



**Contact:** Chris Parks, Communications Coordinator

**Phone:** 712-243-4196 x228

**Email:** [chris.parks@swipco.org](mailto:chris.parks@swipco.org)

## **Public transit is growing, not dying in rural Southwest Iowa**

*Despite some urban trends, rural transit ridership is on the rise*

**Atlantic, IA-** The national narrative on public transit has been a little bleak lately. The COVID-19 pandemic spurred record investment in transit systems, but also caused a major disruption in lifestyles and transit ridership numbers. The rise in remote work and more abnormal work schedules has caused ridership to dip in some major metropolitan areas. Fluctuation in fare money and other funding has caused budgeting problems. All these things aren't necessarily true in a rural setting.

Southwest Iowa Transit Agency (SWITA), based in Atlantic and serving 8 Southwest Iowa counties, has in fact seen record ridership post-pandemic, while maintaining a very cost-efficient system. SWITA Transit Director Mark Lander said the agency's success can be attributed to several factors, "We are structured differently as a rural system. Urban areas rely on a lot of fixed routes and funding from fares and local taxes. We offer more flexible options and much of the funding comes from the federal and state level. We can operate much more like a private sector transportation firm, offering what people want and need as best we can."

Lander said another thing that helped SWITA weather the pandemic was the fact that they never shut down. "People still needed to get places like work or the grocery store, and we kept serving them," he said.

SWITA had a record 526,300 riders in fiscal year 2023 and has seen record numbers year over year the past three years. Lander credits his staff and drivers for helping achieve those numbers, "We've been willing to do what some others don't want to. We've continued to increase workforce rides, taxi offerings, and student transportation."

One problem some of the major metro areas have run into is their systems were designed to get a lot of people downtown and back out at peak commute times. Many work schedules have changed to a different number of office days, or different times of day so they are trying to adapt to those changes. The workforce routes SWITA supports are set schedules so it's much more predictable.

This September SWITA received an award from the Federal Transit Administration Region 7 for highest rural transit ridership in Iowa for fiscal year 2022. SWITA topped that list in fiscal year 2023 as well. After receiving that award SWIPCO Executive Director John McCurdy said, "Awards because of big numbers are nice, but what is really important is what those numbers

represent. SWITA is getting people in Southwest Iowa where they need to go—including to work, school, and medical appointments. The SWITA staff bend over backwards to meet the needs of our clients because they know every trip is important to that client.”

Not only has SWITA continued to see ridership grow, but those rides are being provided at the lowest cost per ride of any rural transit system in the state. In the past fiscal year SWITA achieved a cost average of \$9.12 per ride, which is nearly \$3 more efficient than the next closest region. The statewide average cost per ride was \$20.87. What makes that accomplishment even more impressive is the fact it was reached while providing the most rides and driving the 2<sup>nd</sup> most miles of any rural transit region.

SWITA transportation is accessible to everyone in the region, including the disabled population and elderly, but you don't have to be elderly or disabled or meet income guidelines to ride. SWITA vehicles are equipped with wheelchair accessibility and one personal care attendant rides free. SWITA transportation is affordable: taxi rides are \$2.50 per trip or \$2.00 per trip for elderly clients (60 years and older) with collaboration from Connections Area Agency on Aging; medical trips are \$30 per hour; Summer Fun Bus rides are \$1 per trip or \$40 for the full summer; other special trips are \$40 per hour.

For questions or to request a ride, contact SWITA at 712-243-2518 or 1-800-842-8065. SWIPCO is an equal opportunity employer, provider, and lender.

###