

County of Milwaukee Interoffice Communication

DATE: 2/21/2020
TO: Theodore Lipscomb, Sr., Chairman, Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors
FROM: Donna Brown-Martin, Director, Department of Transportation
SUBJECT: MCTS Recommendations to Connect County Residents with Jobs

BACKGROUND

The adopted 2020 Transit Budget (Amendment 1A032) shifted \$100,000 into an allocated contingency account and directed MCTS to recommend a best use of the funds to get workers to jobs. This report provides valuable information about the distribution of jobs in Milwaukee County, and how the MCTS transit network is best able to support access to those jobs.

METRO MILWAUKEE JOB DISTRIBUTION

Current estimates state the number of jobs in Milwaukee County is approximately 600,000—twice the number of jobs in any other county in the region.¹ Furthermore, half of the jobs in the seven-county region are in Milwaukee County. Clusters of dense employment exist throughout Milwaukee County from downtown Milwaukee to the Milwaukee Regional Medical Center (MRMC) in Wauwatosa and from the industrial parks on the northwest side to various retail corridors and universities throughout the county (see Figure 1).

Employment density in Milwaukee County is four times higher than its neighboring counties. Of the 25 census blocks with the greatest number of jobs in the region, 21 of 25 are in Milwaukee County with the remaining four such census blocks in the Bluemound Road corridor of Waukesha County. While pockets of job density exist in other counties, like Waukesha County, these pockets are often separated by large expanses of low-density development with few employment opportunities (see Figure 2).

Job estimates from the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (SEWRPC) indicate that much of the region, including Milwaukee County is outperforming even the most optimistic “high growth” job projections. This forecast anticipates average job growth in Milwaukee County of about 2,500 jobs each year—approximately 50% more jobs than are expected to be created by the opening of the new Amazon MKE2 distribution center in Oak Creek. While the new Amazon facility will represent a large single employer, it does not match or exceed annual projected job creation in Milwaukee County, much of which is served by fixed route transit.

METRO MILWAUKEE TRANSIT DISTRIBUTION

MCTS operates fixed route service seven days per week for nearly 24 hours per day on 29 different fixed routes and an additional 13 weekday routes focus on work and school schedules. In Milwaukee County, two out of every three jobs are within ¼-mile of an MCTS bus stop, which is the transit industry standard for the distance that bus riders are typically willing to walk to a bus stop. To put this in perspective,

¹ United States Census Bureau Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics survey 2017

Milwaukee County has more transit-accessible jobs than the total number of jobs in Waukesha County. Furthermore, as part of the MCTS NEXT Route Redesign project, MCTS aims to expand its high frequency network of routes that operate every 15 minutes or better. Under this plan, approximately 58,000 more jobs within Milwaukee County would be accessible from routes with the highest frequency of service.

MCTS GETS PEOPLE TO WORK

Thousands of people in this community use MCTS service as a convenient and reliable way to get to work. Most of these rides are taken on fixed route buses that operate frequently during peak travel times and cover a large service span from early in the morning to late at night. On most fixed route services, work commuters are assured a transit ride home, even if they need to work late because these routes run well into the night.

Work commutes by bus to a remote office location or business park often occur on a shift-change timed transit service, rather than on a fixed route bus service. To contrast these two types of services and resulting commutes, consider the following. The average trip on MCTS is just 3.5 miles, but bus trips to more remote locations can be 15 miles long and last between 45-90 minutes in duration. A commute longer than 45 minutes is associated with increased absenteeism, frequent tardiness, high turnover and reduced productivity.² Reduced employee productivity and job performance caused by long transit commutes to suburban and ex-urban job centers means employees using transit are less likely to retain employment or will seek alternative transportation options. This cycle is detrimental to both the transit provider and the commuter. Although transit can improve job access to remote locations, it can never fully correct for the ill effects of past land-use decisions.

New routes and route extensions to far-off job centers are not a new concept—transit agencies across the U.S., including MCTS, have decades of experience with this type of service, often with low degrees of success (see Figure 3). Across the country, these single-use, one-way, low frequency, long distance routes are often the worst-performing routes in operation because they simply do not serve areas conducive to mass transit. For commutes to relatively remote areas, solutions other than mass transit service should be considered, not only because of the long ride duration, but also in part due to the high cost per passenger.

Where a typical urban bus route may require a subsidy of \$3 per passenger, suburban commuter shuttles can require a subsidy of \$10-20 per passenger. Retired MCTS Routes 102, 227 and 280, which served various industrial parks on the outskirts of Milwaukee County all required subsidies of over \$10 per passenger—in each direction. These types of routes have proven to be financially burdensome, as well as unattractive to riders because of the long trip times and limitation in the numbers of trips offered each day. Consequently, such routes are often targeted for elimination when a budget gap requires service changes to balance expenses with projected revenues.

HIDDEN GAPS

It is important to point out that a route line on a map does not always represent the same level of service in terms of quality, frequency and equity. In this modern-age of convenience-driven decisions bolstered by new transportation options, transit choice is becoming increasingly associated with frequency of transit service (every 15 minutes or better) during the day, and span of service from early in the morning to late at night. As such, commuters value reliability, as well as the knowledge that a bus will be there when they want to leave, even if their work hours change. Transit becomes less viable of an option if the trip length is thought to be too long, or if the availability of transit is so limited that an employee would have to arrive at work 30 minutes early for a shift, or wait 45 minutes for the next bus after their work shift ends.

² <https://www.tlnt.com/how-commute-issues-can-dramatically-impact-employee-retention/>

In addition, approximately two out of five workers in the United States work outside of typical first shift hours.³ If even half of these jobs either start or end between midnight and 4AM, they are effectively unserved by transit. Jobs such as hospital staff, janitorial services, call centers, bar and restaurant employees and even bus operators all work shifts that render transit extremely inconvenient or impossible to use as a commuting option. Many second and third shift jobs are held by lower-income or otherwise disadvantaged individuals. Households under the poverty line are twice as likely to hold a job with non-standard hours.⁴ Potentially 40,000 jobs in Milwaukee County are inaccessible via transit—not because there isn't service nearby, but rather because that service is not running at the times required by the employees.

OPTIONS TO IMPROVE TRANSIT ACCESS TO JOBS

Budget Recommendation Revisited: As proposed in the recommended budget, \$100,000 could be used to operate transit service at two different shift times between Milwaukee and the new Amazon MKE2 distribution center in Oak Creek upon the opening of the facility (projected as August 2020). Although this facility is remote from much of the rest of the MCTS grid network, MCTS would seek to decrease travel times by operating a portion of the route on freeways (See Figure 4). Since all employees would be at one work location there is greater potential for transit trip times to support shift-change times than exists at a multi-employer business park with uncoordinated workday start and end times. A full year of this service would cost four-times (or more) than the \$100,000 budgeted for 2020; therefore, MCTS and the County Board should both keep in mind the need to budget for this service in 2021 if it is initiated in 2020.

Alternative 1: Another idea for the \$100,000 held in contingency is to identify the bus route serving the largest number of “late night” jobs and extend the service span of one trip on that bus route by 30-45 minutes later into the night. With investment into focused outreach efforts at employment centers along a specific route, another gap towards using transit to access jobs could be bridged in a small way. Of some concern is the fact that the number of new riders acquired would likely be minimal, especially relative to the outcomes from closing this transportation gap with a larger financial commitment to late night services.

Alternative 2: The last alternative presented for consideration is not a service at all, but instead the notion that the \$100,000 held in contingency could be invested into raising awareness about jobs that are already accessible by transit. Despite route information being made available on printed schedules, RideMCTS.com, websites like Google Maps and a variety of smartphone applications, it is not always apparent to job seekers, especially those unfamiliar with transit, that a vast number of employers are located on or near bus routes. For example, advertising on social media about job openings and routes that directly serve employment centers holds potential (e.g. *to get to hundreds of open jobs at the MRMC take the GoldLine, Route 31 or Route 67*). In addition, since the learning curve to using transit can be steep, video tutorials or testimonials from current bus riders could also be helpful in assisting non-riders in overcoming uncertainty about desired bus trips while they begin to transition to regular transit passenger status. Better coordination with Job Centers would also be consistent with this alternative.

CONCLUSION

The adopted 2020 Transit Budget shifted \$100,000 into an allocated contingency account and directed MCTS to recommend a best use of the funds to get workers to jobs. At the direction of the County Board, the funds may be released from contingency. MCTS has had the most success in connecting workers to jobs when resources are targeted towards providing frequent, all-day service to the region's most employment-rich areas. When long travel times can be avoided, multi-purpose fixed route transit services deliver the greatest benefit to the largest cross-section of the Community.

³ Population Reference Bureau “A Demographic Profile of U.S. Workers Around the Clock”

⁴ Population Reference Bureau “A Demographic Profile of U.S. Workers Around the Clock”

Single purpose routes and extensions can have utility by creating niche opportunities for employers and employees. The recommendation to serve the Amazon MKE2 facility is strengthened by the potential to serve two-shift change times with a single bus trip, thereby potentially doubling the amount of ridership that a remote suburban location would typically generate. Using the freeway for portions of the trip also help to reduce travel time that would otherwise make such a trip undesirable for some riders.

Alternative 1 incurs direct costs for additional service. It provides the potential for attracting riders by adding transit service during nighttime when it is not currently offered; however, the additional number of riders would be small since less than 20% of workers are out travelling at this time.

Alternative 2 addresses efforts that can be pursued with current staff and the limited budget MCTS has for transit promotion; however, a fund transfer dedicated to supporting these efforts would re-prioritize other transit promotion strategies, and focus staff deliberately on this initiative.

Obviously, MCTS continues to support the concept of transit service intended for getting residents to jobs at the new MKE2 distribution facility. Should there be general agreement among the County Board to also support this strategy, MCTS will return to the Finance and Audit Committee with a fund transfer and resolution seeking to authorize moving forward with this service. Once approved, MCTS will work to make the route a success.

RECOMMENDATION

This report is for informational purposes unless otherwise directed.

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Approved by:



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Figure 1

Milwaukee County Job Density

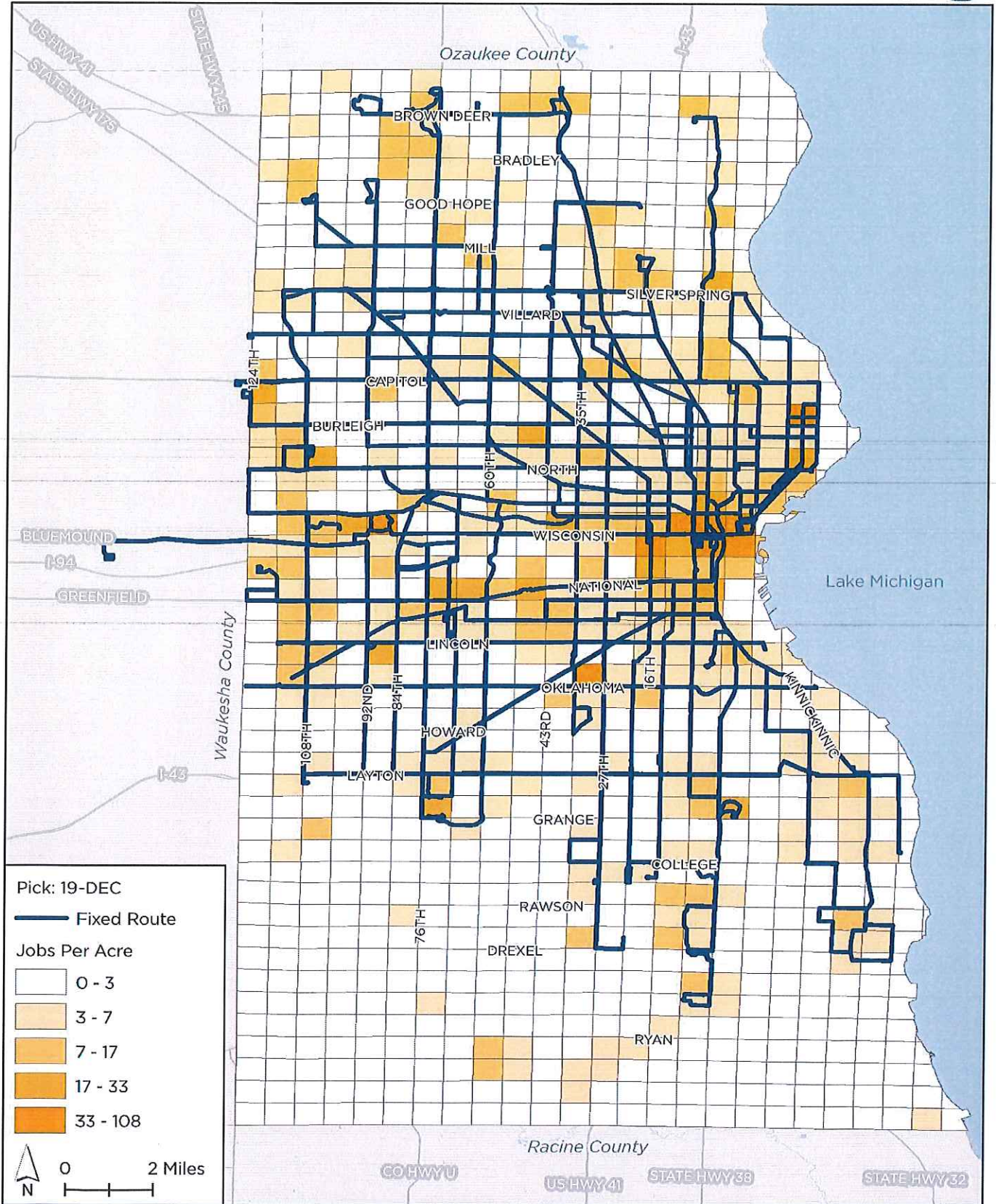


Figure 2

Southeast Wisconsin Job Density

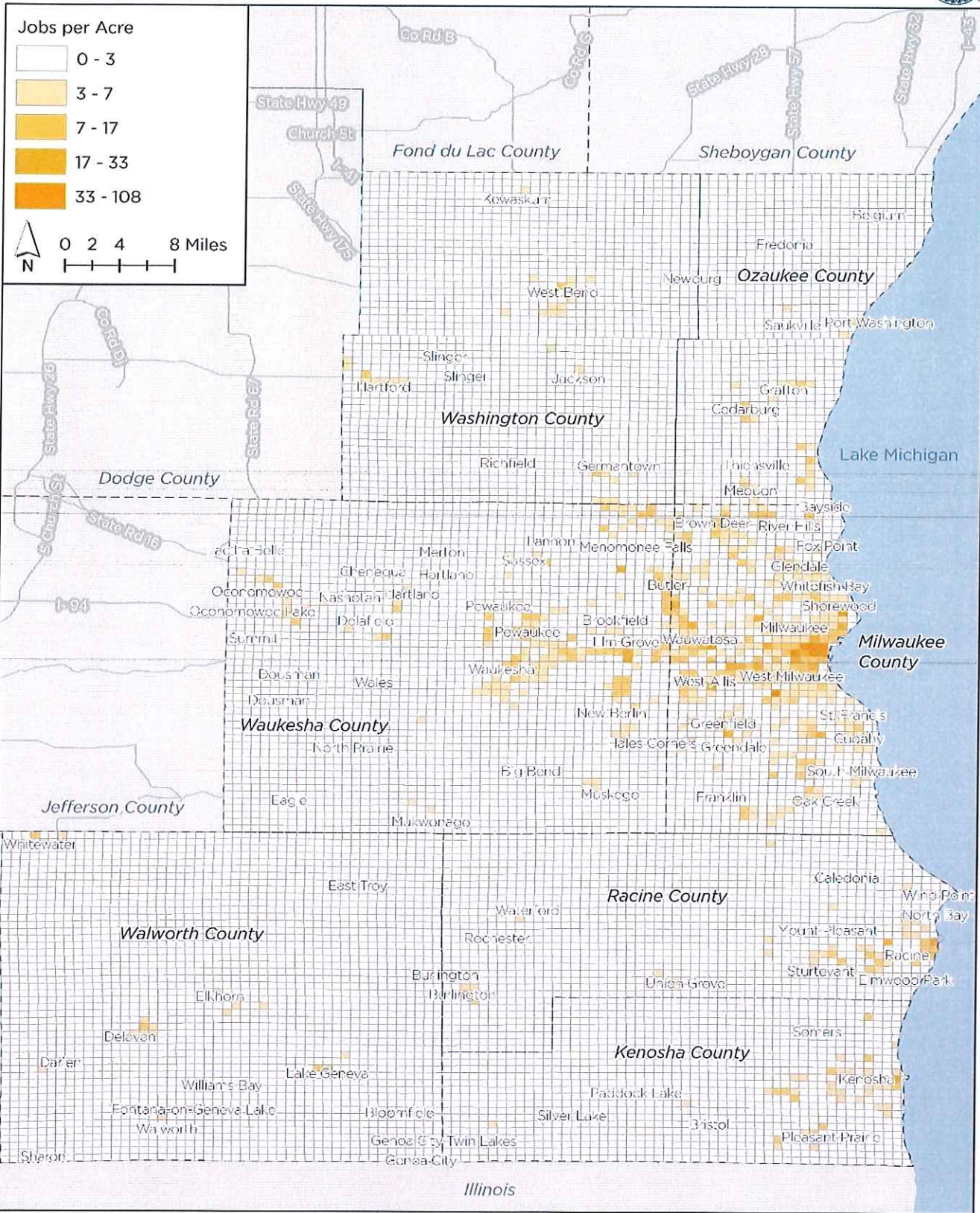


Figure 3

Job Centers Served by Historic Eliminated Routes

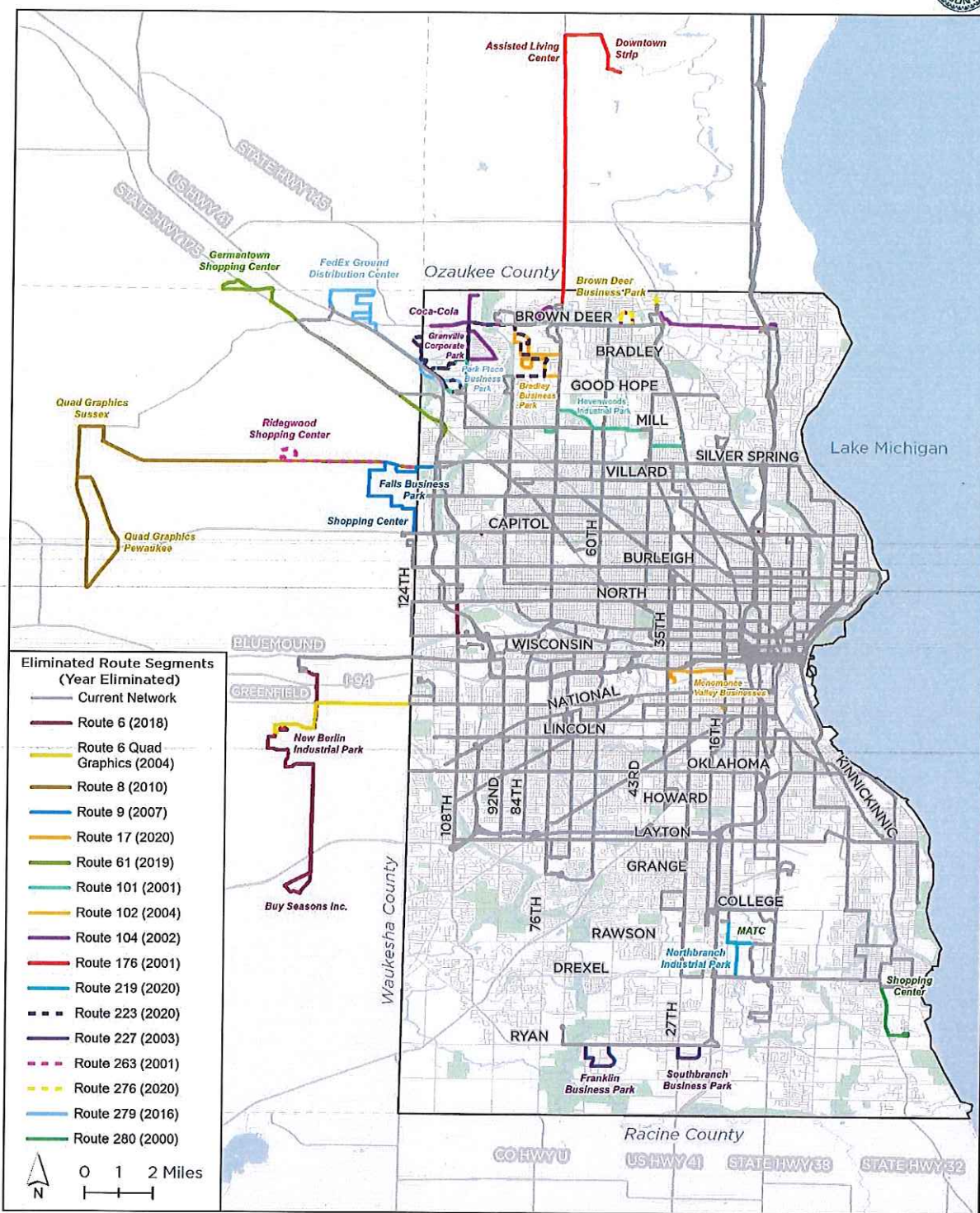


Figure 4

Proposed Amazon MKE2 Route Concept for 2020 Budget

