



LONG BEACH INNOVATION

by Rich Sampson

Little more than 20 miles south of Los Angeles, along the sandy shores of San Pedro Bay is the city of Long Beach. Although the city has long been known as a seaside resort destination for cramped Los Angelinos, Long Beach boasts California's fifth-largest population and likewise prides itself on its own distinct identity. A large and vital part of that identity is Long Beach Transit.

More than a collection of bus routes and vehicle fleets, Long Beach Transit has continuously sought-out new and innovative ways to better serve its community. It was one of the first adopters of battery-powered buses, formed partnerships with private transportation operators to provide its demand-response services and regularly engages with community agencies and groups to ensure its system is always integrated into area projects and events. Moreover, how many transit agencies can count both water taxi and catamaran service as part of its intermodalism? And it is that spirit of

Long Beach Transit's *Passport* – first established as the *DASH* in 1974 – was one of the first downtown circulator services and has since served as a model for systems elsewhere.

innovation and responsiveness that attendees at the 2010 Community Transportation EXPO will witness in action.

“Working here is fun and challenging,” says Long Beach Transit General Manager Larry Jackson, who has led the agency for more than two decades and who currently serves as the chair of the Long Beach Convention and Visitors Bureau. “We have a great group of employees who love what they do and it shows every day in our service.”

Transit in the City by the Sea

Although the growth of Southern California communities like Long Beach occurred later than other places in this country, its pattern of development mirrors that many metropolitan regions back east: transportation resources fueled their growth. While a few entrepreneurial developers eyed the community's beachfront plots in the late 19th century to attract the rapidly expanding population of Los Angeles, it was the arrival of

the railroads – first the Southern Pacific in 1888, followed by the Los Angeles Terminal Railroad in 1891 and the famed Pacific Electric interurban system in 1902 – that truly turned Long Beach into a prime attraction in the region. Local streetcar routes were established in the new century's first decades, which themselves became bus operations by 1940. From 1920 through 1960, the population of Long Beach skyrocketed from 55,000 to more than 340,000.

Also paralleling the course of transit history in communities elsewhere, the private companies that first operated streetcars and then buses in Long Beach were unable to sustain their systems by the 1960s. The operations of the Long Beach Motor Bus Company and Long Beach City Lines were acquired by the City of Long Beach in 1963 and the Long Beach Public Transportation Company was formed to provide public transit service in the city. One of the new entity's first acts was to hire William F. Farell from Santa Monica's

Municipal Bus Lines to serve as the agency's vice president and general manager. After inheriting a collection of hand-me-down buses and disjointed routes, Farell went to work restructuring the network into a single cohesive operation. A new facility was constructed on Cherry Avenue and in 1967, a new line was established to connect riders to the city's latest arrival: the Queen Mary, docked in the Port of Long Beach. The route utilized double-decker red buses imported from England to match the iconic ocean liner's British image.

The system continued to offer new and improved options for riders throughout the next several decades. It added two new express routes in April 1974 to expedite trips through the city for outlying neighborhoods. Later that year, a new shuttle service for Downtown Area Short Hops (DASH) was established using battery-powered vehicles. The DASH service marked the arrival of two important transit innovations that continue to shape Southern California and many other cities today – the use of more environmentally friendly vehicles, and the integration as a low-fare, downtown circulator operation into the larger transit network. Although the Electrobuses ultimately presented operational challenges and were donated to the University of Florida, the DASH downtown circulator concept would prove a lasting concept for the system, and one that would eventually be modeled by similar services elsewhere.

After shortening the entity's title to simply Long Beach Transit in 1978, Larry Jackson assumed the general manager's role in 1980 after Farell's retirement. Jackson continued the innovative mindset initiated by his predecessor, and worked with local leaders and transit professionals in the region to establish a bus and pedestrian mall in downtown Long Beach. Opened in 1982, the Long Beach Transit Mall not only hosted Long Beach Transit buses, but also those from the Southern California Rapid Transit District – which became

today's Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA), Orange County and Torrance Transit. Like the creation of DASH nearly a decade earlier, Long Beach Transit was pioneering a nascent concept in transit: co-locating services of many transit providers in a single location – an approach that would be fully realized as multimodalism when the Transit Mall welcomed the MTA's Blue Line light-rail along the former Pacific Electric right-of-way to downtown Los Angeles in 1990.

“Our agency's vision has always been one of new ideas and approaches,” says Jackson, who

initially came to the system in the mid-1970s to help manage its finances. “We've had a series of really exciting projects that not only introduced new vehicles or new routes, but more importantly provided our riders better service.”

Becoming a Community Partner

Transit systems, inherently, play a visible role in the daily life of any community by virtue of their buses traveling down busy thoroughfares and passengers embarking and disembarking to reach key destinations and attractions. However, that activity is built upon support



Two of the first Long Beach Public Transportation Co. buses (above) were unveiled in 1964. Long Beach Transit established its First Street transit mall (below) in 1982, not only hosting its own buses, but routes from across Southern California. The MTA's Blue Line light-rail arrived on the mall in 1990.





Larry Jackson (left) has led Long Beach Transit since 1980. The system commemorates its dedicated employees on its wall of honor (above).

by public officials and community leaders who recognize the value those buses provide. To enhance its connection with Long Beach's larger civic life, Long Beach Transit has established strong and vibrant partnerships with other community agencies and organizations.

Given the importance of tourism and recreational activities in Long Beach, its transit system is an active participant in making the area easy to navigate without an automobile and ensuring that the system is well-connected with local events – such as the famous Toyota Grand Prix of Long Beach. To that end, Jackson has served for many years as a member of the Long Beach Convention and Visitors Bureau. That presence ensures that potential riders find their way to the system and that the community benefits from its investment in transit service to positively influence the local economy. The system's DASH operation was re-branded as the Passport in 1998 to coincide with the opening of the Aquarium of the Pacific on the waterfront. Today, the downtown shuttle operation incorporates

bright inviting, red, low-floor buses, and the low-floor technology has been expanded to the entire fleet, allowing for easier boarding and unloading for all riders. (NOTE: *All Passport service is fare-free and available to all EXPO attendees at stops near the Long Beach Convention Center and EXPO hotels – ed*).

The Passport acts as a link between all of our major attractions, convention center and downtown hotels," says Steve Goodling, President and CEO of the Long Beach Convention and Visitors Bureau. "This is a major selling point for our city when talking with convention planners. Also, Larry's deep involvement in our tourism industry has provided our organization and the city with a sensitive, passionate leader who has used transportation as a way to provide a warm hospitality to our visitors and an excellent economic impact to our city. Larry's commitment to our entire community has resulted in major improvements to our bus routes, a new downtown visitor information center and lighting and beautification projects."

Ever the innovator, Long Beach Transit has often looked abroad at Europe and Asia for its next system improvement. Jackson, who also serves as a board member of the International Association of Public Transport, and his colleagues pushed for American bus manufacturers to produce low-floor vehicles after seeing their applications in communities around the world.

"We knew that low-floor technology would be helpful here," says Jackson. "Now its everywhere."

Meanwhile, although Long Beach Transit is the community's established public transportation provider, it has steadily cultivated relationships with local private transportation entities to ensure the region's mobility needs are met. Since 1982, the system has utilized local transportation companies to provide its Dial-A-Lift demand-response service, offering the program before it was mandated by the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1991. Today, the service is operated by a local taxi company with a fleet of 16 fully accessible minivans, which the company can also utilize for its larger operations to the public. The switch to a dedicated accessible taxi fleet has yielded lower operating costs for Long Beach Transit, makes better service available for Dial-A-Lift participants and introduces more accessible taxi options for everyone.

"Having a strong partnership with Long Beach Transit allows us to provide better service," says

Mitch Rouse, Chairman of American Logistics, which coordinates the Dial-A-Lift service for the agency. “That partnership allowed us to determine that a fleet of accessible minivans would meet the needs of their riders, but also improve accessible taxi service to the larger community.”

At the same time, Long Beach Transit is the operator of two water taxi services – AquaBus and AquaLink – which connect downtown attractions to the Queen Mary, Shoreline Village marina entertainment district and the Alamitos Bay Landing district. Catalina Express, which also operates ferry service to Catalina Island – is contracted to provide the water taxi services for the transit system.

Long Beach Transit’s community orientation, no doubt, comes from the example set by its leader. Jackson is also the board chair of the Long Beach Medical Center, the community’s largest hospital and medical care provider. Beyond ensuring good communication between the transit system and one of the region’s largest employers – and one that generates a significant volume of riders to Long Beach Tran-

sit buses – it also enables Jackson to keep informed on the community’s larger needs for mobility to health care. That perspective allows the system to plan its operations to serve those mobility needs and do so in a more efficient manner.

“It’s important for our system to have a very visible role in the community,” says Jackson. “Our work doesn’t just involve running buses. It involves staying active in the pulse of the city and responding to trends and issues as they arise.”

Moving Forward

In keeping with the system’s vision of innovation and involvement, Long Beach Transit plans to continually enhance and reenvision its services. Currently, like many other transit operators – and especially those in California – the constraints of state and local budgets are producing challenging environments in which to be a transportation provider. The system’s top priorities are maintaining current levels of service across its various operations and avoiding job losses for its employees. Although Jackson and his colleagues have had to introduce fare hikes to avoid service

cuts and workforce reductions, they envision that the system should be able to weather the current fiscal crisis and ultimately return to the work of improving service options.

“We’ve been in this business of moving people for a long time and that continuously helps us see a bigger picture than just today’s tough economic climate,” says Jackson.

And while opportunities to expand service are temporarily limited, those constraints do not mean the system is done innovating. Long Beach Transit is currently implementing a global positioning system to monitor the location of its vehicles, which in turn will be accessible to its riders through its automated traveler information line and service bulletins. Later this year, the system will provide real-time, next bus arrival information through a web-based platform and several high-traffic bus stops, including its Transit and Visitors Information Center on the Transit Mall. Additionally, all Long Beach Transit routes are now displayed on Google Transit.

Likewise, the agency has utilized

Long Beach Transit has pioneered the use of innovative vehicles – including low-floor technology – for more than four decades.



investment from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) to not only purchase new buses, but upgrade a series of bus shelters, install informational resources at its stops to inform riders on its bus tracking tools, and is currently in the process of revitalizing the Transit Mall, now more than 20 years old. The enhancements on the Transit Mall will introduce improved passenger waiting amenities, lighting, security and streetscape improvements.

Moreover, Long Beach Transit's Maintenance and Facilities staff are investigating new options for alternative fuels, continuing the agency's aggressive approach to modeling new vehicle technologies. While no final determination has been made on what format of fuel or vehicle power might be used by the system, the extensive study demonstrates the agency's commitment to ensuring its vehicles are environmentally responsible while

also contributing to its operational efficiencies.

"We're always taking a good look at how we can improve our operations," says Rolando Cruz, Long Beach Transit's Executive Director and Vice-President of Maintenance and Facilities. "We have a track record of doing new things – not because they're new, but because it's right for our system and for our riders."

Happiness is a Warm Bus

As a system fueled by the exploration of new options, Long Beach Transit has established a foundation for solid transit service in Southern California. After its community leaders moved quickly to solidify transit service in their city almost a half century ago, the sure footing the system realizes today is recognition of the value its leaders and residents place on having responsive and reliable mobility op-

tions. And those priorities are reaffirmed and enlivened by a service that views its role in the community as an ongoing effort to respond to needs and employ new ideas.

"We want people, when they step on one of our buses, to view their trip as improving their overall happiness," explains Jackson. "Good leadership continues to be innovative, and that's how we view ourselves."

(NOTE: Stay tuned for profiles of community and public transit providers throughout California in our next edition of Community Transportation Magazine – ed.)



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