

Reno's Regional Transportation Commission Does It All



“We all wear multiple hats, and as a result, we have a good knowledge base on the totality of the transportation network in Reno,” he says.

This level of collaboration wasn't always the standard in Reno. While the City of Reno and Washoe County – along with the State of Nevada – always constructed and maintained the region's roadways, Reno's public transportation options, like those in many communities, evolved from private companies. Reno Bus Lines operated fixed route service until 1979, when financial uncertainty threatened abandonment of the system.

Community leaders quickly mobilized to assume control over the existing routes, vehicles and infrastructure. The State of Nevada revised its statutes to allow for the provision of public transportation systems by counties, and formed the Regional Transportation Commission in July of 1979 by consolidating the Regional Street and Highway Commission, the Regional Transit Commission and the Washoe County Area Transportation Study Policy Committee. The new entity would be led by two representatives each from the cities of Reno and Sparks, and Washoe County.

Jickling explains that the

By Rich Sampson

The story of growth and achievement in northwest Nevada – the area claimed by the adjoining cities of Reno and Sparks, within a stone's throw of Lake Tahoe – has always been marked by a enterprising spirit to translate resources into great fortune. That same ethos is exhibited by those seeking to capitalize on the sustained growth of the Washoe County population base and economy by ensuring its residents have access to assets and attributes of their community.

The Regional Transportation Commission of Washoe County very much embodies that spirit through its work as the region's primary transit entity, by providing a significant and growing public transportation network, and looking forward to anticipate the needs of the community it serves. What could be more fitting for an area like

Reno than an organization that views itself as all-in to deliver the best outcomes for its community?

More Than a Third

Nearing its 30th anniversary of providing public transportation in and around Reno, the Regional Transportation Commission [RTC] of Washoe County fashions itself that more than just a transportation agency. It is responsible for all policy, planning, construction, and operation in the County. Under these auspices, the Commission is – all at once – the Metropolitan Planning Organization, the highway and roads department and the transit agency. Meanwhile, they are both the recipient and grantee of the region's federal transportation investment.

According to David Jickling, the Public Transportation Director for the Commission, the integration of all the Reno area's transportation activities is viewed as an asset.



arrangement, “allows for continual contact between the jurisdictions on all our transportation needs, and makes for a streamlined process.”

Providing Rides and Achieving Access

While each aspect of the Commission’s activities – public transportation, streets and highways and planning – has a strong and distinct role, the Commission’s public transportation services are the agency’s most visible components in the community. RTC administers two central transit facets to serve the community: RTC RIDE, which moves over 20,000 daily riders over 30 fixed routes served by more than 70 vehicles; and RTC ACCESS, its fully accessible demand-response service operated with a fleet of 50 vehicles. Meanwhile, as a component of its RIDE network, RTC supports its INTERCITY service, which provides commuter connections between Carson City and downtown Reno, as well the *Sierra Spirit*, a free downtown connector route

that operates every 10 minutes between the University of Nevada and downtown destinations such as the Riverwalk and California Avenue. Additionally, RTC administers a Vanpool program, which offers subsidies to ridesharing groups of seven to 15 riders, while also supporting Tahoe Area Regional Transit in Placer County, California for the service it provides in Washoe County in and around Lake Tahoe.

The multiplicity of options offered by the RTC has delivered a strong community response in Washoe County. In calendar year 2006, the Commission provided more transit trips in Washoe County than ever before. More than 9 million riders rode RTC RIDE buses, while more than another 200,000 were served by RTC ACCESS. RTC provides both services under contract – First Transit operates the RIDE fixed route system through its local entity, Transit Management of Washoe County, while MV Transportation operates the ACCESS service. Through precise management of those contracts, and a strong

community outreach effort, the Commission has achieved a 30 percent farebox recovery rate across all of its services. Farebox revenues are combined with federal investment and Washoe County contributions to support the system’s operating costs.

“We’re very proud of the efficiency of our system,” says Jickling. “We’ve been encouraged by the reaction we’ve received even when we’ve had to raise fares.”

Indeed, although the RTC works hard to make the best use of its resources, the rising costs of fuel, liability coverage and other expenses means the Commission has needed to increase fares several times in the last few years. However, each fare increase was kept at a five percent raise or less, and the changes were preceded by a thorough community outreach effort to explain the rationale for the higher fares. Even though fares have risen each year since 2005, no ridership decrease followed the change in prices.

“Our passengers have understood that costs rise, but if they could be kept at a small and predictable rate of growth – which we determined was five percent – it was a much easier to rationalize with their budgets,” explains Jinking.

The Opportunity and Challenge of Growth

The Reno and Washoe County area has been growing rapidly in the past decade. Within the last six years, 60,000 new residents have arrived to boost the region’s population to over 350,000. Projections estimate at least that many new arrivals, and likely more, over the next decade. Accordingly, the RTC is working to respond to the growing needs of its community.

RTC RIDE’s busiest route – Route 1, stemming south from downtown Reno along South Virginia Street – already carries over 4,000 daily riders, marking about 20 percent of RIDE’s daily ridership. The Commission is conducting a study to determine what upgrades can be made along the route to meet current and future demand. As part of the alternatives analysis, a form of Bus Rapid Transit is under consideration for the Virginia Street corridor, which could include more and larger vehicles, designated stations at key intersections or destinations, improved technology, including off-vehicle payment systems, and an expansion of the route further south through Truckee Meadows to Mt. Rose Highway. The Commission is expected to complete its analysis later this summer and work with the community to select a preferred option. If a Bus Rapid Transit option is ultimately selected, Jickling expects the Commission

EXPO Bus Service

Reno’s RTC RIDE service offers frequent and convenient connections between our EXPO sites – the Atlantis and Peppermill hotels and the Reno-Sparks Convention Center – along its Route 1 / South Virginia Street line. A complimentary RTC RIDE pass is provided with your registration at the Atlantis or the Peppermill. For more information, call 775.348.7433 or visit www.rtcwashoe.com.

to work to receive investment through the Federal Transit Administration to support the capital costs of the project.

At the same time, efforts are already underway to construct new transit facilities in the downtown cores of Reno and Sparks. In Reno, a new transit station is under construction. The new Fourth Street Station is expected to open in 2010, and will be able to accommodate 14 vehicles at a given time to allow better transfers during the three-to-five minute window when many RIDE buses meet in downtown. The Station will feature improved passenger amenities, upgraded technology, including real-time arrival and departure information, and offer the system a more pronounced presence in downtown Reno. Likewise, the Centennial Plaza Station in

downtown Sparks will open in 2008 and will be able to host up to seven vehicles concurrently. Beyond features and amenities similar to Reno’s new facility, the Centennial Plaza will incorporate many new environmentally-friendly design functions, such as energy-saving technologies and rooftop greenery. These same enhancements will be incorporated into the design of Reno’s Fourth Street Station. Washoe County and federal investment streams will support both projects.

“Between the new transit centers in Reno and Sparks, and our planning for the Virginia Street corridor, the Commission is working proactively to take the next step in providing even better resources and service for our riders,” says Jickling.

