

This case story was produced by Accelerator for America for the Local Infrastructure Hub and published in November 2023 and focuses on the City of Lincoln, NE's FY22 Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity (RAISE) grant for their Multimodal Transit Transfer Center (MTTC). This grant was awarded by USDOT under the Biden-Harris Administration.

Under the current Administration, the program is once again being called the Better Utilizing Investments to Leverage Development (BUILD) grant, with a slightly shifted focus and priority set. However, this case story still provides key lessons and best practices useful for communities seeking strategic guidance for BUILD grant pursuit.

RESOURCE

Multimodal Transit Transfer Center (Lincoln, NE)

Project at a Glance:

Project Leadership	Mayor Leirion Gaylor Baird Elizabeth 'Liz' Elliott, Director of Transportation and Utilities, City of Lincoln
Location:	City of Lincoln
Timeline:	August 2022 - 2025
Focus:	Multimodal infrastructure, economic mobility, and climate

Project Description in Brief:

The Lincoln Multimodal Transit Transfer Center will include 18 bus bays (one for future intercity bus service), protected passenger boarding areas and walkways, waiting room, and administrative and safety offices for StarTran. The new, off-street facility will replace the current outdoor, on-street transfer center and will be more environmentally sustainable, including electric vehicle (EV) charging infrastructure to support fleet electrification.

Key Players/Entities

Mayor Leirion Gaylor Baird	Current Mayor of Lincoln, NE
Liz Elliot	Director of Transportation and Utilities for the City of Lincoln
StarTran	City-owned bus transit system
Lincoln Electric System	City-owned electric utility

Funding Sources

The project is funded by a \$23.6M RAISE grant; the local match is composed of the site's land value of approximately \$8M and \$900K from local sources, including Lincoln's Transit Capital Improvement Program.

Project Dates / Timeline

Lincoln was awarded a RAISE grant in August 2022. Construction is slated to begin in 2024, and the project could be completed as soon as 2025.

Lessons learned

- 1 Translate abstract visions into concrete plans
- 2 Demonstrate local commitment to the project in a tangible manner
- 3 Incorporate shows of support from community members and outside partners
- 4 Seek feedback from federal agencies on grant applications
- 5 Be persistent in continuing to pursue any and all applicable sources of funding

Problem to Solve

StarTran, Lincoln's city-owned bus transit provider, operates on a hub and spoke model, whereby there is a central transportation hub serving as the primary point for transferring between radial bus routes that go from the hub to various destinations. Lincoln's current primary bus transit transfer point, the hub of the system, is an on-street location that has suffered from traffic congestion, poor pedestrian circulation, and other design challenges that delay bus trips. The location is undersized and not conducive to the safe and timely transfer of passengers between bus lines.

Because the current hub is undersized, StarTran has more fixed routes in its system than boarding / deboarding locations at the current transfer location, as a result StarTran has had to develop a network schedule that splits its timed, or 'pulse,' transfers. The staggered pulse makes transferring between routes confusing for passengers as well as causing inconvenient additional transfer time, up to 50 minutes, to daily trips. The constraints of the location further limit StarTran's ability to add new routes in the future.



The current hub does not have multimodal functions, or the capacity for such investments, whether it be improvements to intercity connections or local first/last mile connections given the lack of space for bike or scooter storage facilities. In a support letter from William Bivin, Statewide Mobility Manager at University of Nebraska at Omaha, it was noted that there are three intercity bus carriers providing daily service through Lincoln, two of these providers share a bus stop location that is not located on a city bus route or convenient to lodging; posing a challenge as current intercity bus and Amtrak schedules often drop off and pick up between midnight and 6am in Lincoln.

Furthermore, the StarTran transfer location is entirely outdoor with no indoor amenities or restroom facilities for riders or operators. Amenities are limited to two enclosed passenger shelters and benches under a building overhang, providing minimal shade and cover from precipitation. And, due to the shelter's limited visibility from the street and the site's inadequate lighting in the evenings, StarTran has had to contract off duty police officers to assuage riders' safety and security concerns.

Today, 13 of StarTran's 67 buses are electric and [26% of the fleet](#) is electric, hybrid, or alternatively fueled. StarTran continues to invest in fleet electrification and alternative fuels, with a goal of the entire fleet running on 100% electric, renewable, or alternative fuels by 2040, in line with [Lincoln's 2021-2027 Climate Action Plan](#). However, StarTran's electric buses need rapid charging mid-day, so a charging-enabled parking solution is required to achieve the 2040 goal. Lincoln highlighted this aspect of the project in their most recent grant applications.

These issues result in a transit network that is far from its potential efficiency and reliability. Mayor Leirion Baird, Lincoln Transportation and Utility Director Liz Elliot, and local leadership concluded a new Multimodal Transit Transfer Center (MTTC) was required to make StarTran an attractive, sustainable, and dependable option for residents' daily transportation needs.

The current primary transfer location for StarTran does not have capacity for vendors or customer service staff who can address real-time concerns or facilitate on-site ticket sales. The site also lacks a breakroom or other amenities for bus operators, escalating challenges with employee retention which have further indeed route efficiencies. The MTTC concept addresses both of those concerns and will improve the transit experience for riders and operators alike. In the interim, the city has taken steps to strengthen its staffing levels. After seeing bus operator vacancies nearly double in one year, StarTran partnered with a marketing firm to produce a hiring event and campaign using bus, radio, and billboard advertisements. In just one event, StarTran was able to hire 20 new bus operators which more than covered the recent shortage.

Finally, StarTran's administrative offices are located in a brownfield slated for remediation and reinvestment as part of the [South Haymarket Park Redevelopment Site](#). The new MTTC will have space for StarTran's administrative and security offices, allowing them to leave their current offices at South Haymarket, enabling further private investments in the South Haymarket project, transforming the brownfield site into a mixed use development, including 1,000 to 2,000 residential units and expanded commercial and office space.

“Truthfully, I don’t know if StarTran has ever been fully staffed, and during the COVID-19 pandemic we lost a third of our staff.”

— **Liz Elliott**
Director of Transportation
and Utilities, City of Lincoln

Pre-Development

The MTTC project has been in development for almost 20 years, beginning with Lincoln's first multi-modal study in 2004, which highlighted challenges at the existing transfer station given its exposed on-street, entirely outdoors location. Continued engagement with ridership and community members determined this was a chief reason more residents were not utilizing public transit. From 2014 to 2022, the city applied eight times for federal grant funding, through the Better Utilizing Investments to Leverage Development (BUILD) and Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) Discretionary Grants. Over the years, StarTran received repeated feedback along the lines of "you did well in the concept design, but [the application] did not prove technical progress, or [that the project was] shovel ready." With this in mind, each year they continued to do more work in planning and preparing the project, taking steps that would take it, in Liz Elliott's words, from a "back of a napkin type of thing" to a "strong enough, concrete vision... a plan that could be implemented."

Beginning in 2016, the city began proactively setting aside funds for the MTTC via Lincoln's Capital Improvement Program (CIP), allocating \$900K for the project's local match component. That same year, the city made sure to include the MTTC in its annual transit plan and 2020-2021 long-range transit plan. Then, in 2020, Lincoln hired external consultants to produce a [feasibility study](#) to support their grant application. The feasibility study provided a "deep dive" into why Lincoln needed the MTTC, what benefits could be gained from it, and where it could be located.

2022 RAISE Award

Building on years of grant applications to fund the MTTC project, StarTran adjusted the approach for the 2021 and 2022 grant applications by focusing more of their efforts on storytelling and building a narrative around how the MTTC can positively impact their community.

For example, equity considerations were always a part of the project's development, however, it was a lesser priority for prior federal administrations. As such, Lincoln's TIGER and BUILD applications included only short mentions of the MTTC's equity components. Then, with the Biden-Harris Administration's announcement of the Justice40 initiative, StarTran knew they needed to demonstrate that equity considerations and impact were central to the project. They spent more time throughout the application telling a story about how the MTTC would positively impact all 18 defined areas of persistent poverty in Lincoln by providing access to more work opportunities and across the community. Similarly, they place increased emphasis on highlighting the environmental implications of the MTTC by showing its alignment with Lincoln's long-term climate action plan and its critical role in facilitating StarTran's transition to a green fleet.

"Year to year, priorities may change but the goal and your vision remain the same. You need to determine what becomes the driving focus of your storytelling across the application."

— Liz Elliott, speaking on how you adjust grant applications year to year

The city of Lincoln also thought it was important to highlight the ripple effects of the new MTTC in that by allowing for them to move their administrative offices and support the South Haymarket redevelopment, StarTran was creating an additional economic benefit and impact on non-transit users in the city.

Finally, for the 2022 RAISE grant application, StarTran and the city of Lincoln worked with their federal lobbyist to significantly increase their engagement with the federal government. Mayor Baird met with members of Nebraska's congressional delegation to increase awareness of the MTTC project and ensure it had their support. StarTran worked with the lobbyist to review drafts of the 2022 grant application prior to submission, continuing to hone and focus its narrative throughout the process.

Lincoln submitted their MTTC RAISE grant application for the eighth and final time in April 2022. Building on lessons learned over the preceding eight years, Lincoln learned that they would be a RAISE grant recipient in August 2022. Lincoln is now working closely with the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) on technical aspects of the grant as they formalize the RAISE award ahead of its disbursement. The award will provide the funding necessary to mobilize resources for the project and construction of the new hub, ending a 20 year journey from the initial feasibility studies in 2004 to a modern MTTC expected to be open in 2026. And, to maintain their new level of engagement with the state delegation, Mayor Baird and Liz Elliot have made a point to keep their Senators and Congressional Representatives briefed on the project's updates whenever possible.

Lincoln's Proposed Multimodal Transit Transfer Center

- 18 bus bays, including one for future intercity bus service
- Connections to bike/scooter shares and designated parking spaces for electric scooters
- Storage space for bicycles and other bike-related amenities
- Protected and lit passenger boarding areas and walkways, providing for improved safety and security
- Waiting room with indoor amenities, including restrooms and vending machines
- Break room for operators
- Administrative and safety offices
- Future plans for bicycle lanes on roads connecting to MTTC
- Eight blocks from Amtrak station
- One block to access point for bicycle/walking trail network over 130 miles



Partner Engagement and Support

Engagement with elected officials and stakeholders was a key component for project development and Lincoln's successful grant application. At a local level, city elected officials played a key role. Mayor Baird and Lincoln City Councilmembers provided strong support by, as mentioned previously, committing funds from Lincoln's CIP for the MTTC project through annual investments in planning components and set asides for future construction. These funds were integral in organizing the local match for executing the RAISE grant, strengthening Lincoln's application. Mayor Baird also provided a letter of support, making a strong and compelling case for the impact that the MTTC would have on Lincoln.

“The City is committed to developing and maintaining a modern, energy-efficient, and safe public transit system. The proposed project will enable us to better serve the transportation demands of our growing city, provide connectivity to the greater region, and support economic opportunity”

— Mayor Leirion Gaylor Baird, Mayor of Lincoln, Nebraska

The Lincoln Metropolitan Planning Organization showed the regional impact of the city’s project, noting how it supports the Lincoln MPO 2050 Long Range Transportation Plan, by providing a high level amenity for bus riders, bicyclists, pedestrians, and other transportation providers.

“The MTTC would also provide a strong and permanent statement of intent on the part of Lincoln to become a multi-modal friendly community”

— David Cary, Planning Director Lincoln MPO/Lincoln-Lancaster County Planning Department

Given that the proposed site is a joint city-county property, and nearby the county’s offices, the city has engaged closely with county-level partners to illustrate the shared commitment to transit improvements, the project, and a consensus on the usage of the jointly owned property. Deb Schorr, Chair of the Board of County Commissioners for Lancaster County, signed a support letter for the RAISE grant application, noting their belief that the project would support “the County and the City’s shared interests in providing efficient transportation to better serve the demands of [a] growing City and County, to provide connectivity to the greater region along with enhanced parking for [their] guests and workforce, and to support economic opportunity across the community.”

University of Nebraska at Lincoln (UNL) has a [contract](#) with StarTran where StarTran provides intra- and inter-campus routes Monday through Friday during fall and spring semesters. University staff and students can use the transit service free of charge. UNL sent a letter of support for the RAISE grant application, laying out their commitment to the project given that the institution’s and city’s growth demanded stronger transit connections.

“We are finding that these types of sustainable practices on and off campus are important elements as we recruit professionals to Lincoln – a progressive community that takes pride in its amenities and family-friendly culture”

— Michelle R. Waite, Assistant to the Chancellor for Government and Military Relations, University of Nebraska at Lincoln

The Lincoln Chamber of Commerce and Lincoln Partnership for Economic Development also wrote a support letter, noting that the MTTC “will help support two decades of \$1.53B of private and public investments in the downtown area.”

“As a result of these investments, downtown Lincoln has become an economic development engine creating and providing thousands of jobs to Lincoln residents and others living in nearby communities.”

— Jason Ball, President of Lincoln Chamber of Commerce and Lincoln Partnership for Economic Development

The Center for People in Need (CPN), a private, nonprofit dedicated to providing services and programs to low-income people that address their basic needs and help them achieve economic independence, illustrated their support for the project in a support letter. They noted the need for a new transit transfer center, identifying challenges with the existing hub related to safety, lack of onsite ticket sales, and unreliable timings.

With the emphasis on the clean energy transition in the Biden Administration, StarTran wanted to highlight how their new multimodal transit center fits into their broader citywide climate action plan. Specifically, the new transit center would support fleet electrification by providing space where buses could charge midday, enabling electric buses to be used for all regular services. StarTran engaged Lincoln Electric System, the municipal-owned electric utility, to support the fleet transition and necessary infrastructure upgrades. In-line with StarTran’s 2040 goals for transitioning their fleet to electric or alternative fuels, StarTran and Lincoln Electric are applying for other IIJA programs such as the FTA’s [Low-No Emissions Bus Program](#) and the FHWA’s [Charging and Fuel Infrastructure Program](#).

Community Engagement

Throughout the project pre-development and grant application processes, StarTran has been intentional in their community engagement efforts and strategy. Liz Elliott, director of transportation and utilities for Lincoln, attended the [Bloomberg Harvard Civic Engagement Program](#)^{*}, providing her with new tools for public engagement and enabling her to break from the traditional, less-effective approaches - "I'm the government, [and] I'm going to come speak at you [to] tell you this is a good idea." Elliott's biggest takeaway from the Harvard program has been the importance of investing time and energy into smaller events rather than hosting a few large, public open houses. Elliott noted that they are being more intentional about doing [stakeholder mapping](#) to ensure that nobody is being left out of the discussion.

Under Elliott's leadership, StarTran is working to engage people who would not usually show up to a community meeting. Instead they are meeting residents where they are, such as neighborhood cultural centers. Elliott and her team garnered further insights about the unique challenges facing non-native English speakers who may be overwhelmed by the transit system. Lincoln is home to over 30,000 refugees from across the globe, with 55 different languages spoken throughout the city. This has spurred them to think about how to make StarTran more welcoming for all residents and help them to utilize the transit services more.

"That might mean I have to do 10 different presentations or meetings and discussions, but we think that would be a valuable investment to really hear from the people"

— Liz Elliott, Director of Transportation and Utilities, City of Lincoln

As part of the engagement process, in addition to several online surveys, StarTran employees and consultants engaged regular riders on buses and at bus stations to learn more about what they want to see in the transit network and a new transfer center. These efforts shed light on the biggest concerns of riders, which mainly related to safety and lengthy transfers.

StarTran also sought input from non-riders by engaging with stakeholder groups, including the Lincoln Chamber of Commerce, minority communities, and local residents, to leverage their networks for further feedback and to generate new ideas to make StarTran a more attractive transportation option. Their engagement with impacted businesses, both near the current and future transfer center, has allowed StarTran to identify potential changes and service adjustments to ensure that customers can still access those businesses and support new local businesses, both during construction and long-term. Beyond these groups, Liz Elliott noted that they are also engaging with a residential community adjacent to the site of the MTTTC to address concerns related to light and noise pollution and loitering.

Site Selection

Lincoln's site selection was driven by several geographic factors, including current rider origin and destination points, as well as gaps in underserved communities more likely to utilize public transit. Since the start of the Justice40 initiative, Lincoln has sought to highlight the fact that the proposed sites are within the same designated [Climate and Economic Justice census tracts](#).

Lincoln's original site, an old police station, was disqualified through the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Review Process, which identified its prior use as a gas station and would complicate development and increase costs due to its underground gas tanks.

Lincoln subsequently proposed a site on the same block that is home to a parking structure for city and county employees working at an adjacent building. The site was designated in their 2022 RAISE grant application despite city concerns that it is surrounded by four busy arterials, worsening traffic congestion and creating safety concerns. Replacing the parking structure at this site would cost an additional \$16M, according to Elliott. While the city considered shrinking the site to maintain parking, the FTA had concerns given that in their RAISE proposal StarTran proposed the full city block for the project. Given these concerns, the city identified a third site on a surface parking lot for city and county employees, that would only cost \$6M to replace, with no existing structures, only two arterials, and less potential for traffic congestion. Because the third site has a comparable land value, they have been able to work with FTA to make the switch.

^{*}Bloomberg Philanthropies is a partner and funder of the Local Infrastructure Hub and its activities, including this Case Story.

Project Funding

The project is funded by a \$23.6M RAISE grant, awarded to StarTran in 2022. The required local match consists of the city-county owned property, valued at approximately \$8M, in addition to \$900K from Lincoln’s CIP.

Capital Stack

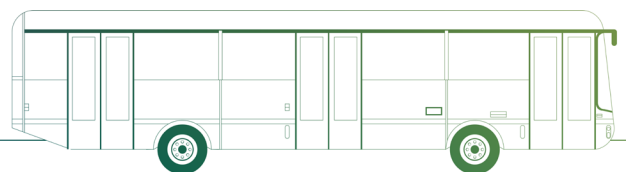
2022 RAISE Grant	\$23.6M
Property value (in-kind value)	\$8M
Lincoln, Capital Improvement Program	\$900K
Total	\$32.5M

Community Impact

A 2020 Benefit-Cost Analysis (BCA) commissioned for the MTTC’s 2020 BUILD grant application found that the facility “will accommodate a suite of mobility services... [promoting] a network of non-automotive transportation in Lincoln, expanding access to employment, social, and recreational opportunities to a broader swath of the regional population of all ages and abilities.” The updated BCA found that the project would yield a benefit-cost ratio of 1.2, meaning that every dollar spent on the project would yield \$1.20 in benefits. Over the time of the analysis, the project would yield total benefits of \$20.3M. .

As a facility designed for pulse operations with a fixed-route system, the MTTC will accommodate buses on all routes at once, rather than in waves, providing for efficient, reliable, and coordinated transfers for passengers. Thus, bus passengers will see reduced travel times. Further, the MTTC will provide indoor seating and restrooms, giving passengers and operators shelter from the elements that the current, on-street transfer center cannot provide. The relief and amenities provided in the MTTC for operators will support StarTran’s efforts to hire and retain employees, especially considering the lack of amenities for bus operators on their routes. In addition to increased safety at the new MTTC, due to its off-street location and the presence of additional lighting and security offices, these benefits will encourage more transit trips in Lincoln, fostering a decrease in automobile usage and thus in emissions from cars. The new facility will also support StarTran’s fleet electrification by providing charging infrastructure, furthering their work towards the 2040 goal.

The MTTC is expected to generate further economic development in the area through transit-oriented development and mixed-use developments. Already, there are several apartment complexes for students and others being built in the immediate vicinity within one or two blocks of the MTTC. The community will also benefit from the continued interest in developing South Haymarket and remediating a current brownfield. The MTTC project also fits within the University of Nebraska’s long-term masterplan given their relationship with StarTran. Elliott noted that they want to hone in on these groups of new residents to attract them to the transit network.



The Center for People in Need's (CPN) support letter noted the impact of the MTTC project on low-income populations, highlighting the fact that these transit investments would lead many of their customers to self-sufficiency:

"The time is ripe to build the MTTC because downtown Lincoln has the highest density of jobs available in the city. Using public transit enhanced with a new, high-functioning multimodal transportation center would lead many of CPN's customers to economic self-sufficiency."

— Chris Funk, Executive Director of CPN

Finally, Lincoln's 2020 Benefit-Cost Analysis recognized the successes of transit centers in peer Midwestern cities, such as: Springfield, MO; Des Moines, IA; and Sioux Falls, SD where new facilities have allowed the initiation of "more efficient 'pulse operations' with safer, element-protected transfer areas, while adding additional community benefits such as new businesses, park-and-ride spaces, and bicycle facilities."

Conclusion

Lincoln's Multi-Modal Transit Transfer Center was first conceptualized in 2004 and went through seven (7) unsuccessful application processes before finally receiving RAISE funding in August of 2022. Through persistence, thoughtful listening, and trust-building with local, state, and federal partners, Lincoln continuously improved upon the MTTC concept and developed a comprehensive, equity-driven solution for their transit operators and riders. Local leaders like Mayor Leirion Baird and Transportation and Utility Director Liz Elliot prioritized community engagement to guide their approach and ensure that all of their residents could feel comfortable and safe using StarTran's services. As they move into implementation, StarTran is continuing their public engagement efforts in the leadup to construction beginning on the MTTC in 2024, with the project expected to be complete as soon as 2025.

According to the updated BCA anticipated that the project would attract new riders to the system "beyond baseline ridership growth because the MTTC will provide shorter transfer times and needed amenities." The original BCA estimated 1.8M hours in saved travel time, the result of a 15-17% reduction in total travel time. Over the projected 30 year analysis period. The new MTTC, due to anticipated growth in transit demand, is estimated to result in a substantial reduction of over 3.6M vehicle-miles traveled, resulting in reduced emissions from personal vehicles. Over this period, the project will also save over a million hours of travel time. In total, the project is estimated to provide for \$20.3 in benefits.