	-17.2%
Chadron City Transit	0.0%	208.7%	63.3%	208.7%	63.3%	-47.1%
City of Sidney Transportation System	100.0%	120.7%	93.2%	10.3%	-3.4%	-12.5%
Crawford Public Transportation	0.0%	-2.2%	-28.2%	-2.2%	-28.2%	-26.6%
Garden County Public Transportation	0.0%	91.1%	34.2%	91.1%	34.2%	-29.8%
KCTS	50.0%	49.3%	127.9%	-0.5%	51.9%	52.6%
Open Plains Transit	33.3%	210.4%	72.0%	132.8%	29.0%	-44.6%
Tri-City Roadrunner	0.0%	8.2%	3.3%	8.2%	3.3%	-4.5%
Overall	**25.0%**	**47.7%**	**65.1%**	**18.2%**	**32.1%**	**11.7%**

Source: (9) Nebraska Transit Invoice Portal

The total number of vehicles in service increased from 48 in FY 2022 to 60 in FY 2024. City of Sidney Transportation System added two vehicles, Open Plains Transit added three, and KCTS added seven. For the City of Sidney Transportation System, the additional vehicles were closely tied to its ridership growth, reflected in both boardings and total miles traveled. Similarly, KCTS showed proportional growth in boardings and vehicle fleet size. The sharp increase in miles traveled by KCTS likely stems from the launch of its Red Line route to Denver International Airport in November 2022. Open Plains Transit added its three vehicles in FY 2023 as part of its rebranding (previously known as Panhandle Trails) and the expansion of services to Cherry County.

With boardings increasing at a faster rate than vehicle additions, boardings per vehicle rose by 18.2% across the region. Among providers that expanded their fleets, only KCTS reported a slight decline in boardings per vehicle (-0.5%). The five providers that did not add vehicles experienced an increase in boardings per vehicle equal to their overall ridership growth.

Average miles traveled per vehicle also increased, as total miles traveled grew faster than the number of vehicles in service. This trend likely reflects service expansions by Open Plains Transit and KCTS, as well as the introduction of new services and extended hours by Chadron City Transit and the City of Sidney Transportation System.

Miles per boarding increased regionally by 11.7%, driven entirely by KCTS. With the introduction of its Red Line offering long-distance trips to Denver International Airport, KCTS was the only provider to report an increase in average trip length from FY 2022 to FY 2024. For all other providers, the average trip length decreased, suggesting more frequent, shorter rides.

Overall, transit providers in the Panhandle delivered more rides, covering shorter average distances, in FY 2024 than in FY 2022.

Key Findings:
1. **Ridership Growth**
   The region experienced a 47.7% increase in boardings and a 65.1% increase in miles traveled. Crawford Public Transportation was the only provider to report a small decline of 2.2% fewer boardings and 28.2% fewer miles traveled.
2. **Shorter Trip Lengths**
   Most providers saw shorter average trip lengths, except for KCTS, which introduced a long-distance bus route to Denver International Airport.

TRIP DESTINATIONS

To better understand the state of rural transit across the region, we examined the most frequent drop-off destinations for all the regional providers who shared a sample of their rides. We first geocoded each reported drop-off using the U.S. Census Geocoder to determine a latitude and longitude for each destination and counted the number of drop-offs that occurred at or very near that location. We then determined the "point of interest" nearest each location to report a name for each destination, excluding locations that we determined to be single-family homes.

Seven of the providers in the Panhandle provided us with sample ride data, for a total of 41,382 individual rides taken between January 2024 and July 2024. Those rides provided a list of 2,054 unique destinations. The number of rides and unique destinations reported by each provider are summarized in Table 14, including the number of boardings reported for FY 2024.

Table 14. Number of rides, unique destinations, and boardings reported by each provider, January 2024 to July 2024

Provider	Number of Rides in Sample	Percent Total Rides	Number of Unique Destinations	Percent Total Unique Destinations	Number of Boardings (FY 2024)	Percent Total Boardings
Alliance Public Transit	6,090	14.7%	269	13.1%	37,751	21.8%
Chadron City Transit	3,338	8.1%	152	7.4%	16,679	9.6%
City of Sidney Transportation System	9,351	22.6%	250	12.2%	25,843	14.9%
Crawford Public Transportation	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	5,226	3.0%
Garden County Public Transportation	541	1.3%	118	5.7%	5,645	3.3%
KCTS	12,032	29.1%	586	28.5%	39,484	22.8%
Open Plains Transit	4,610	11.1%	369	18.0%	6,016	3.5%
Tri-City Roadrunner	5,420	13.1%	403	19.6%	36,700	21.2%
Totals	**41,382**	**100.0%**	**2,054**	**100.0%**	**173,344**	**100.0%**

Source: (9) Nebraska Transit Invoice Portal, (10-16) provider reported ride data

Comparing the number of rides in the sample to the number of boardings reported for FY 2024, three of the providers — City of Sidney Transportation System, KCTS, and Open Plains Transit — are over-represented in the sample of rides provided; Alliance Public Transit and Tri-City Roadrunner are slightly under-represented in the sample. This is reflected in the list of top destinations overall based on the number of drop-offs, which primarily includes destinations in Kimball and Sidney.

Table 15. Top 10 drop-off locations for seven out of eight Panhandle transit providers, January 2024 to July 2024

Drop-off Location	City/Town	Number of Combined Drop-offs
Mary Lynch Elementary	Kimball	1,487
Walmart Supercenter/I-80	Sidney	1,019
Regional West Medical Center	Scottsbluff	967
Western Nebraska Community College/Here Wee Grow	Sidney	860
George Risk Industries	Kimball	740
KCTS Transfer - Kimball	Kimball	725
Box Butte General Hospital	Alliance	684
Sidney City Sioux Villa	Sidney	598
Sidney Regional Medical Center	Sidney	558
Open Plains Transit	Alliance	477

Source: (10-16) provider reported ride data, various dates

In summary, we make two main observations from our analysis of the drop-off data, as described in more detail in the following subsections:
- The most common shared destinations are either medical facilities, public or affordable housing developments for low-income or elderly residents, or grocery or discount department stores (such as Walmart or Safeway).
- Most rides end in the largest cities in the region. From our sample data, 88.7% of the total drop-offs and 73.3% of the unique destinations were in Scottsbluff, Gering, Alliance, Sidney, Chadron, Valentine, and Kimball.

SHARED DESTINATIONS

To explore the intersections among the agencies, we identified destinations served by multiple transit providers. Each provider's top individual destinations are listed in their profiles.

Based on the data from our sample, we found the following:
- Nearly all destinations (1,979, 96.4%) were reported by only one provider, indicating there is little overall duplication in the drop-off destinations served by the Panhandle providers.

Of the 75 unique destinations shared by more than one provider, none were shared by more than four providers. The top 10 shared destinations by number of drop-offs are listed below.

Table 16. Top 10 shared drop-off locations for seven out of eight Panhandle transit providers by number of drop-offs, January 2024 to July 2024

Drop-off Location	City/Town	Number of Combined Drop-offs	Number of Providers
Walmart Supercenter/I-80	Sidney	1019	4
Regional West Medical Center	Scottsbluff	967	4
Box Butte General Hospital	Alliance	684	3
Sidney City Sioux Villa	Sidney	598	2
Sidney Regional Medical Center	Sidney	558	4
Open Plains Transit	Alliance	477	2
Prairie Pines Retirement Community	Chadron	447	2
Walmart Supercenter	Chadron	381	2
Sidney City Western Heritage	Sidney	377	2
Rosewood Estates	Alliance	352	3

Source: (10-16) provider reported ride data, various dates

- Four of the 75 destinations were visited by four providers — Regional West Medical Center in Scottsbluff, Sidney Regional Medical Center in Sidney, and the Walmart Supercenters in Scottsbluff and Sidney.
- Ten destinations were visited by three providers, including the Box Butte General Hospital and Rosewood Estates in Alliance and the Western Nebraska Regional Airport in Scottsbluff.

HIGH-FREQUENCY DESTINATION AREAS

To complete our analysis of the trip destinations in the region, we also examined the geographical distribution of the reported drop-offs and identified geographical areas where many drop-offs took place. These frequent destination areas may require additional resources or further analysis, as the riders taken to these areas may need other local services within the area.

The 2,054 unique destinations reported in the sample are geographically distributed across the Panhandle region. Some of the destinations outside the Panhandle region include Ogallala and North Platte, Nebraska. Further, a smaller number of destinations are outside the state, including Cheyenne, Wyoming; Denver, Colorado; and Rapid City, South Dakota. Figure 32 shows a heatmap summarizing all the destinations from the sample rides.

A significant majority of destinations (1,505 out of 2,054, or 73.3%) and drop-offs (36,710 out of 41,382, or 88.7%) are concentrated in the region's seven most populated cities — Scottsbluff, Gering, Alliance, Sidney, Chadron, Valentine, and Kimball. This concentration is notable given the region's large geographic area and limited number of major cities, indicating that many people travel to these key locations. Once there, they are likely to need services around these destinations as well.

The following subsections summarize the drop-off destinations within each of the six high-frequency destination areas we identified during our analysis:
- Alliance
- Chadron
- Kimball
- Scottsbluff, Gering, and Terrytown combined into a single area
- Sidney
- Valentine

Figure 32. Drop-off locations within the Panhandle region (shaded light gray) for reported rides by seven out of eight Panhandle transit providers
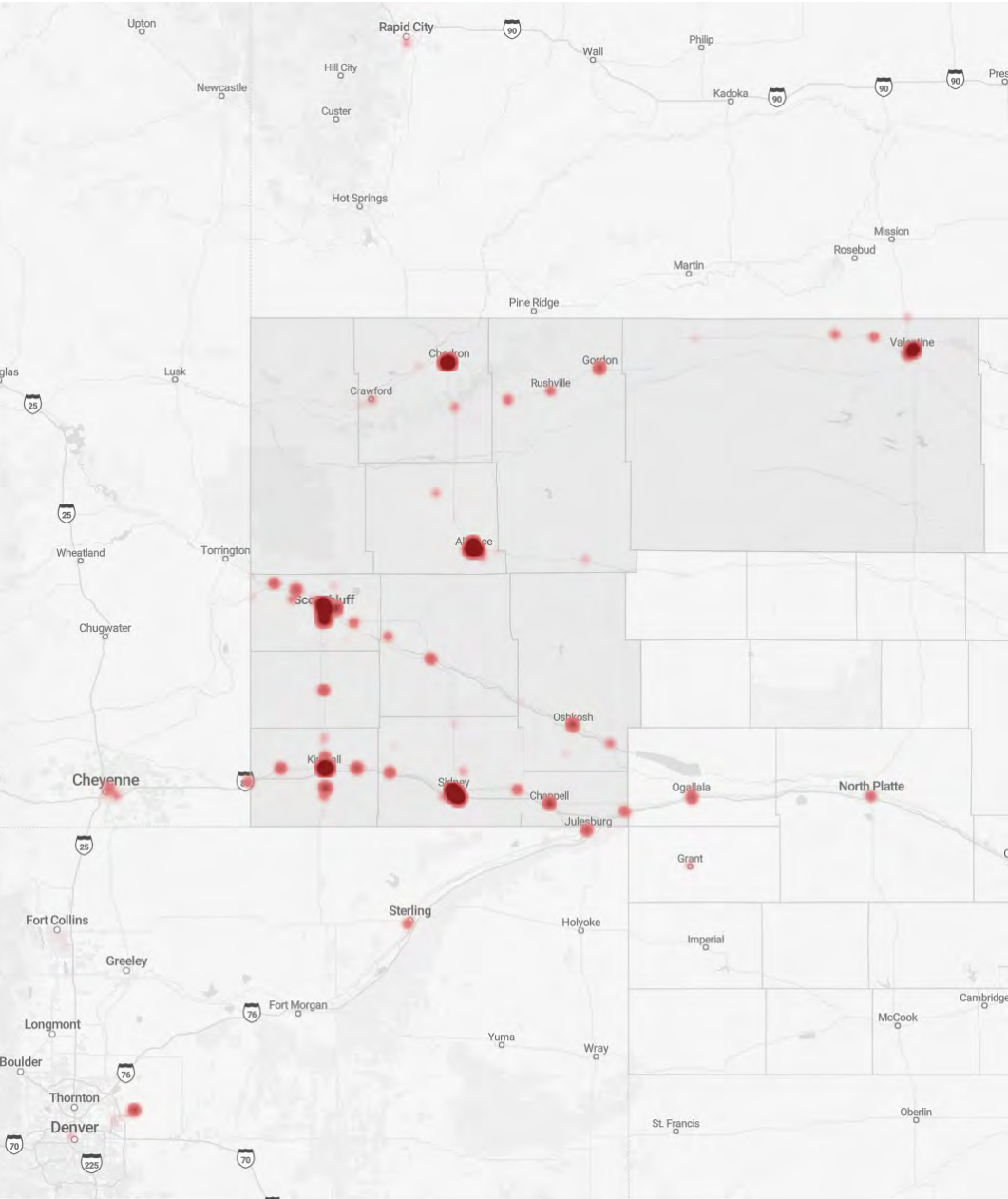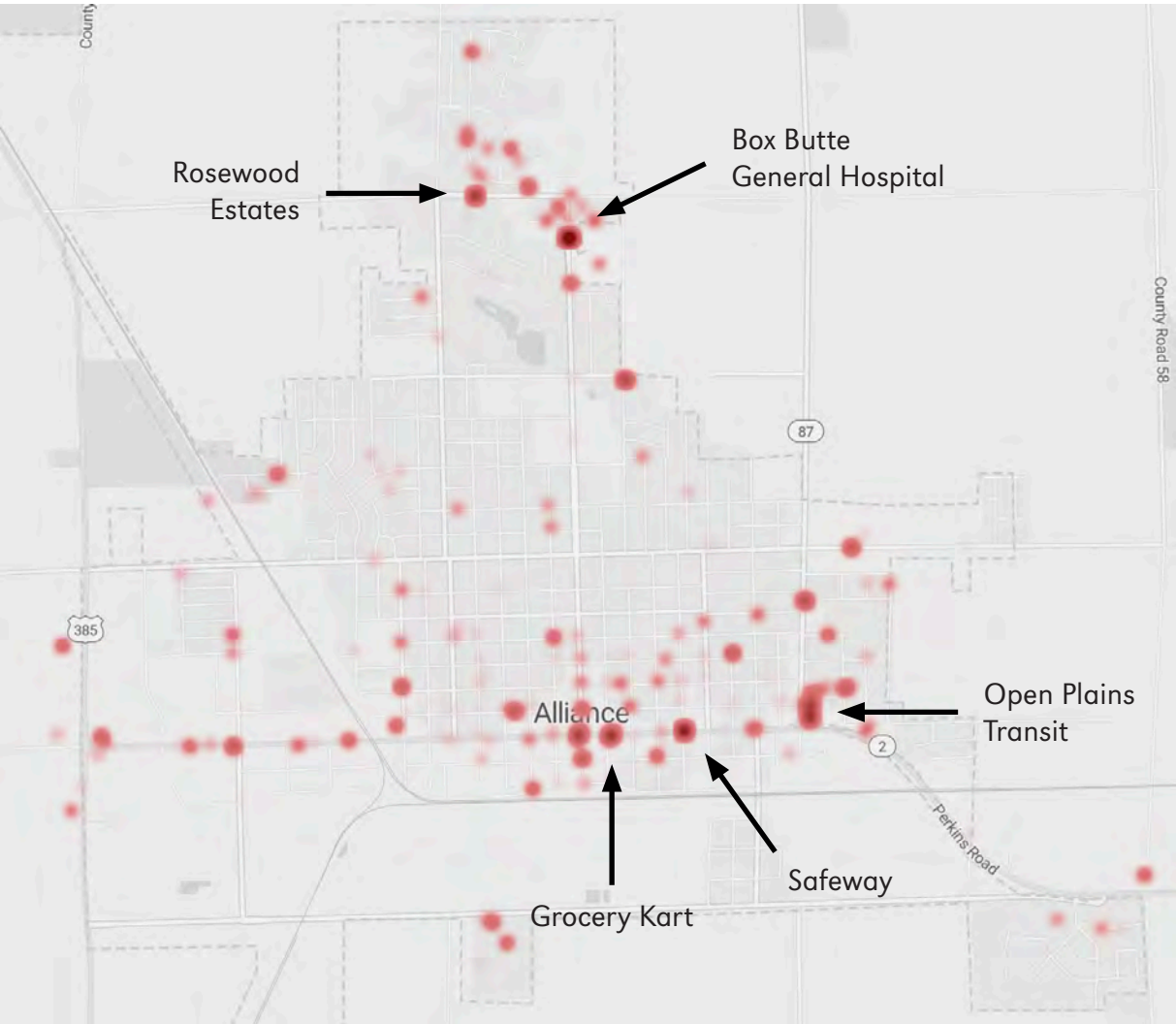

Source: (10-16) provider reported ride data, various dates

DROP-OFFS WITHIN CITY OF ALLIANCE

Figure 33 shows a heatmap of drop-offs within the City of Alliance with the top five noted and also listed with the number of drop-offs. The drop-offs are largely clustered in two areas: (a) around the Box Butte General Hospital and Rosewood Estates toward the north and (b) near the Open Plains Transit offices, the Safeway, and the Grocery Kart along Nebraska Highway 2.

Figure 33. Drop-off locations in and around the City of Alliance by Panhandle transit providers
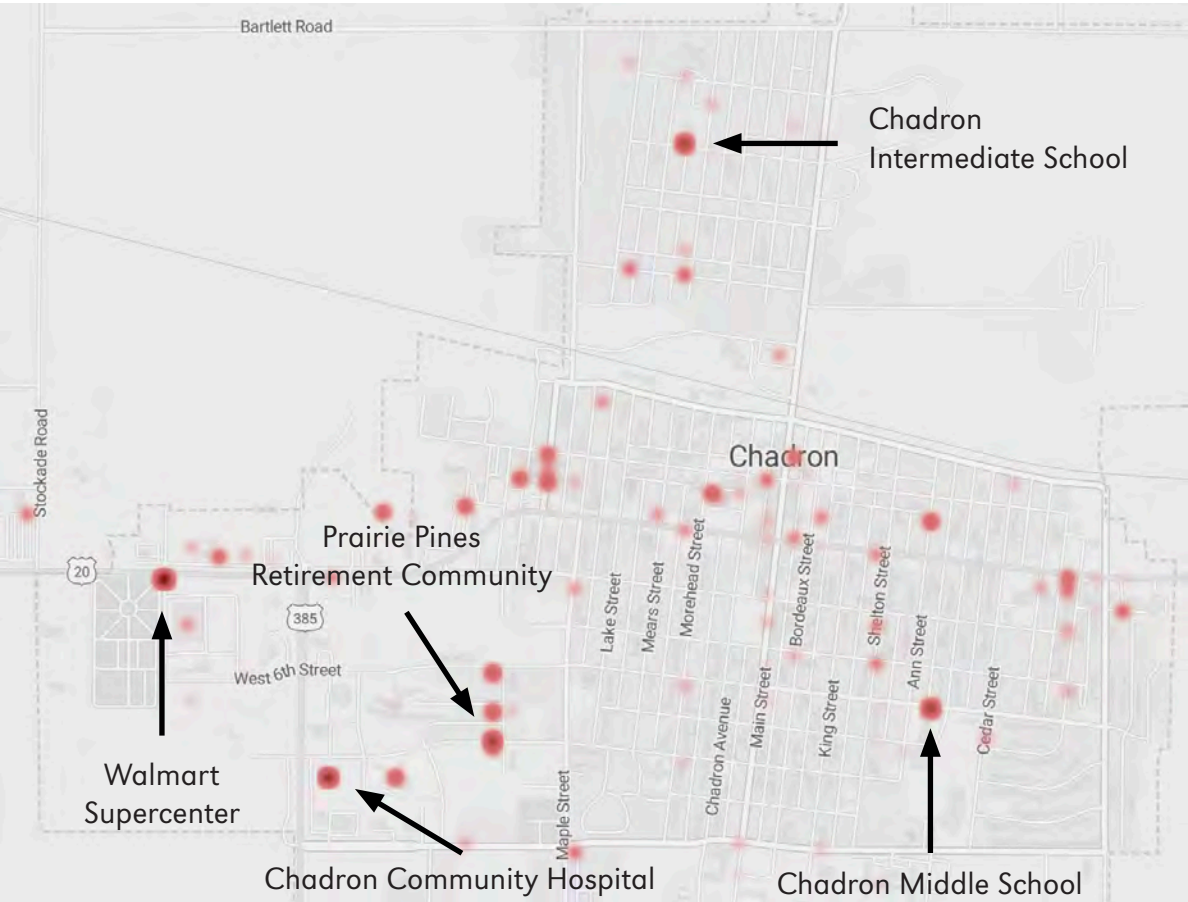

Top Five Drop-off Locations	Number of Drop-offs
Box Butte General Hospital	684
Open Plains Transit	477
Rosewood Estates	352
Safeway	338
Grocery Kart	277

Source: (10-16) provider reported ride data, various dates

DROP-OFFS WITHIN CITY OF CHADRON

Figure 34 shows a heatmap of drop-offs within the City of Chadron with the top five noted and also listed with the number of drop-offs. The drop-offs are mostly clustered around the Prairie Pines Retirement Community, the Walmart Supercenter, and the Chadron Community Hospital all in the southwest part of the city.

Figure 34. Drop-off locations in and around the City of Chadron by Panhandle transit providers

Top Five Drop-off Locations	Number of Drop-offs
Prairie Pines Retirement Community	447
Walmart Supercenter	381
Chadron Community Hospital	336
Chadron Middle School	209
Chadron Intermediate School	194

Source: (10-16) provider reported ride data, various dates.

DROP-OFFS WITHIN CITY OF KIMBALL

Figure 35 shows a heatmap of drop-offs within the City of Kimball with the top five noted and also listed with the number of drop-offs. The drop-offs are spread across much of the city, with the highest concentrations near Mary Lynch Elementary School, George Risk Industries, and the KCTS transfer location near downtown Kimball.

Figure 35. Drop-off locations in and around the City of Kimball by Panhandle transit providers

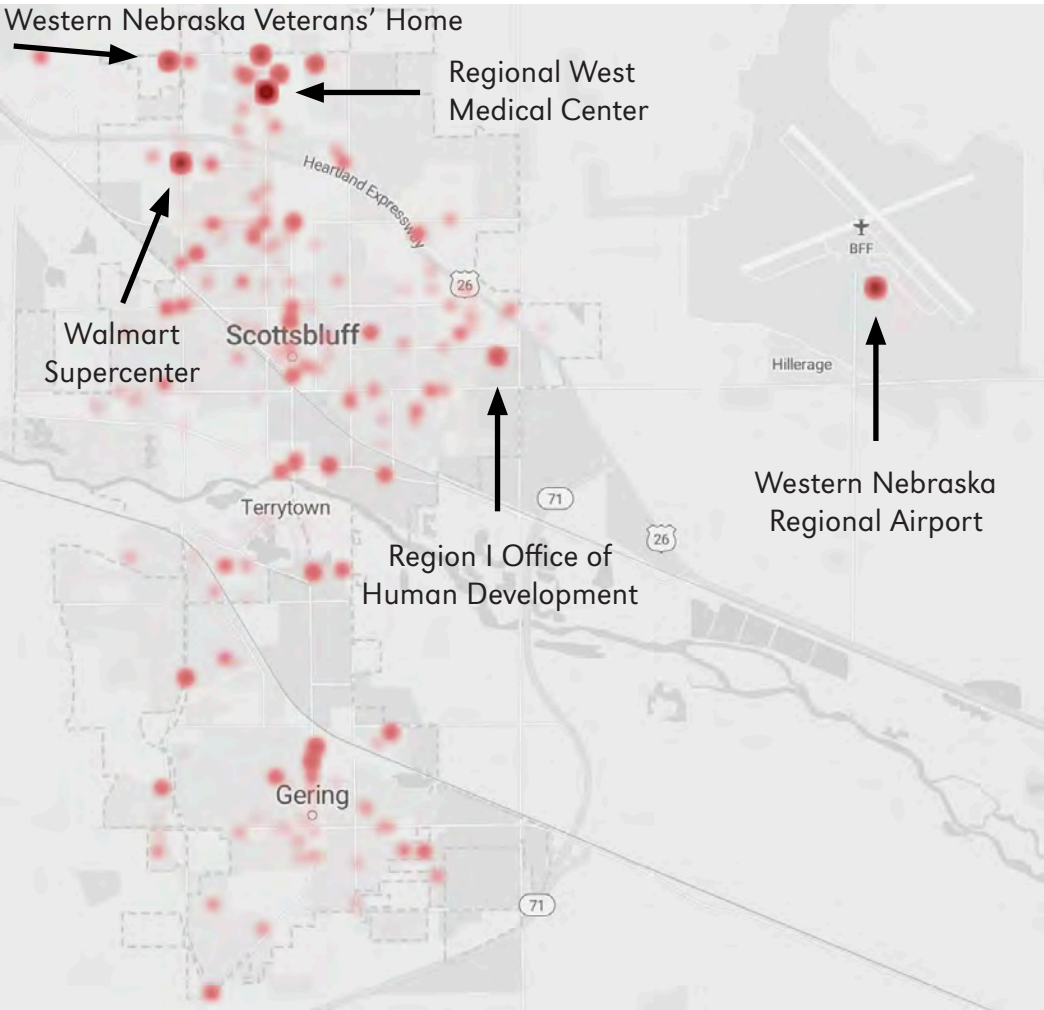| Top Five Drop-off Locations	Number of Drop-offs
Mary Lynch Elementary School	1,487
George Risk Industries	740
KCTS Transfer - Kimball	725
Kimball Public Schools	357
Kimball County Manor	302
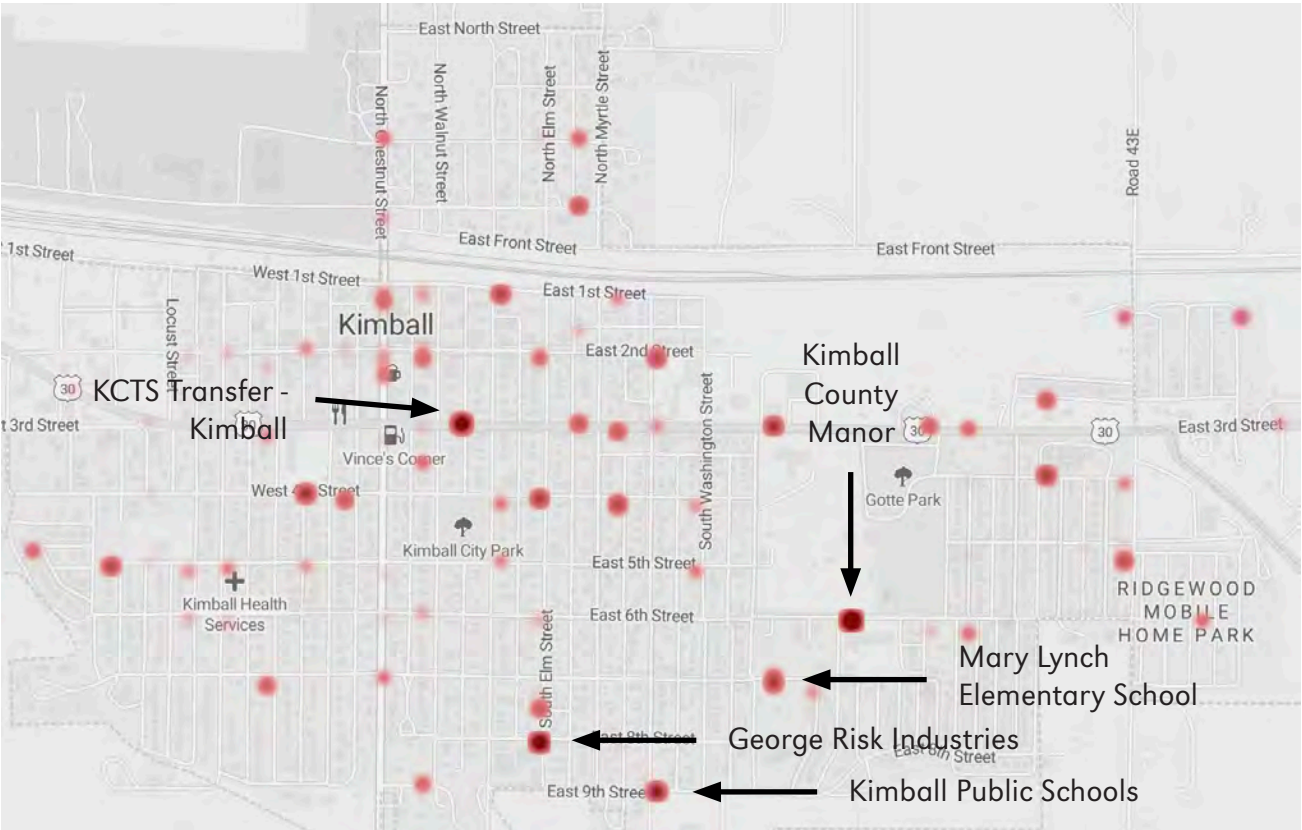
Source: (10-16) provider reported ride data, various dates.

DROP-OFFS WITHIN CITIES OF SCOTTSBLUFF, GERING, AND TERRYTOWN

Figure 36 shows a heatmap of drop-offs within the cities of Scottsbluff, Gering, and Terrytown, with the top five noted and also listed with the number of drop-offs. Most of the drop-offs occurred in northern Scottsbluff, near the medical facilities surrounding the Regional West Medical Center and near the Walmart Supercenter.

Figure 36. Drop-off locations in and around the Cities of Scottsbluff, Gering, and Terrytown by Panhandle transit providers

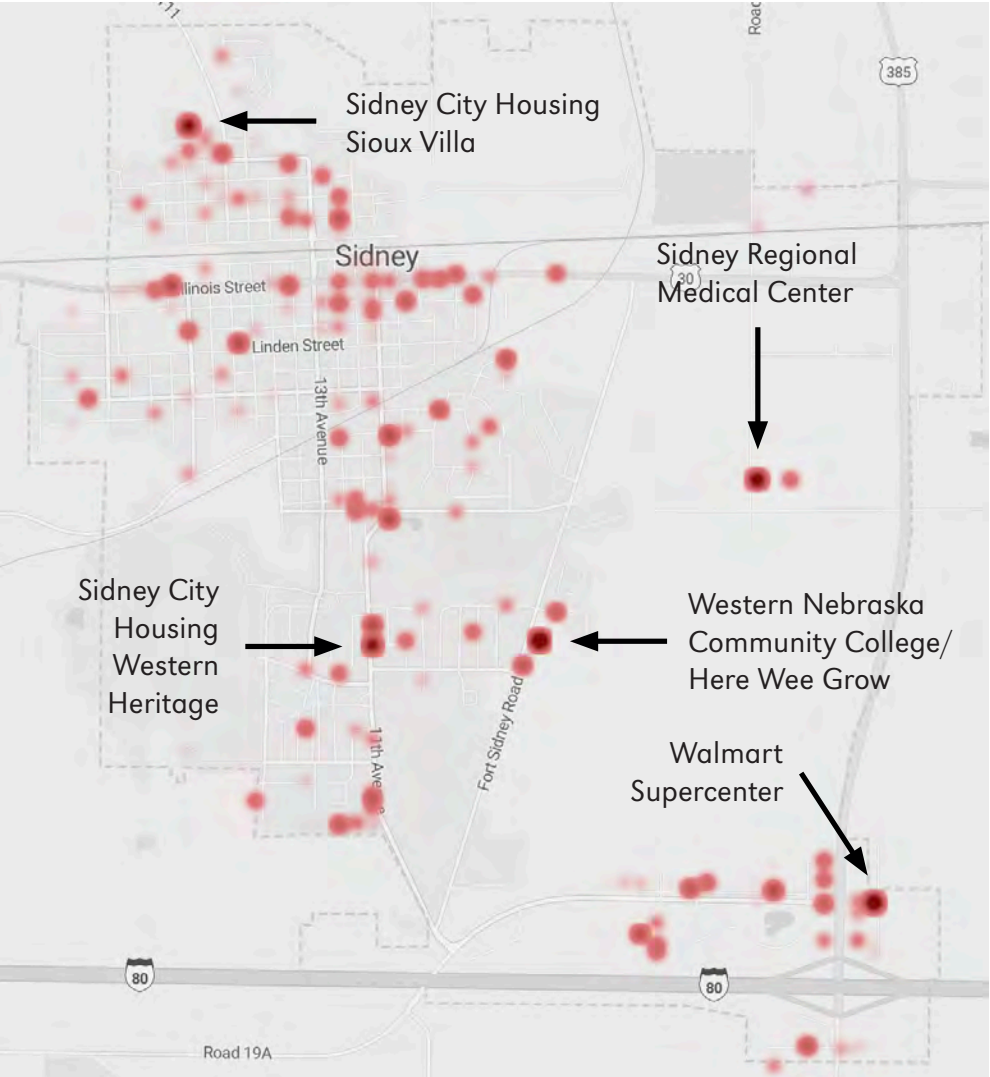| Top Five Drop-off Locations	Number of Drop-offs
Regional West Medical Center	967
Walmart Supercenter	307
Western Nebraska Regional Airport	280
Western Nebraska Veterans' Home	179
Region 1 Office of Human Development	108

Source: (10-16) provider reported ride data, various dates

DROP-OFFS WITHIN CITY OF SIDNEY

Figure 37 shows a heatmap of drop-offs within the City of Sidney with the top five noted and also listed with the number of drop-offs. Many of the drop-offs occurred near the Interstate-80 interchange in the southeast part of the city, which is also near the Walmart Supercenter. Other top destinations include the Western Nebraska Community College/Here Wee Grow daycare center and the Sidney Regional Medical Center.

**Figure 37. Drop-off locations in and around the City of Sidney by Panhandle transit providers**

Top Five Drop-off Locations	Number of Drop-offs
Walmart Supercenter/I-80	1,019
Western Nebraska Community College/Here Wee Grow	860
Sidney City Sioux Villa	598
Sidney Regional Medical Center	558
Sidney City Western Heritage	377

Source: (10-16) provider reported ride data, various dates.

DROP-OFFS WITHIN CITY OF VALENTINE

Figure 38 shows a heatmap of drop-offs within the City of Valentine with the top five noted and also listed with the number of drop-offs. Most drop-offs were made near medical and senior care facilities, including the Cherry County Hospital, the Valentine Senior Citizens Center, the Cherry Hills Estates Assisted Living Facility, and the former location of Good Samaritan Society-Oakwood (which closed in 2021).

Figure 38. Drop-off locations in and around the City of Valentine by Panhandle transit providers
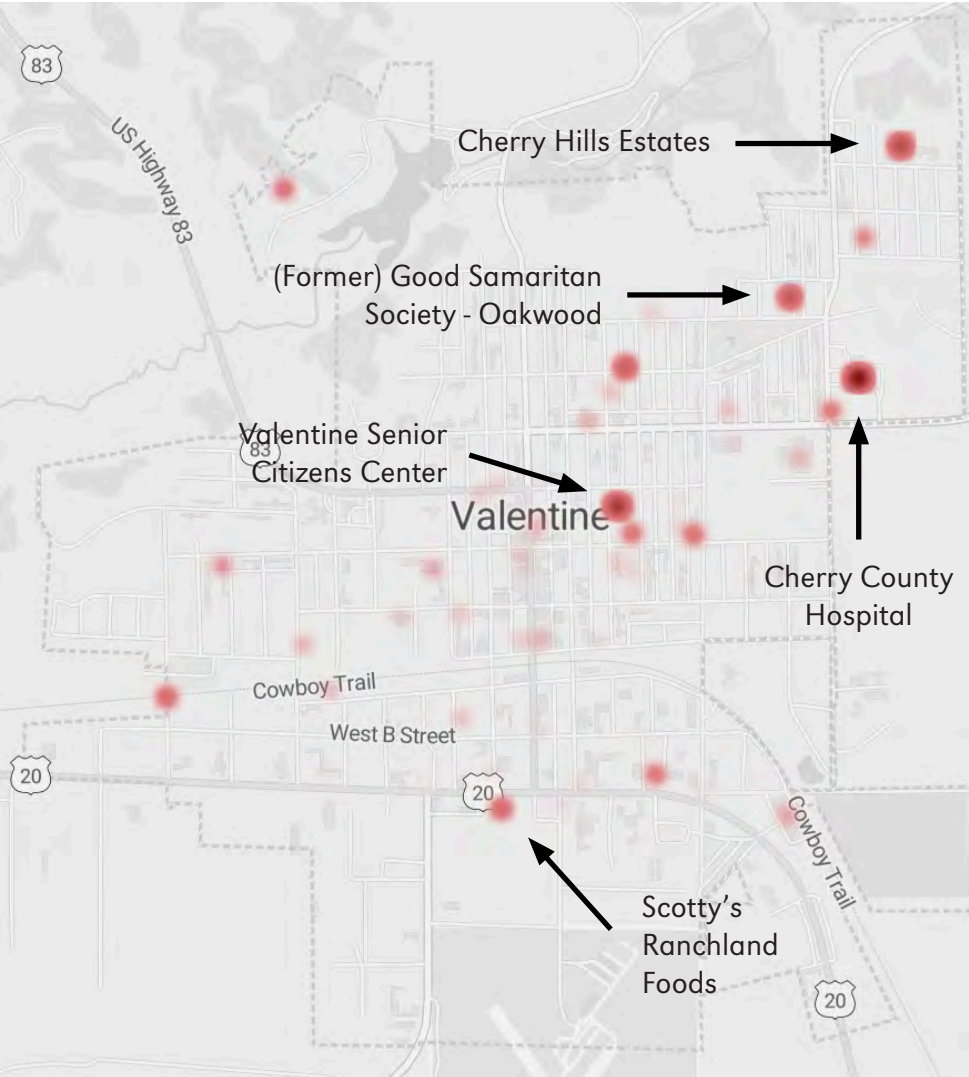
Top Five Drop-off Locations	Number of Drop-offs
Cherry County Hospital	435
Valentine Senior Citizens Center	240
Cherry Hills Estates	174
(Former) Good Samaritan Society-Oakwood	130
Scott's Ranchland Foods	69

Source: (10-16) provider reported ride data, various dates.

AVAILABILITY OF TRANSIT

Along with frequent destinations, we also analyzed the areas in which riders were picked up by each transit provider as reported by the samples of ride data obtained from the providers. We analyzed the pickup data by first determining the observed area served by each provider and computing the estimated total and transit dependent populations that fall within each area. We then used that information to identify gaps and overlaps in service areas and any populations that may be underserved.

Nearly all the Panhandle's population (more than 96.4%) live in an area with reported pickups by at least one provider, as shown in the map of the observed coverage areas shown in Figure 39.

Overall, we do not find there is a large gap in rural transit services available to the population of the region. Nearly all of the Panhandle's population, more than 96.4%, live in an area with reported pickups by at least one provider, with nearly 56% living in an area served by three or more providers.

Figure 39. Overlaid pick-up areas within Panhandle region for all reported rides by Panhandle transit providers; darker areas indicate overlap among pick-up areas
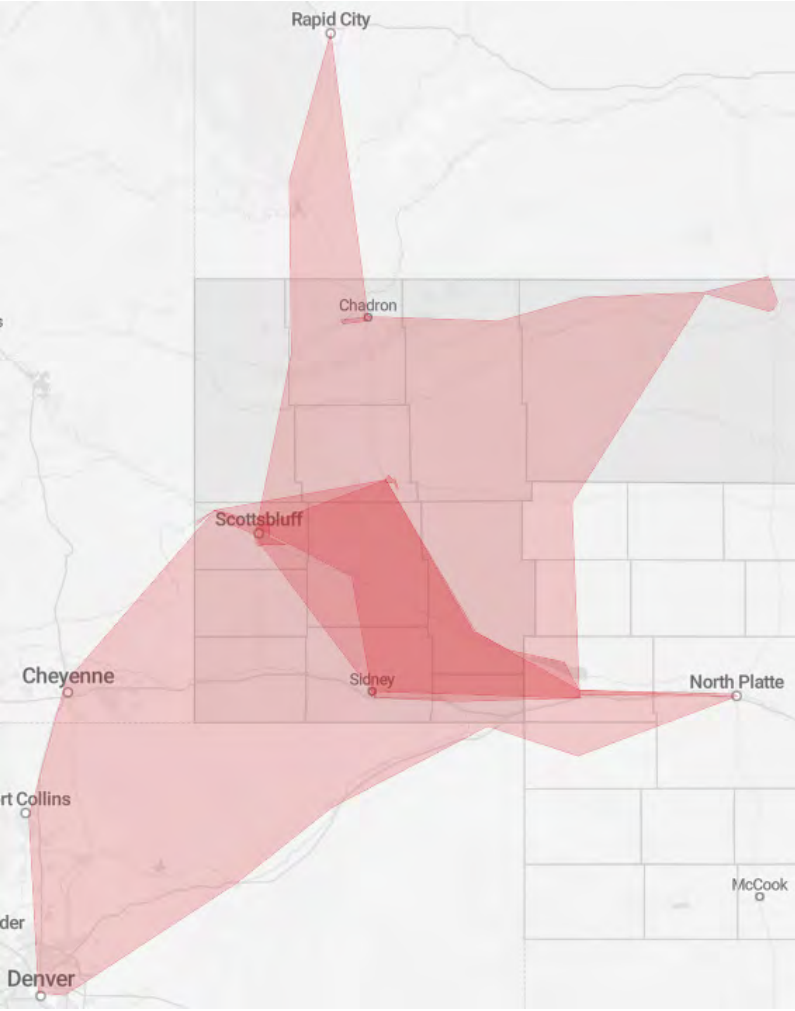
Source: (10-16) provider reported ride data, various dates

Our dataset shows only two areas without reported pickups: Sioux County and the eastern and southeastern parts of Cherry County. As these areas fall within the advertised coverage area of Open Plains Transit, it is likely that they are covered but had no reported rides during the data collection period.

Based on the pickup locations provided by the Panhandle providers, the three metropolitan areas of Alliance, Scottsbluff (including Terrytown and Gering), and Sidney are each covered by four of the eight providers. In particular, Garden County, KCTS, and Open Plains Transit serve all three of these metropolitan areas.

According to the American Community Survey 5-year estimates for 2022, those municipalities have a total population of 38,275, accounting for 43.2% of the Panhandle's total population. Among the transit dependent population, an estimated 40.3% of those aged 65 years or older and an estimated 30.9% of those with some disability live in those cities covered by four transit providers. Table 17 summarizes the observed coverage for the total population, population aged 65 years or older, and the population with a hearing, vision, cognitive, ambulatory, or independent living difficulty.

## Table 17. Population of reported pick-up regions, by number of providers, 2022

	Total Population	Percent of Total Population	65 years or older	Percent 65 years or older	With a Disability	Percent With a Disability
Panhandle	88,594	100%	18,537	100%	13,225	100%
Covered by...						
4 Transit Providers	38,345	43.3%	7,474	40.3%	5,737	30.9%
3 Transit Providers	11,119	12.6%	2,591	14.0%	1,889	10.2%
2 Transit Providers	17,316	19.5%	3,226	17.4%	2,263	12.2%
1 Transit Providers	18,658	21.1%	4,542	24.5%	2,913	15.7%
0 Transit Providers	3,155	3.6%	705	3.8%	423	2.3%
Alliance Public Transit	8,130	9.2%	1,481	8.0%	1,160	8.8%
Chadron City Transit	5,271	5.9%	722	3.9%	624	4.7%
City of Sidney Transportation System	6,411	7.2%	1,276	6.9%	984	7.4%
Crawford Public Transportation	962	1.1%	265	1.4%	106	0.8%
Garden County Public Transportation	38,063	43.0%	7,903	42.6%	5,948	45.0%
KCTS	56,112	63.3%	11,749	63.4%	8,805	66.6%
Open Plains Transit	70,544	79.6%	14,479	78.1%	10,402	78.7%
Tri-City Roadrunner	28,582	32.3%	5,631	30.4%	4,487	33.9%

Source: (8) U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey, 5-year Estimates 2022

Outside those metropolitan areas, the part of the Panhandle with the highest availability of transit appears to be the area roughly defined by the segments of U.S. Highway 26 from Scottsbluff to Ogallala and U.S. Highway 385 from Sidney to Alliance, which intersect near Bridgeport.

That area — roughly described as a shape with corners in Scottsbluff, Bridgeport, Sidney, Ogallala, Oshkosh, and Alliance — is covered in its entirety by three providers: Garden County Public Transportation, KCTS, and Open Plains Transit. Including the cities at each corner and nearby cities, villages, and Census-designated places, the estimated total population of the communities in that region is 45,918. That accounts for more than half of the population of the Panhandle region, indicating that more than 55.9% of the population of the Panhandle region is currently being served by three or more rural transit providers.

Figure 40. Overlaid pick-up areas within Panhandle region with coverage by three or more providers; darker areas indicate overlap among pick-up areas
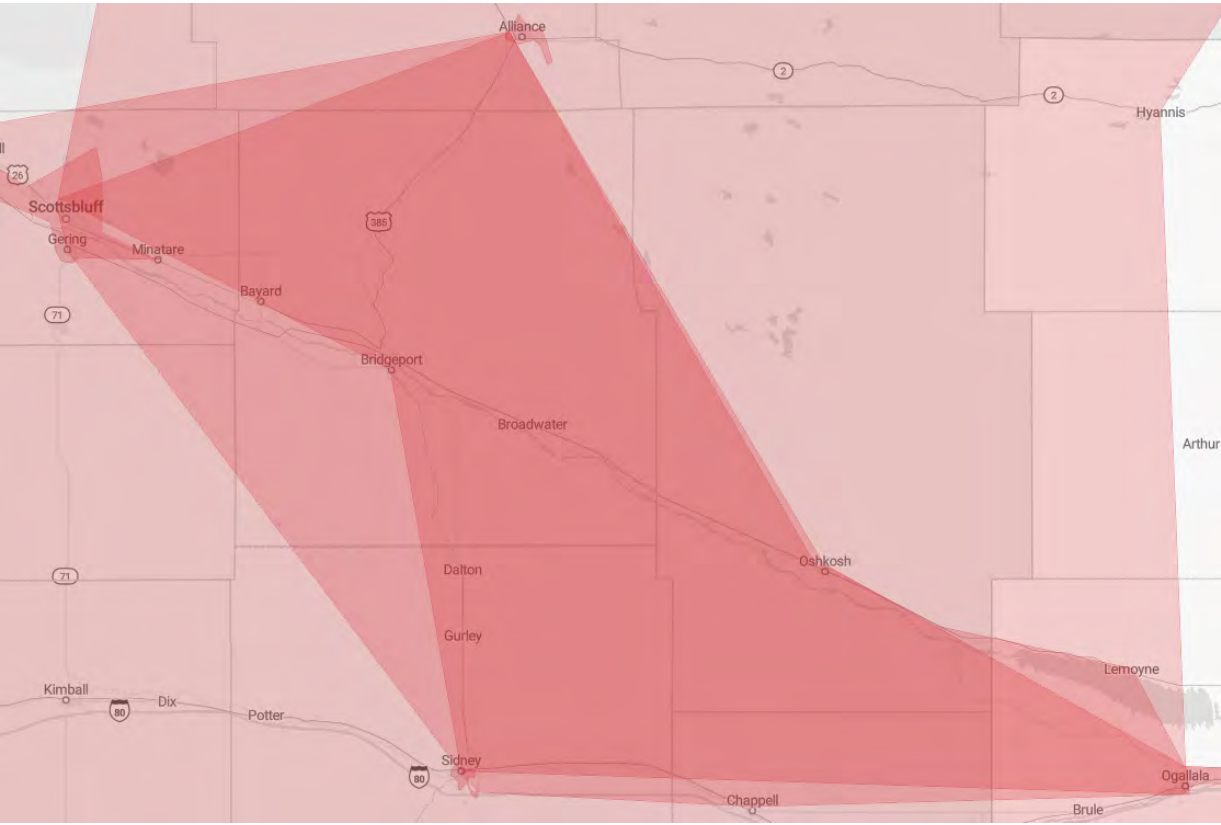
Source: (10-16) provider reported ride data, various dates.

KEY FINDINGS

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our analysis shows that the population of the Panhandle Region relies more heavily on public transit than Nebraska as a whole, with a larger percentage of residents classified as transit-dependent. This includes 20.9% of residents aged 65 or older, 11.7% living in poverty, 15.2% with a disability, and 5.2% of households without access to a private vehicle. These figures highlight the increasing need for public transit in the region.

Reinforcing that trend, our analysis found that ridership across the region has increased compared to FY 2022. Boardings rose by 47.7%, and the total miles traveled by the region's providers grew by 65.1%. Notably, for all but one provider, the average trip length decreased during the same period, indicating a shift toward more frequent trips over shorter distances.

Eight transit providers operate in the Panhandle, all working to meet growing demand. They connect residents to essential services such as healthcare, housing, groceries, schools, and workplaces, demonstrating transit's vital role in residents' quality of life. As a result of their efforts, rural transit is widely available in the Panhandle, with over 96.4% of the population served by at least one provider.

More than 55.9% of the population resides in areas served by three or more providers, including the region's largest cities — Scottsbluff, Gering, Alliance, and Sidney — which collectively house 43.2% of the population. Some providers' coverage overlap along U.S. Highways 26 and 385, suggesting opportunities for route coordination to improve efficiency.

Transit providers primarily serve unique destinations. In our sample, only 3.7% of destinations were shared by more than one provider, reflecting the large geographic area and distinct coverage responsibilities. However, overlapping service areas present an opportunity for better resource alignment.

Garden County Public Transportation provides broader service than advertised. This expanded reach may strain their limited resources, as they currently operate only four vehicles to cover an area of 2,755.5 square miles.

Based on our analysis, we offer the following recommendations:

1. **Support Local Transit in the Region**
   Overall, these findings emphasize the Panhandle's reliance on public transit, the broad availability of services, and the dedication of providers to meet regional needs. Continued coordination and investment will be essential to sustaining and enhancing access to vital services for all residents. In particular, a great deal of transit activity occurs within the Panhandle's seven largest cities. Strengthening mobility options within these cities will enhance access and allow riders to reach multiple destinations more easily. Incorporating transit planning into regional economic development strategies could strengthen rural economies.

2. **Prioritize Access to Essential Destinations**
   Medical facilities, public or affordable housing, and grocery or discount stores are the most common destinations for transit riders. Maintaining reliable service to these critical locations is essential, especially for low-income, elderly, and transit-dependent populations. Moreover, given that the Panhandle has a higher proportion of elderly residents and individuals with disabilities than the state average, transit agencies could develop programs specifically tailored to these groups.

3. **Enhance Coordination Along Overlapping Routes**
   Three transit providers operate in overlapping areas along U.S. Highways 26 and 385 in the south-central Panhandle. Better coordination among these providers can reduce redundant trips and improve efficiency.

4. **Integrate Keith County into the Panhandle Region**
   Many Panhandle transit providers frequently serve Ogallala and other parts of Keith County, which are currently part of the Southwest Mobility Management region. Including Keith County in the Panhandle region would align with existing mobility patterns and improve coordination among providers, increasing service efficiency.

5. **Improve Data Collection and Performance Metrics**
   Standardizing how transit providers collect and report ride data could provide clearer insights into service usage and unmet demand. Incorporating performance metrics such as on-time performance, rider satisfaction, and trip frequency would help providers refine operations and identify gaps more effectively.

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