

NORTH CENTRAL AREA TRANSIT STRATEGIC PLAN

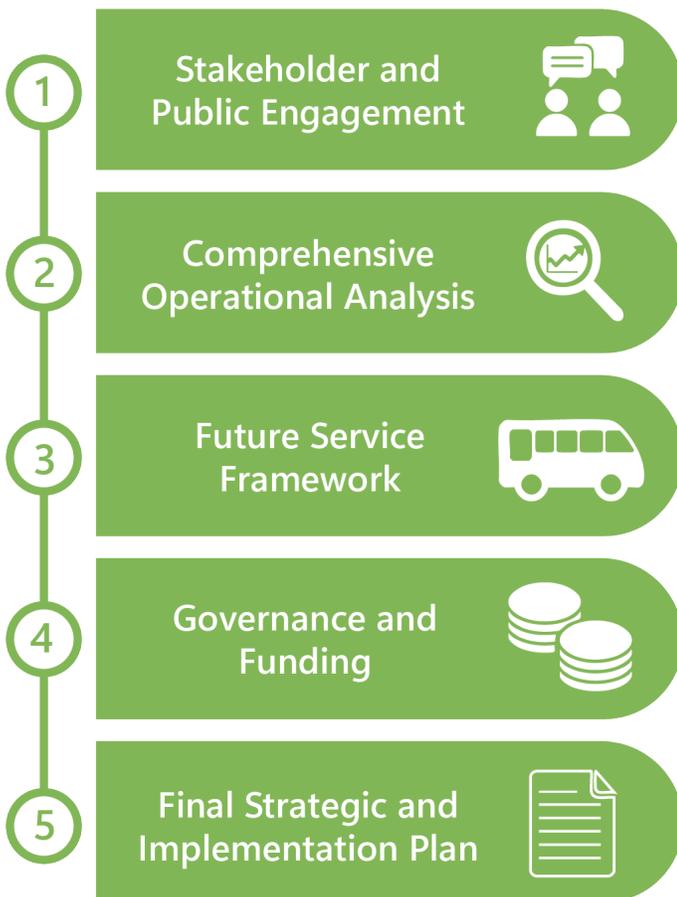
Executive Summary



The North Central Area Transit (NCAT) Strategic Plan will position the City of Ottawa, LaSalle County, and NCAT to prioritize and implement transit improvements that meet government and stakeholder expectations. This plan is intended to address growing demand for public transportation in LaSalle County while maintaining fiscal sustainability and resilience in operations.

Process Overview

The NCAT Strategic Plan process included extensive public engagement, detailed analysis of current operations, and recommendations for future service, funding, and governance. This Executive Summary synthesizes the findings of each prior phase and serves as the plan's final guiding document



Needs and Opportunities

NCAT has undergone significant growth and transformation in recent years, driven by increasing demand and a more diverse rider base. Ridership has more than doubled over the past four years, expanding beyond its initial focus on medical trips to encompass employment and education-related travel.

While there has also been growth in service provision, the rapid expansion has also strained operational capacity, leading to rising instances of late arrivals and trip cancellations, indicating a need for system adjustments to maintain efficiency and reliability.

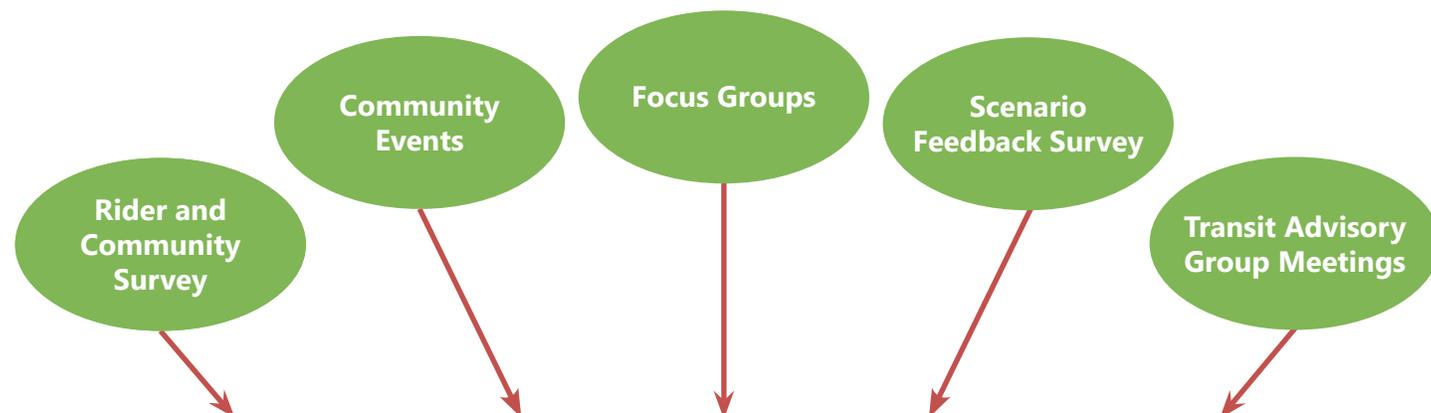
Opportunities

NCAT connects people to jobs, healthcare, education, childcare, grocery stores, and community life.

- Better transit improves residents' access to jobs, which also strengthens the local economy by broadening employers' hiring pools.
- Transit availability lowers costs for families and local government to provide access to healthcare, improving overall community well-being.
- Ridership growth, strong awareness of the service, and positive customer satisfaction help NCAT convert today's unmet trips into tomorrow's riders.

Engagement Approach and What We Heard

The strategic plan process involved stakeholder and community engagement throughout LaSalle County.



Highlights from Engagement

- **Service Hours.** Riders would like NCAT to extend its evening hours to serve shift workers, medical appointments, and safe late-night trips.
- **Scheduling and Capacity.** NCAT customers are having challenges reserving trips due to capacity. NCAT can reduce overbooking by adding vehicles and drivers or exploring different service types.
- **Coverage Model.** Some riders and community members would like to see predictable, scheduled bus service in urban areas (e.g., LaSalle–Peru, Ottawa).
- **Availability and Affordability.** Riders would like NCAT to cut waits and accept short-notice trips, similar to microtransit. They'd also like NCAT to consider fare relief for low-income and rural riders.
- **Fleet, Comfort & Safety.** Riders appreciate NCAT's fully ADA-accessible fleet. They would like NCAT to continue strengthening its customer-service training and policies for disruptive riders.
- **Specialized Needs.** Some riders would like to see NCAT improve access for recurring trips, including dialysis/discharge/therapy, childcare, and monthly senior grocery runs (higher bag limits).
- **Public Perception.** Many community members see lack of transportation as a barrier to work, education, and errands, but see NCAT as a strong partner in finding solutions.



A Future Service Framework

To meet community needs, NCAT evaluated four complementary service concepts. Together, they form a scalable framework that increases convenience and trip capacity while preserving door-to-door service for those who need it most.

Deviated Routes



Concept: Scheduled local bus service in Ottawa and LaSalle-Peru, with service within 3/4 mile of route upon request

Benefits: Enhanced capacity and reliability for local trips

Annual Cost Estimates: \$297,000 per route

Concept: Provide on-demand reservations within urban centers (LaSalle-Peru, Ottawa, Streator)

Benefits: Improve operational efficiency, enhance the customer experience, and shorten wait times.

Annual Cost Estimates: \$363,600 to \$615,300 per zone

Microtransit Zones



Regional Routes



Concept: Scheduled bus service between LaSalle-Peru and Ottawa/Marseilles/Streator

Benefits: Reduce need for long-distance demand response trips to improve cost effectiveness

Annual Cost Estimates: \$257,300 to \$430,700 depending on concept

Expanded Demand-Response

Concept: Expand weekday service span, add weekend service, and/or add vehicles/drivers

Benefits: Address capacity and service span challenges without major changes to service structure

Annual Cost Estimates: From \$280,000 to \$1,200,000 depending on service expansion type



Recommended Phasing Approach

Short Term

Add more vehicles and drivers to current demand response service

Extend service hours from 5am to 10pm

Medium Term

Introduce weekend demand response service

Begin one or more microtransit zones

Implement one or more local deviated routes

Long Term

Begin operating one or more regional routes

Expand the service area beyond county lines

A Final phasing plan will depend on the **governance structure** that NCAT pursues, as well as the sources of **sustainable funding**.

Funding and Governance

The Strategic Plan recommends strengthening the existing governance structure in the short term, while pursuing the eventual formation of a mass transit district. This transition would help NCAT better match its formal decision-making structure to the area where service is being provided.

Funding and Governance Models Explored

	Advantages	Disadvantages
City Government Existing Condition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transit markets are often tied to urban areas City of Ottawa is a supportive partner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Governance and funding mismatch persists Limited contributions from partner communities
County Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Governance better reflects service area Potential taxing authority 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> LaSalle County has limited interest in managing the transit system
Mass Transit District	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regional agency focused on transit services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Potentially high administrative services for relatively small service

Recommended Phasing Approach



What's Next?

NCAT is working to build a coalition for transit expansion in LaSalle County, including strengthening existing funding partnerships. To learn how to get involved, visit NCAT's website or contact Kim Zimmerman, NCAT Executive Director.



Kim Zimmerman
Transit Director
North Central Area Transit
Phone: 833.433.6228
Email: kzimmerman@ridencat.com
W: RideNCAT.com