



INDIAN COUNTRY SNAPSHOT: Confederated Tribes of Umatilla

Located in rural northeastern Oregon, CTUIR long struggled with a lack of transportation options that prevented its members from accessing local and regional training and employment opportunities and made it difficult for reservation-based businesses to attract employees and customers. As one CTUIR official described the situation, “In some cases, it was harder for tribal members to get to the job site than to get a job or even housing.”¹ In response, in 2001 CTUIR launched the award-winning transit system Kayak Public Transit, which provides free bus rides to CTUIR members and the general public across 19 reservation and neighboring communities in northeastern Oregon and southeastern Washington, an area spanning more 7,000 square miles.² Enacting CTUIR’s vision for regional mobility for tribal members throughout its historic lands,³ Kayak has systematically grown the geographic reach of its operations over the past 25 years through a creative pooling of U.S. Federal Transition Administration, Oregon Department of Transportation, and Washington Department of Transportation grants and contracts, supplemented by CTUIR general funds “to fill gaps as needed.”⁴ A “testament to regional collaboration, dedication and determination, and finding robust solutions to common challenges,”⁵ Kayak has proven instrumental in increasing CTUIR members’ and other area residents’ access to training and employment, as well as creating jobs of its own.⁶ Logging nearly 68,000 rides in 2023 alone, Kayak provides “a significant cost savings” by providing no-cost, reliable transportation to job commuters and other riders who otherwise would have to pay for it.⁷ In 2024, Kayak launched an EV shuttle service to provide safe transportation to CTUIR employees and tribal members between key locations within its sprawling and busy tribal campus.⁸ Building on its partnerships with nearby counties and towns, Kayak plans new routes in the near future, which will enable CTUIR members to affordably commute even longer distances to work and train while still residing in and around the Umatilla reservation.⁹

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[CTUIR Kayak Public Transit](#)

[CTUIR Kayak Public Transit receives RTAP Tribal Transit Agency Award](#)

[EV shuttle service to start on Umatilla Indian Reservation](#)

[2020 CTUIR Coordinated Human Services Public Transportation Plan](#)

[Harvard Honoring Nations: CTUIR Public Transit \(2010 Honoree\)](#)

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- ¹ Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, “CTUIR Public Transit - Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation,” Honoring Nations: 2010 Honoree, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 2011 (https://hwpj.harvard.edu/files/hpaied/files/ctuir_public_transit.pdf?m=1639579064, accessed August 25, 2024).
- ² Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR), “Kayak To Offer EV Shuttle Service on Nixyáawii Campus,” April 12, 2024 (<https://ctuir.org/news/kayak-to-offer-ev-shuttle-service-on-nixyaawii-campus/>, accessed August 25, 2024); Mass Transit, “CTUIR Kayak Public Transit receives RTAP Tribal Transit Agency Award,” November 14, 2023 (<https://www.masstransitmag.com/management/press-release/53078102/confederated-tribes-of-the-umatilla-indian-reservation-ctuir-ctuir-kayak-public-transit-receives-rtap-tribal-transit-agency-award>, accessed April 29, 2024); Phil Wright, “Kayak Public Transit employees receive statewide awards,” *East Oregonian*, August 14, 2023 (https://www.eastoregonian.com/news/local/kayak-public-transit-employees-receive-statewide-awards/article_34663e02-39f6-11ee-bc48-e71efedd5eab.html, accessed August 25, 2024). Among its many awards, in 2019 Kayak Public Transit was awarded the Tribal Transit System Award from the National Rural Transit Assistance Program “for creating a vision for regional mobility for tribal members through the CTUIR’s historic tribal lands by forging partnerships with the state, ODOT [Oregon Department of Transportation], adjacent counties and towns” (Mass Transit, “CTUIR Kayak Public Transit receives RTAP Tribal Transit Agency Award,” November 14, 2023).
- ³ CTUIR, “Kayak Public Transit: Transportation for all” webpage (<https://ctuir.org/departments/tribal-planning-office/kayak-public-transit/>, accessed August 25, 2024).
- ⁴ CTUIR, “Kayak to Offer EV Shuttle Service on Nixyáawii Campus,” April 12, 2024; Eric Smith, Interim Public Transit Manager, Confederated Tribes of Umatilla, Conversation with NCAI, August 22, 2024.
- ⁵ JD Tovey, Deputy Executive Director, CTUIR (Mass Transit, “CTUIR Kayak Public Transit receives RTAP Tribal Transit Agency Award,” November 14, 2023).
- ⁶ CTUIR, *COORDINATED PLAN (Coordinated Human Services – Public Transportation Plan)*, 3-Year Plan, December 2020, p. 9 (<https://ctuir.org/media/soshe5z0/21-002-ctuir-coordinated-human-services-public-transporation-plan-exhibit-1.pdf>, accessed August 25, 2024). As of October 2024, Kayak Public Transit employed 25 staff (Eric Smith, Correspondence with NCAI, October 8, 2024).
- ⁷ CTUIR, *COORDINATED PLAN (Coordinated Human Services – Public Transportation Plan)*, December 2020, p. 16. Several years ago, CTUIR conducted a survey of CTUIR employees who reported saving between \$130 and \$200 monthly by using Kayak to commute to and from work (increasing their household disposable income and, in turn, consumer spending at local businesses) (Kayak Public Transit, “KAYAK Public Transit: Owned and operated by the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation,” 2018, p.1).
- ⁸ According to CTUIR, Kayak purchased its two EV shuttles “to provide safe and reliable transportation for movement of tribal members and employees around the campus without using their private vehicles.” The shuttle service runs every 15 minutes during weekday business hours from the Kayak Transit Hub to Nixyáawii Education Center, Timíne North Apartments, Yellowhawk Tribal Health Center and the Nixyáawii Governance Center (CTUIR, “Kayak to Offer EV Shuttle Service on Nixyáawii Campus,” April 12, 2024). The EV shuttle service also is used for events, “like basketball games, to bring people from parking areas at the governance center to the school” (Chris Aadland, “Big changes coming for tribe’s public transit provider,” *Confederated Umatilla Journal*, October 2023, p. 5 (https://issuu.com/confederatedumatillajournal/docs/oct_2023_cuj_web, accessed August 25, 2024).
- ⁹ According to Smith, Kayak’s expansion plans are in direct response to CTUIR members’ expressed transportation-related needs for training and employment (Conversation with NCAI, August 22, 2024). Kayak’s continued geographic growth also will mean more jobs, as Kayak “will need to hire several more drivers, at least seven, as well as need to bring on more administrative staff and managers” (Aadland, October 2023, p. 5).